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The Effect of Social Networking on Grief

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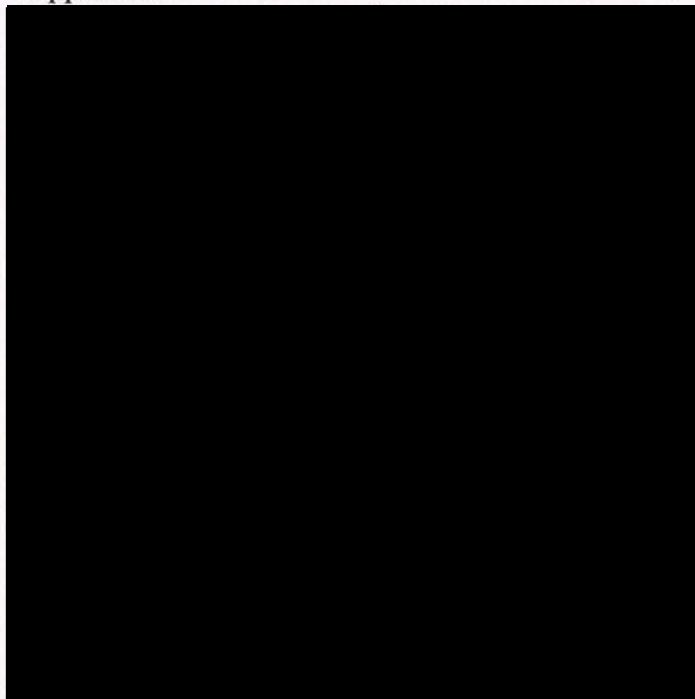THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING ON GRIEF

by

Heather Margaret Gianatassio

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ABSTRACT

THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING ON GRIEF

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Death and loss are complicated issues. They are further complicated by the Internet and the increased usage of social media; however, there is little research on the effects of social media on grief. This project's goal was to gather information about grieving via online social networking sites. Data was collected from 20 *in memoriam* profile webpages on Facebook and MySpace. The deceased were between the ages of six months and 32 years. Results indicate that society is using social media as a form of support and comfort in times of loss.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Death and loss are difficult to understand and process, especially for children, adolescents, and young adults. One increasingly popular way in which different age groups are mourning is through the medium of the Internet. This mode of communication is particularly unique because it allows grief between family, friends, and co-workers to be expressed, and provide comfort and social stimulation when needed (Dyregrov, 2005). In fact, turning to the Internet for assistance in the grieving process has debatably become commonplace and is replacing other resources to help with mourning.

In general, the use of the Internet has become increasingly common with all age groups. In fact, 3.6 million children under the age of twelve had social networking accounts in the year 2009 and 93% of adolescents used social networking as a main source of communication with peers (Richtel & Helft, 2011; Williams & Merten, 2009). Even with this large percentage, Richtel and Helft believe that these numbers will continue to rise with close to 100% of certain age groups using it. However, the understanding of how life transitions—such as grieving the death of a peer or family member—are impacted by the medium of technology has been less documented. Due to the abrupt increase of the Internet being used to communicate about emotional experiences with grief and the subsequent lag in research of understanding the use of this form of media with different age groups (Williams & Merten, 2009), this project attempted to minimize this limitation by gathering information about grieving via online social networking sites. Comments placed on the homepages of users with an *in memoriam* status were analyzed to determine how peers and family members were

disrupt the lives of children, adolescents and young adults with common symptoms being disbelief, anger, and shock (Lobb et al., 2010). Complicated grief can also be related to traumatic events or sudden losses. A common example—particularly for adolescents—is the grief process after a sudden automobile accident due to its unexpectedness (Williams & Merten, 2009).

There are many resources available to people who are experiencing complicated grief. Counseling and support groups are the most popular while other forms, such as books and therapy, are also common (Dominick et al., 2009). Unfortunately, these services are not being utilized as much as social networking sites. This is due to the fact that individuals are skeptical of the effectiveness of therapy and counseling (Feigelman, Gorman, Beal, & Jordan, 2008). Research shows that those suffering from the loss of a loved one find it more helpful to gain support from other individuals experiencing the same type of loss which can be more easily found through social networking due to its ability to connect people around the world (Roberts, 2004).

Social Networking

Social media is a mode of communication that allows individuals to interact with one another without being physically present with each other; social networking is a specific form of social media. Marwick and Ellison (2012) describe social networking as allowing individuals (a.k.a. *users*) to connect with others through the use of profiles. Two of the top ten sites for this type of communication are MySpace and Facebook (Discovery News, 2012).

Social networking sites have four common characteristics. They are persistent, replicable, scalable, and searchable (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). The information placed

on networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, does not disappear (i.e., *persistent*). If a user deletes a profile, it still remains in the site's database although it may not be made visible to others. Information on these sites can also be viewed by others, can be copied and shared with anyone, can be viewed by millions of people, and can be searched by anyone (i.e., *searchable* and *replicable*). When individuals grieve publicly, they are able to express themselves differently, using variations in their language and tone. For example, those who find it difficult to express their grief face-to-face to an individual can use the Internet to more freely share their feelings (i.e., *scalable*; Marwick & Ellison, 2012).

Children, adolescents, and young adults tend to use social networking as a form of communication with peers because it is useful in supporting peer relationships. Particularly relevant to this study and its focus on social media by developmental stage, adolescents tend to rely more on their peers for support than their parents and have used the Internet increasingly more as a means of communication with friends (Williams & Merten, 2009). In fact, 42% of adolescents use social networking to communicate with their friends on a daily basis (Szwedo, Mikami, & Allen, 2011). As a result, the Internet could be supporting the grieving process by connecting different age groups more easily to those they are conversing with more.

Developmental Responses to Grief

All children and adolescents have the ability to grieve, even if they cannot fully understand death. School-aged children generally understand that death is permanent and that it can happen to anyone at any age. However, children of this developmental

age sometimes believe that they could have stopped the death from occurring or that it was their fault that the loved one passed away (Brown, 2009).

During adolescence, death is also understood as being final, but more thoughts surround one's own death (Brown, 2009). Likely due to the additional pressures adolescents have about feeling wanted or desired, this change in focus also includes what others may think when they pass away. By engaging in these thoughts, teenagers exhibit an understanding that anyone—including themselves—can die (Fitzgerald, 2003).

Young adults can have different reactions to death. They arguably need additional social support due to their experience of a wide range of emotions and the imminent prospective of the separation from their own support group (e.g., leaving home). The most common reactions for young adults are anger, trying to make sense of the loss, and acceptance (Holland & Neimeyer, 2010). Young adults may also be experiencing high levels of hormonal changes which can increase additional symptoms such as anxiety and depression (Regev et al., 2011). Young adults heavily rely on their peers for support, as they continue to increase their independence and decrease their need for parental support (Trevino, Fasciano, Block, & Prigerson, 2013) which, as mentioned previously, makes social networking sites particularly popular for exchanging interactions.

A majority of adults grieve differently than children, adolescents, and young adults. Adults tend to be more resilient in how they grieve, but also typically experience depression though it generally decreases over time (Bonanno et al., 2002). For mature adults, the grieving process will not delay their ability to continue on with their lives. In

fact, Bonanno (2004) indicates that adults are able to continue to function at "healthy

levels of psychological and physical functioning" (p. 20).

CHAPTER II

MATERIALS AND METHODS

There has been an increase in using the Internet to communicate emotional experiences, but minimal studies have been performed to understand the process of using this form of media for such disclosures (Williams & Merten, 2009). Thus, this project's goal was to gather information about grieving via online social networking sites and, different than other prior research, also analyze it developmentally. By doing so, a better understanding of how using the Internet to assist or hinder the grieving process will be achieved. The researcher reviewed online profiles of deceased people, ranging in age from six months to 32 years of age. Comments and phrases posted on these profiles were analyzed to assess the effects of social media on grief processes.

Participants

Twenty *in memoriam* user profiles, thirteen male and seven female, were included in the study. There were sixteen Caucasian (80%) and three African American profiles (15%), as well as one Hispanic profile (5%). Figure 1 represents the ethnicities of the deceased. The known occupations of those older than six months of age were students, military cadets, and military personnel. The known causes of death included abuse, gun violence, an overdose, cardiac complications, and suicide. The numbers of surviving relatives for the deceased were located by reviewing obituaries, which ranged from two to 24 with an average of 7.45. The deceased were located in various areas of the United States though a majority came from the Northeast.
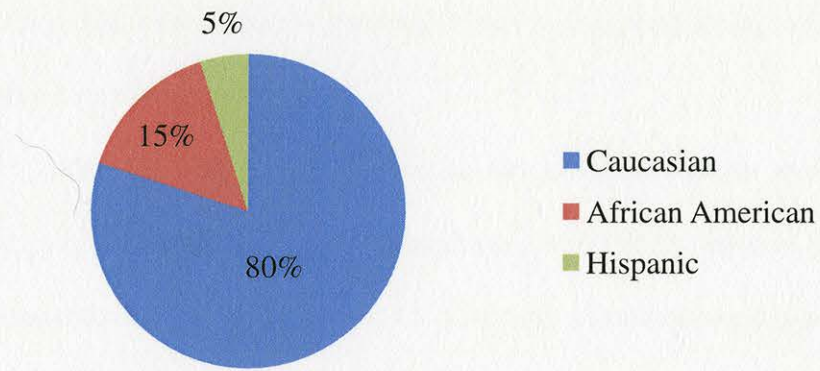
Figure 1. Ethnicities of the deceased.

Procedures

After obtaining IRB approval from the University of Southern Mississippi, data was collected retrospectively by reviewing *in memoriam* profile webpages on popular social media websites. During the review of some of the webpages, respondents posted names and photographs of other people who passed away from similar causes. Using the snowball effect, the researcher also reviewed the webpages of those posted names and, if qualified for the study, these profiles were also used. All profile webpages were made available for the public to view.

Any comments and phrases posted on the *in memoriam* profile webpages from the past six months (i.e., November 1, 2012 to May 5, 2013) were included in the collection. Since the definition of complicated grief includes not being able to move past the death after six months, comments and phrases from the past six months were included in an attempt to find evidence of delays in the grieving process. The intent of the study was to focus on those who are mourning the deceased. As a result, all comments and phrases not geared toward the actual deceased member, such as comments placed regarding

other people who passed away from the same causes of death, were not included as part of the data collection.

After the collection period ended, the profile comments were coded inductively using standard content analysis procedures (Dey, 1993). Each of the comments was placed into categories (see Table 1). Once the comments were placed into categories, the researcher looked for patterns within and between each age group to search for potential themes. Comments were also analyzed according to date to determine whether or not user responses were changing as time moved forward.

Table 1

Code Numbers and Corresponding Categories

Code Number (% of total responses)	Category
1 (14.2%)	Rest in peace
2 (13.4%)	Comments about heaven, God, and prayers
3 (5.7%)	Comments about thoughts being with family and deceased
4 (17.7%)	Comments about cause of death
5 (4.6%)	Memories about deceased
6 (5.8%)	Thanks for love and support
7 (19.6%)	Comments about missing and loving deceased and comments about loving family
8 (1.1%)	Comments about deceased birthday
9 (3.5%)	Comments about holidays and special events related to deceased

Table 1 (continued).

Code Number (% of total responses)	Category
10 (3.8%)	Comments about deceased never being forgotten
11 (1.15%)	Comments about deceased being loved
12 (.38%)	Wishes for family
13 (7.7%)	Expressions of sympathy
14 (1.3%)	Comments about lack of postings

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Chronological Age

School-Aged in memoriam Profiles (6-11 years)

There were fifty-two total responses for six *in memoriam* profiles of decedents who fell into this age range. The majority of responses were categorized into category 7 (46.2%), which was defined as comments about missing and loving the deceased and the family. Thus, more people who responded on profiles that fell within this age group used the Internet to explain how much they loved the family as well as how much the deceased is loved and missed. Some responses included "You are missed everyday" and "The world misses you." There are less responses for categories 1 (rest in peace posts) and 2 (comments about Heaven, God, and Prayers). For category 2, there were six responses (11.5%) for this age group. Some responses included "My prayers are with you" and "Your baby girl is watching you from Heaven right now." For category 1, eight users posted "Rest in Peace" (15.38%) while six responses were from family members thanking other users for their love and support (11.5%). Only one user fell into the category of responding to the cause of death (See Figure 2).
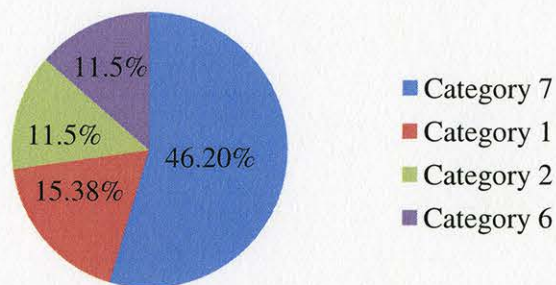

11.5%

11.5%

15.38%

46.20%

■ Category 7
■ Category 1
■ Category 2
■ Category 6

Figure 2. Percentage of responses per category for participants who were school-aged.

According to the data, user responses for this subgroup did not change over the six month period that the information was analyzed. Users consistently expressed their thoughts about the deceased individual and their families being missed and loved. In the case of those who have had children passed as a result of gun violence, family members were more likely to report their thanks for all the love and support.

Adolescent in memoriam Profiles (12-18 years)

The total number of responses was 157 for the ten *in memoriam* profiles of decedents who fell into this chronological age. Category 2 (i.e., heaven, God, and prayers) was the most prominent with this age group with twenty-six (16.56%) responses. Some responses included "She is with Jesus now, safe and loved" and "What a beautiful angel watching over you." Missing and loving the deceased and family members (i.e., category 7) was the second most prominent category with twenty-one (13.37%) responses. Responses in this category included "I love you," "I miss you," and "You are missed and loved by so many whose lives you have touched." Finally, seventeen (10.8%) responses were found in category 13, which was described as expressions of sympathy, such as "My deepest sympathies" and "So sorry for your loss" (See Figure 3).
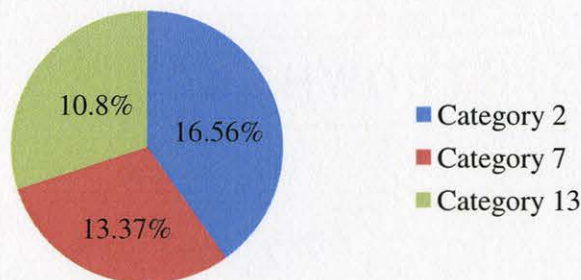

Figure 3. Percentage of responses per category for participants who were adolescents.

According to the data, responses did not change over the six month period of analysis. Users consistently made expressions of a religious manner and were also more likely to post responses of "Rest in Peace." Compared to the other age groups analyzed, families were less likely to post thanks to users for their support; however, they were more likely to post about holidays and birthdays that the deceased was missing.

Young Adult in memoriam Profiles (19-32 years)

The total number of responses was thirty for the three *in memoriam* profiles of decedents who fell into this age range. The most popular responses (33.3%) fell into category 5, which is described as memories about the deceased. Users also posted pictures of the deceased and attached memories to those pictures (e.g., a picture posted of the deceased and a user dancing). Six responses (20.0%) fell into category 7, which is described as comments about missing and loving the deceased and comments about loving the family. Some responses included "Miss you more every day" and "Forever in our minds and hearts" (See Figure 4). All comments that fell into category 5 stemmed from one profile in which the individual died in active military duty. Four of the users who also fell into category 7 stemmed from a participant with an unknown cause of death.
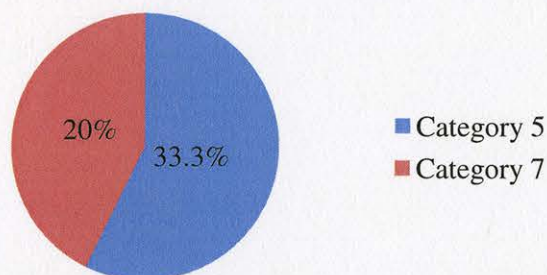
Figure 4. Percentage of responses per category for participants who were young adults.

Based on this data, responses did seem to change over time. Users began their posts expressing their condolences to the family with their responses falling more into categories 1 (Rest in Peace) and 7 (Comments about missing and loving the deceased and comments about loving family). In less than one month, users began to make more postings regarding memories they had with the deceased.

<center>Between Age Groups</center>

Responses were also analyzed between age groups. Based on the overall data, fifty-one (19.6%) total responses fell into category 7, which is described as comments about missing and loving the deceased and comments about loving the family. This category was ranked highest between all age groups. Each chronological age also showed differences in the percentage of responses that fell into categories 2 and 5. For example, the deceased who were school-aged had a smaller percentage of responses for category 2 than the deceased who were adolescents; the deceased who were young adults had a higher percentage of responses that fell into category 5 than any other age group. Young adult decedents were the only population who had categorical responses changing over time.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

For school-aged decedents, users were not making posts based on the cause of death; they were more fixated on making sure the family is aware that the deceased is missed and that they and their families are loved. The fact that all of the participants in this age group died as a result of gun violence/tragedies could contribute to the fact that users were less apt to talk about the cause of death. In addition to this unique variation, family members were more likely to thank users for their support, which could have also influenced the responses. It can be assumed that users may continue to respond in this manner because they feel as though their comments are helping the family members cope with their grief.

For adolescent decedents, most people expressed comments about heaven, God, and prayers. They were also using the Internet to express how much the deceased was missed and loved as well as how much the family was loved. It can be assumed that these comments could be due to the fact that the majority of participants in this age group died as a result of gun violence/tragedies and suicides as a result of bullying. The assumption can also be made that these comments could be linked to religion, as adolescents are beginning to think abstractly. It has previously been found that this could be linked to how they perceive death and its meaning (Leighton, 2008). The exploration and perception of the meaning of death could result in more religious responses. Religion is also the most common form of coping with a tragedy. A study showed that 90% of people used prayer to help them cope (Meisenhelder & Marcum, 2009).

The only comments made regarding the cause of death for adolescent decedents came mainly from one participant, who had thirty-four responses in which the deceased died as a result of overdosing on drugs purchased from Canada. It can be assumed that users are more focused on speaking about the cause of death when drugs or other addictions are involved.

For young adult decedents, one respondent who died from suicide had a response that fell into category 14, which is described as comments about the lack of postings. The respondent's mother stated "No one has left a comment since February, seems like everyone has moved on." Unfortunately, the data limits knowing whether or not users actually contacted her about her son. However, the mother's request for grieving in a non-public format is relevant to this study; in particular, what is this individual not getting from social media sites that others are, arguably, receiving. Furthermore, if users did not contact the mother, she may have unresolved grief while social media may have increased her ability to cope with the loss. The limitations of this study only make these speculations assumptions; however, future research exploring this limitation would be beneficial in determining whether or not social media assists with coping.

There was only one chronological age of decedents (young adults) that showed a categorical response change over time. In less than one month, users made more postings regarding memories they had with the deceased. This change correlates with typical responses from this developmental level for literature indicates that adults tend to resolve grief and move on with their lives quicker than any other age group (Bonnano, 2004). This was also shown with how the responses change for the young adult

decedent; users began to focus more on memories of the deceased and less on expressing comments about missing and loving the deceased.

The comments from users posting to school-aged and adolescent decedent profiles can be considered a type of complicated grief. Comments did not change over time, but rather consistently focused on the deceased being loved and missed. In other words, responses did not move past the death and, rather, focused on memories of the participant. These comments allude to these types of deaths (i.e., with school-aged and adolescent children) being more likely to result in complicated grief.

It was also found that the type of death seemingly caused users to respond in a certain manner. Those who lost their lives to gun violence/tragedies included a majority of responses focused on the deceased and family and not on the cause of death. Conversely, those responses that focused on the cause of death were from decedents who died from something that could have been prevented (e.g., overdosing on drugs). Responses such as "The Internet sure is getting worse, selling drugs to 16 year olds. It will need regulation soon because of all these idiots" indicates this.

Study Limitations

There are four major study limitations. First, the age of the users posting responses on the deceaseds' webpages were not examined. This could help determine how users are coping with grief and tragedy based on age. Due to the fact that some users block their personal data, the researcher was unable to determine the age of the respondents. Second, there was limited data from families of the deceased. Their postings provided limited information on how they were coping with the loss of their loved one. Third, comments unrelated to the deceased, but related to the cause of death

were not included in this study. Many users posted pictures and stories of other loved ones who died from the same cause of death as the decedents. Those responses were not analyzed to determine their level of coping with the grief. Finally, there was no research conducted on how other forms of media (i.e. television and radio) influence grief. The media may contribute to society being hyper-sensitive to certain issues. As a result, respondents could be more apt to focus on the sadness and grief families are experiencing.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Previous studies--along with this study's results--indicate that social networking sites are being used more frequently as a way of dealing with grief and loss. Research indicates that society is using the Internet to connect with peers. It also shows that society is using social media to communicate emotions in a non-threatening and comfortable manner. The results of the study correlate with this research; they indicate that society is using social media as a form of support and comfort in times of loss.

Further research on the effect of social media on grief processes is needed for the medium of the Internet to assist in therapy is becoming increasingly popular. Review of how the respondents' developmental levels affects grief is particularly necessary with the aforementioned changes influencing each group differently. Although not particularly analyzed in this study, showing pictures of those who have passed from similar conditions should also be addressed. Further research in these areas will help practitioners and social media developers support grieving families and the public.

APPENDIX

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
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NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
  Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 13030504
PROJECT TITLE: The Effect of Social Networking on Grief
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COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education & Psychology
DEPARTMENT: Child and Family Studies
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 03/18/2013 to 03/17/2014

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board

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