

Grief Iconography

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Is the evolving practice of online posting of photographs and images, often accompanied by emotional comments about deceased loved ones. It is frequently used to express mourning and sorrow, maintain a continuing bond with the deceased, cope with grief, pay homage to the deceased and provide the mourner opportunities to receive empathic support from other users. Grief iconography is observable across various Social Network Sites and various cultures (see Cupit, Sapelli, & Testoni, 2021). This practice may be considered as the online evolution of past visual displays of loss and grief, such as post-mortem photography or mourning portraits.

Keywords: death ; grief ; internet ; photograph ; comparative study ; social network sites

1. Introduction

The expression of online grief is becoming increasingly common ^[1]. The first Web memorial (“Web cemetery”) appeared in 1995 ^[2], helping to develop a digitized venue for the expression of emotions, reminiscences and the establishment of communities to commemorate the deceased ^{[3][4]}. These online cemeteries were joined by sites, blogs and forums for the manifestation and processing of mourning in public spaces. In the 21st century, the development of social network sites (SNSs) ^[5] enabled grief to become more communal, and brought death awareness back into everyday life ^[6]. The collective funeral celebrations of public personalities ^[7] and the individual commemoration of deceased loved ones in specific support online groups ^{[8][9][10]} have increased considerably, and have been extensively studied. Looking at Facebook in particular, it is possible to ascertain how the two-way communication typical of new media has allowed anyone to participate in someone’s grief, normalizing what would once have been regarded as a rude invasion of immediate family mourning ^[11]. According to Brubaker and colleagues ^[12], social media has expanded awareness of an individual’s mourning due to the combination of the user’s networked communication and SNSs’ automated notifications. In particular, the researchers identified three main areas where online mourning has expanded: 1) the temporal, enabled by the asynchronous nature of SNSs resulting in both the immediacy of information enabled by the daily use of SNSs and breadth of information available as individuals add content from the past and present (e.g., discovering the death of friends and contributing postmortem comments); 2) the spatial, enabled by the removal of geographical barriers, allowing for interaction among bereaved users regardless of distance; and 3) the social, referring to the dissemination of information across previously separate social groups, now unified by SNSs. Current research suggests that a fourth form of mourning expansion may be seen: cultural expansion

Before the Internet era, ceremonies such as funerals provided family members with specific spaces of commemoration with a limited time-frame, but in the “social media age” SNSs provide a public venue with a potentially much wider audience for commemoration, co-constructing biographies of the deceased and fostering a continuation of the relationship with the deceased ^{[14][15][16][17]}. Thus, the death of a significant other is not the end of the relationship; rather, the relationship persists, not frozen in time, evolving with modifications of biographies of the mourners and of the deceased ^[18]. Such a continuity in the relationship is facilitated by social media, which can go beyond time and space, and ultimately beyond life and death. SNSs may therefore play a fundamental role in defining how we understand death and how we face it, presenting new tools with which new death-related rituals gain popularity. The expression of mourning via an SNS provides a manifestation of one’s feelings of grief and others’ empathy and condolences in new multimedia ways that are no longer limited to speech or text on paper. Furthermore, because the digital dimension does not force people into ‘face-to-face’ interactions, it removes many of the main interpersonal risks that accompany this type of communication. It follows that suffering a loss online is usually “safer” from an interpersonal point of view, allowing not only family but also friends and acquaintances ^{[3][19]} to discuss the deceased’s life with less inhibition by choosing what kind of words to use to avoid embarrassment or emotional tension ^[15]. The connection between grief and the Internet is becoming so strong that some researchers have begun to speak about “social media mourners” to refer to those people who, having lost someone, make use of social networks to face the loss through one-way communication (to express mourning), two-way communication (to dialogue on death with others) or immortal communication (to communicate with the deceased

him/herself) [20]. “Multi-way communication” may also be a useful term, preferred in this article, in order to highlight the interactive nature of social media and the participation of several users in the same communications.

In Western societies, traditional forms of death ritualization [21] have become increasingly removed from their religious roots, as well as being truncated in time and accessibility to family members who may have moved far from their families of origin [22]. Communal support by physical presence has been particularly affected by the COVID-19 crisis, which rendered grievers socially isolated [23]. The process of a deceased’s biographical reconstruction may result in a number of roadblocks [24] that SNSs seem to solve. The digital landscape offers valuable solutions through a greater connection between people, as well as new traditions within the framework of traditional and non-traditional religions [7][25][26][27]. SNSs may serve to reintroduce death into the world of the living by allowing the sharing of stories with others in order to cope with the loss [28][29].

The majority of the research in this field has focused mainly on the verbal content observed or reported by the bereaved. However, SNSs offer the possibility of the visual manifestation of grief by publishing photographs or images related to the deceased, as photography is one of the simplest ways to remember [30][31][32]. From a historical perspective, the use of postmortem photography, also called memento mori photography, was widespread in the United States during the 19th century [33]. Contemporary practices, particularly with regard to parents posting pictures of their deceased children, are an online manifestation of this earlier behavior [19]. The research on photographs in relation to online mourning has spanned the gamut from funeral selfies, which may communicate an individual’s affect to a broad audience [34], to postings which include photos of loved ones who died by suicide [35]. Church [36] writes of the “digital gravescape” on Facebook, where photographs show visual depictions of the afterlife and nature scenes. Images appear to supplement the poems, song lyrics and personal updates from adolescents mourning their peers on an SNS [36]. Additional studies published on this “iconography of grief” have indicated that the photographs are useful for coping with grief over missing persons presumed dead, and with the intense grief over deceased children [37][38]. Most of these studies found that the verbal and visual postings were used to communicate with the deceased, as a “continuing bond”. Overall, grief photography is considered an “evolving practice,” both in the online and offline world.

2. Grief Iconography between Italians and Americans

Two countries in which the practice of grief iconography has been studied are Italy and the United States [39]. In both countries, prior tendencies not to share anything concerning a deceased loved one in order to protect their privacy, has been changed by the use of SNSs [40][41][42]. In comparison to Italian users, SNS users in the U.S. seem to make greater use of the communicative potential of social media and the “collapse of the context” [43] to report deaths [20]. Americans reported higher percentages in relation to the willingness to inform everyone about the death, and in relation to the choice of images that adequately portray the deceased’s appearances to a vast and varied virtual audience. For both Italian and U.S. SNS users, the evidence suggests a tendency, typical of mourning posts, to speak to the deceased instead of about the deceased [12][39]. Many Italians, addressed the deceased directly by expressing a greeting, a wish, a dedication or a promise to the deceased. Similar to those in the U.S., Italians used SNS communication mostly to express emotions and to remember.

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