

## **Exploring attitudes to online grieving on Facebook through survey research**

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### **Abstract**

The research explores the process of grieving in an online environment, aiming to answer the question of how users perceive grieving practices on Facebook. The article is based on a survey of Facebook users, in which they estimate the importance of the topic and anonymously share their personal experiences related to death on Facebook. The survey aims to define how age, Facebook experience (frequency, motivations, number of friends) and also personality traits correlate with acceptance of different grieving practices in online context. Survey input left by the users with first-hand experience of death on Facebook shows the comforting effect of Facebook grieving after the loss of a valued person in the user's life. At the same time, those users who did not have any emotional personal ties with the deceased or their relatives, tended to regard online grieving as superficial or disturbing experience.

### **Keywords**

Online grieving; Online memorial; Online mourning; Facebook; Death

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## Introduction

The discussion about social networks and their influence on grieving practices in contemporary society began in the early 2000s. In the mass media we can find reflections on whether it is appropriate to tweet a funeral (Ingram, 2014), about the oddity of a Facebook funeral and smiling avatars (Kavulla, 2007), on the voyeurism of watching the life and death of Facebook friends (Bolick, 2010), about social media etiquette surrounding death (Buck, 2013) and on R.I.P. pages as a catalyst for participation (Kern, Forman, & Gil-Egui, 2013). There have also been discussions about ways to handle digital assets after death (Kaleem, 2012), legal aspects of controlling the pages of deceased people (Eder, 2013) and current policies and the factors that shaped the policy and procedures that define Facebook after death (McCallig, 2013).

Such discussions are absolutely logical in the current stage of social media development. After a decade of the rapidly growing popularity of all kinds of online social networks, the majority of users have had personal experience of dealing with profiles of deceased people in social media. The mass media expresses anxiety regarding the “virtual cemetery” and the growing number of “dead profiles” (Kaleem, 2012). Randall Munroe, a blogger in the field of popular science, forecasted that based on the Facebook growth rate and the age breakdown of its users over time, there may be more dead users than living ones on Facebook in either the 2030s or the 2060s (Munroe, 2012). In general on the internet over the last decade, subjects related to death and grieving have become “overwhelmingly common features” (McMahon, 2010).

*“Social media etiquette surrounding death is a delicate and highly subjective construct. What one person views as good judgment could translate as incredibly poor taste or downright offensive to others.”* (Buck, 2013)

Grieving online has been researched from different perspectives. A rhetorical analysis of Facebook Memorials has been conducted (Brooks, 2014) as well as analyses of the bonds in the virtual world and the role of Facebook in adolescent grief (James, 2014). Other researchers have provided insight into how people use search engines in times of grief and bereavement (Ruthven, 2012) or how the online grieving process is constructed on YouTube (Dinning-brinkmann, 2010) and MySpace (Malenkovich, 2013).

The positive psychological effect of the online grieving process has been confirmed in a number of studies. Online social networks have been proven to serve as the catalyst for participation in and creation of online communities (Kern et al., 2013) and to reduce panic and anxiety in the mourning process (Beretsky, 2012). Online social networks have transformed the grieving process (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013), making it more public and thus bringing relief to those who mourn (Buck, 2013). Related psychological research indicates that Facebook may have a negative influence on users by, for example, causing a decrease in mood (Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014) or potentially having an effect on loneliness (Song et al., 2014).

However, most academic works concentrate on the analysis of existing practices of grieving, and thus they research the phenomenon of grief in online contexts from the perspective of the experiences of users who are directly involved in the grieving process online. The present article makes an insight into the grieving process from the perspectives of users who are not necessarily involved in the grieving process. The survey also gave the respondents the opportunity to share their personal experiences and opinions in open-ended questions (158 respondents left replies describing their own stories and feelings related to death on Facebook).

The researchers who investigate the death and grieving in social media also have to take into account the certain level of death related scepticism among users. This is explained by numerous cases of fake deaths in social media. The famous Tom Sawyer's prank became available to everyone via social networks. There are well documented cases when individuals fake their own deaths and watched the reaction of their online friends (Chan, 2012; Veix, 2015). This may cause the scepticism of some users related to healing effect of grieving online.

The hypothesis of the research is that despite the academic studies confirming the healing effect of online grieving, the major part of users has ambiguous feelings about grieving practices on Facebook or even finds them unacceptable.

## Materials and Methods

The data was collected through a survey available online. The link to the survey has been shared on Facebook and Reddit. The online questionnaire designed for the research consists of three parts. The first part defines standard demographic variables (sex and age) and also Facebook use and experience (overall experience on Facebook, number of friends, usage frequency and purposes of using Facebook). The second part is devoted to attitudes to online grieving practices and other aspects of dealing with death on Facebook. The third and last part includes the Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) of the Big-Five personality dimensions. The TIPI was designed and tested by Gosling et al. (2003) and has been proven to be a reliable measure of the five personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability); see also five-factor model of personality (Digman, 1990). TIPI as a personality measure was found to reach adequate levels of convergent and discriminant validity and test-retest reliability (mean  $r = .72$ , compared to mean  $r = .80$  for the longer BFI (John & Srivastava, 1999) and is recommended as a reasonable and proxy for Big-Five measure in situations where personality is not the primary focus of the research (Gosling et al., 2003). Our motivation to use the shortened version was also dictated by the length of survey. Since this was an online survey where a respondent can quit at any moment, we were mostly interested in making the maximum number of respondents to complete the survey. Including larger Big-Five personality measures in the online survey would significantly increase the number of incomplete surveys (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, 2002).

In total 541 completed questionnaires were submitted through the online form available during February 2015. The collected sample is gender-balanced: 55.1 percent of all respondents identified themselves as being male and 44.9 as female. The sample is skewed towards younger users: almost half of the respondents (44.7%) reported their age within the 18-25 interval and 25.3 percent are between 26 and 35 years old. The majority of respondents (60.1%) have been using Facebook for more than five years, while only 1.8 percent said they have been on Facebook for less than a year. 85.9 percent indicated using Facebook at least every couple of days, thus the sample is comprised mostly of experienced and active network users. Most of the respondents said they use Facebook both for keeping in touch with close friends (79.3%) and maintaining connections with acquaintances (64.5%), while only 4 percent indicated using the network for building new connections. This confirms earlier findings that Facebook is primarily used for maintaining existing ties rather than establishing new ones (Golder, Wilkinson, & Hubennan, 2007; Joinson, 2008). No data regarding socioeconomic status of the respondents were collected.

Two types of analysis were used for the research: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data was analysed through two-way analysis of variance and crosstabulations where appropriate. The participants were first asked to answer all the questions of the survey except for the TIPI scale and then they were offered “to share any personal experience, opinions or feelings related to death or grieving on Facebook” as an open-ended question. In total 158 respondents provided textual answers, which were further divided into three groups, according to key words used by the respondents. The first group included respondents who grieved about significant others, the second one contained the responses from those who share their Facebook experience related to grieving about acquaintances and the last group had responses that could not be classified in either of the first two categories. We manually indexed the responses, outlining the key words that allowed us to evaluate the experience described as positive or negative.

The Cronbach’s Alpha value for the TIPI scale was .519. As noted by the TIPI scale’s authors, such small scale would necessarily not yield high alphas and CFI indices because of the fact it measures personality traits, which are rather broad concepts and two questions on each of the factors measured effectively look into different components of the trait (Gosling et al., 2003; Gosling, 2015). This is typical for the scales with low number of items for which the validity and test-retest reliability is the focus (Woods & Hampson, 2005). In this research five dimensions of personality were used as just one of the ways to compare the Facebook users rather than the main criterion of distinguishing between the respondents.

## Results

In the survey, 55 percent of the respondents answered positively to the question “Did any of your Facebook friends die?” Moreover, every third respondent of the survey had thought about what would happen to his or her own Facebook page after his or her death.

In the survey, we asked the respondents to answer the questions regarding four practices related to death on Facebook: memorial pages (and page deletion by the relatives of a deceased person as an alternative practice), timeline posts, tagging and messaging the deceased users. The attitudes were measured on a 3-point scale: respondents could denote positive, negative and neutral attitude to each of the grieving practices. Discussion of the distribution of the collected values and their relations to the independent variables is presented below. Where possible, the quantitative results are illustrated with comments left by the respondents.

## **Memorial Pages**

The profile of a deceased person can be converted into a memorial page at the request of relatives or friends. When a profile is converted into a memorial page only friends can see it, contact information and status updates are removed and logging in is restricted, while friends and family can leave posts on the profile timeline. In academic discourse memorial pages are defined as an alternative (to ritualistic memorials and cemeteries) space to mourn that is public, collective, and has archival capabilities (Kern et al., 2013).

Most of the respondents (63.3%) find it acceptable when the profile of a deceased person is converted into a memorial page. Only just above 10 percent answered that memorial pages seem unacceptable to them. Those who answered that they find it unacceptable to create a memorial page on Facebook were mostly people older than 26 years, while among users under 25 the percentage of those who found the memorial pages unacceptable was almost two times lower: 16.7% to 27.6%. There was also a connection between number of friends and tendency to accept the memorial pages. The more friends users had, the more accepting they were towards the memorial pages. Time spent on Facebook and frequency of Facebook use do not influence the attitude to memorial pages.

## **Deletion by Relatives**

An even bigger percentage of respondents (75.7%) find it acceptable for relatives to delete the profile page of a deceased person. Those who think that relatives should not delete the profile page of a deceased person are again mostly people older than 26 years – the percentage of those who would not like to have their page deleted by relatives among users above 26 is 5.4 percent higher than the average across the sample. In contrast to the attitude towards the memorial pages, the way users evaluate the deletion of the Facebook account of a deceased person by a relative depends on the time spent on Facebook. Among those who have more than three years of Facebook experience, there are two times more users who think that it is inappropriate when the Facebook profile of a deceased person is deleted by relatives. The more content users generate through the years, the more reasons they have to reject the option of the deletion of their account by relatives.

## Writing on the Timeline of the Deceased

A significant percentage of respondents (46.4%) think that “It’s absolutely fine to express the condolences/memories/feelings” by writing on the timeline of a deceased person. Another 37.5 percent feel “somewhat uncomfortable” seeing such updates on Facebook even though they think this is a normal practice for expressing sorrow on the Facebook timeline. 12.8 percent of respondents answered that they would prefer not to see such posts on their Facebook at all. While the influence of age, number of friends and frequency of Facebook use on negative perception of this grieving practice is marginal, the users who have 1-3 years of Facebook experience seem to be the least tolerant of writing on the timeline of a deceased person ( $p < .05$ ). While the percentage of those who prefer not to see the timeline posts in the groups of users who have less than 1 year, 3-5 years and more than 5 years of Facebook experience is around 11 percent, 21.2 percent of those with 1-3 years of Facebook experience avoid seeing such posts.

## Tagging the Deceased

The percentage of respondents who feel comfortable if a deceased person is tagged in someone’s photo or image is similar to those who find it appropriate to write on a deceased person’s timeline. 43.2 percent of respondents think that tagging a deceased person in a photo or image is a normal way to keep him or her in their memories. 34 percent do not mind seeing photos of a deceased person on Facebook, but find tagging someone who has died somewhat uncomfortable. Only 15.4 percent of the users think it is inappropriate to tag someone who has died in a photo or image on Facebook. Experience on Facebook was found to be the best predictor of the attitude towards tagging of the deceased (Table 1).

**Table 1. Facebook experience and attitudes towards tagging the deceased**

Facebook Experience	I don’t think it’s appropriate to tag someone who died in a photo or image on Facebook (percentage of all users)
Less than 1 year	20%
1-3 years	21.6%
3-5 years	16.4%
More than 5 years	13.2%
Total Sample	15% (N= 541)

The more years users have spent on Facebook the more tolerant they are to tagging of the deceased in photos or images. In the open-ended questions are comments that confirm the finding that Facebook experience influences the way people perceive tagging a deceased person or writing on his or her timeline:

*“When Facebook was still quite new (early 2006) I had a friend/college classmate pass away. We were Facebook friends and her Facebook page quickly became a space for her*

*friends past and present to keep writing to her/in her memory. It was very uncomfortable for me to see at the time, and had a pretty powerful impact on me at this age. Now, as Facebook had become so much more commonplace among not only college students, but everyone, it makes me less uncomfortable to see things like memorial posts, tagged photos, etc.”*

In the opinion of this respondent, we can track the personal evolution of attitude to grieving on Facebook. We cannot state that the attitude of many users evolved in this way, but with the help of this opinion we can see one possible explanation of the relation between years spent on Facebook and the perception of grieving practices online.

### **Direct Communication with the Deceased**

Therapeutic letter writing is a common practice in post-traumatic recovery (Kress, Hoffman, & Thomas, 2008). The possibility to directly message the digital self of a deceased person via Facebook influences questions of mortality and the grieving process and deals with afterlife experiences (Moreman & Lewis, 2014). While sending an actual letter does not make much sense, in digital reality we can send a messages and hope that it will somehow reach the digital self of the deceased person. In a 2012 study the messages directed to the deceased on Facebook memorial group walls were examined to explore how grieving individuals utilise Facebook to reconnect with the deceased. The results showed that they tend to write to the deceased as if the deceased could read the messages, making such messaging a unique type of direct communication (DeGroot, 2012). Despite the accessibility of this therapeutic grieving practice and its confirmed healing effect, only 7.2 percent of survey respondents answered that they would probably message a deceased person via Facebook. Those who have more Facebook experience are more ready to message the deceased via Facebook.

**Table 2. Facebook experience and attitudes towards messaging the deceased**

Facebook Experience	Yes, I would message the deceased (percentage of all users)
Less than 1 year	0%
1-3 years	3.8%
3-5 years	7.3%
More than 5 years	8%
Total Sample	7.3% (N= 541)

More women than men think they would message the deceased via Facebook (57.1 compared to 42.9 percent). Those who support the idea of messaging the deceased explain their attitude as follows:

*“Sometimes I want to write to her but I don’t do it, but the fact that it is still possible to do it is comforting”*

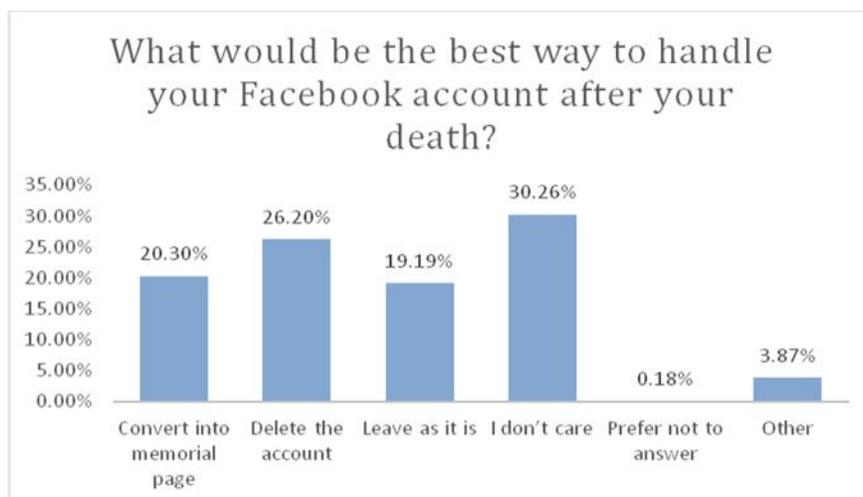
*“There is something peaceful about being able to leave her a little note when I’ve been thinking about her. Maybe that’s trying to make up for the years when we were both too busy with life. It’s all comforting to do. It also means that I can see messages other people send to her, which feels a bit strange.” (partner)*

*“I sent a Facebook message to a friend who had recently died telling him how much he meant to me, and his wife responded to me. It weirded me out a little bit because the message was meant for him, even though he wouldn’t see it. She eventually took over his account and posted as him for a little while before changing the account over to her name. The whole experience seemed strange.”*

Almost half of all surveyed users (48%) answered that they would not message the deceased via Facebook but can understand people who would do it. Still, 41.2 percent think that messaging the deceased via Facebook does not make any sense. Except for sex (most of those who chose this option were men (62.2%) no other factor was found to be associated the users’ readiness to get involved in direct communication with the deceased.

### Facebook Post-mortem

As a part of the survey respondents were offered a choice of the best way to handle their Facebook accounts after their hypothetical deaths. 30.7 percent answered that they do not care about what happens to their Facebook profile after death.



**Figure 1. The best way to handle Facebook account after death**

Still, the majority of respondents care about their Facebook accounts from a post-mortem perspective, choosing the three most popular options: memorial page, deletion by relatives and leaving the page as it is. Among those who chose the “other” option, several people specified that they want their family to decide what will happen to their profile (e.g. *“I want my surviving*

*loved ones to do what they want with it. It will be up to them to delete it or memorialize it. They are the grieving ones.”*). Three people mentioned that they would like their Facebook pages to be used for funeral arrangements and then to be deleted. Interestingly, several people mentioned that before deletion they would like the data archive to be downloaded from their pages and saved. Two respondents gave almost identical answers about a wishful afterlife on Facebook:

*“make it so it automatically posts witty ghost jokes every few days as status updates”*

*“connect to something that updates dumb puns and jokes about my death every other day”*

Thus, they do not just care about their Facebook accounts after their deaths but also want to keep their digital selves alive in some way.

Answering the question “Who do you think should regulate the digital content of a deceased person (mailboxes, pages on social networks, blogs etc.)?” the majority of respondents (68.5%) chose the option “relatives”. The legal regulation of digital content is supported by only 9 percent of respondents. A similar number of users (8.8 %) think that service providers should be responsible for the regulation of digital content left by the deceased on social networks, mailboxes, etcetera. Another ten percent (10.9%) had their own views on the regulation of digital content: named executor; best/close friend (“*Would never want my family to read my private stuff*”); nobody (“*let it die*”, “*don't see need for regulation*”); “*similar to how bank accounts currently work*”; “*in the same way as physical property*” and other answers.

In general the majority of respondents find the question of the regulation of digital content left by the deceased either very important (12.7%) or somewhat important (52.4%). Only 24.7 percent of the users think that the regulation of digital content is not important at all and 10.2 percent do not care at all about the issue.

## **Gender Differences**

Generally female users are more tolerant than male respondents both to writing on the timeline of the deceased (9.3% to 13.5%) and to tagging the deceased (9.8% to 16.6%). Furthermore, fewer women find it inappropriate to create memorial pages (7.8% to 12.7%) while men are somewhat more tolerant of the deletion of the Facebook account of the deceased by relatives (11.9% to 15.6%). All differences are significant at  $p < .05$ .

## **Personality Traits**

Out of the five personality traits evaluated with the help of the TIPI scale (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to experiences) only the agreeableness scale can be used to predict the tendency to accept grieving practices on Facebook.

People who score higher on agreeableness have a more positive attitude towards the researched grieving practices.

### Personal experience and attitudes to grieving practices

Similar to the amount of experience on Facebook, personal experience of facing death on Facebook is also associated with higher levels of acceptance of all the Facebook grieving practices, except for the deletion of the Facebook profile at the request of the relatives. There is a significant difference between the respondents who have had a friend on Facebook die and those who have not regarding attitudes to tagging or writing on the timeline of the deceased ( $p < .05$ ). The respondents who have personally faced death on Facebook are more tolerant to all the above-listed practices, but less accepting of the deletion of a Facebook page by relatives ( $p < .05$ ).

Respondents describing their own experiences of grieving after the loss of family members or close friends wrote that it brought them relief to receive condolences via Facebook (e.g. “*when my mother was in her last illness, friends and acquaintances reached out to sympathize and it made a lot of difference to me*”) while those who called grieving, for example, “*too serious a matter for Facebook*” or “*a thing for grieving teenagers*” did not describe any personal experience regarding grieving online.

Interestingly, the respondents who shared their experience of grieving for a family member (parents, siblings, cousins) or a close friend did not find it uncomfortable to see wall posts about a deceased person or images and photos where a person who had passed away was tagged. Quite the opposite - keeping the page alive and seeing posts from friends is described by the relatives or close friends of the deceased as a comforting experience. We also included in this group those respondents who described grieving experience of their close friends. Out of fifty two respondents who shared their feelings regarding grieving about a significant person forty seven responses were coded as positive, using such key words as *great, touching, comforting, supportive, happy, caring, helping, sensitive* and others.

In contrast, out of 31 respondents who described online grieving after the death of just a “Facebook friend” or “acquaintance”, twenty six answers were coded as mostly negative. They described keeping the page alive and posting on it as “*a constant reminder*” for a grieving family, using such key words as *selfish, harsh, not tactful, too personal, impersonal, annoying, confusing, weird, strange, upsetting, disturbing, creepy, overwhelming* and others.

One of the respondents compared the experience of online grieving for a family member and a Facebook acquaintance:

*“A friend in a dog rescue group I belong to passed away, as did my father. I didn't find my father's Facebook until after his death, and only a few people posted on his page after his*

*death. It didn't make me uncomfortable. When people posted on my friend's page, however, the outpouring was overwhelming and made me a tad uncomfortable.”*

This shows that there is a clear trend where those users who do not have any emotional personal ties with the deceased or with those who mourn for the deceased online tend to think that online grieving is often superficial, overwhelming and uncomfortable. In other words they demonstrate a protest against being involved in the grieving process, while those who grieve for family members or close friends or support their friends in their grieving describe grieving on Facebook as a comforting experience that helps overcome loss.

Among the 75 responses that were labelled as general, eleven respondents wrote that thanks to Facebook they had the chance to find out about the passing away of acquaintances they would never have found out about otherwise. Still, there were eight responses that evaluated learning about someone's death via a Facebook update negatively (e.g. *very insensitive, distasteful* or *“one of the worst ways to learn about death”*)

Admittedly, there were seven people who mentioned the key word *“pressure”* describing grieving on Facebook (e.g. *“A friend I had only just met died in a car crash very soon after I had added him on Facebook. The messages on his timeline felt... off, somehow, and it was filled with social pressure to participate.”*). This pressure leads to the defensive feeling that those who grieve online do it in an attention-seeking, impersonal manner and probably hurt the feelings of the families in the process. Respondents without first-hand experience of grieving online tend to classify online grieving as narcissistic behavior.

## Discussion

In general, the results of the survey confirmed the research hypothesis that the major part of the users feels ambiguous about grieving on Facebook. Of the outlined ways of grieving the biggest support has received the deletion of Facebook page by the relatives of the deceased. Even though the majority of respondents (63.3%) find it acceptable to convert the page of a deceased into memorial page, less than half of the respondents fully accept the idea of writing on timeline of a deceased (46.4%) or tagging the person who passed in photos or videos (43.2%).

The relatively low level of acceptance of tagging the deceased or writing on their timeline can be explained by the fact that while grieving communities organized as memorial websites or forums devoted to coping with death provide public spaces for grieving, death on Facebook often enters the private space of a user. In other words, participating in an online community created for mutual support for people who are going through loss is always the decision of the user who chooses to cope with trauma with the help of an online environment. Conversely, online social networks involve a person in the mourning process even if he or she would prefer to stay away from online grieving. A Facebook user will see updates about a deceased friend or even about

friends of friends, and cannot somehow shield him or herself from them without breaking the connection with a Facebook friend.

The biggest difference in attitudes towards online grieving was observed, perhaps unsurprisingly, between users who have had a Facebook friend die and those who are familiar with death on Facebook only theoretically. Survey input left by the users with first-hand experience of death on Facebook clearly shows the comforting effect of Facebook grieving after the loss of a close friend or family member. Many comments suggested that the availability of Facebook for expressing (or receiving) condolences has had a positive effect on the process of dealing with death when the deceased was a valued person in the user's life. At the same time, those users who did not have any emotional personal ties with the deceased, or with those who mourn for the deceased, tended to regard online grieving as superficial, disturbing or even as hurting the relatives. This shows that a certain discomfort about transferring grieving practices online is still present, at least among those who have not experienced the death of close friends on Facebook.

The results of the survey confirm the importance of the topic: death on Facebook is a phenomenon that has already been experienced by many users and the majority of them have already formed their opinions about their digital afterlives. The paper also provided a look at the way grieving attitudes form. There is certain link between the time a user has been using the network and his or her attitude towards grieving. Users who have been registered on Facebook for years and have accumulated more content over that time more often rejected the deletion of profiles by relatives as an acceptable option. In general users prefer to transfer the control of their online account to relatives or a trusted person, rather than allowing the service provider to take care of their profile after their death.

The research does not include other online platforms and therefore we cannot extrapolate the results to the phenomenon of online grieving in general. Another limitation of the present research is that we could not differentiate the bonds of the respondents to the people they grieved about on Facebook. Grieving about a relative or a close friend is possibly different compared to the grieving about a Facebook acquaintance. In addition, even though apart from the quantitative survey data we collected responses for qualitative analysis, we did not have a chance to ask follow up questions, asking the respondents to clarify their answers.

Future research directions may also include studying the psychological effects of online grieving and the use of the internet for therapeutic purposes when dealing with loss. Connection with social activism is also worth exploring: memorial pages on Facebook can be used as platforms for raising awareness of issues connected to the page owner's death (e.g. safety on the roads, responsible driving and other issues).

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