The Impact of Social Media on the Grieving Process

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Eastern Illinois University

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BY

Resa Ware

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The Impact of Social Media on the Grieving Process

Resa Ware

Eastern Illinois University
Dedication

This research is dedicated to all of the individuals out there grieving a loss. The pain you feel is unimaginable. May you never feel alone.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank many individuals in my life for the support, love, and encouragement through this entire thesis process:

My parents: I could not have actually finished this without you. Thanks for always supporting me during the ups and downs in this process. Mom, thanks for all of your brilliant advice throughout the writing process.

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IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON GRIEVING PROCESS

Abstract

In 2015 the Pew Research Center reported that 72% of adult Internet users are on Facebook and it continues to be the most used social networking site in the world (Duggan, 2015). Facebook is a source of social expression, connections, and support for others. It is becoming much easier to express feelings such as grief in an online setting. In fact, the online expression of grief has been found to empower individuals who feel that traditional grieving practices are ineffective (Carroll & Landry, 2010). The purpose of the current study was to explore the impact of social media (i.e. Facebook) on the individualized experience of grief, connections formed with other grievers online, and what motivates individuals to use social media as a grief outlet.

The Ware Facebook and Loss Questionnaire was distributed through Facebook to users at least 18 years of age that had experienced a loss or interacted with a loss through Facebook. Two hundred and three participants answered demographic and Facebook use questions as well as open-ended in-depth questions. The demographic and Facebook data were analyzed using frequencies. Qualitative data analysis led to one overall theme of support. Four other themes under support emerged including: social connectedness, contact with others, information handling, and memory sharing. Further research should include the use of face-to-face interviews. In addition, future researchers could expand the analysis to other social networking sites.
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Chapter One

Introduction

In 2013 a radio program host, Scott Simon used Twitter to document his mother’s illness and eventual death. Normally, he used his radio program or a simple recording or book to document his thoughts; however, Mr. Simon found that the “internet enabled him to celebrate his mother and mourn her in real time, creating the sense that an online community was collectively grieving with him” (Stelter, 2013, para. 7).

Grief is an individualized human experience. It is a normal human response to loss. Individuals and families must develop coping strategies to deal with the pain of the loss (Anderson, 2010). Society’s approach to grief is not immune to the impact of technology. For example, social media has become an outlet for many individuals grieving the death of a close member of the family, a friend, or sometimes even a complete stranger. As the virtual world opens up as a space for online memorials, support groups, and celebrations of life, more individuals are finding it easier to express their loss and grief through this forum than through more traditional means.

Thanatology is the term used to describe the scientific study of death and the practices associated with it (Sofka, 1997). Thanatechnology is the use of technology such as websites, informative videos, or computer programs to contribute to the study of thanatology (Sofka, 1997). In later years, researcher Karen Goldschmidt (2013) studied the topic extensively and concluded that a form of thanatechnology is the way individuals use the Internet to express their feelings of grief. During her research, Dr. Goldschmidt found that individuals use social media, specifically Facebook, to commemorate life events as well as memorialize those who have died.
Bereaved individuals in the majority culture of the United States are encouraged to quickly leave behind daily feelings of grief, as well as accompanying memorialization rituals, and to return to their typical daily activities (Carroll & Landry, 2010). Displays of grief tend to cause social discomfort, leading others to encourage the bereaved to “move on.” In contrast, online forums such as Facebook provide a “dynamic and inclusive” environment in which to share feelings of grief with individuals who may be experiencing similar feelings (Carroll & Landry, 2010, p. 347) and are patient with lingering feelings of grief. Prior researchers have studied many aspects of the individualized experience of grief in the online world. However, technology is changing constantly and that means empirical evidence regarding grief and social media is changing constantly as well.

The current study aims to build on prior research regarding the grieving process and the use of social media, specifically Facebook. The study explored motivation for using Facebook to grieve, as well as the usefulness of the tool throughout the grief process. In a world that is becoming increasingly technologically based, actual human contact is decreasing. This places an importance on understanding how and why individuals are using virtual spaces such as social networking sites and other online forums to express strong emotions such as grief.

This study utilized exploratory mixed-methods, which included the use of a non-experimental survey developed by the researcher based on a previous study by grief researchers McEwen and Scheaffer (2013). Quantitative frequencies were analyzed using Qualtrics and Excel and a qualitative coding framework developed by researchers Corbin & Strauss was used to analyze narrative data.
IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON GRIEVING PROCESS

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to explore the impact of social media (i.e. Facebook) on the individualized experience of grief, connections formed with other grievers online, and what motivates individuals to use social media as a grief outlet.

Research Questions

1). In what way is social media (i.e., Facebook), used to make connections with others after a loss?

2). What motivates individuals to choose social media as a tool to make connections after a loss?

3). How does social media influence the grieving process in those that actively use it as a coping mechanism?

Definitions

1). Bereavement – the loss of something or someone, mostly by death (Granek, 2010).

2). Grief – the emotional reaction to a loss (Granek, 2010).

3). Mourning – a period of time in which a bereaved person outwardly expresses grief (Merriam-Webster, 2015).

4). Rituals - a ceremony or other type of remembrance with symbols of the loss incorporated throughout (Reeves, 2011).

5). Social Networking Sites – a website where individuals can create public profiles to connect with others.

6). Trolls – individuals who seek out other users to bully through social networking sites (Phillips, 2010).
7). Rubberneakers – individuals that wish to participate and share in the grief of other social media users with no intent to cause harm (DeGroot, 2014).

8). Parasocial Grief – the one-sided emotional reaction to a loss, for example the loss of a celebrity.

**Summary**

This chapter introduced basic concepts related to the study. Because the world is only growing technologically stronger, it is imperative to study how engagement with technology is impacting the individual grief process as well as how and why those who are grieving are using social media as an outlet. The following chapter provides a detailed review of the current literature related to the topics of consideration in this study. The chapter includes a brief history of grief, different types of grief, a brief history of social media and usage trends, common rituals and memorialization related to death, online grief, and the use of social media while grieving.
Chapter Two

Review of Literature

The following paragraphs review current literature regarding grief, the general use of social media, memorialization and mourning techniques in the physical world as well as the technological world, and current grieving practices on social media. This review describes current research related to past and current practices of grieving, both before the widespread use of social media became common and during its growth in contemporary society. It builds upon current research addressing the use of social media when grieving the loss of a family member, friend, or stranger. While the current study focuses on popular social media (i.e., Facebook), other examples of social media will be included in this review.

Grief and Loss

Bereavement is the loss of something or someone, mostly due to a death. Grief is defined as the emotions and reactions associated with a loss (Granek, 2010). Grief can be expressed in many different ways, and is impacted by the context in which it occurs. For example grieving is impacted by the relationship to the deceased and the means of death (Anderson, 2010). In the grand scheme of things, grief is a normal human reaction, but there is still great mystery surrounding the practice.

The study of grief. One of the earliest written records of the study of grief dates from the early 17th century. During this time, grief was thought to be potentially fatal and a leading factor in premature death (Archer, 1999; Granek, 2010). In fact, grief was recorded in public documents as the primary cause of death in several cases throughout the century (Archer, 1999). As research regarding grief became more prevalent,
researchers began publishing informational books. In 1651 Robert Burton published a book that stated that grief was thought to affect everyone at some point in his or her life (Archer, 1999). By the 19th century, grief was considered to be a condition of the human spirit. In 1812 Benjamin Rush published a book with a list of emotional and physical symptoms of grief including: (a) aphasia; (b) fever; (c) sighing; (d) loss of memory; and (e) development of gray hair. Rush also offered remedies for overcoming grief, including the use of opium, crying, and for very intense cases, bloodletting and purging (Archer, 1999; Granek, 2010). In 1872 Charles Darwin briefly discussed emotional expressions associated with grief and depression by studying aspects of each feeling, for example crying and facial expressions.

By the time the 20th century rolled around, Sigmund Freud turned the tables by studying grief through a psychological lens. In 1917 he published a famous essay “Mourning & Melancholia.” He integrated grieving concepts into his psychological studies and wrote several other essays within which his ideas regarding grief and mourning led to the creation of the term “grief work.” Grief work is something that all those who grieve must go through in order to complete the grieving process and move forward. However, Freud did not intentionally focus his work on grief on the pathology of the process. He believed that a grieving individual must do grief work to heal, but he also believed it was a slow process with no possibility of one hundred percent resolution (Granek, 2010).

In 1914 A.F. Shand created what is commonly viewed as the first psychological discussion of grief based on works of great poetry (Archer, 1999). Shand reported that poetry gauged human emotion, and he referred to grief as the “laws of sorrow” (Granek,
These laws state that there are four types of grief reactions: (a) active grief towards the outside world; (b) depressive grief; (c) bottled up grief; and (d) hyperactivity. Shand also wrote about continued bonds with the deceased and the importance of support for those who are grieving (Granek, 2010). Shortly, after in 1924, Karl Abraham contributed to the field by continuing the pathological, psychoanalytic study of grief that Freud initiated. Abraham also pointed out that there were not any set norms while mourning, but in order to heal from the loss, it was important to carry the deceased person inside of oneself at all times (Archer, 1999).

In 1944 empirical studies surfaced that worked directly with grieving individuals. In 1958 Marris published the first study of bereavement among community samples. This provided a more organized description of the typical pattern of grief (Archer, 1999). Other researchers followed suit and continued to build a solid pathological description of grief. Another major contributor to the grief research field is Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969). She studied terminally ill individuals and eventually applied her studies to bereaved individuals and created the five stages of grief: (a) denial; (b) anger; (c) bargaining; (d) depression; and (e) acceptance.

Kubler-Ross strived to create more individually-centered care for individuals that were dying. While it appeared that she presented grief as a step-by-step process that occurred in stages, the application of her work did not limit individuals in that manner. Kubler-Ross stated that individuals might pass through her stages in a variety of ways. For instance, individuals may shift between stages (Kubler-Ross, 1969). In addition, she found that individuals will move through at least two stages, but may not even experience all five. Kubler-Ross was important to the field of death education. However her stage
theory has been criticized for rushing individuals into moving toward a feeling of acceptance. Russell Freidman and John James (2008) found that stage theories tend to cause emotional conflict for grieving individuals. As much as those grieving want a solid answer on how long the emotions will last, stages still cannot predict the intensity or length of intense feelings of grief.

John Bowlby also developed stages of grief: (a) numbness and disbelief; (b) yearning and searching; (c) disorganization and despair; and (d) reorganization (Bowlby, 1980). These phases are similar to Dr. Kubler-Ross’s work and have been a helpful supplement to counseling techniques and the development of coping mechanisms (Archer, 1999). By 1988, grief was considered measurable, diagnosable, and manageable. With the 1971 creation of Omega, the Journal of Death & Dying those researching grief had a forum for publication of their work (Granek, 2010). As the years have passed, several instruments, scales, and questionnaires have been created to measure grief (Archer, 1999; Granek, 2010), furthering the opportunity for study of the phenomenon.

After the introduction of the concept of grief work, and because of the growing emphasis on grief research, Western culture has held strong to the belief that grief is an active process within which a person must struggle. It is expected that individuals involved in the grieving process will invest a lot of time and expend a lot of energy working through the process, not knowing if their pain will ever been resolved (Granek, 2010). Knowing that each grief experience is individual and the process cannot be rushed, Kubler-Ross, Freud, and many other grief researchers emphasized the importance of taking the time necessary to work through the stages (Granek, 2010; Kubler-Ross,
The nature of grief can be difficult to handle on a daily basis. It is during those times that common grief can transform into complex grief.

**Complex grief.** “Complex” or “traumatic grief” is the clinical term used to denote grief that lasts longer than two months (Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001, p. 622). Specific studies have shown that traumatic grief that lasts for an extended period of time can be highly debilitating. It can heavily affect social and occupational areas of life as well as overall daily functioning (Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001). Since each individual grieves differently, it is difficult to gauge at what point a normal human reaction to grief becomes traumatic. Specific factors, such as relationship to the deceased and mode of death, may also affect whether an individual will be in prolonged traumatic grief (Anderson, 2010). An individual experiencing extended traumatic grief may need to seek professional help. Mental health professionals can work with individuals experiencing traumatic grief by encouraging them to build necessary resources to begin processing trauma in order to promote healthy mourning (Barle, Wortman, & Latack, 2015).

**The myth of closure on grief.** Pauline Boss studies the field of grief closely and plainly states that the goal of working through grief is not to get it over with, but to learn to cope with it in the long term. Grief is never finished, it is ongoing, but society urges individuals to quickly resolve their grief and get back to their normal lives (P. Boss, personal communication, November 8, 2013). Boss has done in-depth studies on a concept called ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss is defined as, “the loss of an individual’s body or mind” and the loss can be either physical or psychological (Boss & Carnes, 2012, p. 456). For example, an individual may disappear leaving those closest wondering if they will ever see their loved one again and to wonder if they are dead or alive. In this
case, the individual’s memory is alive and well to the family, but their body is missing. Another example of ambiguous loss is when an individual loses cognition to a disease such as dementia, leaving the individual’s body present while their mind is not functioning as before (Boss & Carnes, 2012). Ambiguous loss is a complicated loss, which also complicates the grieving process and tends to leave an individual without closure. As stated earlier, complex grief lasts longer than two months, and ambiguous loss can create complex grief (Boss, 2013). There are so many variables related to grief and loss, which is why the field of grief research is so diverse.

**Disenfranchised grief.** Grief that is not socially recognized is called disenfranchised grief (Robson & Walter, 2013). Disenfranchised grief can take many forms, which makes this type of grief even more complicated. Social support is missing during periods of disenfranchisement, causing uncertainty with, and a limited ability to participate in, common bereavement practices. Disenfranchisement often occurs when the relationship between a same-sex couple is not acknowledged or appreciated. At the death of a partner the grief felt by the remaining partner may not be considered valid. Other disenfranchised griever could include those with developmental disabilities and those who are incarcerated (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). Society can view grief in a negative light, and those with special circumstances are given even less room to grieve their losses because disenfranchised grieving throws a wrench in the “normal” conventions of the grieving process. The word disenfranchised has a negative connotation and it is implied that there are only two acceptable ways of grieving (Robson & Walter, 2013; Zupanick, 1991).
A disenfranchised griever may question whether the relationship to the deceased is worth their grief. Society can imprint this feeling by defining which relationships are deemed worthy of the expense of intense emotions. For example, an individual that loses a pet may suffer intense grief, yet many view pets as expendable and would not treat the loss of a pet with the same respect as the death of a person. In fact society often mocks the relationships between people and their pets, leading bereaved pet owners to feel shame for their feelings. It is important to note that relationships are key to the experience of grief, strength of human connections determine intensity of grieving (Robson & Walter, 2013; Zupanick, 1991).

Another issue for those experiencing disenfranchised grief is the fact that there are not typically rituals or memorials to help individuals through the bereavement process and cope with the loss. Rituals and memorials can serve as a way to express and release the intense emotions that come up during the grieving process. They can also serve as a source of support from others in the community or family, which is key to the successful resolution of grieving (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998; Zupanick, 1991).

Memorization: Rituals and Coping Mechanisms

Acceptance through ritual. After the death of a loved one, mourners expect that there will be some sort of a ritual. A ritual usually includes a ceremony or other type of remembrance with symbols of the loss incorporated throughout (Reeves, 2011). Rituals are a coping strategy for bereaved individuals and may promote acceptance and healing (Vale-Taylor, 2009). Some of the most common post-death rituals are the wake, memorial service, and funeral (Reeves, 2011). However, because grief is individualized, bereavement practices vary as well. Hospice chaplain Pamela Vale-Taylor (2009)
administered a questionnaire to bereaved individuals that was designed to solicit self-report data regarding rituals surrounding the death of a loved one. She found that individuals tend to engage in the following behaviors with the most frequency: (a) talking to others about the deceased; (b) displaying photographs of the deceased; (c) visiting the cemetery frequently; (d) attending a remembrance service; (e) performing dedications to the deceased; (f) lighting a candle in remembrance; and (g) revisiting special memories of time spent with the deceased.

One of the most important aspects of ritualization is the reinforcement of the bond with the deceased. Another study noted that other common rituals can include (a) planting trees in remembrance; (b) dedicating a park to the deceased; (c) putting together a memorial fund through a bank; and (d) creating a memory box (Romanoff & Terenzi, 1998). The individuality of a ritual is as present as grief itself. Different individuals will memorialize or participate in rituals in different ways, depending on how their grief is developing after a loss. In addition, grief work, and the accompanying memorialization and bereavement, tends to change as society changes.

**Diversity in death trends.** Body disposition refers to the disposal of a body after death. In most societies the final resting place of a loved one is equally as important as the rituals leading up to the burial or cremation. Research shows that personalization is a growing trend in body disposition. According to George Dickinson (2012), bereaved individuals have more choices than ever before. There are now a variety of options of caskets, funeral themes, eco-friendly disposition plans, cemetery preferences, and even cremation techniques. Traditional practices for cremation such as burial, placing cremains in an urn on the mantel, or scattering over a favorite spot of the deceased, have shifted
over the years. Individuals can choose to take cremains and have them put into a painting, placed into space orbit, inserted into a coral reef in the ocean, or made into jewelry (Dickinson, 2012).

Overall, the trend is seemingly focusing on the celebration of life rather than the typical mourning rituals from the past. Memorialization is not strictly bound to the funeral home. Bereaved individuals use roadside memorials to mark a site of loss and personalized decals allow for the remembrance of a loved one on a family vehicle (Dickinson & Hoffmann, 2010). Even headstones can be personalized with a picture or a video that the bereaved can watch when they visit the cemetery (Dickinson, 2012).

Obituaries are another common form of memorialization. Technology allows for increasingly personalized obituaries. Online guest books allow individuals to provide words of consolation without leaving the home, and social media platforms, such as Facebook, have become a common site of memorialization (Dickinson, 2012).

As the rituals surrounding grief and loss are shifted online, the opportunity arises for increased engagement in bereavement. The number of hours spent online is increasing (Perrin & Duggan, 2015), and social media platforms have become common arenas in which to memorialize a loss. When memorial pages are viewed on a daily basis they serve to keep the loved-one present in the life of those that are grieving. According to Norton & Gino (2014), many grieving individuals reported feeling out of control after a loss, but rituals and memorials provided them with a sense of control and peace.

The General Use of the Internet and Social Media

Brief history of social networking sites. The Internet can be described as an interconnected set of networks (Campbell-Kelly & Garcia-Swartz, 2013). Computers can
connect with other computers as long as they are both connected to the Internet. Long before Internet use became common, individuals began connecting with one another through online meeting spaces. The first online meeting sites were CompuServe and Bulletin Board System (BBS), which launched in the 1970s but continued to be utilized into the 1980s and 1990s, when Internet use gained more popularity. These sites were structured to allow individuals to communicate within a central system where they could share materials, download files, access information, play games, and post messages to one another (Digital Trends Staff, 2014). The World Wide Web, which is defined as an avenue to access information through the Internet, was officially launched in 1993 and exploded with popularity (Campbell-Kelly & Garcia-Swartz, 2013). At this point social media was born. Online chat rooms, such as AOL and MSN came to be. These online communities allowed members to search for one another through personal user profiles and to chat (i.e., log on the site and send messages to one another in order to engage in personal conversation), either individually or in groups.

The start of the new millennium brought new forms of social media. In 2002 Friendster was launched in order to help individuals create social connections, make friends, or even find romance. In 2003 LinkedIn was created specifically for professional networking and is still used today. In 2015 twenty-five percent of adult Internet users were on the site (Duggan, 2015). Myspace was also launched in 2003. Myspace users were able to add one another to networks of “friends” where they post photos, create statuses to document daily activities, and personalize their profiles (i.e., what is seen by others) with songs and wallpaper (Digital Trends Staff, 2014). In 2004 Facebook was launched and was marketed towards college students. Facebook eventually expanded and
marketed the site to any individual looking to connect or re-connect with others, greatly expanding interest in the site. Users were able to use Facebook to post photos, share life updates (i.e., statuses), learn about updates in friend's lives, and send private messages to one another (Facebook, 2015). In 2015 the Pew Research Center reported that 72% of adult Internet users are on Facebook and it continues to be the most used social networking site in the world (Duggan, 2015). In 2006 Twitter was launched. Twitter focused on the use of status updates to create connections (Twitter, 2015). In 2015 the Pew Research Center reported that 23% of adult Internet users were on Twitter (Duggan, 2015). In 2007 Google created a social networking site similar to Facebook called Google+ (Digital Trends Staff, 2014). As various social media platforms continued to be refined, and new sites were launched, technology was used more and more to form and maintain relationships. In 2015 the Pew Research Center reported 65% of American adults use social networking sites (Perrin, 2015).

**Mobile trends and social media.** In 2015 the Pew Research Center found that 68% of U.S. Americans owned a smart phone (Anderson, 2015), and 19% relied on only a mobile device to access the online world (Smith, 2015). Therefore, the focus shifted to making social networking sites easier for the mobile smart phone user.

Social networking became mainstream on smart phones because most social networking sites (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) have created mobile applications, or "apps," for their sites. Mobile applications are basic Internet websites designed to be downloaded and used on a mobile device (Beal, 2015). The creation of apps ensured maximum accessibility. Research suggests that users of all ages spend about 114 billion minutes a month on Facebook alone in the United States (Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2014).
The Internet: A Safe Haven for the Bereaved

Online grief. Much of the world uses technology in the grieving process. In 1997 Carla Sofka coined the term thanatechnology. She defined thanatechnology as the use of technology such as websites, informative videos, or computer programs in the scientific study of death and its associated practices (Sofka, 1997). Goldschmidt (2013) expanded on Sofka’s research, addressing the use of social media in the grieving process. In her research, she pointed out that individuals use social media, specifically Facebook, to commemorate life events as well as memorialize those who have died.

Social media networks like Facebook have become a common source of social expression for much of the population. Therefore there is also an increase in the use of social media to express feelings related to grief and bereavement. The Internet creates a safe haven for the growth and maintenance of relationships that may be separated by distance, whether it is physical distance, psychological distance, or distance due to death (Falconer et al., 2011). Those that are unable, or unwilling, to connect in a physical environment can use the online platform as an alternative to isolation. In fact, the online expression of grief has been found to empower individuals who feel that traditional grieving practices are ineffective (Carroll & Landry, 2010).

Research has shown that there are advantages to grieving online: (a) faster communication capabilities; (b) normalization of the grief experience; (c) ability to share emotions more freely; (d) the inclusiveness of a larger community with whom to share emotions; and (e) a vibrant, dynamic platform in which to remember a loved one.

Although many individuals reported positive experiences with online grief, it is important to note that there are also individuals that have experienced online grief in a negative
way. Users have reported disadvantages such as the fact that one may become “frozen in time” and unable to let go of a loved one, there also may be pain associated with online abandonment, and there is the risk of one person deactivating an online memorial upsetting others (Falconer et al., 2011).

Impressions of the deceased are also almost impossible to control within the online world and negative impressions marking the deceased’s page could cause much distress to the individuals left behind (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). In some cases, social media profiles and memorial groups have been overrun by individuals that try to intentionally cause harm by bullying others through social networking sites. These individuals, otherwise known as “trolls,” will be discussed in more detail below (Phillips, 2011; Marwick & Ellison, 2012). Another reported disadvantage to online grieving is the fact that almost anyone is able to take over a social media profile or create a memorial group. In some cases, individuals have been found to continue to post on a deceased user profile, creating painful emotions for the users that do not wish to see the posts (Pennington, 2013). In these instances, online manifestations of grief hinder the ability to cope with the pain associated with grief.

Social support in the online environment. Social media provides the opportunity for people from all over the world to come together to openly express their grief in a manner that contains a social component. According to Falconer et al., (2011) there are a variety of options for online bereavement activities. Social media websites (e.g., Facebook) are commonly used as online support groups, dedicated online memorial websites (e.g., Legacy, 1000Memories), funeral home guest books, and personal blogs (i.e., online websites where individuals can express themselves through personal
reflection, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary). There are also a variety of educational bereavement resources to be found online, including but not limited to: (a) The Association for Death Education and Counseling; (b) Wikipedia; (c) local hospice organization websites; and (d) Facebook pages specific to certain losses.

Goldschmidt (2013) researched online grieving practices, addressing both the formation of online relationships and the continuation of social bonds within an online community. Participants in her study reported that commemorating a loved one’s life on the Internet provided a coping mechanism used to be able to deal with the loss itself while still holding on to part of the relationship that existed. In some cases, participants that barely knew the deceased still felt a sense of connectedness through online memorialization and therefore grieved publicly as part of a community.

Displays of grief tend to be socially discouraged, implying that it is an embarrassing matter. Individuals that are mourning the loss of a loved one often find it necessary to appear poised and in control in face-to-face encounters. Online support groups may therefore be a more effective outlet for grief. According to Hart (2007), in the online world the rules of grief are more flexible and feelings can be expressed with more ease.

Individuals who report feelings of isolation after the death of a loved one are more likely to find solace through online support groups because it may be hard to face close family and friends while actively grieving. Participants of a study of an online support group said they were searching for validation when seeking out an online support group (Varga & Paulus, 2014) and found that the online platform created a safe space in which to express grief without judgment. Online groups are generally open to a variety of
individuals, offer anonymity, and are generally more supportive of the disenfranchised (Hammond, 2015). Individuals that have participated in online support groups indicate that sharing the story of their loss was important, as was the opportunity to honestly describe the full nature of their relationship with the deceased without judgment. Participants were searching for sympathy, empathy, and support and reported distaste for a facilitator guiding them through their grief. Individuals in these groups, no matter how different, found they could bond however they chose due to their common grieving experience (Varga & Paulus, 2014).

One example of an actual online support group is a website called Grief Beyond Belief (http://www.griefbeyondbelief.org). Grief Beyond Belief is formatted into a Facebook page as well (https://www.facebook.com/faithfreegriefsupport/?fref=ts). This page is an online support group for grieving individuals that do not have a religious background. The site provides a safe space for those that may feel that religion has not been helpful to them in the past and have struggled with spirituality and religion (Hensler, 2012). This is an example of the formation of a group of like-minded individuals with the common goal of expressing grief without the confines of traditional social rules.

Changes in Grieving Practices due to the Internet

As more and more people find solace in this unique format, new social rules must be formed, changing the grieving process. Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillides (2012) conducted a study focused on how traditional memorialization practices have transformed due to the Internet. This study also focused on concepts within death studies. Their research even went as far as to state that dying itself has changed due to the
Internet. An increasing amount of individuals are sharing their end of life stories through personal blogs or social networking sites and the awareness of death is becoming increasingly more noticeable online. Interestingly enough, the spotlight that is shining on the grieving process today is exactly what society has tried to deny.

Death is becoming a much more public experience (Walter et al., 2012), due in part to the introduction of technology. For instance, individuals in the funeral industry are working to keep up with the advancing technological state of grief. Some funeral homes display the deceased’s Facebook page, or include a digital file of pictures playing on screens around the room. There is also the possibility of virtual attendance at a funeral. Online obituaries with guestbook capabilities offer another avenue for the expression of grief or of support for the grieving.

The use of popular social media to grieve the death of a loved one. “When someone leaves us, they don’t leave our memories or our social network” (Chan, 2009, para. 3). Social networking sites have grown increasingly popular. Many individuals use social networking sites to connect with others, provide updates about exciting news, and vent about daily stressors in order to seek emotional support. It stands to reason that individuals would also use social networking sites as a place to seek support after a loss. The top seven most popular social networking sites are: Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, Pinterest, Google Plus+, Tumblr, and Instagram (eBizMBA, 2015). Individuals use all of these sites to express grief, but for the purpose of this study, Facebook will be the main focus.

Facebook’s bereavement policy. According to Facebook’s newsroom (2015), as of June 2015 there were an average of 968 million active daily users and 844 million
users on mobile devices. There were also 1.49 billion monthly active users and 1.31 billion mobile monthly active users. The number of users has steadily increased since the initial launch of Facebook in 2004 (Facebook, 2015). As the number of Facebook users increase, so does the likelihood that users will die with an active Facebook account and accompanying profile. Facebook Community Operations is working to enhance Facebook users’ experience in life as well as after death, while respecting the wishes of the deceased and the individuals who are grieving.

In 2009 Facebook introduced the memorialization option for the accounts of deceased users (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013). They created this option when a Facebook employee died in an accident, leaving administration to think twice about what should happen to a user’s account when the user is deceased (Stone, 2010). A few years later, Facebook once again struggled with how they could best respect the wishes of the deceased as well as support grieving family members. They addressed this issue by implementing a change to the visibility option of a memorialized Facebook page. In the past when a Facebook user’s page was memorialized, only current friends could view the profile, but in February of 2014 Facebook decided to maintain the visibility preference that the user set when their account was memorialized. For example, if the user set their visibility to public, it would remain public and if the user had it set it to private, only current friends would be able to view the profile (Price & DiSclafani, 2014).

Another change Facebook implemented in 2014 was the “Look Back” video. This made it possible to view a recap of an individual’s journey on Facebook. Initially, the company did not make it available for a memorialized account, but with a single e-mail from a grieving father, they decided to make this an option as well. Individuals can now
request a “Look Back” video of their deceased loved one’s Facebook life (Price & DiSclafani, 2014).

In 2015, Facebook started working to find ways to respect the owner of an account even after they have died. The latest update to the Facebook bereavement policy is the ability to create a “digital heir” (Wong, 2015). Users can choose one person to manage their account or they can choose to have the account permanently deleted by Facebook upon their death. This digital heir is called the Legacy Contact and they will be allowed to announce the memorial service for the deceased, view and accept or deny friend requests, and change the person’s profile and cover photo. This individual will also be able to download photos, posts, and information from the deceased’s profile but they will not be able to view private messages or change previous posts (Wong, 2015). In recent years, there have been several grief and social media researchers addressing how and why individuals are grieving so openly on a public space.

Social Media and Grief: The Facts and Research

With grief being an individualized or family experience, there is still an expectation that the general public should be notified of a death through an announcement of some type (i.e., obituary). Social networking sites have created both an open and a closed experience for those announcing and mourning death (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). In one sense, posting about an individual’s death on social media is like notifying the general public by publishing an obituary in the newspaper. However, posting information on social media can still be a private matter in if the post is only available to those linked to the social media account. Individuals can choose how public
to make a profile or post when using Facebook, allowing for some choices regarding the sharing of information.

On the other hand, the very act of sharing information on social media opens a line of communication to a much broader spectrum of individuals. Marwick & Ellison (2012) coined the term “context collapse” to describe this concept. In short, context collapse can be described as several different types of social contacts collapsed into one solid category of friends or acquaintances. For instance, an individual may be Facebook friends with a classmate from 20 years in the past and a current co-worker, causing those individuals to connect through a shared relationship. Context collapse impacts social communication by bringing together groups of individual members that may know the deceased, but not one another.

When a death is announced publically, anyone can respond, either through individual posts or by posting on the page of the deceased or those close to him or her. Information posted online about a deceased individual cannot be directly addressed after death. In essence, the public can comment about a deceased individual and he or she cannot post a rebuttal or defense. During a face-to-face interaction one is able to adapt to the social context and better gauge social cues, but the online environment does not always offer that opportunity. Miscommunication can easily occur during online communication. Grief may be compounded by seeing negative statements about the deceased individual. The use of social media creates an opportunity for the deceased’s reputation to be scarred or shifted in a negative manner. While this issue doesn’t affect the deceased anymore, it does affect the close family and friends who are truly mourning the loss (Marwick & Ellison, 2012).
In all reality, social networking sites are helpful for some grieving individuals and are a hindrance for others. According to literature from 2013, there have been approximately 30 million Facebook accounts that have been memorialized (Frost, 2014). According to Frost (2014), there are four different methods that traditional mourners use on Facebook profiles and memorial groups: (a) speak directly to the deceased; (b) speak to other group members; (c) write about the deceased without directly knowing the deceased; and (d) post directly to the deceased’s profile wall.

Researchers analyzed several sources of data regarding social media use including: (a) Facebook’s terms of use; (b) public obituaries from an online newspaper; (c) participant’s Facebook profiles; and (d) public Facebook memorial groups. Survey data showed that “over half of participants stated that Facebook was important, very important, or essential in the process of coping with the death of their loved one” (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013, p. 67). However, on the opposite side of the scale, some individuals found it more appeasing to delete the account of a deceased individual. The research noted that some participants felt that deleting the page would help others find a way to move on and complete the grieving process (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013).

Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish (2013) conducted interviews with 16 individuals that addressed experiences related to grieving on social networking sites and used thematic analysis to create three themes regarding death and the grief expressed through social media. The three themes include temporal, spatial, and social expansion. During temporal expansion, grief and death are circulated back into every day practices and grieving is not addressed solely through memorials and funerary processes. Spatial expansion refers to the removal of geographical barriers, allowing grieving individuals to
connect with family and friends at a distance (e.g., out of town, state, or country). When full social expansion occurs separate social group norms are removed creating a unified space for anyone to grieve. These themes create the ultimate community for sharing grief through a social networking site.

In all actuality, a social media profile serves two purposes. First the profile is a conscious construction of an individual’s identity while living (Stokes, 2011). After death the profile becomes a virtual memorial or cemetery. The virtual cemetery serves to “continue bonds with the dead, strengthen relationships with the living, and to create new cyberspace communities” (Church, 2013, p. 185). One of the most prevalent themes within research related to grief and social media use is the idea of continuing important bonds with the dead. The art of conversation can keep a relationship alive for a long time. If some form of communication is occurring, the bond between a deceased individual and a loved one can stay strong for years following death. Many individuals use social networking sites to maintain the bonds by posting a deceased individual’s wall: (a) expressing emotions; (b) sharing memories; (c) stating the deceased’s presence; (d) providing updates; (e) giving appreciation; (f) requesting the deceased’s guidance; and (g) noting the expectation of a reunion some day (DeGroot, 2012). Examples are shown below.
The maintenance of a bond can continue for many years and it almost goes without saying that it does not feel right to remove a deceased individual’s profile from a personal friend list. Existing literature shows that it is uncommon to de-friend a deceased individual’s Facebook profile. In 2010 and 2011, Natalie Pennington conducted 43 interviews with individuals that were regular Facebook users, had a Facebook friend that died, and were still friends with a deceased user’s page. Pennington (2013) found that participants agreed that one is to never de-friend a user just because he or she died. Participants fell into two groups when asked to report on their online interactions with the deceased. The first group visited the deceased’s page, but did not make any comments and the second group chose to vocalize their grief on the page. Pennington further found that many reported it to be unsettling when a family member or friend actively used the deceased user’s page. Online grieving clearly provides comfort to some, especially when traditional methods have not proven successful. “Grief is such an individual journey that it is often difficult to dictate what is right and wrong for each person” (Frost, 2014).

Other Users Outside Looking in on Mourning and Grief Rituals

Contemporary research has found both positive and negative outcomes related to the use of social media platforms in the grieving process. The process can be impacted by individuals that use online grief as an opportunity to act out personal needs.

Trolls. One aspect of Internet use is the provenance of “trolls” (Phillips, 2010). Trolls bully others through social networking sites, often leading to a negative experience for their targets. Facebook memorial groups were some of the first targets for individuals trolling the Internet. Some Facebook users utilize a fake name to create a profile and once they are established, they use that profile to search for memorial groups so they can post
inappropriate and hurtful comments and images. Facebook has multiple situations in which trolls have caused distress. Trolls tend to target the most fragile social media users (e.g., those grieving a loss) and attack the most sensitive topics (Phillips, 2011). In trolling situations, it is easy to understand why an individual would view grieving online as a negative experience.

**Rubbernecker.** Another type of social media user is the “rubbernecker” (DeGroot, 2014). Rubbernecker do not intend to cause harm; they simply want to share in a community of sadness. These Facebook users might know the deceased as an acquaintance or distant friend and they visit memorial pages to read what close friends and family have posted and to share their own grief regarding the situation. Rubbernecker tend to report that they identify with the deceased (DeGroot, 2014). Rubbernecker found relief in these groups and pages because they participated as distant observers and were not feeling the heavy grief of those closer to the deceased. Most individuals reported positive vibes for the deceased and the mourners. In fact, this particular expression of grief can actually be healthy for the rubbernecker as well as the individual in deep mourning (DeGroot, 2014).

**Parasocial grief.** Another type of grief, closely related to that of the rubbernecker, is “parasocial grief.” Parasocial grief is mostly connected with a one-sided relationship, (e.g., the relationship between a celebrity and a fan). Sanderson & Cheong (2010) took an in-depth look at individuals who grieved online for deceased celebrities. The research was spurred when Michael Jackson died and his fans were very vocal on social media. The research provided a look into how the five stages of grief, developed by Kubler-Ross, could be identified in an online forum. The researchers looked at ways
social media users posted their expressions of grief at the different stages of the grieving process. Through this research the “critical” stage of grief was identified. This stage is an addition to Kubler-Ross’s stages and focuses on instances of criticism of the deceased during the bereavement process. For instances, upon the death of Michael Jackson fans took to social media to express disapproval of his life choices (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). Parasocial grievers use social media to express grief from a one-sided perspective, contributing to the overall conversation.

In summary, social networking sites are used by a broad spectrum of individuals. The individuality of the users of social media makes it difficult to directly pinpoint the impact of the online expression of grief on any individual grieving individual. This work summarized contemporary research related to the field of grief, bereavement, and technology. As technology continues to be a priority in most individual’s lives, it will become increasingly important to view all aspects of grieving online and how it is impacting how society views active dying, death, and grief.

**The Current Study**

Current research has failed to delve into the why and how social networking sites are impacting a mourner’s individual grief experience, and many researchers have urged others to explore these questions further. “Although there is a growing amount of research in this area, there is still a lack of strong empirical evidence to validate whether expression of grief on Facebook has a positive or negative impact on the bereavement process” (Frost, 2014, p. 257). The purpose of the study was to explore the impact of social media (i.e. Facebook) on the individualized experience of grief, the past or present connections formed with other grievers online, and what motivates individuals to use
social media as a grief outlet. The study explored how individuals use social media, specifically Facebook, after the death of a loved one and the motivation for using it as a tool for grieving. The study examined how the use of Facebook as a grief tool impacts the grieving process as a whole.
Chapter Three

Method

The purpose of the current study was to explore the impact of social media (i.e., Facebook) on the individualized experience of grief, connections formed with other griever online, and what motivates individuals to use social media as a grief outlet.

The research questions were as follows.

1). In what way is social media (i.e., Facebook), used to make connections with others after a loss?

2). What motivates individuals to choose social media as a tool to make connections after a loss?

3). How does social media influence the grieving process in those that actively use it as a coping mechanism?

Design of the Study

This was an exploratory, mixed-methods study, which included the use of a non-experimental questionnaire developed by the researcher based on the work of McEwen and Scheaffer (2013) (Appendix A). The questionnaire was used to collect descriptive data, as well as demographic information about the participants. The mixed-methods design allowed for the participants to provide in-depth response to certain questions. Quantitative data was analyzed using frequencies. Qualitative data was analyzed with coding based on work by Strauss and Corbin (2008).

Sample Selection

The sample for this study was one of convenience and participation was voluntary. The researcher invited Facebook friends at least 18 years of age that have
experienced a loss or had any interaction with memorialization on Facebook to participate by posting a link to an online questionnaire available through Qualtrics. The researcher used the snowball approach, by asking Facebook colleagues, friends, and family to post the questionnaire asking their Facebook friends to participate in the study. The Facebook post was shared 37 times from the researcher’s original post and 203 responses were collected.

**Instrument Description**

Participants were invited to participate in the study through a Facebook post (Appendix B). The Facebook post introduced the study (Appendix B). If the participants agreed to participate in the study, they clicked a link through the Facebook post, which led them to a consent page that confirmed that they were at least 18 years of age and experienced a loss or had any interaction with memorialization on Facebook (Appendix C). Participants provided consent by choosing “yes” and were directed to the online questionnaire (Appendix A). The participants responded to demographic information such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, geographical location, and average Facebook use characteristics. Additionally, participants answered questions addressing the main research questions for the study including how Facebook is used to make connections after a death, motivation for using Facebook after a death, and the impact of social media on the grieving process.

Three professors in the family studies field with one specifically specializing in grief and social media research tested the validity of the questionnaire. Qualitative aspects of the questionnaire were not easily tested, but there was increased reliability since the questionnaire was created based on a previous study performed by McEwen and
Scheaffer (2013). The researcher performed a pilot study with 10 individuals to verify the readability and to receive feedback. The questionnaire was adjusted according to the comments provided. The pilot study increased the credibility of the questionnaire.

**Procedure for Data Collection**

Permission to conduct research with human subjects was obtained by Eastern Illinois University’s Institutional Review Board, IRB number: 16-024. Participants were invited to participate in the study through a Facebook post (Appendix B). Participants clicked the link through Facebook and were directed to a consent page through Qualtrics verifying their age of at least 18 years and if they had experienced loss or interacted with loss on Facebook (Appendix C). Participants were also informed that all responses were anonymous. Once participants agreed to take the questionnaire, they were prompted to choose “yes,” which allowed them to complete the questionnaire (Appendix A). Participants were able to type answers directly into the online format. Participants also had the option to discontinue taking the survey at any point without repercussions if they felt any discomfort. The researcher activated the questionnaire on February 12, 2016 and closed the survey on February 22, 2016. All responses were unanimous and stored on the personal computer of the researcher. Due to the anonymity of the questionnaire, there were not any identifiable characteristics of the participants through the responses.

**Data Analysis**

The mixed-method design study allowed the researcher to analyze the qualitative and quantitative data differently. Quantitative data such as demographic information and Facebook-use characteristics were analyzed using frequencies. Qualitative data were analyzed based on the work by Corbin & Strauss (2008). The qualitative nature of the
questionnaire provided the researcher with the opportunity to closely examine the data in order to gather understanding and in turn develop empirical evidence and common themes on the topic.

For the purpose of the study, the qualitative analysis tools of microanalysis, open coding, and axial coding were utilized to create concepts and themes related to the topic. The researcher first used microanalysis (i.e., detailed open coding) to generate ideas from the first few questionnaire responses. For example, the researcher read through qualitative data as it was obtained. Common themes naturally developed as the researcher identified instances of repetitiveness in responses. Repetitive responses were grouped into broad categories. The researcher then used open coding to break down the data. The researcher utilized constant comparisons to differentiate the similarities and differences among participant's responses. Responses continued to be sorted into broad categories as themes were identified. Axial coding was used to relate concepts to each other and build upon common themes as questionnaire responses came in (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Categories were refined as incoming data was compared with existing data. The addition of content strengthens categories, and categories were weeded out if comparable incoming data is not found. The researcher utilized qualitative data analysis to uncover common themes related to the way Facebook is used to make connections after a death, motivation for using Facebook after a death, and the impact of social media on the grieving process.
Chapter Four

Results

The purpose of the current study was to explore the impact of social media (i.e., Facebook) on the individualized experience of grief, connections formed with other grievers online, and what motivates individuals to use social media as a grief outlet.

The research questions were as follows.

1). In what way is social media (i.e., Facebook), used to make connections with others after a loss?

2). What motivates individuals to choose social media as a tool to make connections after a loss?

3). How does social media influence the grieving process in those that actively use it as a coping mechanism?

Sample

The sample was comprised of 203 participants. Of the participants, 85.22% (n = 173) identified themselves as female, 14.29% (n = 29) as male, and 0.49% (n = 1) genderqueer or gender non-conforming. The average age of the participants was 44.52 (N = 201). In addition, the most common age reported was 53 (N = 201). Finally, the median or middle of ages reported was 48 (N = 201). Two participants did not provide an answer for the age category. The sample consisted of 95.54% (n = 193) Caucasian participants followed by 1.49% (n = 3) African American, 1.49% (n = 3) Hispanic, 0.99% (n = 2) Asian, and 0.50% (n = 1) other. One participant did not provide an answer for the race/ethnicity category. Sixty-seven percent of the sample considered
their hometown to be rural and 33% considered their hometown to be urban. Participants came from 25 different states (see Table 1).

**Instrumentation**

Data were collected using the Ware Facebook and Loss Questionnaire (Appendix A), which was created by the researcher based on the work of McEwen and Scheaffer (2013). The questionnaire consisted of twenty questions, fifteen of which were quantitative in nature and five that were qualitative. Five questions solicited data that were demographical in nature. Because contemporary literature indicated that Facebook was the predominant social media platform for the sample population, two questions addressed general Facebook use, while seven questions addressed Facebook use while grieving. Finally, one question asked about the overall use of resources while grieving. Current research in the field lacks strong empirical evidence for the manifestation of, and specific nuances found during, grief and grieving on social networking sites (Frost, 2014). Therefore, the researcher created the instrument based on current literature with the intent to expand knowledge on the topic.

**Data Analysis**

The mixed-method design of the study made data analysis a two-part process. Demographic data and Facebook use data were analyzed using frequencies through Qualtrics and Microsoft Excel. The researcher exported reports from Qualtrics into Microsoft Excel. From there, the researcher calculated statistical data such as mean and frequencies that were converted into percentages in order to report a demographical picture of the sample. The same statistics were calculated to report Facebook use in general as well as after a loss.
Table 1
*Percentages for the geographical location of sample (N = 203)*

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<tr>
<th>Geographical location</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
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<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
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<td>Indiana</td>
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<td>North Carolina</td>
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<td>Florida</td>
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<td>Nevada</td>
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Qualitative data were analyzed using Grounded Theory, based on the work of Corbin and Strauss (2008). First the researcher used microanalysis (i.e., detailed open coding) to generate ideas from the first few questionnaire responses. For example, the researcher read through a few responses at a time. Commonalities developed through the repetitive responses and these responses were grouped into broad categories. The researcher then broke the data down with open coding. Constant comparisons were utilized to comb through similarities and differences in the data. These responses
continued to be sorted as broad categories developed into common themes. Axial coding was used to relate concepts to each other and build upon common themes as questionnaire responses were sorted through (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Categories were refined as data was sorted through. Through this data analysis process, the overarching theme of support emerged. In addition, the themes of: social connectedness, contact with others, information handling, and memory sharing also emerged under the support umbrella.

**Facebook Data**

Participants were asked several questions regarding the use of Facebook, both overall and while grieving. Questions six and seven addressed the overall use of Facebook. Participants were asked how often they posted on Facebook. Data indicated that, on average, participants posted 11.82 times a week \( (n = 203) \). However, some participants did not respond to this question in a manner that allowed for traditional analysis. For example, thirteen provided a range of numbers, such as “1-2 postings,” when asked how many times a week a post is initiated. Therefore, the researcher used the median score from each range provided to calculate the mean in order to report the data sets. In addition, six participants provided responses that could not be used in analysis. Participants were provided the opportunity to identify the way they used Facebook by selecting from a list of choices. They were also able to write in their own response. A clear majority, 84% \( (n = 171) \), primarily used Facebook to connect with friends and family (see Table 2).

Questions eight through fourteen specifically addressed the use of Facebook after a loss. Participants were asked if they used Facebook while grieving.
Table 2  
*How participants use Facebook (N = 203)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facebook use</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connect with friends or family</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share photos</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share life events</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share comedic posts (Memes, cartoons, etc.)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share memories</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational posts (News, current events, etc.)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in groups</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share personal writing</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional networking</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seventy three percent (*n = 149*) responded in the affirmative while 27% (*n = 54*) responded that they did not. In addition, participants were asked if they had ever created a public post after a loss. Sixty six percent (*n = 134*) responded yes and 34% (*n = 68*) responded no. One participant did not provide an answer. The researcher followed up asking participants if their posting habits changed had after a loss. Thirty four percent (*n = 68*) responded that use changed, while 66% (*n = 134*) responded that it did not. One participant did not answer this question. If participants implied that their posting habits had changed, they were asked how they changed. The majority of participants reported that the amount of Facebook posts created severely diminished. It was also noted that their posts tended to be more negative and more depressing. However, several participants reported that viewing others’ Facebook posts provided important support even though they were posting less. One participant reported, “I posted less than normal because I'm too depressed to be bright and funny. However, I liked to look at FB and gather the love, prayers and hugs that other people sent due to my loss.” In addition,
participants also reported more awareness and sensitivity for others on Facebook as well as increased self-awareness. One participant reported, “I think before I speak. I’m more aware of the impact of my words.”

In regard to connections formed after a loss, participants were asked if they reached out to anyone with whom they were not previously connected. Thirty-four percent \( (n = 68) \) responded yes and 66\% \( (n = 134) \) responded no, while one participant did not answer this question. Also on the topic of connections, participants were asked if the use of Facebook while grieving had a positive, negative, or neutral impact on connections with others. Fifty percent \( (n = 100) \) of the sample responded positive, followed by 48\% \( (n = 97) \) neutral, and 2\% \( (n = 5) \) negative. In relation to the impact of Facebook on grieving, participants were asked to explore whether Facebook had a positive, negative, or neutral impact on their individual grief journey. The response of 51\% \( (n = 103) \) of the sample was neutral, followed by 46\% \( (n = 92) \) positive, and 3\% \( (n = 6) \) negative. Overall, participants were also asked how important Facebook was while coping with the grieving process. By a very small margin, 37\% \( (n = 74) \) reported Facebook as somewhat important in this process while 36\% \( (n = 36) \) reported Facebook as not at all important in this process. One participant did not answer this question.

The last question provided the opportunity for participants to identify which grief resources they used other than Facebook by selecting from a provided list of choices. A clear majority, 82\% \( (n = 151) \) of the sample stated that conversations with friends and family were utilized most (see Table 3). Participants were also able to write in their own responses.
Table 3  
*Resources other than Facebook used while actively grieving (N = 203)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conversations with family and friends</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journaling</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face to face counseling</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support group</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Internet resources</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority of participants used this space to report that using spirituality including prayer, talking to God, and conversations with clergy was a major resource utilized while grieving. While participants were asked directly about demographic data as well as Facebook use characteristics, the questionnaire also included qualitative questions that further addressed the research questions. Specific themes surrounding how Facebook was used to make connections, motivations for using Facebook while grieving, and how social media use influenced the grieving process arose out of the qualitative data.

**Support.** Participants were asked for in-depth answers related to grieving via Facebook. Specifically how their posting habits changed and what the motivation was for creating a public post after a loss. Participants also provided answers regarding connections after a loss. In particular, they provided reasons for connecting with others and how Facebook use impacted those connections. Participants were also asked to examine how Facebook use after a loss impacted their individual grief journey.

Through this study, the overarching theme of support emerged. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), an overarching theme develops out of data obtained through qualitative research. The researcher must extract the commonalities in the data to learn the overarching theme. For each qualitative question, a majority of participants reported
that Facebook was instrumental in providing support to others, as well as receiving support for themselves. One participant was solely motivated to create a public post to solicit support. It was stated that the post was created for this reason, “so I could get support from more people than I connect with on a daily basis.” The participant further indicated that, “support was very important to me.” In regards to how posting habits changed, one participant reported, “The support of family and friends lets me know I am not alone and have people thinking of and praying for me.” When asked the reason for contacting a person with whom they had not previously been in contact after a loss, one participant simply reported, “to show support.” Another participant reported that using Facebook while grieving impacted connections with others in a positive way, expressing the following, “It showed me how much support I have when I thought no one cared.” Finally, the theme of support was also apparent in reference to Facebook use throughout individual grief journey. One participant reported that Facebook had a positive impact on their journey and reported simply feeling “encouraged by support.” While support is the overarching theme of the study, other themes including: social connectedness, contact with others, information handling, and memory sharing emerged.

**Social connectedness.** Data revealed that participants related the use of social media after a loss to the sense of social connectedness. Facebook is its own network with several communities within. Individuals that are grieving a loss make up one community of Facebook. Participants primarily stated they felt less alone while grieving on Facebook. One, in particular, stated:
I think it is because there is strength in numbers. Many times when dealing with a loss, one can feel very alone. Seeing people post, or posting to someone else's page let's [sic] them know they are not alone.

Another participant expressed similar feelings:

Not dealing with it alone, knowing that their were people and family out there that missed him as much as I did and to this day we are all back in each others lives sharing stories and pictures of all loved ones that have passed. Talking about memories of the past etc.

Participants also related personal feelings regarding grief and social connectedness. One participant reported that "shows we all feel the same way." Another participant expressed similar feelings and reported; "I have felt like there was always someone to talk with about my feeling. I have never felt "alone"." One participant even related the sense of social connectedness to the overarching theme of support, "Just feeling like your [sic] not alone in the grieving process & support."

**Contact with others.** Analysis also revealed the theme of contact with others. Through participants’ responses, contact with others seemed to be a very important of aspect regarding grieving a loss on Facebook. One participant expressed, "It nice to keep in touch with friends and family." While other participants felt a much deeper connection to contacting others after a loss. One participant stated:

Being in contact with others whom have lost people close to them made me feel supported. Even tho [sic] there are many people in the group that I belong to that I don't know I feel safe posting there. Everyone else on that sight [sic] has suffered a big loss and we help each other with positive sharing.
Other participants described just simply being in contact with others sharing a loss helped immensely. For example, one participant stated, “I think it has put me in contact with others who have been through what I was/am going through. It has given me some outlets to channel my grief.”

Interestingly enough, participants also reported that reconnecting with others was another common form of contact after a loss. One participant reported that reconnection with past individuals and staying in contact with newer friends was equally important. This participant stated, “Reconnect with people from my past and to check up on new people that come into my life to see if they are authentic and positive enough to be in my life.” Another participant used Facebook to reconnect with family members and to provide support. They stated the following, “I reached out to some cousins to see how they were handling the grief and used it as an avenue to reconnect with them.”

**Information handling.** Analysis also revealed information handling as a common theme. Several participants reported the use of Facebook after a loss to provide information to the masses about the actual death, memorial services, and to express appreciation. A number of participants actually stated they used Facebook as a way to inform others. One participant stated, “To give details to distant family and friends. To get support from face book family and friends.” Another participant specifically reported that it was easier to publically post it. They reported using Facebook for these reasons, “Informing loved ones spread across country. And eliminate need for people to message me directly.” Other participants were specific about using Facebook to post information on memorial services for the deceased. One participant simply stated, “To notify friends of service details.” Another participant stated they used Facebook while grieving to share
information as well as gather information. This particular participant stated their motivation for creating a post was “informational purposes for other people” and the reason they reached out to someone was purely “informational gathering.” A number of the participants pointed out that they use Facebook to express mass appreciation and thankfulness for all of the support provided.

Thanking everyone for their thoughts and prayers, notes sent, facebook posts, cards, etc. Just a generic thank you to show how much their support means to me. Those that made a monetary donation, brought food to the house, sent flowers, etc., received a hand-written thank you note in the mail.

One participant used Facebook for several types of information handling. Their motivation for creating a post on Facebook was three fold, “1. After family and friends were told we communicated our loss / 2. Memorial info / 3. Memories of the person.”

**Memory sharing.** Social networking sites became popular so quickly because users could easily share memories with others quickly and often. Major events can be shared with loved ones near and far. It is not any surprise that a major theme throughout this research was the idea of sharing memories. One participant specifically reported, “To share my memories of my grandma.” Another participant explained more in depth their motivation for posting.

To share some personal memories with her sister. I still post on my friend who passed webpage every year around the anniversary of her death usually just so that I don't forget her (not that I would but it makes me feel better). It provides me with a Fessional [sic] time to sit down and put in writing what I'm feeling.
One participant described the urge to share memories about a loved one as a "need."
Several participants reported that reading memories shared by their loved one’s friends also seemed to help heal their own grief. One participant described it below.

People that were impacted by my sister reached out to our family after she died. If I knew the individual (such as a favorite teacher she had growing up) I responded back with a kind message how of important that individual was to my sister even if they weren't necessarily a part of my life. It was comforting to share stories I knew from my sister about those individuals. I thought they'd like to know their lasting impressions and the impact they made on my sister's life.

One participant even noted that their loss had happened before Facebook came to be, but it had proved to still be a helpful tool for sharing memories while grieving.

To keep the memory of that person alive. To share memories, heart-warming or funny, of that person [sic]. I have also created a Facebook in memory of my two deceased sons. They died just before we had Facebook. This has been a great way to do grief work and to keep connected with all the people who loved my sons.

Summary

The current study used a questionnaire to collect information regarding the use of social media specifically Facebook while grieving. Overall, more than half of participants used Facebook while grieving and did create a public post after a loss. However, a majority of participants said their posting habits did not change overall. In addition, a majority of participants said that they did not reach out to anyone with whom they were not previously in contact with. Participants also felt using Facebook while grieving had
either a positive or neutral impact on connections with others as well as the individual
grief journey. Through the qualitative data analysis, support emerged as the overarching
theme. Four other themes under support emerged including: social connectedness, contact
with others, information handling, and memory sharing. In the discussion, the researcher
applied each of the themes to answer the stated research questions.
Chapter Five

Summary of Study

The purpose of the current study was to explore the impact of social media (i.e. Facebook) on the individualized experience of grief, connections formed with other griever online, and what motivates individuals to use social media as a grief outlet. Through the current study three research questions were answered.

1). In what way is social media (i.e., Facebook), used to make connections with others after a loss?

2). What motivates individuals to choose social media as a tool to make connections after a loss?

3). How does social media influence the grieving process in those that actively use it as a coping mechanism?

Discussion

Overall, two hundred and three participants participated in the current study and posted on Facebook 11.82 times a week. Eighty four percent of participants primarily used Facebook to connect with friends and family. Facebook is a common tool to use while grieving a loss. More than half of participants (73%) reported using Facebook after a loss. Participants also reported conversation with family and friends outside of Facebook was a very important tool to use while grieving. It is also common to use Facebook to create a public post after a loss. A majority of participants (66%) in this study, created a public post after a loss. However, interestingly enough over half of the participants (66%) reported their overall posting habits did not change after a loss. The use of Facebook while grieving seems to have an almost equal positive and neutral
impact on connections with others. Fifty percent of participants reported a positive impact on connections with others and 48% reported a neutral impact. As far as the individual grief journey goes, the use of Facebook also has an almost equal positive and neutral impact. Fifty one percent of participants stated it had a neutral impact on their individual grief journey and 46% reported it had a positive impact. Grounded theory data analysis revealed the overarching theme of support. Support seemed to be a driving factor pertaining to each research question. Four other themes including: social connectedness, contact with others, information handling, and memory sharing emerged underneath support.

**Research Question #1: In what way is social media (i.e., Facebook), used to make connections with others after a loss?**

Social media is a widespread form of networking and it is no different while grieving a loss. Existing research points out that social media websites are commonly used as: (a) online support groups; (b) dedicated online memorial websites; (c) home guest books; and (d) personal blogs (Falconer et al., 2011). Each of these websites were created with the common purpose of connecting others after a loss. According to the current study, 66% of participants did not make a new connection with anyone after a loss, but 34% did. The 34% that did described their reasoning for reaching out and the most prevalent reason was to give or receive support. Under that support umbrella, individuals make connections through Facebook by sharing memories, making contact with others, and sending condolences. The collected data found that it was important to a grieving individual to hear how much other people cared about their loved one. For example, another Facebook user may post a random memory on the deceased person’s
Facebook wall and that brings comfort to the family and friends closest to the deceased. This is an example of a connection without having to directly reach out. Facebook users also use Facebook to send private or public condolence messages to make that connection. There also may be individuals that post on the deceased person’s wall to simply establish a connection to that particular person. This could be an example of connecting with that person in order to promote self-healing.

**Research Question #2: What motivates individuals to choose social media as a tool to make connections after a loss?**

According to the current study, the use of Facebook while grieving has either a positive or neutral impact on connections with others so it is easy to understand why individuals choose social media as a tool to make connections after a loss. Facebook users are motivated to use social media after a loss by the support, information handling, and social connectedness. Many Facebook users want to feel the support from others as well as give the support. The data collected overwhelmingly showed that support was a driving factor in making connections. One user stated, “It was cathartic to put thoughts and feelings into words and then to get instant, direct feedback from a network of supporters.”

The information handling is also a motivating factor. In a technologically based society, the best way to spread the word about any news is through social media. Facebook users want the opportunity to let others know they experienced a loss, as well as keep them updated on memorial service information. Facebook is also the easiest way to send out mass appreciation and thankfulness to all of the supporters. There is also a sense of social connectedness. Facebook users feel as though they have their own
community of people and report a motivating factor to make connections through Facebook is to feel less alone. Prior to the current study, researcher Karen Goldschmidt (2013) took a deeper look at online grieving practices, specifically the formation of online relationships as well as the continuation of social bonds within an online community. Similarly to results of the current study, social connectedness was a major driving factor for the use of social media while grieving. Even individuals that barely knew the deceased still felt a sense of connectedness therefore creating an even larger network of support (Goldschmidt, 2013).

Research Question #3: How does social media influence the grieving process in those that actively use it as a coping mechanism?

According to the current study, participants found Facebook somewhat important while grieving. The use of Facebook also had an almost equal neutral or positive impact on users individual grief journeys. Again, Facebook users that are actively using Facebook after a loss are finding the support to be an incredibly positive experience. The data collected proved that sharing memories was a very positive experience for Facebook users.

Many users post pictures and videos in honor of their loss regularly or on the anniversary of the loss or a special day. It is a comforting experience to know that others are grieving the loss with them. This particular group of Facebook users found it positive to share their individual stories about the loss. Users also reported that they hope to help others in their grief journey while they help themselves. It is a sense of social connectedness again because many times it is eye opening to see that others are going through the exact same process. The results of the current study coincide with existing
research. Participants of a previous study noted that grieving through Facebook provided the inclusiveness of a larger community with whom to share emotions (Falconer et al., 2011). The beauty of a social networking site is that those whom are using it to grieve are in different stages in their grief journeys. It makes grief a relatable experience.

**Limitations**

There were limitations to the current research study. The sample size \( n = 203 \) was not representative to the entire Facebook user population. The sample consisted of mostly females, with a much smaller percentage of males, which is likely to have impacted results. Research shows that males and females tend to have different styles of grieving. Men may feel the need to stay strong and avoid those emotional public grief reactions, while women may feel more comfortable expressing emotions in search of support (Wallace, 2013). The questionnaire was both qualitative and quantitative and was distributed online. The researcher was unable to get clarification on the qualitative responses. There is also a concern for researcher bias in qualitative analysis due to natural biases and assumptions, which can be engrained in the analyst’s mind (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). There is the chance that the researcher did not fully understand and reflect what participants truly think and feel.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

It would be beneficial for future researchers to expand this research and include a variety of social networking sites. It would also be beneficial to focus a research study on the individuals that feel social media has had a negative impact on their grief journey. Further research should focus on the length of time individuals specifically impacted by a loss use Facebook to grieve. For example, how long and how often individuals post on
deceased users' pages or how long users keep profile pictures up and the motivations behind these actions. In addition, future research should include more focused qualitative work with in-depth face-to-face interviews on top of questionnaires.

Conclusion

This study focused on the impact of social media (i.e. Facebook) on the individualized experience of grief, connections formed with other grievers online, and the motivations individuals have to use social media as a grief outlet. As technology continues to become increasingly prevalent, social media will continue to be an efficient way to spread the word on a variety of topics. Overall, Facebook users are currently motivated to use Facebook to express their grief by social support as well as social connectedness, memory sharing, information handling, and contact with others. Through these themes, it appears that social media specifically Facebook has created a positive community for users to heal and cope with their grief. The constant support that Facebook provides grieving individuals also allows them to make connections with others that may be experiencing similar feelings. While there are many aspects to research in the world of grief, the impact of social media on the grieving process will continue to be a relevant topic of study with growing research and constant development.
References


http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/M/

mobile_application.html


IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON GRIEVING PROCESS


Vale-Taylor, P. (2009). “We will remember them:” A mixed-method study to explore which post-funeral remembrance activities are most significant and important to bereaved people living with loss, and why those particular activities are chosen. Palliative Medicine, 23, 537-544.


Appendix A: Ware Facebook and Loss Questionnaire

1. What is your age? __________

2. Identify your preferred gender:
   Male
   Female
   MTF (Male to Female)
   FTM (Female to Male)
   Genderqueer or Gender Non Conforming
   If your preferred terminology is not listed, please fill in the blank.
   ____________________________

3. Circle your race/ethnicity:
   Caucasian     African American     Hispanic     Asian     American Indian
   Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander     Other: ____________________________

4. What state do you live in? ____________________________

5. Would you consider your hometown urban or rural?
   Urban     Rural

6. Approximately how many times do you post on Facebook per week?
   ____________________________

7. What do you generally use Facebook for? Check all that apply.
   Share photos __
   Share current life events __
   Share comedic posts (Memes, cartoons, etc.) __
   Share personal writing __
Share memories__

Connect with friends or family__

Involvement in groups__

Informational posts (News, current events, etc.)__

Professional networking__

Other:

8. Since you have been a Facebook user, have you actively used the platform while grieving a loss?
   Yes or No

9. Did your posting habits change after a loss?
   Yes or No
   If Yes, how?

10. Have you ever created a public post after a loss? (Posts include: comments directly on a wall or on another’s post, pictures, status updates, or memorial information)
    Yes or No
    If yes, what was your motivation for posting?

11. Did you reach out to anyone after the loss with whom you were not in communication previously?
    Yes or No
12. How important was/is Facebook in helping you cope with the grieving process?

Essential Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all

13. Has using Facebook while grieving impacted your connections with others in a positive or negative way?

Positive Negative Neutral

How?

14. Has using Facebook had a positive or negative impact on your individual grief journey?

Positive Negative Neutral

In what way?

15. Did you use any other resources/coping mechanisms other than Facebook while grieving? Check all that apply.

Books

Journaling

Face to face counseling

Support groups

Other Internet websites
Conversation with friends and loved ones

Other: ________________________________
Appendix B: Facebook Post

Hello everyone! I am conducting research titled The Impact of Social Media on the Grieving Process to complete my Master’s degree. I would greatly appreciate your help in completing my questionnaire. It should take you about 5 to 10 minutes to complete. You may participate if you are at least 18 years of age and have experienced a loss, encountered grief through Facebook, or had an interaction with another individual grieving on Facebook. Please feel free to share this post with your Facebook friends as well. Thanks in advance!
Appendix C: Informed Consent

By continuing onto the questionnaire, you are verifying that you are at least 18 years of age. Please note that your information is completely anonymous. The student and the faculty advisor will be the only ones with access to data collected. You may withdraw from the questionnaire at any time if you do not feel comfortable.

There are minimal risks to your participation. However due to the sensitive topic of loss and grief, participants may want to seek support in some manner. Please feel free to visit the following websites for support. Also included below is the telephone number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

The Association for Death Education and Counseling at http://www.adec.org/adec/Main/Resources/ADEC_Main/FindHelp/ResourcesHome.aspx?hkey=fec0088c-a603-4f9d-a90f-37c4443c122e

Grief Share at http://www.griefshare.org

Hello Grief at http://www.hellogrief.org/resources/

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1-800-273-8255

If you have any questions, please contact the student researcher or advisor with the information given below.

Resa Ware, student
raware@eiu.edu

Dr. Mikki Sherwood, Family and Consumer Sciences professor
mlsherwood@eiu.edu

By choosing yes, you are verifying that you have read and consented to the above procedures.

Thanks for your participation!

Yes

No