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“*Help me. I am so alone.*” Online emotional self-disclosure in shared coping-processes of children and adolescents on social networking platforms.

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Abstract: Losing a close relative or friend is a traumatic event for anyone, especially for children and adolescents. This article investigates the motives and patterns of children’s and adolescents’ interpersonal online communication on bereavement platforms. A qualitative content analysis of two different youth bereavement platforms ($n = 21$ threads; 319 postings) illuminates how one common feature is the verbalization and illustration of missing support in the off-line world. The substantial usage of social network platforms can be considered an extension of children’s and adolescents’ personal social environment. Furthermore, topics on bereavement platforms ultimately go beyond grief, as children and adolescents also include emotions such as hope, gratitude and cohesiveness. Communication within online bereavement communities thus enables a process known from offline communication as transformation from a loss-oriented to restoration-oriented coping (Stroebe and Schut 2010, p. 277).

Keywords: social network sites (SNS), emotions online, children and adolescents, bereavement platforms, interpersonal communication, social sharing of emotions

1 Introduction

Losing a close relative or friend is a traumatic event for anyone. Yet, when children and adolescents lose a loved one, the implications are far-reaching. The loss of a significant person has direct effects on young mourners, their

Note: The citation “Help me. I am so alone.” in the article title is an original quote from children’s bereavement platform “Kindertrauer.org” [Children’s sadness; will be abbreviated CS].

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emotional world, concept of life and identity. An understanding of their grieving processes is vital. At the same time, taking into account the relevance and growing numbers of social net platforms, such as specifically designed bereavement platforms, this article investigates why and how young mourners deal with their emotions online. An extensive literature overview shows that support groups for children and adolescents have been made subject to research in diverse offline environments (cf. Huss and Ritchie 1999; Zambelli and DeRosa 1992). Furthermore, for most children and adolescents, using online communication, especially social net platforms such as Facebook, is an essential part of daily communication routines (O'Neill and Staksrud 2014; Peach, Bell, and Spartariu 2012; Winsor and Blake 2012). Yet, the online communication of bereaved children and adolescents still leaves many questions unanswered. The study focuses therefore on the motives behind the use of SNS, and the inherent emotional online communication patterns of children and adolescents. As the following quote highlights, young mourners turn to SNS in search of emotional support, even years after the disruptive event.

"This year is the third one without my Dad. ... He was just so present today... The day after tomorrow is his third day of death and I am just scared..." (F. in Youngwings)¹

As the quote denotes, children and adolescents make use of SNS in sharing emotions of personal grief caused by the loss of a loved one. But what motivational incentives lie behind the use of the social web in the communication of such an emotion as personal grief? How do children and adolescents use SNS for such emotional communication? Thus, the leading questions of the analysis, which addressed three components, were:

1. Why do children and adolescents use the social web in their grieving processes? (Motive)
2. How do children and adolescents deal with their loss? (Process)
3. How does virtual interaction concerning personal bereavement affect children and adolescents? (Effect)

Investigating those central leading questions, the first part of this paper scrutinizes the relevant theoretical perspectives as well as existing research gaps. In the second part, the analysis will be laid out, results will be put into context and implications for further research will be elaborated.

¹ The quotations cited throughout this article were translated from German into English. The colloquial style of language was maintained.

1.1 Children and adolescents and emotional self-disclosure in computer-mediated communication

For a young person, the loss of a loved one can cause severe disorientation and insecurity. This is especially true when a child or adolescent loses a close friend or relative, a “significant other” (Mead 1934). Attachment theory (Bowlby 1982) highlights that the proximity to a familiar caregiver is essential in identity formation and self-construction of young individuals (Maccoby 1992). Likewise, parental and family caregiving experiences in all stages of childhood development are associated with individual variations in secure base script knowledge in young adulthood (Steele et al. 2014). Hence, the loss of a significant other inevitably marks a loss of stability in orientation and accordingly has a direct impact on the identity of the young mourner (Worden 1996).

Adolescents and children who have been raised in digital surroundings use the internet in their very own and natural way. This may lead to emotional, even intimate online-disclosure in bereavement. Today’s youth is thoroughly acclimated to the digital way of life and communication (Buckingham 2006). In a recent study, Antheunis, Schouten, and Kraemer (2014) provide findings that the role of SNS in early adolescents’ social lives is to be seen as positive with respect to friendship quality and bonding social capital.

Furthermore, research evidence suggests that computer-mediated communication reveals high degrees of self-disclosure. Based on a series of studies, Joinson finds evidence that self-disclosure is even greater in computer-mediated communication than in face-to-face communication. He explains this with the factor of “visual anonymity and heightened private/reduced public self-awareness” (Joinson 2001, p. 192). In this vein, Tufekci (2008) uncovers that privacy concerns were not of much relevance to students’ self-disclosure on online SNS. Social network sites allow children and adolescents to perceive themselves as members of an emotional community, without local or national boundaries (Misoch 2006). As Radcliffe, Lumley, Kandall, Stevenson, and Beltran (2007) observe, social disclosure of one’s writing has broad benefits. Yet, research on offline *social disclosure of distress* still provides contradictory results. On the one hand, disclosing distress promotes health and overall well-being by promoting social support (Carpenter 1987, p. 235). On the other hand, distress disclosure may diminish social support, a result that Carpenter calls “ironic” (1987, p. 235). As the analysis of *offline self-disclosure* of stress and suffering reveals, people disclosing psychological distress might be rejected by strangers (Coyne, Aldwin, and Lazarus 1981). However, King and Heller (1986) argue there is little sound evidence of a unique response to self-disclosure in depressive emotional states.

Based on this, the article argues that children and adolescents may use SNS for emotional self-disclosure with like-minded people who have lived through similar traumatizing experiences. The reciprocal exchange might engender *social validation* and *emotional understanding* and the much-needed *emotional support* that may not be accessible in the offline world. Accordingly, this article includes research on disclosure of bereavement, taking the sociology and psychology of emotions as well as communication analysis into account. The interdisciplinary conceptual underpinnings promise fruitful insight into the emotional spectrum within online communication.

2 Realizing loss and managing grief. Death and dying from a child's and adolescents' perspective

The understanding of life and death is a primary factor in the emotional development and maturity of children and young adults. How this interrelated connection is seen, realized and understood is strongly related to the cognitive and emotional development of the child and adolescent and their concepts of finality and irreversibility which is developed during this period of growing-up (Worden 1996). Even though, as Bowlby (1994) reveals, toddlers are aware if something is taken away from them, the distinctive understanding that life can and will be over at some point is not accessible to children until the preschool age (Bowlby 1994). The concept of death is then gradually developed at the approximate age of seven, with the understanding that all living beings must die at some point (Piaget 1978; O'Connor 2004). It is the realization of death as an irrevocable loss of a loved person, that grieving becomes pertinent. Adolescents have an understanding of life and death, but they are in a fragile mental state, still finding their identity, their personality, their sense of purpose and place in life. The death of a loved one can lead to a relapse into one of the previous stages of grasping the concept of death (Worden 1996).

The emotional state of grieving fulfils a vital psychological purpose: Ideally, bereavement and grieving initiate a process of dealing with the loss of the loved one, also known as *coping* (Aldwin 2007). The situation that is perceived as a stress factor is examined and the subsequent stages of processing are initiated (Holland and Holahan 2003; Maes, Leventhal, and de Ridder 1996). Life as it has been before will not recur and grieving will not be brought to a definite close after a period of time. Yet, the child and adolescent can regain a positive

understanding of life and find a new perspective for him- or herself. This process of *loss-oriented* and *recovery-oriented coping* displays a natural coping strategy caused by an emotionally challenging situation. As Stroebe and Schut (1999) highlight:

- “Loss-orientation refers to the concentration on, and dealing with, processing of some aspect of the loss experience itself, most particularly, with respect to the deceased person” (p. 212) while
- restoration-orientation is “focusing on what needs to be dealt with (e.g., social loneliness), and how it is dealt with (e.g., by avoiding solitariness)” (p. 214).

Coping with the loss of a loved one can take many forms. Owen, Fulton, and Markusen (1982) indicate that the age of the child and that of the parent, as well as their closeness of relationship can be considered underlying variables. The stronger the bonds with a parent or other loved one are; the more distressing is the loss. Sprang and McNeil (1995) highlight that distress in young children may be manifested in their play as well as recurring nightmares. Balk (2009, p. 17) points out that death has “cascading effects” on adolescents that may impede their entire further development, while McCarthy (2009, p. 25) stresses the importance of social bonds and the sense of reality that is at stake. He equally emphasizes that bereavement always includes psychological as well as social aspects (McCarthy 2009). In regaining meaning (Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis 2014), the “social environment is essential as it engenders a recovery process and facilitates meaning structures” (Döveling 2015a, p. 109). Framing the experience, positioning it in a context through the help of others is crucial. Interacting with others can help in recognizing, realizing and finding a meaning for one’s personal situation (Luminet, Bouts, Delie, Manstead, and Rimé 2000) and also lead to the much-needed support from the social environment (Rimé, Mesquita, Boca, and Philipot 1991).

Thus, one highly essential characteristic of coping with the loss of a loved one is social support: Bereaved children and adolescents need encouragement and understanding in order to manage their grief (Pierce, Sarason, and Sarason 1996; Stroebe and Schut 1999). The social environment is crucial in finding a meaning for the loss (McCarthy 2009); and it is imperative in order to regain a sense of self. As such, mutual exchange and social support, the “social sharing of emotions” (Rimé et al. 1991), represent a fundamental method of coping. Social sharing of emotions embodies social reciprocity, which is given and received as an emotional resource (Pierce et al. 1996; Stroebe and Schut 1999). In sharing reciprocal empathy, an active communion with the others’ emotional situation is expressed (Eisenberg 2000).

As known from post-traumatic analysis in children (Feather and Ronan 2010; Joseph, Williams, and Yule 1997), the relief that is felt after talking about a traumatic event is based on its function of being able to “work through and understand what has happened to them” (Lewis 1999, p. 53). It is this insight into offline coping mechanisms that leads this investigation of the online management of grief. Online emotions and the online management of grief need to be considered social phenomena which are correspondingly influenced by inherent intergroup relationships comparable to those in direct encounters (Jakoby 2012).

2.1 Grieving online. Socio-emotional processes in online communities

For children and young adults, several difficulties may hinder the grieving process: If a death has occurred within the family, the close family may not be able to support the child or young adult, as they are captured in their own grief; and are not able to focus on the needs of the child or adolescent. Moreover, cultural attitudes, norms, values and customs come into play that may hinder the open expression of grief. This process gives rise to Hochschild’s (1983) concept of ‘feeling rules’, which argues that people feel emotions according to cultural normative prescriptions. As Yamamoto and Felsenthal (1982) underline, adults perceive the situation differently from children and adolescents. Adults may use a different lens in interpreting, managing and coping with the situation (Yamamoto and Felsenthal 1982). In this context, Hogan and Balk (1990) raise the question about mothers’ perception of the grief of their adolescents; querying their accurateness and reliability. A young person requires an understanding from someone using a common lens in interpreting the distressing event (Hogan and Balk 1990). In searching for another environment of understanding and support, he or she may turn to an online support platform, where not only the attention but also the emotional alignment that is not always available in their immediate surroundings can be found.

Collins (1984) characterizes the interaction that is set in the emotional communities in offline settings as “emotional energy”. In this sense, socio-emotionally interacting with each other harmoniously, and supporting the other affects social solidarity within the community. Group-specific symbols can be employed which represent the affiliation with a specific group and have the potential to engender “interaction ritual chains” (Collins 1987, p. 198). Those group symbols include visual images which are primarily used to enforce emotional messages, and based on their associative logic, may not solely be encoded nor

decoded with words alone (Kappas and Müller 2006). Taking this into account in the analysis of online communication, visuals then may reinforce text messages and may equally expose new ways of communicating that correspond to the communicative needs of the young mourners. So-called emoticons as simplified visual signals of portrayed emotions thus may support, underline and accentuate the emotional message (Derks, Fischer, and Bos 2008; Dresner and Herring 2010; Misoch 2006; Wagner 2009; Walther and D'Addario 2001) in online interaction rituals chains.

Due to trust and confidence in each other, social interaction about a sensitive emotional topic primarily happens face-to-face and with individuals who know one another. However, the interaction and the emotional support that is given in the real (offline) surrounding may not be sufficient or it may be restrained by "disenfranchised emotions"² (Doka 2008) or imposed "emotion management" (Hochschild 1983). Therefore, the question arises whether the social sharing of emotions is then extended to a group of anonymous individuals on online support platforms (Gary and Remolino 2000; Radcliffe et al. 2007).

Within online communication, Bambina defines two primary roles that may apply to users of online bereavement communities: "[G]ivers, who supply each other and the takers with support" and "takers, who do not provide anyone with support" (Bambina 2007, p. 115). Those role patterns evolve dynamically and can change according to the needs of the other online users (Bambina 2007).

Summarizing the research lines laid out above, it was disclosed that the loss of a loved one is a devastating experience in the life of a young person (Balk 2009) which ultimately causes a process of coping (Aldwin 2007). Within this coping process, the social sharing of emotions (Rimé et al. 1991) needs to be considered a fundamental trait. The research findings in offline communication equally revealed the necessity to take the social reciprocity in emotional communication into account, and include ritual interactions, as Collins (1984) emphasizes for the offline world, into the analysis of online management of grief. Insights into online communication disclosed the necessity to include role structures in the analysis of interpersonal online support. Furthermore, diverse perspectives in self-disclosure revealed heterogeneous findings. Thus, the study of online patterns of socio-emotional self-disclosure of children and adolescents promises new insight into understanding online shared coping-processes of children and adolescents.

² Disenfranchised grief is an expression for grief that is neither socially validated nor supported (Doka 2008).

3 Qualitative content analysis

An extensive qualitative content analysis of two platforms for grieving children and adolescents in Germany (with a sample of 21 threads and 319 postings) was conducted over a period of one year (from 11/2012 to 11/2013).

3.1 The sample

Following an in-depth exploration of platforms in Germany, the two largest SNS with similar technical features were chosen. Both platforms addressed children and adolescents and offered *interactive chat forums* for the users. SNS which only provided expert advice were excluded. Platforms that just provided the opportunity to, for example, go to a virtual church or a playground and not an option to interact amongst the users were also not included in the analysis. The most active and currently used platforms were then chosen. One of the platforms was designed with a predominant focus on child support (Kindertrauer [Children's grief]), yet is open to all age groups, and the other (Youngwings) aimed mainly for the 12–21 age group. Both platforms provide instruments of diverse visual communication: Users are able to implement emoticons in both platforms, and even submit their own drawings on Kindertrauer [Children's grief] platform. In addition, visuals such as virtual candles were included on the Children's grief platform.

The sample consisted of most recent threads collected in both platforms over a period of four weeks (Nov.–Dec. 2012). The criteria for selection were (1) most recent threads and (2) threads with the largest number of postings in order to ensure coding of developments of communicative structures. After gathering screenshots from all threads that fulfilled the above criteria, the material was compared and the most current and lengthy threads were chosen. This two-step sample enabled sufficient scope and depth in the communicative processes and interactions and provided insight into communication motives, structures, and potential effects. Screenshots of all 319 postings were collected, password-saved and securely archived.

Due to their nonrestrictive visibility, the platforms examined in this study are to be considered as public domains, and compliance for scientific research was therefore not needed. On both platforms, the children and adolescents use nicknames to secure their anonymity. In most cases, these do not provide any clues to their recognition in their offline surroundings, such as information on gender or exact age. Yet, in order to retain their absolute anonymity throughout the study, the nicknames that belonged to the cited statements were encoded.

3.2 Method

The qualitative content analysis sought to uncover motivational communication structures and reciprocal interaction patterns and to highlight if and how children's and adolescents' online communication can be considered a constitutive element within their coping processes. The qualitative analysis enabled a comprehension of the central leading *motives, structures, goals, patterns* and *inherent roles* within the platforms. Derived from, and based on, the theoretical background and the research questions laid out above, the principal aspects of the textual material were scrutinized. In addition, visual communication patterns were examined in regards to their specific functions within the online conversations.

Following the research questions, central aspects of the text interpretation were set into categories, which were carefully founded and based on their reliability, revised in 'feedback loops' (Mayring 2000) within the process of analysis. Reliability was granted through a set of six coders. Category definitions and operationalizations were laid out and exemplified with prototypical text passages. Rules for differentiating diverse categories were formulated that corresponded to theory and material. These were completed gradually in a critical intersubjective feedback-development and revised within the progression of analysis. Previously elaborated empirical and theoretical insight enabled a conceptual framework (Marshall and Rossman 2006). As such, the explorative analysis of the inherent content in addition to the theoretical background led to the main categories of analysis. In the development of categories, these were continuously enhanced so as to correspond to the data and then investigated further using the online material. Through this combination of inductive and deductive qualitative content analysis (cf. Beck and Vowe 1995), patterns of emotional communication were disclosed and insights into fundamental interactional disclosure-patterns were gained. Emoticons as simplified visual signals of portrayed emotions as well as the use of symbols and itemized depictions such as drawings were likewise integrated as essential aspects into the analysis.

4 Results

4.1 Missed support in the offline world

In regards to the first research question which asked for the central motives underlying the use of online platforms in grieving processes, fundamentally interrelated meaning structures in online communication of emotions were dis-

closed. The qualitative content analysis illuminates how one common feature is the verbalization of the fundamental need for social sharing and illustration of missed support in the offline world. The social net platform creates a space for support, for release and for disclosure:

“The death of my father has deeply hurt me and it is so hard to understand this finiteness (...). It is only pure sadness and almost impossible to live a life without him, he is everywhere and omnipresent and then again not. I miss him so much. [...] I would really like to talk about this with others, maybe people who have been through something similar.” S. [CS]

Children and adolescents use bereavement platforms as an extension of their own personal social environment, particularly when they do not feel sufficient emotional support offline.

Dealing with a child’s bereavement is a challenging experience for the social surrounding, at school and at home, for teachers and for fellow students, as one child, 13, who lost her mother, reveals:

“When I came to school, all my classmates were acting as if nothing had happened.” (Anonymous [CS])

Equally, the offline support that a young person has in his or her own home may be disrupted due to the death of a close relative or friend. Parents may not know how to interact with their child anymore, as the following quote highlights:

“My parents don’t understand me at all. They just tell me stupid things that won’t help me.” (J. [YW])

Bereavement platforms become vital resources in coping processes as children and adolescents can open up to those who understand their feelings. Children and adolescents can find a common ground with peers using a similar lens and language which leads to a reciprocal understanding that they are not alone. The similar emotional experience has a binding function between users of the online platform, which becomes a community.

4.2 Processes and effects in online regulation of grief

Focusing on the second research question, the analysis disclosed that the online management of grief cannot always easily be separated into categories of process and effect. Instead, online grieving mechanisms need to be considered non-linear as ongoing developmental stages reveal processes as well as effects.

As such, in the process of social sharing of emotions, a positive thought can be a remarkable improvement and thus signal an effect in the emotional well-being of the child or adolescent. At the same time he or she may still feel deep grief and the sense of loss. Thus, the processes explicated in the following section are also linked to gratifications as relief from the grief.

4.3 Interactive solidarity online

Examining how children and adolescents deal with their loss online, the analysis discloses that next to the overwhelming and devastating emotions of deep grief, additional emotions play a significant role in online interaction patterns. The following online conversation brings to light how young users exchange their manifold emotions, such as gratitude.

“Thank you for writing to me and for trying to help me, D. [...] It is so hard to find people that are willing to talk about death or who have endured a suicide in the family!! It seems like people are ashamed of what happened and try to hide it... what a sad world! Thank you for your kind words!” (S. [YW])

As the conversation continues, it becomes clear that not only S. is thankful for D.’s willingness to share, but in return, D. also feels alleviated due to the sharing of S.:

“I just read your posting and it touched me incredibly! I can absolutely understand you and your feelings and thoughts. Thank you for writing me and I would love to talk to you more often.” (D. [YW])

As the quote highlights, open disclosure and exchange of a multiplicity of emotions without normative regulations need to be considered vital interactional resources in bereavement network sites. Young users reciprocally help and support each other. As previously revealed, Collins characterizes such mechanisms “emotional energy” (Collins 1984): It is the interactive solidarity and the empathic support that reveals positive effects in online social solidarity. Empathic emotional exchange patterns within online interaction thus need to be considered vital resources on bereavement platforms. They structure situations, enable the finding of a meaning for a devastating event, and lead to patterns of reciprocal understanding. Due to increasing reliance on each other and assurance that all emotions are allowed, communication about sensitive, emotional topics is enabled. Social sharing of emotions can therefore be extended to a group of anonymous individuals (Gary and Remolino 2000). The concept of ritual interaction, as Collins (1984) emphasizes for the offline world, can thus

equally be found in the online world. Within the interactional ritual dynamic, the users are not trapped in their bereavement, they also feel gratitude and appreciation for the exchange of social support:

“Thank you for your kind words. I like writing to you and always feel better after.” (L. [YW])

Although the young mourners do not know each other in person, the communicative sharing of empathy creates an emotional closeness. J. (see quote below) points out that telling her story and expressing her feelings has upset her and made her relive her pain, which then ultimately led to an explicit appearance of relief:

“As I wrote that, all the pictures in my head came up again and I had to fight tears. But still I think it was good to finally get it out of my head and write it all down.” (J. [YW])

This resulting relief from sharing emotions not only confirms current findings on therapeutic effects of interpersonal communication for traumatized children in the offline surrounding, but can also be found in online communication in a group of like-minded people. Within this process, reciprocal empathy needs to be considered the underlying key to social support in the bereavement platform. Empathy forms the foundation for social support and solidarity between the young bereaved and needs to be seen as a basis for the gratifications that are being experienced. Young griever find confirmation in their emotional state, a deeply shared understanding, support and encouragement that they often lack in the offline world.

4.4 Visual communication

In further answering how children and adolescents cope with their loss online and communicate on the platforms, the analysis also displayed that children and adolescents use visual means to share their emotions. In addition to the textual communication of empathic social support, visuals reinforce text messages and equally enable ways of interacting that correspond to the communicative needs of the young mourners. As such, emoticons used in the network sites mostly fulfill three principal functions:³

1. Affirmative interpretational function: Emoticons visually underscore the interpretational framework, as they display aspects that may be difficult to formulate, for example, the expression of grief:

³ These are the predominant and distinctive functions as found in the online sites. This distinction is of a methodological nature.

“My grandma just told me that my grandpa will only live for a couple more weeks. 😞 I am just so scared!!” (I. [YW])

2. Toning function: Emoticons are used to display emotions like community feelings, gratitude or underscore ironic statements, as seen in the example below:

“No worries, you can always fire questions at me! 😊” (L. [YW])

3. Complementary function. The written message receives a supplementary meaning through the emoticon. The emotional message is thus complemented, as the following example demonstrates:

“I can’t imagine that there won’t be anything after death. [...] There’s always something there, isn’t there? Wow, we’re getting really philosophical here... 😊” (S. [YW])

In addition, on the Children’s Grief Platform, as this platform places its focus on the special needs of younger mourners, symbols such as hearts or balloons were employed that fulfilled functions of emotional expression in unilateral interpersonal communication with the deceased loved one.



For Daddy: “My dear Daddy, Today is your birthday and you cannot celebrate it with me and Mom. We both miss you and want you to come back so badly. Mom says that I will see you some time again. But it’s not going to be soon. I love you, Daddy. Many, many kisses from your J.” (J. [CS])

Children and adolescents use symbols such as balloons (see above) as resources in their interaction chains. Children engage in diverse forms of visual communication such as hearts made of hands or gummy bears, powdered sugar cakes or in personal drawings which they submit to the platform, as this example demonstrates:



Figure 1.

In this drawing, L. expresses her grief through the many crying clouds. Yet, when one looks closely, she draws her father with wings in the clouds, also shedding tears and leaving puddles on the ground. L. is left behind with her mother, both unprotected, without an umbrella.

As revealed above, SNS allow children and adolescents to communicate with the deceased in a direct way, in visuals and in writings. This pertains to current research which challenges the concept that continuing relationship with the deceased is to be considered as ‘complicated’ or ‘unresolved’ grief (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 1996). This interaction with the deceased indicates similarities with the ritual of prayer and indicates the continuous bond with the loved one.

Children and adolescents thus display emoticons as well as other ritualistic symbols like hearts. Virtual interactions as blowing up balloons for a deceased parent, as well as addressing the deceased and sharing emoticons such as crying or smiling expressions, illustrate the complexity of childlike and adolescent-like emotional communication, similar to those in real life.

4.5 Emotional gratification: From taker to giver – from loss orientation to recovery orientation

The third research question addressed the effects of virtual sharing of personal grief on children and adolescents. Children and adolescents may utilize the online community over a long period of time, sometimes over years as the first quote illustrates. In the course of their diverse online interactions and encounters, the young mourners attain multiple forms of emotional gratification, they share and find emotional understanding, and create a community which may act as a refuge.

In addition, the central effects of the online interactions go beyond a short-term gratification of relief. As a conversation continues and intimacy increases, the depth of the conversation intensifies, it gradually includes more topics aside from death, and the empathic relationships between the users evolve and deepen. Consistent with the concept of “self-disclosure”, as known in offline surroundings (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, and Margulis 1993), children and adolescents open up in an online-conversation. Interpersonal online sharing of emotions influences the bereaved child in a positive way, engenders interactive emotion regulation processes, and enables cognitive strategies in managing bereavement. The findings reveal that SNS promote personal empowerment and a shift of attentional disposition within online *emotion regulation* (Döveling 2015a). While the grieving process will not be concluded for months, years or

ever, the online communication with like-minded individuals who are predominantly in the same age group enables and reinforces the coping and recovery process and guides a way back into life.

Another main result in the analysis of interactional patterns is an interactive role change from taker to giver. In the course of emotional interaction and gratification, one central effect is what can be called a 'role transitioning effect'. Based on Bambina (2007), this term is utilized in order to explain the communicative shift of roles that can be experienced throughout a conversation. A young mourner who has been in the (virtual) community of grieverers for a while has evolved in his coping process and thus the online communication structure changes. He or she is now able to support other users with informational or emotional support. As the first of the two following quotes reveals, B. needs social support:

"Does anyone of you know why I think like that? Do you think the same way? Or is it just me?" (B. [YW])

Further on in the conversation, B. has evolved in her grieving process and through the social support of the community, she has developed useful coping strategies. B. now supports other users in their emotion management, as the following excerpt highlights:

"I think that whether you can cry or not should not measure how sad you are or how much you miss your parents. What do you think?" (B. [YW])

Online social sharing of emotions thus has a relieving function, engendering coping processes from "loss orientation" to "restoration orientation" (cf. Stroebe and Schut 1999, p. 213).

In addition, the analysis of children's and adolescents' online communication revealed that the emotional interaction enhances a communicative development that ultimately leads to the exchange of topics that go beyond grief and death, as the following quote demonstrates:

"No, I don't speak another language. I am more of a mathematical talent. Were you born in Hungary?" (M. [YW])

As the quote above highlights, children and adolescents who communicate over a period of time start to ask questions about each other's lives, and may even evolve online friendships.

Summarizing the above, the findings disclose that in virtual interaction chains, empathic emotions on bereavement platforms become a vital resource that is exchanged. The anonymity of the social net platform enables children

and adolescents to receive emotional gratifications stemming from social support. The feeling of community ultimately leads to the rediscovery of everyday conversational topics. As exemplified above, during the interactional disclosure process, children and adolescents engage in different roles, asking and obtaining support. This corresponds to the research findings laid out above (Bambina 2007, p. 115). Due to reciprocal empathy in ritual online interactions, a taker can develop in his or her coping process and become a giver. The exchange of emotion in personal struggles can lead to bonding and a sense of online intimacy that engenders other conversational topics aside from death and bereavement. Online social sharing of emotions in the analyzed bereavement platforms has a relieving and supporting function, enabling coping processes from “loss orientation” to practices of recovery in “restoration orientation” (Stroebe and Schut 1999, p. 214).

4.6 Limitations

As with all analyses, the research design led to specific constraints and shortcomings. The generalizability of the findings is not ensured; neither is the external validity, due to the qualitative nature and the sample size of the analysis. As in all qualitative content analyses, the coding processes, though meticulously conducted, still cannot rule out any subjective interpretation. Additionally, the lack of prior research in this domain leads to the exploratory nature of the study, and discloses the need for further quantitative investigation into this domain. Furthermore, the analysis was conducted in Germany, scrutinizing two platforms. A widening of the scope, integrating culture-specific variables and other countries in online disclosure promises further insight. Additionally, gender-specific variables might play a central role. As the users in the analyzed platforms used nicknames, this aspect was not taken into account. Furthermore, bearing in mind that emotions are influenced by various factors, as age, gender and individual background of the user, these aspects bear fruitful potential for further analysis (cf. Döveling 2015b).

5 Discussion and implications for further research

Due to the expanding relevance of SNS as a means of opinion building, informational exchange and the exchange of emotions like grief, empathy, cohesive-

ness and gratitude, online communication is progressively increasing its importance in daily communication structures (Schmidt 2013). Children and adolescents recognize the possibilities of the online world and actively use social networking sites. Bereavement platforms offer ways for them to expand their own emotion management and regulation. In contrast to direct encounters such as in group therapy, they provide anonymity, enabling like-minded individuals within the same age group and without geographical boundaries to communicate asynchronously (Bartlett and Coulson 2011). SNS need to be considered places where one can find a common ground, share emotions and offer and obtain social support.

Bereavement platforms provide adolescents and children the opportunity to employ a multitude of communication options. In the analyzed platforms, emoticons are used as an affirmation, toning or as a means of complementing messages. In addition, SNS enable the usage of ritualistic symbols and the display of personal drawings. As known from literature on children's drawings (Neuß 2014), such artistic expressions can help in coping with a traumatic event. In addressing the deceased online, children and adolescents engage in ritualistic interactions, comparable to prayers. The analysis thus elucidated that SNS allow emotional communication in coping processes which are similar to those in real life. The theories and concepts such as the “social sharing of emotions” (Rimé et al. 1991) and “interaction ritual chains” (Collins 1987) were highly useful in understanding communicative patterns in children's and adolescents' online bereavement. Moreover, based on Bambina's (2007) insight into communicative roles that can be experienced throughout conversations on online support platforms, the role transitioning effect in children's and adolescents' online bereavement platforms became palpable.

SNS, as the above, provide a refuge for mutual support which ultimately engenders healing processes and enables the young mourner to find a pathway back into life. This study focused on a new field of research. The qualitative analysis allowed an understanding of the inherent communicative patterns in children's and adolescents' online management of grief. Yet, quantitative content analysis is needed to enlarge the scope in a representative manner.

Moreover, further clarification is required in comprehending intervening variables. Thus, the next steps in research are in process and lead to a more detailed exploration, taking factors such as cultural and religious background, age differences, gender as well as disinhibition in the anonymity of the social web into account. Gender (Stroebe and Schut 1999; Thoits 1991) and age (Döveling 2015a) can influence the choice of coping strategy. Young men may cope in a “rational and stoic style”, while females may choose “an expressive style”

(Thoits 1991, p. 119). These aspects would bear fruitful potential for further insight into this complex research area.

In addition, qualitative interviews with the bereaved as well as school teachers, parents and peers will enable a deeper understanding of the social surrounding. Applying diverse methods of research including analysis of children's and adolescents' online diaries and parental knowledge of their online communication could foster further insight into this highly relevant spectrum of research.

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