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# 'It was the easiest way to kind of announce it': exploring death announcements on social media through a dramaturgical lens

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## ABSTRACT

The internet and social media have radically transformed grief, mourning and memorialisation. This article addresses how online death announcements (ODAs) (where bereaved people use social media platforms to share news of a loved one's death) are extending beyond the role of public death notification previously limited to newspaper-published obituaries. We argue that ODAs are social performances embodying a diverse range of grief responses and offer a significant new direction in death scholarship. We draw on semi-structured interview data with nine people who announced the death of a loved one on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. Using a dramaturgical framework to interrogate this data, we argue that ODAs go beyond purely information-sharing devices and are, instead, complex performances which benefit mourners in a number of ways and are governed by tacit 'rules' of permission and content. To make sense of this, we analyse in turn the role of, and collaboration between, the 'actors' who post ODAs, the 'performance' of the ODA itself, and the 'audience' of friends/followers who 'receive' the ODA. We reveal that ODAs are social performances possessing multiple modalities and reveal the depth of complexity present in grieving online.

## KEYWORDS

Death announcements; social media; online grief; bereavement; Goffman; dramaturgy; obituaries

## Introduction

The internet is transforming the experience and performance of grief in contemporary society (Moreman & Lewis, 2014; Walter et al., 2012). Grief on social media can mirror offline practices as users adapt traditional rituals to an online environment (Egnoto et al., 2014; Gamba, 2018). However, social media also offers novel ways to grieve as social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram provide platforms to express online grief and facilitate the development of bereavement support networks (Gibson, 2015; Varga & Paulus, 2014). There is a wealth of research theorising how mourners memorialise the deceased online, maintain pre-death relationships with lost loved ones (see Bell et al., 2015; Kasket, 2012; Klass, 2006) and manifest grief on social networking sites. This research field is vast and has empirically focused on diverse communities

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including those bereaved through suicide (Krysinska & Andriessen, 2015), mothers who have lost babies through sudden infant death syndrome (Finlay & Krueger, 2011), bereaved spouses (Somhlaba & Wait, 2008), and even grieving pet owners (Eason, 2019; Harris, 2019).

Researchers have also examined the specific role of social media within contemporary deathscapes; highlighting that spatialities of death, remembrance and mourning extend beyond physical spaces of body disposal and memorialisation to virtual social networks (Maddrell, 2016). Others have demonstrated the role of social media in publicly grieving dead celebrities (Gach et al., 2017) and as a space for a 'post-mortem' of social performances following bereavement (Brubaker et al., 2013). Yet, despite this burgeoning field, there is very little research into death announcements on social media, why people post them and what function they may have. Here, we define online death announcements (ODAs) as social performances that are digitised when a bereaved user broadcasts the death of a loved one online via social media, namely Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. The lacuna of research into these online artefacts is reflective of a wider scholarly neglect of death announcements more generally, although some work has been conducted via content analysis of obituaries (Árnason et al., 2003; Bytheway & Johnson, 1996; Nagy, 2018).

As such, we argue for a significant new avenue in death scholarship to centre ODAs as artefacts that provide valuable insights into the evolution of online grieving. We undertook a small exploratory qualitative study of people who had announced the death of a loved one on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. Through semi-structured interviews, we explored the multifaceted nature of ODAs led by the question of *what motivations underpin announcing the deaths of loved ones on social media?* Our participants revealed that ODAs went beyond purely information-sharing devices and were, instead, complex performances benefitting mourners in a number of ways but were governed by tacit 'rules'. Given our conceptualisation of ODAs as performances, we mobilise, and critique, Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor to tease out their performative natures.

We begin with an overview of the changing nature of death, grief, and memorialisation online, drawing attention to the shift that social media sites have brought to experiences of grief. We then critically analyse Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, which has been widely applied to other aspects of social media use, but not specifically used to understand ODAs despite its applicability. A statement of our data collection methods leads into a presentation of our findings. We conclude by arguing in favour of a revised approach to Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor as applied to online death practices, which incorporates a greater fluidity between front and backstage, and a more flexible understanding of 'audience' which positions the ODA as a valuable social artefact. By analysing these motivations, this study aims to position ODAs as complex performances and important rituals central to the contemporary grieving process.

## Death and grief online

Printed death announcements, or obituaries, are well-established social artefacts. Research into obituaries repeatedly reveals that print memorialisation is strongly tied to an individual's cultural, economic, or social capital (Connerton, 1989) with 77% of the deceased in Fowler's (2011) sample of obituaries having been privately educated. While newspaper obituaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were mainly reserved for

the ruling class, contemporary newspaper obituaries continue to celebrate tales of upward social mobility, and 'meritocratic aspirations of the new middle class' (Fowler, 2011, p. 62). As such, memorialisation through traditional obituaries may seem unattainable for 'ordinary' citizens. Yet, in the more democratised and egalitarian digital space of social media, mourners possess agency over how they wish to announce death.

As a result of user autonomy built into its platforms (Rossetto et al., 2015), social media allows users to create their own content outside of traditional obituary gatekeeping processes or culturally-inscribed rituals (Graham, 2017). In this way, users can reject the elitism of the traditional obituary and commemorate their loved ones in individualised ways regardless of class, ethnicity, or gender. Moreover, unlike print-based obituaries, ODAs can be interactional devices where those reading announcements are not just passive information-receivers but can interact with them (Hume & Bressers, 2010). The democratisation of social media instils the act of memorialisation with a degree of universalism. As social media use grows, ODAs may become more common; increasing public exposure to death online.

The 'forced ubiquity' of the internet and social media (Falconer et al., 2011, p. 82) has made death and grief increasingly public experiences (Carmack & Degroot, 2014). Indeed, Egnoto et al. (2014) argue that online grief is increasingly seen as a more acceptable mode of dealing with bereavement. Meanwhile, M. H. Jacobsen (2016) maintains we are now in a period of 'spectacular death' 'in which death is gradually returning from its forced exile ... and is now something discussed and exposed in public through the media' (p. 17). Increasingly public practices surrounding death mean that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is marked by the 'pervasive dead' (Walter, 2019, p. 390), where the deceased have become a part of everyday life.

This continued symbolic presence of deceased individuals is accomplished, in part, discursively. Through continuing bonds, the bereaved address the deceased directly via social media, using language such as 'we will miss you' and 'watch over us' (Williams & Merten, 2009) to maintain the relationship they had prior to death. Cesare and Branstad (2018), for example, found that the mention feeds of deceased Twitter users consisted almost entirely of other users directly addressing the dead through their @username. Meanwhile, for Giaxoglou (2015), a transformation in the language of mourning online can indicate a shift from disempowerment to agency for the bereaved as discursive portrayals of space-time change from static to dynamic. For example, the change from addressing the deceased 'up there' to 'everywhere' can represent the mourner's development in managing their grief. Given this continued presence of the dead through social media, Bell et al. (2015, p. 386) suggest that 'the bereaved and the deceased become actors in a wider social forum' and are co-present on social media. Hence, social media offers novel ways to grieve that are not possible in the offline world.

The deep entrenchment of the internet and social media into everyday life has brought about significant shifts in grieving and memorialisation processes. For Gibson (2017), this embedding of the internet and social media has extended 'grievability' to include phenomena such as online platforms for expression, virtual co-mourners, and digital support systems. Online platforms may also transform individuals' relations to the self as a mortal subject (Gibson, 2007) fostering a desire to archive the self and others before death eradicates our identities (Samuel, 2013). As such, online grieving across social media platforms can implant the digital self into mourners' lives and challenge the norm of

physical connectedness (Kasket, 2012). In time, this may have implications on how we perceive mortality, for ourselves and our loved ones.

The existing literature provides valuable insights into how online death practices can be discursive yet visual, public yet private, and individual yet universal. However, there is little focus on the motivations behind the initial death announcement itself. This is reflective of a relative absence of research on ODAs as social artefacts in death scholarship. Yet, according to Barth et al. (2014) and Veszelszki and Parapatics (2016) announcing the death of a loved one by those closest to them has become a cultural universal and, as death practices have increasingly moved online, so too has the process of announcing death become digital. Therefore, by analysing motivations behind posting ODAs, this study aims to position them as complex performances and important rituals central to the contemporary grieving process. Given our understanding of ODAs as performances, we use Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor to capture their dynamic and interactional nature.

### **Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor**

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework uses the analogy of a theatrical performance to highlight the ways humans engage in 'impression management' and present themselves to others in diverse ways. The audience in receipt of these impressions provide subtle feedback so the actor can correct their performance and maintain a consistent presentation of the self they wish to project. The theatrical analogy continues in Goffman's treatment of the physical and symbolic spaces of such performances by distinguishing between frontstage and backstage regions. Performances on the frontstage are given with the audience in mind and carefully managed according to the formal and informal rules governing that particular space, while actors backstage are able to relax and often deliberately shed frontstage impressions.

Despite critiques of Goffman's work as focused too closely on everyday mundanities rather than wider social structures (M. Jacobsen, 2010), his dramaturgical metaphor has been readily applied to both social media activities, and behaviours around death and grief. Social media is posited as a digital frontstage space for impression management on Twitter (Murthy, 2012), through image-based self-presentation on Instagram (Smith & Sanderson, 2015) and in online dating profiles (Ellison et al., 2012). Research has also increasingly drawn attention to the multi-directionality of impression management where the impressions created through social media are intended to be consumed by both the audience and the actor themselves (Hockin-Boyers et al., 2020).

The dramaturgical metaphor has also been applied to understand death in various ways. For funeral workers, the performative aspect of death highlights the gulf between a successful front stage performance and the backstage setting of corporeal reconstruction and embalming. Turner and Edgley (1990) argue that funeral workers must be both competent frontstage performers and skilled backstage technicians. They must juggle compassionate care for the benefit of the bereaved and objective efficiency to maintain profitability (Bartlett & Riches, 2007). Page and Komaromy (2005) also invoke Goffman to suggest that hospital and care home staff enact a scripted, standardised performance to successfully and professionally manage death; any deviation from the script can elicit an awkward disquiet from onlookers. As such, death is positioned as requiring the correct performance and loyalty to the script from those involved. However, Page and Komaromy

(2005) also challenge the true need for the performance, as hospital staff maintain dramaturgical loyalty to preserving life even when death is inevitable and the patient cannot be saved. These studies not only situate Goffman at the centre of death rituals, but also raise questions about the function of performance in death and for whom it is intended.

However, there have been limited attempts to employ Goffman's dramaturgy to understand performances of grief online and theorise why deaths are announced so publicly in online spaces. By exploring ODAs on social media, the remainder of this paper draws out the complexity and diverse motivations behind them. In doing so, we understand the ODA as a performance which has multiple, intersecting benefits for those posting it.

## Methods

This research was designed using a qualitative approach and semi-structured telephone interviews to understand the motivations behind announcing a death on social media. Given that we were interested in individual motivations and behaviours, qualitative methods were the most appropriate for collecting holistic data which would also give participants time and space to explore their own experiences without adhering to a strict structure (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Given the sensitivity of the topic, we invoked the notion of 'verstehen' throughout interviews to ensure we were empathetic towards participants' behaviours and perspectives (Tracy, 2013).

Participants were recruited through a Twitter account set-up for the project which was then publicised through researchers' networks, retweets, and appropriate hashtags. As well as being practically beneficial (see Sibona & Walczak, 2012), there was an epistemological synergy between the research focus on social media and this method of recruitment. Furthermore, Twitter's user interface enables participants to engage with the research in their own time, anonymously and discreetly, thus decreasing the likelihood of emotional distress (Barratt et al., 2015). While recruitment through social media carries risks of homogeneity (Sibona & Walczak, 2012), for Tongco (2007), the inherent bias of purposive sampling may provide a richness of data from people who are experienced in the research topic. In our case, details of the research were mainly shared through academic thanatology networks which elicited responses from participants who had particular interests in the topic and who were comfortable discussing death and grief.

We recruited nine participants from diverse backgrounds and contexts (see Table 1). Nine participants is commensurate with studies such as McEwen and Scheaffer (2013) ( $n = 5$ ) and Brubaker et al.'s (2013) ( $n = 16$ ) studies of mourning on Facebook and provided an adequate quantity of data to explore the research question. The intention of our research was to provide an exploratory picture of social media activity following the death of a loved one rather than focus in on how different social groups may enact this process. Therefore, the heterogeneity of our sample was beneficial in enabling us to identify similarities and coalescences between participants to prompt a discussion around ODAs as social artefacts. At the same time, we are aware that the heterogeneity of our sample means we have not captured the experiences of particular groups of mourners stratified by, for example, age, gender or nationality. We discuss this in our concluding remarks below.

**Table 1.** Participant Demographics.

Participant	Age Group	Gender	Nationality	Religion	Date of Post	Relationship of Deceased	Platform(s) Used To Announce The Death
1	65–69	Female	USA	Jewish	July 2013 – Dec 2013	Mother	Facebook, NYT Obit
2	20–24	Male	Scottish	No Religion	Jan 2018 – Jun 2018	Father	Facebook
3	25–29	Female	British	No Religion	July 2018 – Dec 2018	Grandmother	Facebook
4	30–34	Male	Spanish	Christian	July 2019 – Dec 2019	Father	Facebook
5	45–49	Female	British	Christian	Jan 2019 – Jun 2019	Mother	Blog
6	25–29	Female	British	No Religion	July 2018 – Dec 2018	Grandfather	Instagram, Twitter
7	35–39	Female	British	Hindu	Jan 2018 – Jun 2018	Father	Instagram, Facebook
8	35–39	Female	USA	No Religion	Jan 2017 – Jun 2017	Sister	Facebook
9	30–34	Female	British	No Religion	Jan 2017 – Jun 2017	Father	Facebook

Data were collected via semi-structured telephone interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviews were supported by a topic guide which was used loosely and flexibly to ensure comfortable, flowing dialogue during the interview (Åstedt-Kurki & Heikkinen, 1994) and to allow new concepts and ideas to emerge (see Krauss et al., 2009). Prior to each interview, participants were asked to share with the interviewer a screenshot of their ODA which was used during the interview to prompt discussion and anchor the conversation in a tangible materiality (Bryman, 2008). These screenshots also encouraged 'auto-driving', in which participants use images to steer the interview towards topics that are important to them (Hurworth, 2003), thus increasing the potential for data not considered by the topic guide. The ODAs themselves were not intended to be analysed as we were interested in capturing bereaved people's thoughts and reflections *about* social media death announcement practice and motivations. As such ODAs were used only as interview tools to prompt discussion where appropriate. Moreover, since we did not intend to analyse ODAs separately, participants were under no obligation to share their posts and only 4 ODA screenshots were received, so meaningful analysis was not deemed possible. Below we discuss the implications of the decision not to analyse ODAs.

The ethical issues of interviewing bereaved people were considered. In addition to the standard arrangements for informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality, participants were provided with contact details for grief counselling services, should they wish to use them. The interviewer began each interview by sharing their motivations for the study which emerged from their own personal experience of bereavement. It was important to assure participants that this was a collaborative exploration into grief and not an exploitation of bereavement for the benefit of research.

As experiences of death and mourning are deeply personal and vary between individuals, identifying 'data saturation point' was challenging. However, after seven interviews, we found that participants were reporting similar themes. Following this, we undertook two additional interviews to be certain that we had reached a saturation threshold.

Following transcription, interview data were analysed thematically enabling 'themes that emerge from the informants' stories are pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experience' (Aronson, 1995, p. 2). Open coding was used to elicit themes within the data, enabling a data-driven approach to analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and limiting researcher bias. Through open inductive coding, it was possible to identify the ODA as a social performance. Themes of self-presentation, audience dynamics, and impression management were identified within participants' accounts, which led us to re-situate the analysis alongside Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor. It was then possible to theorise the performativity of ODAs through Goffman's concepts and categorise the study into discrete sections of 'Actor', 'Performance', and 'Audience'. This grounding of the study in Goffmanian ideas also provided an unintended outcome, whereby dramaturgy itself could be evaluated in its applicability to studying complex social media use.

## **The online death announcement as a social performance**

ODAs on social media mostly constituted a single post on the bereaved user's Facebook or Instagram account which not only announced the death, but also memorialised the deceased through anecdotes and an accompanying photo. The style of language varied



from post to post, ranging from formal, matter-of-fact broadcasts to a more euphemistic and informal announcement. For the majority of participants, the announcement was composed quickly;

P9: The point my sister rang me, [to the point when] I posted it, was less than half an hour.

Despite this speed, most participants expressed some hesitation about posting on social media, questioning whether it was appropriate. However, all participants used social media regularly, and understood posting an ODA was the most logical way to share information with geographically-separated friends and family;

P9: Because of how mobile we've been in our lives . . . , Facebook was better [to share information]. We move around so much now. Certain communities would have benefited from a post in the paper years and years ago. They're just not there anymore.

Yet, ODAs were not simply an asocial informational device to share news of a death with friends and followers. They were narrative in structure, imbued with an element of storytelling which reflected a responsibility to the audience for displaying such performative communication (Giaxoglou, 2020). As such, the ODA was framed as a performance which represented a multifaceted social act instilled with benefits for the person posting and those 'receiving' the announcement. Given this reciprocal function, ODAs were predicated on collaboration between what we understand here as the 'actors' and 'audience' to produce a 'performance'. This collaboration was governed by a number of tacit rules about who can post and what kind of content should be posted. In what follows, we explore in turn each of the elements in this collaboration (actors, performance and audience). For the actors, the 'performance' (i.e. the ODA itself) is the central catalyst which brings together 'actor' and 'audience' to mitigate grief through validation and support.

## The actors

ODAs relied on collaboration between the various people who were implicated, involved or interested in the death in question including spouses, children, friends, family and work colleagues. This collaboration was built on a tacit understanding of familial hierarchy rooted in closeness to the deceased. For Humphreys (2018), our online performances reinforce our social roles. Hence, ODAs reinforce the social structure of the family as mourners enact their given roles within a familial pecking order. Particularly important was the role of what Participant 1 called the 'number one mourner'. This role was not formally allocated but understood by participants as being occupied by the closest family member and carrying with it the responsibility of posting the announcement to social media;

P1: If you're the number one mourner, you have a responsibility. So there was a responsibility that we had on mom's death.

For the number one mourner, this perceived sense of duty can be linked to the concept of social obligation, often cited as a reason for action (Miller, 2006). Woods (2014, p. 333) argues it is important for 'any society is to manage the deaths of its members', which mostly occurs through the combination of complex socio-cultural traditions and civic procedures over time, thus inscribing a sense of duty on the bereaved. Implicit family hierarchy and

social obligation were revealed, whereby participants navigated tacit roles of duty and responsibility within family networks whilst simultaneously processing their individual grief.

Through the ODA, the number one mourner was able to reflect on their relationship with the deceased, and their (potentially adjusted) role within a family or friendship network. Participants described using the announcement to highlight the closeness of their relationship with the deceased;

P3: I was really close to my Grandma and knowing that other people also felt so positive towards her and so warm towards her. It made me feel really proud, actually, and it made me feel almost a bit smug.

Through this memorialisation, the ODA represented an opportunity for positive reflection and memory-making where grief, for many participants, took on a narrative element. This narrative transformation echoes the conceptualisation of 'timework' (Willersev & Christensen, 2013), performed by the actor to reconfigure their perception of the past. The ODA strengthens bonds between the deceased and the bereaved, thus enabling the dead to become co-present with the mourner, as opposed to confined to the past. Moreover, the archival nature of social media meant memories could be stored online and revisited, creating a portfolio of the deceased which the bereaved could continue to interact with over time.

## The performance

The ODA itself fulfilled multiple functions for the actors posting them. Fundamentally, it informed multiple people simultaneously of a person's death rather than the bereaved having to retell the same information repeatedly;

P3: It was the easiest way to kind of announce it, to put it up in one place where everybody's going to see it.

P7: It was quite helpful because it meant that people could know without me having to relive it over and over and over again. Talking through it every 10 minutes to new people. It was just too much.

For Taylor (2006), trauma is only experienced in the present through re-enactment. Hence, by actively reducing the number of retellings about the death, participants were able to protect themselves from re-experiencing grief (Brabant, 1990), as Participant 9 explained;

P9: Every time you repeat it, it's painful. It's part of the grieving process that helps you to heal instead of picking the scab all the time.

The ODA also served as a tool for impression management in providing a platform through which participants could justify their erratic or absent behaviour caused by grief. Many of our participants described altering their normal social media performances, or withdrawing from social media entirely, as a result of their grief. These altered performances and absences were perceived as deviant by the participants, as they run counter to normative expectations of positive performance on social media. Moreover, the 'forced

ubiquity' of social media (Falconer et al., 2011, p. 82) meant that participants felt compelled to return to social media to justify their altered behaviour to their audience;

P2: I had been pretty absent from my life. I wanted to explain why I had been the way I was over the last two weeks and why I was going to be that way for the next couple of months.

P6: To make sure people knew why I might be the way I am in the next few weeks. Ignoring people, being very snappy with people, I suppose.

Goffman (1959) acknowledges that humans can be impulsive or erratic but maintains that actors must put on a consistent performance for the benefit of the audience. He also claims 'the individual may come to feel ashamed of a well-intentioned honest act' (Goffman, 1959, p. 236) due to the possibility of the audience forming a bad impression of them, as described by participant 2;

P2: I had a lot of doubt in my mind that I was attention seeking. It kind of niggles on the back of your brain. Are people just thinking I'm looking for sympathy?

Despite initial hesitation, participants openly broadcasted their non-normative social media behaviour to the audience and justified these well-intentioned honest acts through their admission of grief. This still exhibits a form of impression management, but one that appeals to the audience through open honesty, rather than projections of a wholly-positive self. Given its function to account for unstable frontstage performances, the ODA might be understood as analogous to traditional mourning dress which was designed to convey a message to the audience that the wearer was experiencing grief and should be treated with care (Bedikian, 2008). While rituals such as mourning dress have declined in the late 20th century (Bedikian, 2008; Wouters, 2002), our data suggests that it has been replaced by a digital version through which users are able to broadcast and perform their state of mourning through status updates or profile pictures.

As well as justifying non-normative social media behaviour, participants described the ODA as a mode for expressing grief. In achieving this aim, the ODA was a personal performance of self-expression, rather than one intended for the audience;

P7: It wasn't for anybody else. It was just the things I was feeling that I felt I needed say. That all these emotions were boiling over inside of me and I had to get them out somehow. I felt like this was the best way to do it . . . There was no need to mask what I was feeling and putting it out there was my right and I took it.

The functionality of social media enabled the performance of complex emotions deemed inappropriate within the confines of 'commitments required with offline behaviour' (Egnoto et al., 2014, p. 299). In other words, effusive performances of grief on social media were understood to be acceptable in a way that they would not have been offline. This is, partly, because the social media audience is somewhat hidden and interactions are asynchronous, meaning that actors are not subject to immediate (negative) evaluations of their performances (Zarghooni, 2007) and performances (words, pictures, emoticons etc.) can be crafted over time (Aspling, 2011). Consequently, the performance of an ODA is grounded in self-expression which can help the bereaved make sense of their grief (Rossetto et al., 2015), personalising the experience and transforming grief into memory

(Gamba, 2018). Inasmuch, performance on social media is not simply self-projection, but also an opportunity for catharsis.

## The audience

While the audience are in receipt of ODAs (the performance), they are not just passive stakeholders absorbing the information. Unlike traditional printed obituaries, ODAs enable the audience to actively engage with the performance through comments and 'likes' which, in turn, give the actors assurances their performance is being seen. By engaging with the post, the audience collectively reinforces socio-cultural practices of grieving online (Tagg and Seargeant (2016) in Georgakopoulou, A. and T. Spilioti, 2016), thus validating the ODA as a social artefact. Given this reciprocity, Lee et al. (2014) describe social media as a personal feedback system. Participants explained that this feedback on their posts made them feel supported during a difficult time;

P1: I got a tremendous amount of support from people ... I heard from people who I would have suspected didn't even look at my posts anymore, who never comment on my Facebook posts, who never like anything. It felt great.

Participant 1's comment highlighted the diversity of audiences for the ODA performance. While some audience members are fairly obvious (close friends and family), social media also enables engagement from those who may be only tangentially related. Hence, the audience of social media is simultaneously both knowable and unknowable in that actors are able to see their friends/follower lists but do not know which of them are regularly engaging. The audience for an ODA, then, is somewhere between the unknowable public who would read a traditional printed obituary, and the knowable circle of close friends and family. This liminality liberates responses to the performance from obligations of the offline world resulting in an increased intimacy online (Lingel, 2013).

Many participants expected to receive positive responses from the audience and, in some cases, actively sought them out. These positive responses validated participants' grief as 'normal';

P3: I think it really was cathartic ... It validates your experience when you see that other people are responding to it and other people have commented. It feels less isolated.

P6: I thought, what do you do? How do you grieve? Am I feeling the right things?

By receiving messages of condolence and support, participants could ensure their grieving display was 'appropriate'. Compared to the offline world, the communicative nature of social media may provide more opportunities for mourners to check the 'normalcy' of their grief (Veszelszki & Parapatics, 2016) which positions the audience as an active agent within modes of processing grief.

However, feedback from the audience was not always or universally welcomed or needed by participants. Given that ODAs functioned as a mode of self-expression, participants described both rejecting the audience as the performance was a cathartic act but also craving a response to validate this catharsis. Participant 2 highlighted this ambiguity, switching between ambivalence towards the audience and their desire for audience responses to help mitigate the grieving process;

P2: I was putting my feelings into this post. It was like confirming it for myself. This is what happened. This is what I thought about him. It was like articulating how I felt. It took me a while to like figure out how I felt.

P2: I am going through a hard time and I do want my friends to support me and give me sympathy.

Goffman (1959) suggests that actors will select the kind of audience they wish to perform to, and will share the backstage area with a team of fellow performers. Given that social media users assemble teams through friends and followers, participants' displays of backstage behaviour alongside simultaneous support-seeking were performed with fellow members of the 'backstage team'. As such, social media enabled mourners to dissolve the distinction between front and backstage, establishing an open forum which facilitates public and private performances of grief concurrently.

## Concluding reflections

This article argues in favour of a significant new avenue in death scholarship which centres the ODA as a social artefact in need of further investigation. We have demonstrated that ODAs are not simply modes of communicating a death but, rather, performances which have diverse functions and are governed by a set of tacit rules. The ODA offers a window into audience dynamics and collaborative practices around death, family hierarchy, and the balance between self-expression and pleas for support. Through it, mourners can access a range of grief-mitigating functions that may not be so easily attained in the offline world. This implies the existence of a virtual grief-space where mourners can actively manage their bereavement in collaboration with other online users.

In conceptualising the ODA as a performance, we have mobilised Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor to demonstrate the connections and reciprocity between actors who post ODAs and their audience. Using Goffman in this way has not only enabled us to begin theoretically exploring ODAs as artefacts in themselves but also to explore the applicability of Goffman to online death and grieving processes more generally. While Goffman's (1959) notions of frontstage and backstage performances have significant traction in social media research, the rigid dichotomy fails to capture the complexity of grief performances on social media which are concurrently public and private, displaying both frontstage and backstage characteristics. While researchers such as Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) and Zarghooni (2007) have attempted to add nuance to Goffman's model by understanding the boundaries of front and backstage, the separation of front and backstage is still championed. However, by intimately expressing their grief online, our participants displayed backstage behaviour (i.e. self-expression, emotion) in the frontstage setting of social media. As Gibson (2007, p. 423) states, 'the desire to capture death, to expose and publish it is partly an effort to breach or transgress the space between public and private'. As such, the dual function of intimate self-expression and searching for support on social media is simultaneously public and private, individualistic and communal, and challenges the separation of front and backstage regions.

Moreover, Goffman's framework does not adequately capture the power dynamics in social media relationships. Through the dissolution of front and backstage, the audience becomes subject to whatever an actor broadcasts at any given time. 'Surprise encounters'

can often occur, whereby people are exposed to death online without warning or consent (Rossetto et al., 2015). Previous work has shown that social media users can feel discomfort at seeing other users' grief on social media (Brubaker et al., 2013) or deem the subject of death as too personal to be posted (Rossetto et al., 2015). While this can be mitigated through blocking or muting users, the algorithmic nature of social media can mean the audience continues to receive content related to the original ODA (e.g. targeted advertisements for memorial products). Moreover, given the nature of friendship networks on social media, the audience may continue to receive unwanted content from other users (e.g. memorialisation posts, photographs) on their timeline as other audience members engage with the performance.

This raises questions on the dynamics of power within online grief as the mourner defines and presents public/private boundaries at odds with the ethos of sharing, implicit within social media. Meanwhile, the audience's response to death can bestow the mourner with an undeclared position of power as a gatekeeper of 'sensitive' content (Gibson, 2014). Also reflected is context collapse (Humphreys, 2018); the user is unable to tailor content to multiple audiences and therefore, context is blurred as the online performance is received by all followers. Previous work has explored aspects of power and performance in online grief. Yet, by expanding Goffman's dramaturgical framework into the tacit motivations of ODAs and the power dynamics of social media relationships, it may be foundational in further capturing the complexity of expressing grief online.

There are some limitations in the present research. Firstly, our participants were not stratified by age or other demographic characteristics. While we took this decision deliberately to make more general conclusions about the motivations, nature, and function of ODAs, this means that nuances between different populations are not explored. For example, it is entirely possible that younger people, who are assumed to be 'digital natives', may have distinct codes and rules around announcing a death online compared with older adults whose ODAs may be more reflective of traditional print obituaries. In addition, this study does not consider the perspectives of those who maintain public/private boundaries around death and therefore never grieve online. While research is increasingly acknowledging the role of digital communications in death and mourning, it is important that the perspectives of those who do not grieve online are still explored. To capture the particularities of digital ODAs among different groups and the continuities and differences between online and offline death announcements, future research would benefit from comparing social media death announcement practices with more traditional obituaries and notifications.

Related to this, we have not explored the discursive content or schematic structure of ODAs themselves. This means that participants' reported motivations have not been compared with the content of their ODA. Future research could fruitfully employ discourse analytic techniques to explore the content of ODAs themselves. Moreover, given the interactional and visual nature of social media, discursive analysis could be extended to communications which stem from the ODA such as replies and re-posts and might also incorporate visual analysis of images and photographs which accompany ODAs and their resultant interactions.

Additionally, this study does not extensively address the temporality of grief, nor its trajectory. Time since bereavement varied by 3–18 months for the interviewees, meaning there were potential differences in how participants reflected on their experiences.

Since the study's aim was to investigate initial motivations behind announcing death online, time since bereavement or duration were not explored as factors in posting. Yet, ODAs are an archived snapshot of a moment in grief, which we might further interrogate to explore the emotional state of the mourner, and their management of death in an online setting.

Despite these limitations, this paper makes a novel contribution to death research in locating ODAs as a complex social performance involving collaboration between diverse groups of actors and audiences. As such, we demonstrate the value and importance of situating ODAs as social artefacts with multiple modalities. We have uncovered both implicit and explicit functions underpinning ODAs which highlight the depth of complexity present in grieving online. We have revealed novel insights into how online grief can be researched and as such, we are proposing a new arena of death scholarship which updates the anachronistic content analyses of past obituary work.

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## Data availability statement

Empirical data is available on request from the lead author.

## Disclosure statement

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