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# Speaking Ill of the Dead: Anonymity and Communication About Suicide on MyDeathSpace.com

By: Lynnette G. Leonard & Paige Toller

**Abstract:** From birth to death, many individuals chronicle their lives online through blogs, pictures, games, Web sites, and social networks. Online spaces, created by the living about the dead, provide a glimpse into often invisible or silent grieving practices. To investigate the role computer-mediated communication (CMC) plays in influencing communication surrounding the often private and taboo topic of suicide, we analyzed the comments sections of MyDeathSpace.com. Our results suggest both a breaking down of social taboos (speaking ill of the dead) and a reaffirming of strict social norms (enforcing a narrow range of acceptable presentation of identity and purpose in life), highlighting how anonymity as a characteristic of CMC can influence our online communication about death.

**Keywords:** Anonymity, Computer-Mediated Communication, Death, Grief, Suicide

The Internet has become a place where the entirety of human existence can be played out. From birth to death, we chronicle our lives through blogs, pictures, games, Web sites, and social networks. However, what happens to our online identities and personal narratives when we die? For some deceased individuals, their pages and profiles are kept running by friends and family, while others become a part of MyDeathSpace (MDS), an online resting place for those who have died. This online space, created by the living about the dead, provides a glimpse into often invisible or silent grieving practices and allows us to investigate how computer-mediated communication (CMC) influences communication surrounding the often private and taboo topic of death.

A key characteristic of CMC is the anonymity (lack of physical, visual identification) it affords the communicators (Gurak, 2001) and this lack of visual identity has attracted much attention from scholars. Walther's (2010) summary of the CMC discipline notes that the debate over the effects visual anonymity has on communication stems from the assumptions of antisocial communication in cues-filtered-out approach to the loss of self and greater adherence to social norms presented in the social identity mode of deindividuation effects (SIDE) model (p. 493). The negative consequences of antisocial communication online receive a considerable amount of attention, but it is possible that antisocial behavior can have positive consequences, particularly if the social norms being violated are in fact detrimental to individual and society (e.g., bigotry, silence in the face of tragedy, etc.). This debate about the influence of anonymity reflects a larger discussion of the influence of CMC on our communication both positive (Shirky, 2008; Tapscott, 2009) and negative (Bauerlein, 2008; Jackson, 2008; Siegel, 2008), but as Van Den Eede (2010) argues we should be conscious and reflective in our recognition of the good and bad in our online communication as we explore this debate.

In order to explore both the good and bad in how anonymity influences an individual's communication about death online, we analyzed the comments section of MDS articles. MDS has characteristics of a blog

with posters publishing an “article” (usually the obituary) of a MySpace user. It is possible then for anyone to post comments to that article. So while there is a tie back to the social network site MySpace, MDS does not share the characteristics of social network sites (as outlined by Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The MDS articles we focused on concerned deaths due to suicide, as this type of death is often the most stigmatized by society. Our analysis reveals a very different type of online memorial space and communication than has been previously described in the Web-memorializing literature. Our results also highlight how the anonymity of CMC can blur the distinctions between private and public ways of communicating about death and reinforce and, in some cases, extend negative social norms.

### **Communicating About Death**

Several scholars have found that communicating with others following the death of a loved one is difficult for the bereaved (Fletcher, 2002; Nadeau, 1998; Neimeyer, 1998; Sedney, Baker, & Gross, 1994). In particular, bereaved individuals report that they often feel stigmatized, ostracized, and ridiculed for talking about their loved one (Hastings, 2000; Riches & Dawson, 2000; Toller, 2005) as talking about both death and their deceased loved ones is largely taboo in Western culture (Hagman, 2001; Horacek, 1995). Nevertheless, individuals who are grieving the death of a loved one often need ongoing social support from their friends and family in order to cope with their pain and loss. For example, in situations of parental bereavement, grieving parents may need to share their grief as talking with others allows parents to affirm and authenticate their grief experience (Becvar, 2001; Hastings, 2000; Hastings, Musambira, & Hoover, 2007; Toller, 2005, 2011). Indeed, researchers have found that parents who received support following their child's death were better able to cope with their child's death than those who did not (Kreicbergs, Lannen, Onelov, & Wolfe, 2007; Laakso & Paunonen-Ilmonen, 2002).

The giving and receiving of social support is a communicative process that occurs within interactions and relationships (Burlinson, 1994). Unfortunately, individuals who are bereaved due to suicide often do not receive social support as they are frequently avoided by friends and family, resulting in feelings of stigmatization and shame (Demi & Howell, 1991; Harvey, 1998; Jordan, 2001; Knieper, 1999; Ness & Pfeffer, 1990; Worden, 1991). Jordan stated that “there is considerable evidence that survivors feel more isolated and stigmatized than other mourners, and may be viewed more negatively by others in their social network” (2001, p. 93). Likewise, Harvey argued that survivors of suicide commonly experience shame, guilt and often feel misunderstood. Because survivors of suicide often feel stigmatized and may be inhibited from talking about their loss (Demi & Howell, 1991; Jordan, 2001), we wanted to explore whether or not the venue of online memorials provided survivors of suicide an outlet to express their grief and possibly to find social support.

Online or Web memorializing has become a popular setting for individuals to communicate grief and to share information with others about their loved one. Roberts (1999, 2004) claimed that Web memorials are cathartic places where bereaved individuals can pay homage to their loved ones in significant and meaningful ways. Web memorials are vehicles through which living individuals stay connected to the deceased through the online sharing of memories (Moss, 2004). Straying from traditional formats of grieving, Web memorials allow survivors to freely grieve and talk about conditions related to their loved one's death (Roberts & Vidal, 2000) and to develop bonds with other mourners (Roberts, 2004). In a study specifically examining online suicide support groups, Hollander (2001) discovered that several members of the Web support groups experienced others wanting them not to talk about their loved one or to grieve their death quickly and to return to their pre-death state. Hollander argued that these online support groups provided mourners a secure place to talk about their loved one's death without judgment or criticism. Moreover, she found that these online support groups played a vital role in identity reconstruction for the bereaved. Hollander's findings indicate that online memorializing may indeed be a

viable medium by which survivors of suicide can find social support. One reason that individuals turn to the Web to cope with their grief may be due to the degree of privacy and anonymity that the online world permits (Walther, 1996).

### **Anonymity, Communication, and Death**

The literature on anonymity in CMC partly supports previous findings that Web memorials allowed the bereaved to more freely discuss issues of the death, even in cases of highly stigmatized deaths such as suicide. However, the anonymity inherent in CMC also opens up the possibility for darker forms of communication including flaming, a disregard for the feelings of others, and increased conformity to negative group norms. CMC affords a range of anonymity, including absolute anonymity (no visual nor nominal identification), pseudonymity (avatars as visual identification and/or screen names for nominal identification), and nominal identification (no visual identification but use of actual name) (Walther, 2010). In addition, some CMC allows for a combination of visual and nominal identification where pictures or video of our physical self can be included with or without actual names (e.g., Skype, Chatroulette, etc.).

Indeed, researchers of CMC have long been concerned with characteristics of the medium and how they affect communication behavior, both positively and negatively. For instance, Walther (1996) explained that the characteristics of CMC can lead to both impersonal and interpersonal communication. He further argued that CMC can become hyperpersonal having “heightened levels of intimacy, solidarity, and liking” greater than in face-to-face communication (Walther, 1996, p. 4). Walther's work suggests that there are benefits to belonging to online groups such as greater participation from members and an equalization of power. In essence, communication through CMC can encourage a sense of community and support (Ferrigno-Stack, Robinson, Kestnbaum, Neustadt, & Alvarez, 2003; Pack & Page, 2003; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000). This sense of community largely explains why Web memorializing via CMC allows family and friends to grieve and support one another. Because of the equalizing nature of CMC (Walther, 1996), we surmised that CMC may also allow for family and friends of the deceased to communicate about the suicide openly without stigma or shame. Those who choose to grieve online may benefit from the freeing effects of visual anonymity. In particular, those grieving a suicide may violate societal norms, which typically prohibit discussion of suicide by grieving and communicating about their loved one online.

However, research on the anonymous (lack of physical, visual identification) nature of CMC also suggests other forms of communication including flaming (harsh language directed at an individual) and increased social influence and control. Gurak (2001) describes the characteristics of technology that can lead to feelings of anger, frustration, and rage and explains that anonymity online can increase the chances of expressing those negative emotions by flaming. According to Suler (2002) anonymity online can lead to disinhibited communication and this disinhibition can explain flaming behavior as well as extremely kind or open communication online. Postmes, Spears, and Lea's (1998) research on SIDE (the social identity model of deindividuation effects) contradicted previous studies, which had claimed that the benefits of CMC were reduced social boundaries and influence, group pressure, and status/power differentials. Instead, they found that “when communicators share a common social identity, they appear to be more susceptible to group influences, social attraction, stereotyping, gender typing, and discrimination in anonymous CMC” (Postmes et al., 1998, p. 689). Their findings contribute to scholarly discussion regarding the inherent contradiction posed by anonymity in CMC as researchers have found that anonymity can be both positive and negative in nature (Leonard, Withers, & Sherblom, 2010). The contradictions present in the literature on anonymity and CMC as well as the new complications of ranges

of anonymity clearly demonstrate the need for further exploration of communication in anonymous online spaces.

### **A Different Kind of Web Memorial Site**

MyDeathSpace.com advertises itself as a Web site that allows users the “opportunity to pay [their] respects and tributes to the recently deceased MySpace.com members via [the] comment system” (MyDeathSpace.com, n.d.). To view the Web site and any of the public forum postings, one does not have to become a member, to sign-in, or to provide any identifying information. Further investigation of the Web site revealed that “MyDeathSpace.com is an archival site, containing news articles, online obituaries, and other publicly available information” (MyDeathSpace.com, n.d.). To post on this Web site, one must have a MySpace.com profile and must register providing a username and password; however, the individual who posted the profile is not identified by anything other than their username. The only person identified by name is the deceased individual. MySpace continues to have a strong social network site presence with over 100 million users worldwide (MySpace.com, 2007). The continued relevance of MySpace provides plenty of new posts and comments to MDS.

MDS posters have the ability to remain absolutely anonymous or may choose to create a more persistent identity through the use of a recurrent screen name (pseudonymity). The purpose and range of anonymity (absolute to pseudo) of the MDS Web site in contrast to Web sites studied in the Web-memorializing literature (pseudo to nominal) allowed an exploration of communication about suicide beyond the posts of family and friends and an explanation of the contradictions between the general CMC literature and the Web-memorializing literature. Therefore, we extended our initial research question to include a wider range of possible communicators beyond family and friends. In the end, our research question was:

RQ1: How do posters on MDS communicate about suicide?

### **Investigating Patterns in the Posts**

The study was designed in the qualitative/interpretive tradition to investigate the patterns of communication behavior and meaning in the posted comments on the Web site MyDeathSpace.com (Braithwaite & Eckstein, 2003; Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As suicide was the topic under investigation, we searched the archives of MyDeathSpace.com on September 16, 2007 with the term “suicide,” resulting in a total of 216 death articles. The article is the main page announcing the death and includes a picture from the deceased's MySpace page, details on the death, and at times a full obituary. At the bottom of the page links can be entered to related information and there is a link to the comment page. After reviewing the 216 articles for relevance to suicide and the presence of comments, there were 142 articles with a total of 5,005 comments posted for those articles. Articles were not included in the analysis if they did not have comments and if the article discussed a murder/suicide or suicide bomber where more focus was placed on the murdered individual and not the suicide. A random sample of 10% of the comments was taken, resulting in 505 comments for analysis.

The posted comments were analyzed using a modified version of the constant comparative method for thematic content (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Complete thoughts were the unit of analysis rather than by post because a single post could have many thoughts that represented several themes (Krippendorff, 2004, pp. 98–103). When a theme emerged, a category was created. As new themes emerged from a complete thought, it was compared with previous thematic categories. If the theme did not fit with the previous thematic categories, a new category was created (Creswell, 1998). The thematic categories were refined as the comparison continued throughout the data set. The two authors worked together at first to create a similar coding system. From there, the authors worked independently, coming

together at the end to compare analyses and to merge overlapping thematic categories. In the process of comparison, the authors worked until consensus in the categorization was reached.

### **Thematic Categories**

Our analysis of the posted comments revealed six categories of communicating about suicide: (a) sympathy for the deceased or their loved ones, (b) method of suicide, (c) judging the deceased and others, (d) explanations for suicide, (e) regret for death, and (f) loved ones' response to posters. Explanations of these categories along with exemplars from posted comments are presented below.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Theme # 1: Sympathy for Deceased and Loved Ones*

Posts on the Web site contained expressions of sympathy for both the deceased and the deceased's family and friends. Posters expressed sadness and remorse toward deceased individuals who ultimately took their own lives. For example, a poster wrote, “[H]ow awful this young man must have felt to do this. Rip [deceased].” Similarly, another poster wrote, “anyways RIP [deceased] I hope u finally found some happiness.”

In addition to messages of sympathy for the deceased, posts contained expressions of sympathy and comfort for the deceased's family or friends. For example, one poster wrote back a note of sympathy to the deceased's father after he posted a message claiming the deceased was innocent of an accused crime:

Dear [family member], thank you for your beautiful & INTELLIGENT post. It is SO WRONG that you continue to have to defend your son after his death. My heart goes out to you and your family for the loss of your son who did not deserve what he was handed and instead should be remembered and appreciated along with other heroes for his fine accomplishments.

#### *Theme # 2: Method of Suicide*

The messages on the method of suicide included posts speculating on the method, providing an explanation of the method, expressing judgment, regret, and disgust about the method, and finally joking about the method of suicide. The method of suicide is the feature of each of these posts, but the difference between them being the way the topic is approached whether through questioning and searching for answers or judgment and humor.

Guesses about how the deceased committed suicide occurred when the method of the suicide was unknown or unclear. Posters asked questions, brought in “evidence” to support their guesses or just made statements that were unsubstantiated. Questions included simple “What do you think happened? And will anyone ever know the truth about what happened behind those doors” and “So now we know for sure that he hung himself?” The occupation of the deceased was often used as evidence: “So she said he was a soldier. Maybe the COD [cause of death] is Gunshot???” As these posts demonstrate, some posters provided “evidence” in an attempt to determine how the deceased ended their life. At times, questions are not adequate and we search out explanations for how this could happen.

The method of suicide brought up questions regarding the specifics of the method, which in turn led some posters to offer explanations. For instance, one poster noted, “If he managed to hold his breath long enough to pass out, the rest would have been pretty painless I think. The water would fill your lungs and you would just never wake up.” Likewise, another poster volunteered, “my ex-kickboxing instructor nearly drowned when he was 12, he said after the initial panic it is very euphoric ... and he said since that day he doesn't fear death at all ... particularly by drowning.” Another poster opined that “I don't really think this would be a fun way to die, but it appears to be only painful for about a minute and a half.” Explanations like these occurred throughout with all kinds of death including slashing wrists, gunshot,

hanging, jumping in front of a train, etc. In addition to asking and answering questions about the method, posters would move to less neutral positions on the suicides.

Posters also negatively judged both the deceased and their chosen method of suicide. For one individual who stepped in front of a car, a poster made the following comments:

I feel sorry for the person who hit her. That's a hell of a thing to do to someone. Hopefully that individual won't be the next suicide in that area. I can't even imagine what kind of guilt that person feels even though it wasn't their fault.

Likewise, a young woman who committed suicide by jumping in front of a train triggered a chain of evaluative comments, such as "What a horrendous method to choose for suicide. We are seeing lots of angry young girls choosing awful ways:-o" and "But anyways, what a horrible way to die. And messy." Similar comments were written for a suicide by fire: "What a horrible method.!"

In addition to judgment, posters expressed regret and disgust at the method, particularly if the method was gruesome or disgusting. For example, a man who committed suicide by jumping off a bridge led one poster to express this comment of regret: "Poor guy. What a way to go. That bridge in particular is flipping scary." Another poster responded with "I know this bridge. There is [sic] only a few sections that has water directly under it ... the majority has roads or industrial buildings underneath. I hope for the sake of anything or anyone, it was into the water." Similarly, disgust was expressed toward a deceased individual whose body was not found for several months after he committed suicide in a swimming pool: "How messed up huh??? Can you imagine what that pool must have looked/smelled like, having a dead body in it all winter. GAaaaah.:puke:" Another way of expressing judgment is through humor and posters did find humor in the deaths reported.

Joking about the method was present when posters saw the method as extreme or ironic. For a person that committed suicide by slitting her wrists, taking pills, and shooting herself, posters made the following comments "wow ... this one wanted to have all the bases covered...damn perfectionists lol" and "Talk about some overkill here! eeeshh." For a person that committed suicide by jumping out a window with a rope around his neck, posters had the following running joke: "I know how it feels to be at the end of your rope. :cry:," "I know how it feels for my nerves to be frayed", and "Wonder what made him snap. If only his friends had stuck their necks out for them." Even though these jokes would garner chastisement, they were defended with arguments for humor as a way to deal with death and that MDS worked like this allowing posters free reign. One poster summarized this mentality by stating: "Sometimes you have to laugh and gawk at death."

### *Theme # 3: Judging the Deceased and Others*

Despite expressions of sympathy by posters, postings on MDS contained messages of judgment toward the deceased specifically. In particular, posted comments reflected judgment toward the deceased based on his/her parental status, life choices, presumed guilt or innocence, and finally intelligence. The judgment extended from the deceased to families and friends as well as society as a whole.

If posters discovered that the deceased who committed suicide had been a parent, they were often harshly evaluated as being selfish or self-centered. One poster explicitly stated that "Selfish, these parents I've seen on MDS who kill themselves. No matter how bad it is, you have a responsibility to your kids." Likewise, two posters judged a young woman as self-centered when she committed suicide despite having a small child, "Wow. What a selfish little girl [the deceased] was. This makes me so mad. What a precious little angel ... :cry:"

It is important to note that judgment regarding the deceased's parental status was not reserved only for mothers. Fathers who committed suicides were also deemed as self-centered, as the following quote illustrates, "if he had full custody of the child I just can't imagine what that's going to do to the boy. Nice way to fuck up your kid's life. Forever." By committing suicide, posters judged these individuals as ultimately shirking their parental responsibility toward their children.

Posters on MyDeathSpace commented negatively about the deceased regarding one's life choices attributing the deceased's suicide to his/her inability to triumph over bad choices. This was particularly true for adults who committed suicide. For instance, posters criticized a deceased man for not getting help with his drug addiction, which they claimed ultimately led to his decision to commit suicide. One poster commented:

Why wasn't he back in treatment? I mean if you're serious about turning your life around, you know where you should be because you know what isn't working ... .Our society has got to learn to take responsibility for their own life. He wasn't a kid, he was a 24-year-old man. People who have overcome addictions will tell you that what he was doing, was nothing short of a lack of integrity.

This tendency to focus on life choices as a way to explain the death had a reverse expression in the posts as well. The choice to commit suicide was often seen as an admission of guilt.

Deceased individuals who committed suicide while under criminal investigation were particularly subject to ridicule and judgment by posters on MyDeathSpace as posters debated the alleged guilt or innocence of the deceased. For a number of MyDeathSpace posters, committing suicide was viewed as a strong admission of guilt on behalf of the deceased. For example, the following messages were posted toward a deceased man who was accused of child pornography possession. One poster commented, "The fact that he killed himself only shows me that 'He was guilty as charged!' Damn pervert! I have NO sympathy what so ever for pedophiles." Another poster echoed similar sentiments, stating:

If I were innocent of a crime, no matter what, I would fight it. Fuck that. And yeah, by the amount that was found ... accident my ass. May someone else wish he rests in peace because I hope he rots in hell.

In a similar situation, one poster stated, "This death made me say out loud 'Who cares that he died, he needed to die.' I'm sorry but I'm glad he died, I hate molesters [:fu:] and they all need to die. :cheer." A fellow poster agreed, "Sorry but nothing says GUILTY like suicide. :nod: :killself:."

The guilt or innocence of the deceased was not the only judgment cast by the MDS posters. A final form of judgment was the posters evaluating the deceased's intelligence or presumed lack of it on "evidence," such as the deceased's preferences on his or her MySpace page, their spelling in blogs, or what they wrote in his or her suicide note. For example, posters judged the deceased as unintelligent because of what he stated in his suicide note:

This dude is not intellectual. He's got this whole "artificial [*sic*] intelligence" deal. Sure he knows every fucking detail on Japanese anime and samurai swords, but at the end of the day you need to GROW as a person. He sounds way too damn old to be quoting movies in his suicide note.

The friends and families of the deceased were not spared judgment from the MDS posters. They were judged negatively for not preventing the death or for being the cause of the death. Posters viewed friends and family as responsible for somehow not preventing the suicide or not taking action to stop the deceased from carrying out the suicide. For example, one poster blamed a deceased adolescent's mother for not getting her psychological help, stating "At the least she is guilty of depraved indifference. She sought treatment for herself and not for her child." In another case of teen suicide, a poster wrote "WHERE ARE THE PARENTS!?!"



Besides blaming the deceased's parents, friends of the deceased were also judged for not taking action to prevent the suicide. One poster indicated that friends and family failed to get the deceased the help she needed to battle depression:

Maybe I'm going out on a limb here, but you would think one of her friends would realize how depressed she was, they would have recommended her help. Then again, most truly depressed/suicidal people don't let others in on how they're feeling.

Posters also viewed family and friends as directly contributing to the deceased's decision to commit suicide. For example, one poster attributed the family situation of a young man as a primary reason as to why he committed suicide:

This looks to be a pretty fucked up situation all around. The girlfriend appears to be a user, [the deceased] has had his share of problems, his sister's blogs are disturbing (apparently there are all sorts of family issues here) ... I just really feel bad for this kid. It seemed like he was really trying to get his life together.

Posters also blamed society for contributing to the deceased's suicide. When discussing the suicide of a homosexual teenager, one poster commented that the teen's community may be responsible for her death:

Even though she said she didn't feel judged or looked down upon for her open homosexuality, I wonder how many people in her community feel bad knowing they perpetuated the cycle of fear/shame that lingered over her ability to ever be able [to] fulfill her dreams. She just wanted acceptance so she could follow her heart.

#### *Theme # 4: Explanations for Suicide*

In addition to posts that judged the deceased and the deceased's family and friends, posters discussed the reasons why the deceased committed suicide. Posters would speculate back and forth as to why they thought the deceased was motivated to commit suicide. Likewise, because posters saw themselves as "MyDeathSpace Investigators," they would post information that they believed provided evidence for why the deceased committed suicide.

MyDeathSpace posters speculated and shared their opinions with each other as to why the deceased committed suicide in the first place. For instance, posters attributed the suicide of a teenage girl to the emotional ups and downs of being a teenager:

Poster 1: All your emotions are so magnified at that age.

Poster 2: Yeah, even the littlest things can really set off a 14-year-old ... I'm sure we all know from experience.

In another case, posters discussed whether or not bullying led another teenage girl to commit suicide. One poster stated:

[W]hat in the world would this child have to be bullied over?? she was cute, seemed to have many friends who really loved her and a seemingly caring and loving family. i really would like to know more about her. was she depressed? was she on medication? did she have counseling? so many damned questions. what a horrible waste of a promising life.

Posters searched the MySpace pages of the deceased and his or her loved ones in order to find information that might answer their questions. When they found "evidence" of a possible motive they would post this evidence for other posters to see. This evidence ranged from the blogs to writings of the deceased to family and friends. In some cases, family and friends of the deceased would also post comments on MDS in order to "set the record straight."

When discussing why a young woman committed suicide, one poster indicated that the deceased's blogs revealed that the deceased was distressed, "I have not had a proper look yet although she has some sad/contemplative blogs." The poster followed his/her own comment by pasting in part of the deceased's blog:

I'm not saying that I'm depressed or that i'm bout to kill myself ... Don't get that from this blog. I'm just venting. I know i'm kinda in a bad moment. At one moment things are good ... then at next ... I wish i wasnt here.

In another situation, an acquaintance of the deceased wrote in to provide posters with why the deceased committed suicide:

My sister knew [the deceased] as an acquaintance. Just to clear some things up from what I know. She shot herself which is the exact same thing her boyfriend did. It is assumed it was her gun for both suicides. My thought is that she was in a deep depression from the "love of her life" committing suicide and from there everything else was going downhill.

One poster asked for even more information, stating "Rest in Peace. Did either of them leave notes? Or do you know what [the deceased's] Myspace bulletin said in full?"

Among MDS posters, explaining suicide in larger societal terms or with details specific to the death of one individual tended to stir up debate. Suicide in general was often described as selfish or as a mental illness. For example, one poster simply wrote "Suicide = Selfish!!" to explain his or her view on suicide; however, a number of posters suggested that suicide was more complex, as can be seen in this post:

Suicide is selfish at the core, no doubt about it. But there are certain mental states in which normal perceptions of selfish/not-selfish don't come into play. To an outsider, it is selfish, absolutely. When you are at that darkest, bottom point, you really think you are doing everyone a favor by removing yourself from their lives. If you haven't been there, you don't understand that mentality.

Some posters viewed suicide as mental illness, writing "Suicide is not a selfish act to the depressed mind. To the depressed mind, suicide is a gift to your loved ones. Yes, that's 'nuts' but depression is a mental illness. Depression warps reality." Likewise, one poster wrote, "Depression is a disease... sometimes people just can't pull themselves out of it. they lose family (like [deceased's] daughter), and their lives over this disease" and another commented, "Also, I remember hearing in a psychology class once that 'no sane person commits suicide.'"

Explanations for suicide as a choice involved both posts that were general and posts related to specific deaths. The following post categorizes suicide as choice:

We're not talking about run of the mill loss, we're talking about suicide. Someone choosing to be dead. I do not believe the idea that suicidal people are just dying for some help. Choosing to die is entirely different than finding yourself dying.

Finally, explanations of suicide as an accident were almost always linked to the specifics of one death such as this speculation: "You never know she could have been so overcome with grief she merely just ... wasn't paying attention." However, comments from loved ones often presented evidence of accidental rather than intentional deaths such as this post:

I will post this but you and everyone must realize that [deceased] did NOT mean to take his life. He was goofing around but did not realize that by jumping off the top of that swing set his feet would not touch the ground before the weight of fall on his neck & esophagus broke his neck. (It only takes 6-7 lb. and by him jumping like that and weighing 140Lbs it was instantaneous.) He just did not know that he would not walk

away and go to [friend]'s like he'd planned. Please never think that he intentionally killed himself. He loved himself and all of us too much to do that. He had big plans for his life ... To finish school in [town] ... get a job and go to college ... buy a truck ... marry [girlfriend] and have a baby.

### *Theme # 5: Regret for Death*

Along with remorse, posters expressed regret for certain suicides. The expressions of regret depended on the deceased's age, appearance, personality, success, and potential.

The suicide of young people resulted in the following expressions of regret by posters: "Sad stuff, I wonder what could have driven someone so young to kill themselves ... only 14, what could have been so bad that suicide was the only way to escape it?" Likewise, another poster commented, "God, what can be so horrible at 15 that you feel the need to end your life? Why can't kids comprehend that things eventually do get better?" Another poster opined that "at least she was 30 and not 14, I hate when young kids commit suicide."

In addition to expressing regret, if the deceased was young, posters also expressed regret if the deceased was deemed attractive. One poster wrote, "wow she was beautiful how sad not that it would be less sad if she was ugly who'm i kidding, yes it would... :)" Another wrote, "cry: Such a shame, she was a pretty girl." and "why is it always hot guys that die."

It was also a source of regret if someone who appeared to have a good personality committed suicide. Posters based their personality assessments on information from the deceased's blog or the writings of their friends. One poster remarked that "Seemed like a nice kid — has the longest obit ive [sic] ever seen." Another wrote that "Seems like an interesting and intelligent guy. What a waste of a brain. And a Bad Religion fan, awesome. Too bad he couldn't find another way around his problems."

The lost success or potential of the deceased's life was also a source of regret as posters wrote comments, such as "So sad. She was extremely successful. Played college basketball and became a District Attorney," and "she was cute, seemed to have many friends who really loved her and a seemingly caring and loving family ... what a horrible waste of a promising life."

### *Theme # 6: Loved Ones' Response to Posters*

Some loved ones felt it necessary to defend their loved one and themselves. Following the suicide of her friend, one individual posted a message chastising the board for discussing her friend's suicide:

I just want to let everyone know that [the deceased] didn't commit suicide. She passed away. She was ill and her illness took her life away. It had nothing to do with [name of state] or suicide. And for those of you who want to say horrible things about her and disrespect her in anyway that is uncalled for. If you dont know her than you shouldnt have anything to say about it.

Similarly, friends and family of the deceased also posted messages that defended their own actions. Upon discovering that posters were criticizing her for her MySpace page, the romantic partner of the deceased wrote:

My MySpace profile was written a few years ago, and I JUST changed the "single" part to show my true status. I am very much single ... they don't seem to have a category for broken hearted and missing the man in your life. I didn't find out until today how many people were trying to judge me.

Occasionally, posters were chastised for their unkind or flippant remarks. This came from other posters and/or the loved ones of the deceased. Posters commented "Anyways ... fighting over comments is extremely lame, and incredibly disrespectful to the deceased. IMO" and "I can't hold my tongue

either ... you are one ignorant motherfucker. ;fu:.” Comments from loved ones also occurred, including “I am [deceased]’s father. Since [deceased]’s death I have learned lots of things. Complete strangers can be real cruel and talk about things they know nothing, or very little about.” Likewise, another loved one wrote, “I ask you people, to NOT bash on [the deceased]. He was a good kid.” and “I’m sorry if I offend anyone with this comment but [the deceased] was my friend. And everyone talking about her like she would have grown up to be a serial killer is really upsetting to me.” Some loved ones wrote in asking posters to be more respectful and empathetic, as seen in this post:

And for those of you who want to say horrible things about her and disrespect her in anyway that is uncalled for. If you dont know her than you shouldnt have anything to say about it. How would you like if someone was disrespecting your family member? I dont think you would like it at all. Maybe its [sic] easy for someone to comment about someones death when you dont know what happened and you didnt see the things that we all went through. It is not anyones place at all to announce someones death if you didnt know who the person was or the whole story.

While some loved ones come on the board to chastise or complain about the posts, there were expressions of appreciation for comments of understanding and kindness. One example of this appreciation is this post: “I hope you’re right. Sometime I feel like the majority of the world thinks suicidal people intentionally take their own lives just to inconvenience others or something. It’s always nice to see someone who understands.” Other posters expressed a simple thanks for kindness, such as “thanks for posting, as I did read today what others have said, and I appreciate the kindness.” and “Thank you for everyone that has posted comments on him, he is loved and missed.”

## **Discussion**

Within our study, we found that the Web site MyDeathSpace provided a setting for individuals to write in and to discuss the death of an individual due to suicide rather than a site for the bereaved to commiserate and make sense of the death of their loved one. Most posters were not related to the deceased and often referred to themselves as MDS investigators who expressed the need to hunt down information on the deceased from all reaches of the Internet. So while the messages were made up of posts from people not related to the deceased, the information posted about the deceased gave the site a feeling of being more personal that could intensify both the negative and positive aspects of the messages. The analysis of the communication about suicide on MDS enhances our understanding of Web memorializing, anonymity, and the persistence of rigid social norms.

Based on the Web-memorializing literature, the purpose, range of anonymity, and the almost overwhelming negative content on MDS is unique. Our findings directly contradict those of Roberts (2006), who found that even though strangers often visit memorial Web sites, these individuals usually posted kind and supportive messages. For instance, Roberts found that many parents received messages of support via their deceased child’s MySpace page, finding these messages both “comforting” and “overwhelming” (2006, p. 4). In the case of MyDeathSpace, kind words from posters were usually stated only after a loved one had written in chastising them for their insensitivity. Loved ones’ reactions to these comments ranged from describing feelings of comfort to being overwhelmed by the death with the addition of disbelief, disgust, and anger at the audacity of the members of MDS. Clearly, MyDeathSpace does not serve as a venue where survivors of suicide can reach out to others for social support and encouragement. If anything, many of the postings by members of MDS only serve to further stigmatize and shame survivors of suicide by negatively evaluating and harshly judging their deceased loved ones or even the loved ones themselves.

Hart (2007) provides a possible explanation for the jokes and judgments in our findings explaining that “real-time rituals” such as online Web memorializing echo society's discomfort and apprehension about death and things related to death. In the case of MyDeathSpace posters, this Web site provided the posters with a location to express their opinions and judgments about suicide in an anonymous venue. This anonymity may have heightened poster's feelings of safety, leading them to express ideas about death and suicide that are normally not acceptable in face-to-face interactions. The findings of this study demonstrate that scholars must pay close attention to the characteristics of the Web memorial site in order to understand the subsequent communication behavior.

Our results suggest both a breaking down of social taboos (speaking ill of the dead) and a reaffirming of strict social norms (enforcing a narrow range of acceptable presentation of identity and purpose in life). The majority of our postings focused on judgment, speculation, joking, disgust, stereotyping, and a general lack of sympathy. The clearly disinhibited posters (as evidenced by the jokes and extreme judgments) seemed to feel little concern for the family and friends of the deceased as they expressed their frustration and anger in posts that ranged from mild to extreme flames. Their postings suggest a breaking down of social barriers and the influences of polite society that generally govern communication about the deceased. Walther's (1996) discussion of an equal space online translates to behavior on MDS where anything goes in communicating about someone's death confirming the negative effects of anonymity online (Gurak, 2001; Suler, 2002).

However, these disinhibited posters and their derogatory posts toward “unattractive” or “different” individuals indicate an increase of social influence in online communication (Postmes et al., 1998). SIDE frames this increase of social influence as a positive development of group norms. However, this increase in social influence on MDS reinforces extreme societal standards of beauty and the “value” of normative identity. Performance of an alternative identity either in appearance or lifestyle choices is severely chastised on MDS. These posts on MDS support Brookey and Cannon's (2009) findings of violence towards and marginalization of those who transgress the mainstream identity norms in their study of gender and sexuality in the virtual environment Second Life. While some online spaces may reflect “a liberatory perspective that sees cyberspace as a unique social arena in which traditional gender roles and sexual norms are challenged and transgressed” (Brookey & Cannon, 2009, p. 146), it is clear that online communication can reproduce the gender and sexual identity constraints present in face-to-face communication.

## **Conclusion**

While it is possible that online venues may offer the opportunity for loved ones to express grief and to cope with the loss of a loved one, it is evident that sites like MyDeathSpace.com provide a venue for members of society to parse the death, to debate its meaning, and to judge those individuals and issues related to the death. The findings of this study highlight the influence of the design of the CMC medium. Online spaces that allow for primarily absolute and pseudo anonymity appear to encourage extremely disinhibited communication that demonstrates no regard for others involved in the communication. As discovered in the Web-memorializing literature, requiring some identification can produce more positive atmospheres even when strangers are present.

Continued study into the influence of the varying degrees of anonymity is required to fully address the conflicting explanations found in this study. In addition, a greater understanding of the different purposes behind online sites can further help distinguish the different communication we see online. Whether the site is for social support or for spectacle as well as how anonymous the posters are can influence the communication. Both conditions are important to recognize as studies into online communication such as

on MDS progress. The findings of this future research could have practical application in the design of online support sites.

Finally, there is rich area for understanding the persistence of strict social norms in online communication. CMC is often characterized as freeing with the possibility of breaking down our social and cultural expectations. However, as demonstrated in this study, online communication can reinforce stereotypes and can further marginalize “alternative” populations. As very private moments become food for the world's insatiable appetite for information, we will need to consider the effects on real people. We must be mindful that online communication, like all communication, has consequences.

### **Note**

[1] Posts have not been edited in order to preserve the integrity and authenticity of the data.

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