Mourning Practices On Facebook: Facebook Shrines And Other Rituals Of Grieving In The Digital Age

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MOURNING PRACTICES ON FACEBOOK:
FACEBOOK SHRINES AND OTHER RITUALS
OF GRIEVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of the
Dedman College
Southern Methodist University
in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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with a
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by
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Death comes to us all in time. It is innate to the human experience, as is loss. The subject matter of my dissertation was challenging at times. In facing the difficult emotions of surrounding death, I learned so much from the wisdom and generosity of my research participants. I want to acknowledge that this work is the fruit of our combined efforts brought to life, in honor of the memory of the loved ones we have each lost.

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Death is a universal, and for humans so is the experience of grief that follows. This dissertation exams how Facebook users utilize the social media platform as they mourn their loved ones, process their grief, and support the grief of others. It explores how the experience of death and loss shapes the religious beliefs and actions of grievers and how social media impacts the grief experience of its users. It looks at the community that arises organically from mourning on the deceased’s Facebook Timeline and interrogates the social pressure to perform grief in such a public space. Finally, it asks how interacting with these virtual memorials impacts the mental and social health of participants.
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In loving memory of all the loved for whom we grieve.
CHAPTER 1
AN INTRODUCTION TO VIRTUAL MOURNING

Facebook is the graveyard of the Internet. Mourning on Facebook is a growing global phenomenon. In the mid-South of the United States, a region encompassing Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas, users utilize Facebook as a platform for mourning. Facebook gives its users a wider reach for effective and efficient communication with friends and family following a death, making it easy to update the broader network regarding funeral arrangements and plans for memorials. It facilitates social grieving as users can share their grief experiences and mourn with their network. The wider network can support the bereaved by offering supportive comments and sharing memories. Facebook thus provides a socially acceptable outlet for virtual mourning that fits with and adapts the offline mourning practices of users. Because of the prevalence of Facebook use, virtual mourning is now an integral part of many social networks’ grief process.

This dissertation is about the practices, social norms, and user experiences of mourning on Facebook. Death creates a disruption of the social network of the living. Facebook allows the vulnerability brought by death to be front and center as part of a griever’s social identity. My research is based on Facebook users in the mid-South and represents a break with the tradition of grieving being a private emotional process, as performing grief has instead become an essential mechanism of kinwork and identity-building following the aftermath of a death. This dissertation documents three patterns of mourning on Facebook, which I define below: Facebook Shrines, Mourning Status Updates, and Grief Support Groups. The responses these posts receive fit into
three major themes: memorialization, solidarity, and emotional/religious support. The social media posting behaviors I document in this dissertation impact both the individual grief process and the recovery of community health through mourning. While the mourning practices of Facebook represent an adaptation and extension of local offline mourning traditions, the expectation of extended public grief performance generates a new level of exposure and vulnerability.

In this introductory chapter, I describe my personal introduction to the mourning practices of Facebook and the patterns of mourning practices I observed. Then I discuss the research questions, which arose from my early observations and the methods I utilized to address them. My project captures Facebook’s design and mechanics at a particular moment in time as it is based on fieldwork conducted between January 2016 and July 2020. Like all cultural systems, Facebook is constantly evolving in response to the needs and imagination of the Facebook company and Facebook’s user base and in response to the economic demands and geopolitics of the world in which Facebook exists. As Facebook is constantly changing, I present as much visual data as possible to represent this particular moment in time.

1.1 My Introduction to Facebook Mourning

As a Facebook user since 2005, I have regularly engaged with the many permutations of Facebook since its creation. This included the introduction of mourning practices, which were very exceptional to the otherwise positive interactions of early Facebook. I observed the virtual mourning practices firsthand on Facebook on two significant occasions, the first in 2006 and the second in 2013.

In 2006, in the spring of my freshman year of college, second-grader April Edison, age 7, drowned in a public pool near my hometown. Her death devastated her family, friends, and small
community. April was the younger sister of one of my high school classmates, and I first learned of her death on Facebook. I was sitting on the couch in my dorm room scrolling through Facebook, procrastinating while finishing my history term paper. My roommate was watching MTV’s celebrity-centric version of The Bachelor, where a crazy man with a massive clock hanging around his neck was deciding which girl to send home. Amidst relationship status updates and pictures of college parties was the image of a young girl. It was a school photo of a girl who looked about six years old. The picture had been edited to include a soft white frame and text that read “Remembering April Edison 1999 to 2006.” Everything about this post was strange. Photos of children rarely found their way into my newsfeed in those early days of Facebook, and the text suggested a seriousness to this post I had never seen on Facebook before. “Is this some kind of horrible joke?” I asked myself. It had been posted by a high school classmate, so I checked the statuses of other friends from back home. I found messages like “RIP sweet angel!” and “We will always remember you, April!” and images of a happy little girl with friends and family. After about 30 minutes of searching, I slowly pieced the story together from various status updates. April Edison, the little sister of a boy I went to school with, had drowned at a birthday party held at a local public pool. All thoughts of my paper gone, I picked up my phone to call my mother and confirm the story. Hours later, I came across a link to a news report. The next day her obituary was posted along with an announcement of her funeral services and visitation. However, most posts expressed disbelief, grief, and an outpouring of love for the girl’s family. With these sentiments came the promise to never forget April, a promise her classmates carried out ten years later. Through a successful campaign carried out on social media, students insisted on including a chair for April at their graduation. A single white flower lay across April’s empty chair. Her mother was invited to receive a diploma on her behalf, and once again,
April’s pictures surged on Facebook. Through digital action, physical memorialization took place.

April’s memorialization was the first example of mourning posts on Facebook that I observed. It was still in the early days of Facebook, and discussing anything too serious was still a rare occurrence. April’s story stuck with me, as did a need to understand this new and very public form of mourning haunted me.

I had almost forgotten about April until 2013 when tragedy struck closer to home. My partner Greg got the call late one night, after returning home from a trip to see his sister’s college graduation. It was his mother, and with an abrupt start, she said, “Greg, Trey’s dead.” I noticed his expression change instantly; the color slowly draining from his face. In the aftermath of that call, I found myself wondering, how could Greg’s cousin Trey be dead? Greg had seen him less than twenty-four hours prior. Slowly the details came in: Trey had gone out on a lake with his friends, and a terrible accident took the lives of both Trey and his best friend. We were in the middle of packing up our apartment and had only days left to go before we were scheduled to move out, but we had to return to Arkansas for the funeral. Before we could even leave to make the three-hour trek, Facebook was alight with messages from Greg’s sister, Trey’s mother, and dozens of friends, the overwhelming majority of whom were female, 5 to 1 ratio in the post I have retro-actively returned to analyzed. These posts expressed a supreme shock in losing such a bright light in their lives. Trey was dead, and no one could believe it. Trey was dead, yet everyone held on to him, posting again and again with every passing day. Even after the funeral, the near-constant flooding of grief and consolation continued into the summer and the fall. But Greg? He only posted once in all that time.
The flood of Facebook posts came as no surprise to most: two popular young college students died while out on the lake celebrating the first weekend of summer break. The funerals were delayed given the nature of their deaths, which ultimately led to a wrongful death suit against the young man driving the boat. Ultimately, he pled no contest to two counts of first-degree manslaughter. Yet while the family waited for Trey’s body to be released, the media hounded them to give interviews, but the family firmly refused to be a part of a “media circus.” Trey’s mother wrote a formal statement, which her sister read whenever the media called.

Even after seven years, I continue to see messages regularly posted to Trey’s Timeline by his family and friends from childhood, school, and college. These messages, pictures, and videos keep Trey’s memory alive, keeping him accessible for those who continue to seek him out. For many, including Trey’s mother, this is a way to continually grieve and try to ease a pain that will never heal. For others, however, this created an awkward reminder of something they would rather forget. For some of the family and community-at-large, these digital mourning practices frequently generate unexpected reminders of Trey amidst their normal daily Facebook routine.

Trey’s Facebook Timeline spontaneously turned into a digital shrine. A popular young man died publicly and tragically, and the funeral must be postponed while the family waits for the body to be released. With no other outlet for communal grieving, Facebook allowed his previously separate social groups—family, friends, high school classmates and teachers, and college classmates—to all be connected in a way they previously had not been: a place for griever to gather, as a community, to perform their grief publicly and communally while they agonized for action. In doing so, they collectively re-wrote the young man’s life narrative transforming him from son and friend to ancestor whose memory inspires and whose spirit
watches over them all. This process was fascinating and provided me with a second way of
looking at the emerging practice of digital mourning.

When discussing my interest in digital mourning, a friend of mine from New Mexico
quickly alerted me to a third mourning practice on Facebook: the use of Facebook’s private
group function as a private forum to discuss grief or honor the deceased. While the example she
offered me was a private Facebook group created to honor her mother, who did not have
Facebook herself, Trey’s mother informed me that private Facebook groups were also being used
as online support groups usually organized around themes such as the loss of a child, the death of
a soldier at war, or being widowed early in life. This third method is deeply private, and
outsiders are not welcomed into it, allowing for intense displays of emotion that might otherwise
be uncouth for public display and even more disruptive to users who stumble upon while
scrolling through their newsfeed. Thus, these support groups are harder to study and are more
elusive, appearing primarily in interviews in this project.

Mourning on Facebook is done in three ways: as the status update, such as in the case of
April Edison; as a Facebook Shrine such as in the case of Trey; and in private Facebook groups.
April’s case in 2006 took place entirely in status updates as April did not have a Facebook
account herself. April did not have a Facebook account herself, and even if she had, the Timeline
feature did not exist as yet. The mourning for Trey, which began in 2013, prominently featured
the conversion of his Facebook Timeline into a space of memorialization and commemoration.
The creation of memorial groups for the deceased is a much rarer occurrence. I have only
documented three throughout the course of my fieldwork. The thematic grief support groups are
far more common. For this project, I examine all the mourning practices of Facebook: mourning
status updates, Facebook shrines, and grief support groups, a third but much rarer category.
Remembering April and Trey on Facebook was a communal act of memorialization, a way to express the grief we otherwise may not be able to express due to in-person social norms. Providing a peer support group for people who otherwise do not have access to support groups, rallying emotional support for the bereaved, mobilizing physical actions, in-person events, and permanent memorials are all normal social behaviors on the Internet. Facebook provides a connective social space for its users.

I studied Trey’s case closely as it developed with hopes that one of these features of the Internet might clarify what I was observing. I discussed it at length with several people both inside and outside of Trey’s extended social network. However, questions still remained: What made a family that rebuked the media for their coverage of this tragic death choose to actively participate in very public grieving on Facebook? Did engaging in this collaborative narration of the deceased’s life and their personal grief provide the bereaved with a new means of socio-psychological healing? Did Facebook offer grievers a sense of community? Did that community provide grievers with much needed social, emotional, and spiritual support?

When there was a resurgence of memorial posts about April leading up to her class’s graduation in 2016, it forced me to consider how mourning on Facebook was intertwined with offline mourning. It also demonstrated the potential longevity of the mourning practices of Facebook.

Within the context of anthropology, the posting behaviors I observed, and the impact that these Facebook posts had on people’s offline relationships left me with a need to understand this emerging cultural phenomenon. At the time, the specialty of digital anthropology was gaining prominence in American Anthropology, and it is within that field of study that I began framing
my research questions. Why do bereaved Facebook users choose to utilize Facebook as a 
platform for mourning? Why chose to mourn online at all?

This led to additional questions: Do people who engage in mourning practices on 
Facebook do so because they find it awkward or uncomfortable to discuss their loss and 
accompanying emotions in-person? Is it more socially acceptable to discuss death and grief on 
Facebook than in-person? Do the people who choose to mourn on Facebook do so because they 
feel like it is easier to express their grief in text than it is to say it out loud? Is it easier to find 
supportive listeners on Facebook? Does mourning on Facebook allow people to mourn 
communally despite living far apart? Is mourning on Facebook a digital strategy for cultivating 
grief resilience and facilitating recovery? What happens when previously separate parts of the 
deceased’s social network share their memories of the deceased on Facebook? How do mourning 
posts linked to the deceased’s Facebook Timeline shape the deceased’s digital legacy? Does 
engaging in a dramatic collaborative narration of their grief provide these grievers with a new 
means of socio-psychological healing? What are the potential negative side effects of this 
emerging practice on grief and the griever’s social network?

1.2 Methods

In order to tackle these research questions, I devised a mixed methods strategy that 
included digital and in-person ethnographic methods to collect both quantitative and qualitative 
data. The Southern region of the United States was an ideal research area in light of its cultural 
tradition of open religious discourse and its unique political-economic history. Examining the 
integration of Facebook into Southern death practices, I analyzed Facebook as a platform for 
emotional disclosure, memorialization, and seeking out support. Based on these preliminary 
observations, I decided to collect data on emotional language, religious language, supportive
language, and the characteristics used to describe the deceased. I also developed survey and interview questions aimed at illuminating these topics and associated posting behaviors.

Digital media data collection took place in four stages: Facebook participant-observation, an online survey which was coupled with social networking strategies for recruitment, background research during interviewee selection, and examination of Facebook Shrines and Memorialized account case studies. These etic observations were coupled with participant’s emic perspectives collected as narratives during the in-person interviews.

To address the transition of grieving onto Facebook adequately, the project examined the digital and physical overlap. To accomplish this, the scope of the offline research was limited by the physical parameters to the Mid-South region of the United States which I define as Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas. Rather than focusing on all of Facebook as a single community, localizing this project has allowed me to study Facebook in terms of local communities and global media. I conducted in-person informal interviews with local funeral home directors, religious leaders, and health care providers to gain insights into local norms, practices, and grief support resources. I also attended funeral and memorial services whenever appropriate to develop an understanding of the in-person practices for comparative purposes. Finally, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews which adapted the illness narrative interview model to illicit grief narratives.

Research for this project took place on two fronts: online and in-person in the mid-South. Accordingly, the IRB approval process for this project was intensive and took over a year and a half from start to finish. The two major ethical issues of this project relate to digital privacy and the vulnerability of grief. While these were two areas of major ethical concern for me as a
researcher, they are also both critical topics of discussion as the research proceeded with those who agreed to participate in the project.

In July of 2016, I participated in a joint e-seminar between EASA’s Media Network, the AAA’s Digital Anthropology Interest Group, and AAA’s Committee for the Anthropology of Science, Technology, and Computing. The e-seminar entitled, “Facebook as research field and research platform”, was heavily focused on methodology and ethics. For this project, the major ethical issues relate to the debate over whether Facebook should be considered public, semi-public, or private (Zimmer 2010). The argument for Facebook as a public space follows thusly: Facebook, the corporation, owns all content shared on its site. It is a free and open site that anyone may join and much of its content is searchable and appears in search engines. The argument in favor of considering Facebook as private is based in emic conceptualizations of Facebook as a communal space where friends and family gather. But it is also based on a concern that Facebook users have a lot of difficulties mastering or keeping sight of the nuances of Facebook’s privacy settings (Martinez 2017). Based on the way the Facebook users I spoke with conceptualize Facebook, talk about Facebook, and routinely interact with Facebook, I advocate for a middle ground. Facebook is a semi-public space comparable to a country club or church. There is a clear membership and there are private spaces within the larger setting, but as a whole the organization and the interactions which occur within it are fairly open to the public. The caveat is that it is a highly curated public. Facebook users have full control over whom they add as friends. They can adjust their privacy settings and can block people with whom they do not wish to associate. But Facebook users frequently grow overly comfortable and complacent, which leaves them feeling alienated when they face rude reminders of the corporate realities of Facebook. I followed the emerging disciplines standards of best practice as outlined in
Boellstorff et al. (2012). These recommend an anthropologist announces herself by frequently posting anthropology content, frequently posting about her research, and having it clearly stated in her various online profiles that she is a professional anthropologist. I adopted this cautious stance frequently, reminding my network that I was an anthropologist conducting fieldwork, asking permission and obtaining informed consent as much as possible. By the time of the full review the IRB was fully satisfied on this front.

The strength of anthropology is that we are always absorbing data. Gathering data is not something we do in a lab or even something we can easily shut off. We learn through immersion, living in the same cultural context as the people we are studying. We call it participant-observation occasionally, even deep hanging out, in an attempt to over emphasize the casual nature of one of our greatest research tools (boyd 2014).

Due to this “always on” style of data gathering, I offered gentle reminders to the research participants and potential research participants in my extended social network through a series of blog posts that describe my methodology and offer an accessible explanation of anthropological research. As two of these blog posts are highly relevant to this project’s research design, I have borrowed heavily from them for this chapter. While seeking IRB approval, the IRB committee chair recommended that I engage in grief training to prepare me for my fieldwork and ensure that I had local resources in case any issues arose while I was conducting my fieldwork. This proved a valuable experience. I connected with local grief counseling experts and attended twelve hours of training and professional development for grief counselors hosted at the Arkansas Children’s Hospital in Little Rock, AR. During this training I learned key theories and therapeutic perspectives from expert health care providers. I also benefited greatly from the mentorship and support of Gregg Adams, the director of the Good Mourning Grief Counselling Center in the
Arkansas Children’s Hospital. He graciously agreed to provide me with feedback on my survey and interview questions in order to ensure they were worded with grief sensitivity in mind.

It was the vulnerability of grief that concerned the IRB the most at the time of my full review. As I planned to conduct in-person interviews and participant-observation, some members of the IRB committee were concerned that my presence or questions might prove taxing for the recently bereaved. The grief training I received was incredibly important in my preparation for conducting interviews.

Over the course of this project, I interviewed people who had experienced losses as recently as three months or as long ago as forty years. These were emotional interviews, but many commented that they found the process cathartic or that they were comforted knowing that sharing their story would help others facing the same loss. With my research now completed, I would recommend the grief narrative interview technique I developed for this project to grief counselors and therapist.

Participant-observation on Facebook looks very similar to normal Facebook use. I regularly accessed Facebook on my phone, computer, and tablet. Once on the site, I checked my notifications and messages. Then I scrolled through my newsfeed to catch-up on the latest content posted by my network. Once interview subjects were selected, I sought out the content they posted, and Facebook’s algorithm quickly learned to favor these posts in my newsfeed. I documented any posts related to death or mourning by taking fieldnotes and screenshots and then later bookmarked posts to add to my collections. Coded and quantified data on post content was organized into a spreadsheet for analysis.

Facebook participant-observation for this project continued in much the same way during the fieldwork stage as it did during the planning stage, with two notable exception. In 2017, I
began taking screen shots to supplement my field notes realizing that the screenshot preserved data far better than a link to the account’s profile as posts and comments can be deleted or simply become difficult to find as numerous new posts appear overtime.

From January 2016 to October 2016, Facebook participant-observation included approximately 20 to 30 hours of Facebook time every week. In mid-October, with the lead-up to the 2016 US elections, I took a hiatus from Facebook participant-observation as Facebook spiraled into a political warzone full of “fake news” and polarizing nonsense from all sides. I returned to regular Facebook participant-observation in late February 2017 after the birth of my son at the beginning of February. I continued devoting approximately 30 hours a week to Facebook participant-observation until September 2018. From September 2017 to March 2018, I continued conducting approximately 15 to 20 hours a week of Facebook participant-observation while I began writing my dissertation. Additionally, from May 2016 to March 2018, I gave special consideration to posts made by interview participants and the responses they received for comparison with their interviews. From March 2018 to July 2020, I reduced the amount of time I dedicated to Facebook participant-observation, but I continued to document any mourning posts I observed during my time on Facebook. Facebook created a feature called a collection that made it easy to save and organization posts. I began utilizing this feature in early 2018 and went back and add posts that I previous documented to the collection. I also attempted to locate and add any posts that interviewees specifically mentioned so that I would have it in the collection. The collection feature made it incredibly easy to go back and analyze the text and visual content of the posts later.

I also expanded my participant-observation to include Facebook groups designed to be remote grief support groups. I located grief-related Facebook groups utilizing Facebook’s
internal search engine; a keyword search was run to locate as many grief-related Facebook groups as possible. I searched keywords such as “loss,” “death,” “angels,” “widow(er),” “remember(ed),” and “grief”. All of these words had been identified as useful search tags during preliminary fieldwork. Each time a group was located, Facebook’s suggestion feature offered a list of related groups. This feature utilizes Facebook’s algorithm based on factors such as geographic location, user’s friends, recently searched topics, and the user’s membership in other Facebook groups to make recommendations (Bucher 2012; Seaver 2014). I added these additional recommendations to my list of groups until Facebook’s suggestion feature no longer produced new groups.

Once located, I contacted group administrators informing them of my project, and with permission from the group administrators, I made an announcement regarding my project and began participant-observation in the public space of the grief-related Facebook Groups. As these were private groups, I did not take screenshots but took notes of how the content of these posts differed from those posted in public spaces.

To further situate my research and gain insight into how the in-person cultural traditions surrounding death in the Mid-South influenced the digital practices I observed, I consulted and networked with local experts in the Mid-South including: clergy, grief counselors, death educators, social workers, therapists, funeral home directors, etc. I interviewed fifteen local experts, six members of clergy, seven health care and grief experts, and two funeral home directors. My research was enthusiastically supported by the communities I worked with and I received a great deal of encouragement from clergy, healthcare providers, and educators. Reception among funeral home directors was mixed. Most were interested in my project, but all were hesitant to be formally interviewed.
I had permission to survey, informally interview, and/or conduct the semi-structured grief narrative interviews with up to three-hundred participants who were associated with Facebook Shrines or who participated in mourning on Facebook in some other way. The survey was written in such a way as to allow participants to volunteer to be interviewed both informally or in a semi-structured grief narrative interview. They were also able to grant me consent to access their Facebook data. I obtained two separate consents for people who were surveyed and interviewed using the grief narrative interview. By informal interview I mean participant-observation style conversations in which my end of the conversation and questions were informed by my research. Many participants in these informal interviews and the survey, who lived in the Mid-South or had lived there, were exceptionally eager to know more about the project and process.

Finding people to participate was not a problem: the general rule of thumb for many was that everyone knew someone who either had passed away or had mourned publicly on Facebook. Despite this, it made it hard to create a random sample, as everyone suggested my project to
people they knew: limited by the socially networked design of Facebook the project relied somewhat on social networking in its recruitment strategy.

My sample for the informal interviews included seventeen Facebook users who participated in mourning on Facebook directly or indirectly but were not part of my semi-structured grief narrative interview sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</table>

Table 2 Informal Interview Demographics – Race and Ethnicity
## Table 3 Informal Interview – Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Sample</th>
<th>Age 18-29</th>
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<th>Age 40-49</th>
<th>Age 50-65</th>
<th>Age 65+</th>
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</table>

Locating a Facebook Shrine requires immersion in the process. It requires one to be active on Facebook, active in reading posts, and active in the social lives of those around them, research participant or no. Thus, this was a time-consuming process that produced more than sufficient data but required excessive immersion in that data to process and translate it.

During the last six months of data collection, I randomly selected 30 mourning posts for textual analysis. I collected quantitative data on the number of comments, reactions, gender of those commenting, and post length when relevant. I also coded posts and their comments for religious language, emotional language, supportive language, memorializing narratives, and informative/organizational posts. I collected post and comment emoticons, use of images, videos, hashtags, and links. These data were particularly useful for quantifying how gendered each of
these behaviors was. They were also incredibly important for linguistic analysis of idioms of belief, grief solidarity, support, and emotional disclosure.

I designed an online survey utilizing the website Survey Monkey. It is a brief questionnaire with twenty questions relating to Facebook use and posting behaviors, primarily focusing on grieving, support seeking, and religious posts. At the end of the survey, I asked respondents if they were willing to volunteer to be interviewed or to be included in Facebook post analysis. The average time spent on the survey was 6 minutes. This survey put my new recruitment strategy into action. I shared a link to the survey through the project’s official Facebook page and website. I also shared it on my personal and professional social media sites. Fortunately, many research participants and interested parties also shared information about my research and the link to the online survey. There were 272 respondents to the survey--a 92% completion rate. Of these, 262 of the responses were complete with validated informed consent. Of these 262 survey respondents, 109 volunteered to be interviewed. This was an incredibly successful means of gathering essential statistical data and recruiting a pool of potential interview participants. The sample of interview participants was built from this pool of volunteers. For a full list of survey questions and response options, see Appendix 2.
During the period of participant-observation, I utilized Facebook’s collection feature to add death related posts that I observed into a private collection I curated. I sorted these posts into a Mourning Status Update collection, Facebook Shrine collection, and a third collection of grief related memes and resources. Greg Wright, my research assistant, also assisted adding Facebook posts to the collections I curated. These notes and screen shots and bookmarked posts are included in the Facebook participant-observation data analyzed for this project. I organized the posts I collected and analyzed into a collection of posts made on Facebook Shrines and Mourning Status Updates. Mourning Status Updates are defined as a user making a post mourning the deceased, without tagging the deceased’s account. In many cases, the deceased was mentioned by name but either did not have a Facebook account or the poster did not hyperlink the deceased’s name in the text. I collected 90 Mourning Status Posts with 8879 reactions and 3129 comments. From the 90 Mourning Status posts in my collection, I randomly selected forty posts. Following the same protocols that I used on Facebook Shrine posts, I conducted in-depth
textual analysis coding for emoticons, emotional language, religious language, political language or calls to action. I also coded the posts to determine if the poster was speaking to the dead, talking about the dead, honoring the dead’s memory, disclosing their emotional state, or sharing information such as announcing the death or funeral arrangements. There were 1529 comments and 3916 reactions all of which I coded for gender. I also collected data on which emotional reaction was used the gender of the person reacting. Additionally, I did in-depth textual analysis similar to the textual analysis I did with the original posts for the comments of every fourth post included in my sample. From the 10 selected posts, I conducted in-depth textual analysis of 374 individual comments.

My “Sharing Feelings on Facebook” survey targeted general Facebook users in the mid-south. Only 27.31% of survey respondents reported writing on a deceased’s Timeline or tagging the deceased in their mourning posts. Interview participants were selected because of their connection to a deceased Facebook user and their experience with mourning on Facebook broadly defined. Of the people twenty-seven people I conducted formal grief narrative interviews with, 18 were associated with a Facebook Shrine. Of the sixteen people I informally interviewed, an additional 5 were associated with Facebook Shrines. Throughout the course of this project, I came into contact with twenty unique Facebook Shrines which I was introduced to by interview participants and organically during participant-observation on Facebook. Twelve of these were included in the random sample of the Facebook Shrine posts that I analyzed.

Each Facebook Shrine post I collected was connected to a deceased person’s Timeline and a survey of the deceased person Timeline made it evident that they person was dead. Most accounts carry the official “remembering” designation, but not all. For the accounts that were not officially designated as remembering the dead, it was apparent the user was deceased when
scrolling through the publicly visible posts left by mourners. I collected 35 Facebook Shrine Posts with 2799 reactions and 724 comments. From the 35 Facebook Shrine posts in my collection, I randomly selected nineteen posts linked to the Timeline of deceased persons. I conducted in-depth textual analysis coding for emoticons, emotional language, religious language, political language or calls to cation. I also coded the posts to determine if the poster was speaking to the dead, talking about the dead, honoring the dead's memory, disclosing their emotional state, or sharing information such as announcing the death or funeral arrangements. There were 724 comments and 1965 reactions all of which I coded for gender. I also collected data on the gender of the person reacting and which emotional reaction was used. Additionally, I did in-depth textual analysis similar to the textual analysis I did with the original posts for the comments of every third post included in my sample. From the seven selected posts, I was able to conduct in-depth analysis the texts of 309 individual comments.

In the special cases of what I am calling Facebook Shrines, specific individual accounts become spontaneous shrines as the deceased’s Facebook friends continue to interact with the account posting old pictures, videos, stories, and emotional messages. I conducted an in-depth examination and systematic analysis of ten Facebook Shrine cases. These cases are a purposive sample selected for their connection to one or more interview participants. For Facebook Shrines, I analyze the content posted after the person died going forward to the present. Variables identified during the preliminary review of data were systematically measured for all ten Facebook Shrine cases according to the models which are presented at the end of this chapter. Facebook Shrine cases were compared to the one case of a Memorialized account which I came across through my interview sample. It was analyzed to determine how quickly the account was memorialized after the person died and how the appearance of the account was
changed in preparation for memorialization. These cases were also analyzed in relation to themes observed during participant-observation.

Unlike other anthropological projects, I did not have to leave home to enter the field, so I was able to begin immediately once I obtained IRB approval in January of 2016. Between 2016 and 2019, I made a point to attend funerals, secular memorial services, visitations, and graveside services for people in my extended network in Texas and Arkansas whenever feasible. I noted the texts, figurative language, symbolism, and material culture utilized in these services and found in cemeteries, roadside shrines, and memorials throughout Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana for comparison with the texts and images of digital memorials.

While Southern Methodist University’s IRB expressed some concern over this form of participant-observation, my presence was never marked as out of the ordinary. I observed services of people I knew or services of people with whom I had a shared connection. In other words, these were services where my presence was not a burden but rather was frequently expected. I observed physical memorials, including cemeteries and roadside shrines, in public places that any well-behaved citizen would be welcome: places that people regularly drive-by, walk their dogs by, or take rubbings of old headstones.

In-person participant-observation allowed me to establish an etic baseline for local in-person death practices, which in turn provided insights into incongruities in emic accounts and online memorial practices. I took digital pictures of relevant material culture and kept field notes focusing on symbolism, the use of religious language, and trends in the material culture and rituals I observed. I later discussed many of my observations with local religious leaders asking questions about any symbols, practices, and theology I did not fully understand.
Informal ethnographic interviews continued during the fieldwork stage following the same tactics deployed in the planning stage. I kept detailed fieldnotes regarding any in-person interactions and events which were relevant to my research. These notes were written after the fact, whenever I could retreat into a private space for reflection. Informal interviews with Facebook users were most useful in terms of providing me with new insight into the attitudes and responses of non-grievers to experiences of encountering grief on Facebook. When appropriate I invited informants to participate in the formal grief narrative interview. The preliminary findings of religious language and symbolism in Facebook death practices, inspired further interviews with religious leaders and questions were designed based on those preliminary ethnographic findings. The script of questions which guided these interviews is contained in Appendix ##. This script served as a guideline, but the interview process remained open to adaptation.

Ethnographic interviewing is an iterative process. I conducted a few interviews, did online participant-observation, and then asked new questions in subsequent interviews based on the insights I gained from preliminary analysis of earlier data collection.

After developing my recruitment survey and conducting participant-observation for a few months, it was time to begin recruiting interview participants. As I had developed a new interview strategy, the grief narrative interview, I wanted to ensure that my questions were sensitive, and my technique was sound. In May 2016, I discussed the wording and pacing of my questions with Greg Adams. He had helped me prepare for the project with grief training. A mentor of mine, Dr. Alice Wolfe, a professor of religious history at Louisiana State University, volunteered to be interviewed so that I could pre-test my interview questions.
Garcia (2010) argues that “culture, politics, and history coexist as a site of struggle” which influence the griever. She argues that it is necessary to give “close attention to personal and collective histories” in order to attend to these complexities (Garcia 2010: 9). Thus, it is necessary to attend to griever’s spaces, roles, and identities. Grief narrative interviews are a technique I designed, adapting the illness narrative approach used extensively in medical anthropology to fit the specifics of grief experience (Garcia 2010; Kleinman 1988; Das 2000; Desjarlais 2003; Pandolfo 1998). I developed an interview script which was followed in the loosest sense (see Appendix 3). I consented and interviewed 27 people following this method.
Table 4 Grief Narrative Interviewees Demographics – Ages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Sample</th>
<th>Age 18-29</th>
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<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 5 Grief Narrative Interviewees Demographics – Race and Ethnicity

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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
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</table>

*The totals do not add up because two participants indicated that they were biracial.
Table 6 Grief Narrative Interviewees – Griever Type

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
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<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 7 Mourning Venue Utilized by Grief Narrative Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Facebook Shrine Posters</th>
<th>Mourning Status Updates</th>
<th>Facebook Grief Support Groups</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I started by asking the informant about the person they lost and then about the deceased’s life and eventual death. I guided participants minimally, prompting them to describe specific parts of their experience. Interview participants were prompted to recount their loss, their emotional experience, and how traditional and digital memorial practices impacted their grief.
experience. The interview design also asks research participants about both online and offline support-seeking behaviors and their outcomes. From there, I prompted participants to discuss their beliefs about death and the afterlife and then asked them how they think those beliefs shaped their experience. The interview concluded with a discussion of what they posted in response to their loss, where they posted it, and why.

Attempting an adaptation of a more traditional randomize sampling technique, I utilized local newspaper obituaries and Facebook’s search engine to locate recently deceased individuals with a Facebook account that had been turned into a shrine. This strategy did not prove fruitful. As such, I devised a social networking strategy which proved more fruitful in generating both case studies and research participants. But it was not without its limitations as well. The pool of volunteers for grief narratives proved to be even more predominately white, Protestant and female, than the States represented. I intentionally diversified my sample as much as possible given the pool of volunteers, but future research will need to utilize additional recruitment strategies to obtain a quota sample. Across all age demographics, women are the predominant users of Facebook (Statista: 2020), and white Facebook users most commonly checked Facebook at least once a day, making them the most common Facebook users (Statista: 2020). My formal ethnographic interview sample is divided into two categories of Facebook user research participants: primary grievers who lost a close loved one and secondary grievers who experienced the loss of a friend or extended family member.

From a pool of 109 volunteers, I selected 35 interview participants, 27 of whom I was able to coordinate the necessary time for an in-depth grief narrative interview. Of the 27 who participated in the full grief narrative interview, 13 primary grievers and 14 secondary grievers were interviewed. Everyone in this sample was a Facebook user currently living in Texas,
Arkansas, Louisiana, or Tennessee. These in-depth grief narrative interviews were conducted in-person. The analysis of these interviews was coupled with Facebook participant-observation to account for any discrepancies in the etic/emic assessment of Facebook memorial posts and support seeking behavior. When selecting interview participants from the pool of volunteers, I would examine their recent Facebook posts as part of my background research. I attempted to identify whom they had lost and if that person had a Facebook Shrine or Memorialized account.

The data collected from this interview approach include an audio recording of the interview, notes that I took while conducting the interview, and in-depth field notes I wrote while reflecting on the interview later that day. During interviews, research participants frequently brought up specific posts as examples. They often pulled out their phones to show me specific posts which I asked them to forward to me as a screenshot. Following the interview, I briefly examined the relevant Facebook Shrine or Memorialized account attending to the research participant’s posts made connected with their grief experience. I took screenshots of posts which merited analysis.

1.3 Overview of Chapters

Facebook facilitates and simultaneously documents a portion of mourners' communal reimagining of the dead, which makes it an ideal platform through which to investigate the rituals of mourning practices. As a study of the mourning practices of Facebook, this dissertation closely examines the mourning practices of Facebook users as evident in their social media productions, Facebook interactions, and the impact of these practices on their grief experience. In broader terms, this project is an ethnographic investigation into American lived religion, religion as it is practiced rather than as it is theologically prescribed, and religious practices as it pertains specifically to processes of grief and mourning and memorialization.
The dissertation is divided into eight chapters. In Chapter 2 Anthropology of Death, Grief and Mourning, I establish my theoretical framework for mourning rituals and memorial spaces. Mourning rituals and practices, as anthropologists have shown, are there to heal communities and individuals left behind. In this chapter, I examine mental health in relation to the process of spiritual healing after death. Drawing on the literature at the intersections of the anthropology of religion, medical anthropology, and the anthropology of death, I theorize the relationships between lived religion and social organization, the relationship between social organization and holistic well-being, and the powerful connection between belief and grief. I conclude by laying out my theoretically-grounded data analysis strategy. In Chapter 3, Social by Design, I explore the ways in which Facebook became the largest social networking site and why that necessitates its prominence in the modern mourning process. Delving into the history of the Internet and social networking sites, I explore Facebook’s unique design and user interface and why that brought it to prominence on the social web. With this prominence, Facebook users and designers both had to address dead Facebook users’ profiles. Building off of digital anthropology theory and giving examples of how Facebook encourages users to participate, this chapter designs my research site and illuminates its significance to death, dying, and bereavement.

In Chapter 4, Scripted Mourning on Facebook, I begin the analysis of my data by addressing the cultural scripts for mourning on Facebook and the way Facebook’s design has shaped these scripts. In Chapter 5, Rituals of the Grief Process: Mourning, Pilgrimage, and Facebook Shrines, I begin presenting my analysis of the mourning practices of Facebook as a ritual process which in special cases transforms the deceased’s Timeline into site of pilgrimage. I examine the transformation of a deceased person’s timeline into a sacred space (shrine), a community for grievers/mourners, and a transformative narrative commemorating the deceased.
as honored dead. In Chapter 6, Kinwork and Grief Solidarity: Narratives of Communal Mourning, I consider Facebook Shrines as sites which offer the bereaved a community allowing them to communally mourn at a distance and the deceased’s social network to support each other through their shared grief. I discuss the gendered nature of the work involved in constructing and maintaining such a community. Then in Chapter 7, Emotional Disclosure: Individual Grief Experience & the Health Impact of Online Mourning, I analyze the emotional disclosure which occurs in Facebook’s mourning practices. I examine the performance of grief in Facebook mourning posts as a Facebook user’s mourning status is publicly recognized and how this public recognition is dependent upon official relation statuses rather than affect or grief experience. I explore the emotional labor involved in producing and maintaining Facebook Shrines and the conflicts which arise from disagreements regarding the ancestral narrative produced by their shrine. In Chapter 8, I conclude with a summary of the major findings and a discussion of the implications of these findings for broader anthropological scholarship. I also address this project’s limitations and propose some future directions for research.
CHAPTER 2

ANTHROPOLOGY OF DEATH, GRIEF, AND MOURNING

Death is a social event. Beyond the biological implications of death, the end of a person’s life is a disruptive “social loss” felt by the entirety of the person’s social network (Hertz 2005: 323; Kaufman and Morgan 2005; Bloch 1971). In the era of social media, from birth to death every moment is potentially captured and shared as digital content. In fact, some people exist as social entities on social media in the months preceding their birth and years following their death. Social media has fostered dynamic networked mourning practices that are reshaping individual grief experience and the boundaries of communal mourning. Focusing on death and bereavement as a significant and universal human experience, this chapter reviews the anthropological literature on death, bereavement, and mourning focusing on social organization, religion, and health. The chapter will also cover the current interdisciplinary literature of online mourning with special attention to social media and Facebook.

In this chapter, I first discuss the critical role of death rituals and communal mourning in the grief experience of the bereaved. I frame this discussion within the contexts of religion and mental health. Next, I review the relevant anthropological literature on lived religion and rituals as belief in action as it pertains specifically to death rituals, communal mourning, and grief. Then I discuss the significance of mourning practices and death beliefs within lived religion and I lay out my plan to analyze the mourning practices of Facebook as cultural scripts which act on
social, emotional, and spiritual levels. After that, I address the literature regarding the efficacy of belief and ritual for communal and individual healing. Finally, I conclude by discussing how these theoretical frameworks shape my strategies of data analysis.

2.1 Death Rituals, Communal Mourning, and Grief Experience

Religion is not born out of speculation or reflection, still less out of illusion or apprehension, but rather, out of real tragedies of human life, out of the conflict between human plans and realities (Malinowski 1931: 9).

A review of the anthropological literature on death and bereavement illuminates and operationalizes the fine distinctions between bereavement and grief, mourning and death rituals. Death education and counseling experts Charles A. Corr, Clyde M. Nabe, and Donna M. Corr (1994, 2000, 2008) explain that an individual’s experience of their loss is highly dependent upon the value that that individual placed on who or what was lost and the individual’s personal attachment. Bereavement is a term that mental health care practitioners utilize to denote objectively observable experiences of loss, while grief is defined as an individual’s experience of their loss (Corr, Nabe, and Corr 2000). Bereavement is defined by the devastating and brutal loss experienced following a death, but the extent and characteristics of the loss is often distinguished by affectionate attachment for the deceased and the official status of the person’s relationship to the deceased. When the level of affectionate attachment fails to perfectly align with the official status of a person’s relationship with the deceased, it generates ambiguity. This ambiguity between social perception and individual experience is at the heart of public family conflicts that sometimes play out in the social media interactions associated with mourning. The ambiguity also contributes to complicated grief for individuals who feel like their personal experience of grief does not align with social expectations and norms of mourning on Facebook. I discuss implications of this ambiguity at length in chapter 6 and 7.
Anthropologists (Hertz 2005: 323; Kaufman and Morgan 2005; Bloch 1971) point out that the death of an individual often brings with it the loss of status, network connections, and financial resources.

After death only part of our grief is for the person who died. Perhaps for the most part, we grieve ourselves as people who’ve been left behind. That is why we grieve even after a slow, lingering, or painful death when we believe that the dying person has been released from distress and is at last at rest (Corr, Nabe, and Corr 1994).

Grief is an individual’s subjective experience and response to loss. Grief is primarily the person’s emotional reaction to loss, but while it is highly emotional in nature it is shaped by cultural expectations and has both psychological and physiological dimensions (Stroebe et al. 2001; Kleinman 1986, 51). Corr et al. (1994) argue that to define grief as an “emotional response to loss” is inadequate as the grief response cannot be limited to emotions alone. Grief is experienced and expressed in a multitude of variations (Worden 1991). Corr et al. take this argument further claiming, “Grief does include a range of complex emotions. But the grief response is also experienced in terms of physical sensations, and its effect on cognition and behavior” (1994:169 – 170). Grief manifests physically, behaviorally, psychologically, socially, and spiritually, affecting the whole of the person’s well-being.

Complicated grief is the concept utilized in the grief therapy literature to describe “a painful and debilitating reaction to bereavement that has been empirically distinguished from bereavement-related depression and anxiety and is associated with negative mental and physical health outcomes” (Neimeyer, and Burke 2011; Lichtenthal et al. 2010; Prieger, Vanderwerker, & Maciejewski, 2008). While post-traumatic growth is a concept used to describe the long-term positive personal changes that may develop following a stressful life event or loss; it is a term
used frequently in the grief therapy literature (Lichtenthal et al. 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun
2004).

In an interdisciplinary Death Studies article, Neimeyer, Klass, and Denis argue that while
bereavement is experienced internally, the process of expressing grief is a social one as “the
bereaved commonly seek meaning in this unsought transition in not only personal and familial,
but also broader community and even cultural spheres” (2014: 485). Throughout the grief
process the bereaved seek meaning, the meaning of the deceased’s life and death. Niemeyer et al.
(2014) also argue that a significant portion of the grieving process is directed toward establishing
the bereaved person’s post-death social status within the family and broader community. They
argue that this social process takes place on three levels: the level of personal psychology in
which the bereaved individual self-narrates his/her experience in an effort to organize it into a
plot structure that can maintain consistency overtime; the intimate interpersonal level, negotiated
with family and close intimate friends; and finally, how this social narrative process plays out on
the level of public communication in terms of eulogies, obituaries, and social media mourning
posts.

Thus, mourning is the social expression of grief. While bereavement is an objective
valuation of loss, the extent to which society acknowledges a person's loss is largely dependent
upon the officially recognized social relationship the person had with the deceased and
determines socially acceptable expressions of grief in public settings through mourning. An
individual’s experience of their grief may or may not align with social expectations and this is
one of many factors that can compound complicated grief.
2.2 Ritual: Belief in Practice

Religion, poorly defined by critics and adherents alike, has been placed in opposition to logic and observation dating back at the very least to the ancient Greeks. Religion often requires acceptance of its primary premises, on faith, without tangible evidence. Therefore, faith and reason are frequently pitted against one another. Yet these philosophical word games and power plays have very little to do with the how ordinary people engage with religion. People primarily experience their religion through the enactment of beliefs in both sanctioned and unsanctioned, communal and personal rituals. The daily faith in action of lay people frequently falls far from the Aristotle’s “epimeleia for ta hiera, management of holy matters,” but it is here that the power and efficacy of religion goes to work in the mind and on the body of the pious and irreverent alike (Gerson 2018). This is the arena of lived religion.

Originating in French sociology as la religion vécue, the concept of lived religion was introduced into North American scholarship by historian Robert Orsi in his 1985 *The Madonna of 115th Street*. Orsi argues that “religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life” (1997: 7). In his edited volume, *Lived Religion in America*, David Hall (1997) acknowledges that lived religion owes an intellectual debt to the concept of popular religion and its acknowledgement of the significance of the beliefs and practices of everyday people. But he goes on to say that lived religion departs from studies of popular religion as it intentionally ceases to use binary categorizations such as popular and official, sacred and profane, high and low, orthodox and heretical, etc. It is instead built on the traditions of community studies, ritual studies, and symbolic anthropology (Hall 1997: viii). The theoretical framework of lived religion is ideally suited for a study of meaningful practices adapting religious beliefs, language, and symbolism to new online communities.
Despite the interdisciplinary pedigree of the theoretical framework of lived religion, it relies heavily upon ethnographic data and a broad culturally relative mindset in determining its criteria concerning what constitutes religion and religious activity. The framework of lived religion focuses on the connection between thinking and doing. Hall (1997) argues that this framework calls for an analysis of belief as a meaningful and symbolic form of thinking and ritual practice as action which enacts that type of meaningful symbolic thinking. Frameworks of lived religion calls for a consideration of lay people as actors and intentional agents, giving careful attention to the numerous, and at time contradictory, meanings embodied in a symbolic image, phrase, or action (Hall 1997). The lived religion framework focuses on the relationship between belief and ritual. This critical relationship between belief and ritual, in its broadest terms, is effectively the relationship between meaning and practice.

Central to the study of lived religion are idioms of belief. Idioms of belief are small, culturally distinct phrases used by the general public to interact with larger belief systems. The “Golden Rule,” and the idea that “what goes around comes around,” are examples of idioms of belief commonly invoked in the Mid-South region of the United States and wider Western culture. The idea that everyone “needs to grieve in their own way” and that “speaking ill of the dead” as taboo are examples of idioms of belief specific to death. These and other idioms of belief are directly tied to mourning practices on Facebook and participant’s responses to them. This will be discussed in-depth in the lived religion analysis of Chapter 4.

The framework of lived religion focuses on the relationship between religious practices and the idioms of belief invoked by those practices. Lived religion’s emphasis is on what people are thinking and doing. This focus on people’s actual behaviors and the meanings they ascribe to them is very much in alignment with symbolic anthropology. Dating back to Malinowski,
antropologists who study religion have given a great deal of attention to actual behavior rather than theologially prescribed ideal behavior or culturally prescribed anticipated behavior. Scholarship on popular religion similarly focused on what lay people were actually doing, but most frequently couched its discussion of these popular practices within a dichotomy of popular religion and orthodox religion, theology and orthopraxy. According to Peter Brown (1981), this line of thinking lends itself to a “two-tiered” religious system, which views popular religion as a corruption or misinterpretation of orthodoxy. In her edited volume, Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society, Ellen Badone (1990) acknowledges that the scholarly category of “popular religion” is problematic. Yet she and the authors of her edited volume continue to use the concept, defining it as “the informal, unofficial practices, beliefs, and styles of religious expression” (Badone 1990: 5-6). They continue to utilize the theoretical concept because it allows them to talk about how this informal system of belief relates to the formal system, not only when it works in opposition, but also when a greater degree of nuance is required to understand the relationship.

Within the theoretical framework of lived religion, rituals are symbolic enactments of beliefs and values. Orsi (1997) argues that lay people draw on inherited, appropriated, and improvised idioms of belief to utilize and discard as the circumstances of their lives dictate. As rituals of lived religion, idioms of belief are invoked by laity through ritual action in moments of social necessity and convenience and then subsequently discarded when they are no longer needed. The study of lived religion is an attempt to understand religion as it is enacted, to analyze belief systems through human action rather than theology.

Lay practices and formal religion do not necessarily have to be understood in opposition. Hall (1997) argues that within the theoretical framework of lived religion the clergy are agented
actors in lived religion rather than above it or irrelevant to it. Clergy are neither exempt from studies of lived religion nor given final authority. Instead, the role of clergy is examined as that of complicitous agents of lived religion. Clergy, fully aware of the unorthodox beliefs and practices of their communities, are faced with the dilemma of confronting or condoning them. Hall (1997) argues that some clergy even come to realize the utility of lived religion. But ultimately, clergy are merely one influential voice in the social fabric shaping the range of idiomatic conceptualization and embodied cultural knowledge, which the patterns of behavior of lay people. Some clergy actively participate in social media. They are aware of the online practices of lived religion just as they are of practices of lived religion in their communities. Their reaction to mourning and memorial practices on Facebook is a key component of this study.

The framework of lived religion clearly aligns with the significance of this study. It is important to the study of mourning practices on Facebook because these practices are actions which produce symbolic content meaningful to those who engage with it. Applying careful and detailed interpretive analysis to the grieving practices on Facebook allows me to examine the images, written text, and posting behaviors as a whole rather than solely as disparate parts. This analysis will give consideration to Facebook users as intentional agents utilizing idioms of belief to navigate the emotional difficulties surrounding the death of a loved one, rather than as objects acted upon by the globalizing force of the Internet or a failure to comply or comprehend orthodoxy and orthopraxy of their designated religious traditions.

As a study of lived religion, my research focuses on the beliefs and values of lay people as they are enacted in popular practices, the rituals of lived religion. A ritual is a shared pattern of behavior that expresses more as a whole than the sum of its individual parts by invoking the
participants’ shared symbolic system, and thus enacting idioms of belief. While the rituals of organized religions are obvious to observers and participants alike, the everyday rituals of the lived religion of laity do not always announce themselves with the same degree of pageantry. The ritual nature of everyday life is less apparent. The distinction between the sacred and profane becomes blurred in the practice of lived religion. These ritual practices are significant due to the meaning they hold in the lives of participants and the insights they offer into their belief systems.

Horace Miner (1956) defined ritual as “repeated symbolic acts” which reveal significant cultural values. Rituals re-enact myths, which perpetuate society by providing religious explanations for social rules and cultural values (Mircea Eliade 1959). Rituals provide instruction regarding social norms, cultural values, and beliefs and enact them. According to Robbie Davis-Floyd, rituals are “patterned, repetitive, and symbolic enactment[s] of a cultural belief or value” (1992: 8). She argued that the primary purpose of ritual is transformation (Davis-Floyd 1992: 8). Jill Dubisch agreed and argued that rituals are used “to rewrite or reshape the past” (Dubisch 2006: 279). According to Victor Turner (Turner 1967), rituals are symbolic acts which engage participants and observers on sensory and ideological levels. Dubisch also argues that it is the intertwined nature of the sensory and ideological elements of ritual which make rituals so powerful and transformative. Despite being perceived as ‘traditional’, Dubisch argues rituals are “an ongoing human activity and must be re-created every time they are preformed” (2006: 279). Rituals engage the senses and ignite the religious imagination priming participants for transformation.

For my study it is necessary to refine this anthropological definition a step further to the definition of ritual in lived religion. Within the framework of lived religion, ritual is a person or group’s meaningful enactment of belief, which provides opportunities for healing and
transformation through intentional use of symbolism and sensory experience to trigger participants’ religious imagination. Ritual generates complex phenomenological embodied responses as liminality, solidarity, communitas, and morality responses.

2.3 Cultural Scripts and Lived Religion

Cultural scripts and social expectations direct grief’s psychological, physiological, and social manifestations. Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka argue that cultural scripts articulate: cultural norms, values, and practices in terms which are clear, precise, and accessible to cultural insiders and to cultural outsiders alike. This result is only possible because cultural scripts are formulated in a tightly constrained, yet expressively flexible, metalanguage consisting of simple words and grammatical patterns which have equivalents in all languages. (2004: 153). They argue that cultural scripts can be understood with a careful study of speech practices and social interaction norms.

The idioms of belief which play such a central role to lived religion are the “simple words” of Goddard and Wierzbicka’s cultural scripts. Pertinent to my research, social media follows its own grammatical patterns and metalanguage rules regarding post length, post metadata, and where to post specific content. These cultural norms for social media communication are understood and followed by users on a tacit level. Knowing where to make a post is tacit knowledge acquired during the assimilation process to any social media platform. Missteps give a user away as a novice, but rarely earn the poster greater social sanction than eye rolls or mildly annoyed comments. This tacit knowledge informs the cultural scripts of communal mourning and is something my interlocutors were often keenly aware of.

Facebook users can create public posts in one of two ways. Facebook users can visually signal their mourning in a status update that targets their Facebook friends as its audience. Given
the privacy settings of Facebook, the initial poster can even adjust the post’s specific privacy settings to include a wider audience by making it public or a narrower audience by selecting an exclusive list of specific friends who are allowed to see it. The poster can also tag multiple people in the post drawing the attention of that friend and opening up the post’s privacy to include the friends of any users who were tagged. Facebook users can also make their post directly onto the Facebook Timeline of another Facebook user, in special cases this is done leaving the message on the deceased’s Timeline. Regardless of where the post takes place, the post is an act of grief work.

Mourning is occasionally referred to as “grief work” particularly by psychologists and counselors (Lindemann, 1994; Corr et al. 1994). Taking a structural functionalist approach to the study of death rituals and communal mourning, reoccurring themes in this literature are the argument that death rituals and communal mourning serve as a cathartic outlet for expressing the emotions of grief, mechanisms for rallying community support for the bereaved, and maintaining the social cohesion of the family. In the contemporary North American context, I argue that rituals of communal mourning focus on the social cohesion of the deceased’s network of friends and kin rather than the extended kin networks of traditional societies.

In 1982, Carol Gilligan called women “the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies” (Gilligan: 17). In 1987, Michaela di Leonardo applied Gilligan’s theory of kinwork to American women’s tasks of correspondence and holiday card writing. She writes:

*By kin work I refer to the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross-household kin ties, including visits, letters, telephone calls, presents, and cards to kin; the organization of holiday gatherings; the creation and maintenance of quasi-kin relations; decisions to neglect or to intensify particular ties; the mental work of reflection about all these activities; and the creation and communication of altering images of family and kin*
Put simply, kinwork is the labor of kinship creation and maintenance, which so often goes unseen. Di Leonardo writes, “the creation and maintenance of kin and quasi-kin networks in advanced industrial societies is work; and, moreover, it is largely women's work” (di Leonardo 1987: 443). And while it is arguable that the work of kinship is a burden being shared more evenly across genders today, women still bear the majority of the responsibility for maintaining the social cohesion of the extended family. She also writes, “it is kinship contact across households, as much as women's work within them, that fulfills our cultural expectation of satisfying family life” (di Leonardo 1987: 443). In her 1987 work, di Leonardo describes the guilt and defensiveness experienced by adult females when they needed to cut back on constant contact with family members, especially if they felt it led to failures in their ability to keep their family close. Facebook facilitates the constant contact of kinwork, reducing the time burden of attempting to maintain constant contact with extended kin and friend networks.

While Facebook may have begun as a hookup and hangout site, it unintendedly became the primary social media platform for extended family communication. Facebook has become one of many technological tools that is effectively put to use to by those bearing this burden. The continuation of kinwork as gendered labor is perhaps most evident in the mourning practices found on Facebook. I analyzed this gendered division of the work of grief in Chapter 6.

Kinwork is the irreplaceable labor of maintaining extended-kin and friend networks through communication, gatherings, and family rituals. Facebook facilitates this labor in numerous ways. It also profits from it. Obligatory Facebook posts sharing family photos from family gatherings, celebrating holidays, announcing births, and mourning deaths has in many ways replaced the writing of Christmas cards, birth announcements, and other extended-family

communications. Building on the work of Carol Stack, di Leonardo (1987: 447) argues that the kinwork of maintaining healthy social bonds through constant contact, social events, and ritual observance is extended to fictive kinship with emphasis being placed on reciprocity networks especially among ethnic or religious-based networks. On Facebook the significance of this can be seen, not only by close friends, but also with a range of identity-based networks. Religious affiliation is of course significant, particularly in the case of prayer requests, but networks can form around a variety of identity-based community affiliations.

Death marks a social disruption that fractures the social order built on kinship. It disrupts social identities built on the foundation of relationship to the deceased. The work of grief is centered on mending the disrupted social order and maintaining these social bonds. This is a specialized form of kinwork. Mourning rituals attend to the liminal statuses of the bereaved, transitioning them into new social identities and statuses. This transformation of identity proves critical to the healing process of grievers. A communal reorganization of relationships and social identities is a necessary component of the mourning process, as mourners ask themselves “who are we to each other without the person we shared?” Maintaining a sense of social solidarity is critical during this liminal stage, such as following the loss of an individual who was a major lynchpin in their community. A failure to ritually cultivate solidarity will easily give way to a disintegration of the social bonds which held the group together. Death rituals and communal mourning practices during the liminal stage of bereavement foster grief solidarity and maintain social cohesion which has been disrupted by the loss. Without these practices the social bonds of friends and family may be permanently lost, resulting in a splintering of the family or prolonging complicated grief.
For people who already utilize Facebook as a tool of kinwork, it is natural that it becomes a communication tool and platform of the intense level of kinwork necessary to “keep the family together” after the loss of a family member. Facebook’s private messaging functions are utilized to send both individual messages and group messages to coordinate family planning leading up and in response to a death. Public messages on Facebook allow family members to communicate the “official narrative” as well as important organizational information regarding the timing of the funeral and other death rituals. Statements of solidarity allow bereaved family members and friends to support one another and commit publicly to maintaining their social bonds. This has led to the creation of a new death ritual, the communal mourning practice of making public Facebook posts and responding to these posts in both comments and emoticon reactions that sits at the center of my research.

2.4 Efficacy of Belief in Practice

The beliefs and meaning invoked in death rituals and communal mourning practices are critical to the therapeutic efficacy of these practices for comforting and healing the bereaved. This connection between belief and ritual, meaning and practice which are highlighted by the lived religion framework sits at the heart of the connection between religion and health. The anthropology of religion at the most basic level is the anthropological study of what humans believe and how those beliefs shape their perceptions, behaviors and social realities.

Writing in 1912, Emile Durkheim described the study of belief as searching “underneath the symbol to the reality which it represents, and which gives it its meaning” (Durkheim 1964: Location 48). This explanation demonstrates the deep and even subconscious connection between belief, symbolic knowledge, and ascribable meaning. These three layers of belief
transform symbolic knowledge rooted in core cultural values, a belief system’s cosmology, and communitas into powerful psycho-physiological effects.

A cross-cultural anthropological analysis of belief cannot be limited by the English terms of religion and philosophy or Western-centric understanding of them. Agehananda Bharati argues that the term belief system offers great variation as a category (Bharati 1971: 230). A cross-cultural definition of belief system allows for a clear statement of how an individual’s belief system(s) shapes his or her worldview and how that ascribes meaning to experiences and interactions. A belief system contains a culturally specific epistemology through which a body of knowledge, system of symbols, and defined meanings are reaffirmed by a self-perpetuating logical process. It gives its believers a clear cosmogony, system of symbols, and associated rituals. Bharati argues “belief and ritual systems are of the sort that cannot be falsified, since no statement qualifies as a rebuttal” (1971: 232). This makes questions of efficacy problematic, particularly when addressed by applying the evaluation system of one belief system to the results and benefits of another. Belief systems are central to my research: they inform rituals and symbolic interactions on Facebook and in doing so empower their efficacy.

Steven Carlisle and Gregory Simon define belief as “subjective commitments to truths as being true” (2012: 221). In The Anthropology of Religion, Fiona Bowie (2002) argues for an understanding of “belief” which is rooted in trust and allegiance to that which is believed, rather than belief based on “truth” or “real knowledge” (Bowie 2002: 246). Bowie suggests changes in the English meaning ascribed to the word “belief” beginning in the early modern period complicate the issue for English-speaking anthropologists. Folklorist Marilyn Motz defines belief as “a process of knowing that is not subject to verification or measurement by
experimental means within the framework of a modern Western scientific paradigm” (Motz 1998: 340).

It is the modern Western scientific paradigm which led to the cultural paradigm shift that caused the meaning of the word belief in the English language to become so problematic. Bowie, Good, and Motz demonstrate both the difficulty of defining belief in a modern sense, and the value judgment placed on any object of belief. Scholarly language frequently presents objects of belief as being “counter-factual” (Good 1990: 18). While others “believe,” scientists and scholars “know,” and thus a value judgment is placed on the “beliefs” of others. For the same reason that it is disheartening for a scientist to hear a student or someone in the general public say, “I don’t believe in evolution”, this dichotomy of “knowing” and “believing” is both futile and ripe with ethnocentrism.

Jean Pouillion, a French ethnologist, utilizes the French distinction between croire à, which he translates as “to believe in *a fact*” and croire que which he translates as “to believe that …” (Pouillion 2008: 91). Croire à expresses trust in the existence and knowability of the object of belief, be it a Supreme Being or an animistic spirit or a law of nature. Pouillon writes the verb “croire ‘to believe’ is paradoxical in that it expresses doubt as well as assurance” (Pouillion 2008: 91). He defines belief as faith or confidence in one’s conviction that an expected outcome will result from a behavior, social action, or relationship. While this can be extended to religion, Pouillon demonstrates that belief can just as easily be discussed in regard to something such as “economic obligation” (Pouillion 2008: 92). A belief is a symbolic thought that is meaningful to the lived experience of the person who holds it. Trust is the degree of confidence a person has in the validity of their belief. The smallest analytical unit of belief is in idioms of belief.
In the chapter, “The Sorcerer and His Magic”, Claude Levi-Strauss argues that belief is vital to both the beneficial and harmful psycho-physiological effects of spells, sacred rites, and curses (Levi-Strauss 2010: 125). Levi-Strauss presents three levels of belief that are paramount to understanding the power belief has to affect people. He writes, “the efficacy of magic implies a belief of magic” (Levi-Strauss 2010: 125). He gives three complementary, but necessary aspects of belief required for efficacy: the “sorcerer” (ethnomedical healer) must believe in the effectiveness of the treatment; the patient must believe in the power and knowledge of the healer; and the social group’s faith, expectations, and attitudes define the relationship between the patient and healer. The efficacy of a treatment or ritual is located at the intersection of these beliefs and the knowledge associated with them.

Where my research is concerned, it is an open question as to who the “healer” is in this process: is it Facebook, the community the Facebook user is engaging with, or is the ritual itself? The answer to this question is multifaceted and something that differs from user to user, depending on their belief system. Indeed, for many, simply making the post itself is therapeutic, as a cathetic release of emotions into the universe, which is often framed in religious language. These facets will be explored more thoroughly in Chapters 4 and 6.

When it comes to understanding belief’s ability to influence a person’s well-being, the full scope of the individual’s beliefs must be taken into consideration. When it comes to a person’s recovery, it is not only the patient’s beliefs but also the beliefs of the patient’s family, healer, and the larger community. When a person is grieving, they are influenced by a wide range of idioms of belief that they can choose to engage with to meet the needs of the moment.

Public grieving on Facebook is a ritual with healing potential for bereaved participants. Posts and supportive comments express idioms of belief, engage symbolic thought, and initiate
what medical anthropologists have come to describe as the meaning response. In the context of mourning practices and death rituals, the meaning response promotes grief resilience and healing. But to understand how belief and meaning influence overall health and grief resilience in particular, it is necessary to review the medical anthropology literature on belief, meaning, and the placebo effect.

While religions have their miracles, biomedicine has its placebo effect. The term placebo is used within the biomedical community to designate an inert substance or medical treatment, frequently given to control groups during pharmaceutical trials (Moerman 2002: 11). Both placebo and miracles are equally mysterious and highly problematic for the gatekeepers of orthodoxy, because of the degree of power in the hands of lay people and “popular faith” which they represent.

Anne Harrington (2011) defines the placebo effect as a powerful mind-body phenomenon which can no longer be ignored or dismissed as a subjective response. She defines the placebo effect as “the tendency of patients to report feeling better or otherwise having a response to a drug or treatment that is known or later discovered to be inert or ineffective” (Harrington 2011: 266). Harrington argues that in the United States a recent shift in scientific inquiry has led to the exploration of a wide variety of religious practices and spiritual lifestyles. Religious behaviors and spiritual acts are re-written as health practices that are susceptible to scientific research and biomedical validation (Harrington 2011: 265-266). Yet, the placebo effect and its relationship between the health benefits of religious practices have failed to receive the same degree of attention from biomedical research.

Medical anthropologists, Robert Hahn and Author Kleinman (1983) explore this aspect of the “placebo phenomenon” by examining “faith healing” as a possible case of the placebo effect
and “voodoo death” as a possible case of the nocebo effect. Hahn and Kleinman link these cultural phenomena as being “based on an interaction between culture and of physiology mediated by the nervous system’s processing of symbolic perception of experience” (1983: 3, 16). Medical anthropologist, Daniel Moerman, who is trained on both cultural and biological anthropology, has dedicated his career to understanding placebo effect as a cultural phenomenon with physiological consequences. He points out that medicine has considerable evidence for the validity of both the positive outcomes, termed the placebo effect, and the negative outcomes, termed the nocebo effect, of this phenomenon. He argues the phenomenon should be relabeled as the effect as a “meaning response” as a physiological response to meaning is underlying both the placebo and nocebo (Moerman 2002).

Through an examination of the biomedical phenomenon called the “placebo/nocebo effect,” reframed the “meaning response” by Daniel Moerman, the role of belief in shaping well-being and illness recovery becomes apparent. Moerman’s “meaning response” emphasizes the importance of a treatment’s meaning to the patient, to the doctor, and the patient’s family as well as the broader community. Hahn and Kleinman’s findings suggest that, at the most basic level, the positive and negative outcomes can be viewed in terms of “hopeful” beliefs and “fearful” beliefs. The efficacy of an ethnomedical system is reinforced by the system’s beliefs and expectations affecting the reality of sickness and well-being (Hahn and Kleinman 1983: 18). Belief can have both a pathogenic effect and a therapeutic effect; perhaps seeking to control or manipulate the effect of belief through meaning is the true “power” behind all belief systems.

A person’s belief about his or her illness, as well as belief in a healer or health care provider’s ability to heal him or her, is key to the recovery process. Succinctly surmised, ”Belief kills; belief heals” (Hahn and Kleinman 1983: 13). In Body/ Meaning/ Healing, Thomas Csordas
argues, “given the prevalence of religious healing and the global interrelation of religion and healing, the category of holy may in its own way be fundamental to our understanding of health and health problems” (Csordas 2002: 12). Returning to Levi-Strauss’s argument for three layers of belief necessary for healing, the beliefs of the healer/doctor, patient, and family/community shape the meaning of a treatment and the efficacy of the medical intervention, be it in a biomedical clinic or a shamanic ritual. Belief is a densely-packed unit of culturally contextualized, complexly-meaningful knowledge. The action of believing transforms a belief, a form of symbolic knowledge, into powerful psycho-physiological effect which is directed by a meaning response to the culturally contextualized interaction between the patient, the healer, and the treatment. The sub-text of this interaction is heavily influenced by the core cultural values, cosmology, and laws governing the control and manipulation of nature according to the belief systems of the patient, healer, and the patient’s family/community.

These belief systems endow believers with a symbolic knowledge, a coherent cosmology along with laws by which nature can be understood and controlled, and confidence that everything natural, including health and illness, will behave according to the belief system’s laws. Every object, every behavior, and every relationship within a social world is encoded with meaning prescribed by the belief system(s) of that social world.

According to Moerman, “The effect of meaning is a human universal” (Moerman 2002: 152). He claims that both in clinical trials and ethnographic cases like those mentioned by Hahn and Klienman, patients are responding to the symbolic meaning of the social interaction rather than the chemical compound or physical treatment. The meaning response is present equally in ritual or clinical interactions. It is driven by the symbolic meaning the patient, the healer, and the larger community ascribe to the interaction.
Moerman’s “meaning response” demonstrates what is influencing the placebo/nocebo effect not only in pharmaceutical trials but in ethnomedical systems all around the world including practices intended to comfort the bereaved and help them make sense of their loss. The efficacy of mourning practices then lies in their ability to shape, direct, and transform the meaning. Formal death rituals and online communal mourning practices invoke idioms of beliefs to transform the meaning of a loss and thus transform a person’s experience of it. In the context of mourning on Facebook, participants who feel that the interactions are meaningful and that the comments are meaningful shows of support will receive the greatest benefit from the practice. It also means that Facebook users who have a negative experience with Facebook mourning practices or specific encounters will be less like to benefit and may even be harmed by the interactions, as my interlocutors reveal.

In her article, “The Effectiveness of Shamans In an Indonesian Ritual,” Jane Atkinson (1987) argues that the healing rituals are simultaneously religion, therapy, and theater. She emphasizes that the examination of all three of these components is necessary for evaluating the effectiveness of a healing ritual. She argues that research focused on symbolism alone is too text oriented; work focused on therapy is too patient oriented; and analysis which only examines performance is too focused on strategy (Atkinson 1987: 353). Atkinson’s threefold examination of healing rituals can be applied to equally to the mourning practices of Facebook as to all ethnomedical treatments from shamanic rituals to biomedical drug trials. For cross-cultural the purposes of this study, theater can be broadened to the performance of grief-the setting and stage of healing (Facebook and its status updates, newsfeeds, private support groups, and the Facebook Timeline of the deceased); religion is easily expanded to the dominant belief systems guiding the therapeutic rituals being examined; and therapy can broadly include the post behaviors practiced
on Facebook in response to the death of a loved-one, medical treatments and health practices from yoga to cutting-edge antiviral drugs. Following Atkinson’s advice regarding a three-fold analysis of religion, therapy, and theater, I analyze the religious and symbolic components in Chapter 4, the ritual performance components in Chapter 5, the therapeutic value of communal mourning to the community in Chapter 6, and the therapeutic value of emotional disclosure and performance to the individual in Chapter 7.

Communal mourning is a social practice critical to the healing capacity of lived religion in the face of death. Individually and collectively held beliefs about death and the afterlife shape mourning practices and an individual’s ability to cultivate grief resilience. The anthropological literature at the intersection of religion and health demonstrates that there is a powerful relationship between belief and healing, which is highly significant to lived religion, particularly the aspects of lived religion which relate to “making sense” of and coping with death.

2.5 Conclusion: Strategy of Analysis

In this chapter, I have introduced some analytical concepts that emerge from the literature of the anthropology of religion, and particularly the study of death and grief, that are significant to my interpretations of the data on Facebook mourning and Facebook Shrines. In Chapter 4, Scripted Mourning on Facebook, I analyze the cultural scripts guiding Facebook posting behavior in response to death and bereavement. In order to study these cultural scripts, it is necessary to examine the language used in posts and comments. It is also necessary to consider posting choices and behavior as speech practices. By examining the language, posting choices, and posting behaviors, it is possible to analyze mourning posts as cultural scripts as the guiding symbolic interactions of mourning on Facebook. In Chapter 5, Rituals of the Grief Process I discuss the mourning practices and sites of mourning on Facebook as symbolic acts and liminal
spaces, which I analyze through the lenses of ritual process, communitas, liminality, and pilgrimage. I will assess my hypothesis that the liminality associated with rituals is a critical component, particularly, for rituals which move individuals or groups through a transformation of social status. In Chapter 6, Kinwork and Grief Solidarity, I discuss communal aspects of mourning on Facebook and their therapeutic role for deceased’s extended network of kin and friends and the broader community. I focus on the importance of kinwork for keeping the family together during this critical juncture. I present evidence of Facebook mourning practices promoting solidarity, emotional support, and healing, while also discussing what happens when the ritual practice fails, and social cohesion breaks down. In Chapter 7, Emotional Disclosure, my final data analysis chapter, I focus on Facebook as an outlet for emotional disclosure, emotional regulation, and familial conflict. I analyze these findings which are significant for the therapeutic applications of my research from a psycho-social vantage point.
Mourning is communal. A person can grieve alone, but mourning is the expression of grief within socially accepted parameters. Creating a site of mourning was far from the intentions of Facebook’s designers, but the user-generated mourning practices are greatly influenced by Facebook’s design. While not the first social networking site of its kind, Facebook’s unique approach to the individual and their social network allowed it to become the premier of socialization on the Internet. In this prominence Facebook has become the primary hub of mourning on the web, granting researchers such as myself a wide spectrum of topics to study.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how the history and development of Facebook led to it being the primary site for online mourning. The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature of digital anthropology and digital studies that is relevant to Facebook and online mourning, and connect it to my findings. I first explore the evolution of media and community-building and maintenance on both the individual and communal levels. Then I document the venues for social interaction on Facebook which shape mourning on Facebook. Third I explore how Facebook’s success has necessitated both user-generated and network-designed ways of managing dead Facebook users within the larger social network. Next, I discuss the social norms and rules of interaction in each of these spaces as dictated by Facebook’s design and user-generated social norms. Finally, I conclude the chapter by discussing how Facebook’s design and mechanics
intentionally encourage the morning practices I documented on the site, and how users share
grief and mourning with their larger social network.

3.1 Global Media-Driven Communities

Benedict Anderson (1983) argued that the invention of widely dispersed print media,
such as newspapers, fostered the development of nationalism. Mass media generates a sense of
commonality. It connects people in cities and the countryside. Print capitalism did this to
increase its readership and profits, not out of benevolence or civic pride. With the advent of radio
and television in turn, nation-wide syndication was in the financial interests of media companies
as it allowed them to reach broader audiences and maximize profits. Newspapers, radio, and
television all generated their profits through advertisement revenues. The broader a media
outlet’s audience, the greater appeal it had as a venue for advertisements. But in the pursuit of an
ever-larger audience, mass media played an important role in generating a shared national
identity.

Initially conceptualized to discuss nations and nationalism, an imagined community need
not be limited by national or political borders but could instead be extended to any group that
shares a good deal of media in common. Benedict Anderson argues that nations and nationalism
should be evaluated as a large cultural system, like religion or kinship, rather than as a political
ideology, like Marxism or Liberalism or Isolationism. He writes,

It would be short-sighted, however, to think of the
imagined communities of nations as simply growing out of and
replacing religious communities and dynastic realms. Beneath the
decline of sacred communities, languages and lineages, a
fundamental change was taking place in modes of apprehending
the world, which, more than anything else, made it possible to
‘think’ the nation (Anderson 1983).
Just as the changes in the way people apprehended the world allowed people to conceptualize the nation, the changes of the digital revolution allowed people to ‘think’ the Internet as a global, networked cultural region into being.

As mass media and invented traditions allowed nations to become communities imagined in the minds of their citizens, social media and its invented traditions have fostered the idea of the Internet as a global community in the imagination of Internet users. Curran (2012) critiques the common practice of capitalizing “the Internet” as a proper noun. But consider what is meant emicly by “the Internet”. The Internet is a proper noun because it is a highly specific imagined community in the minds of its users; it is a community that far exceeds its material components as a communication network. The same is true of Facebook. The Internet is a global network populated with global media-driven communities, such as Facebook, not bound by geographical distances. This is a key part of mourning and kinwork on Facebook.

While Anderson’s imagined communities bring a sense of commonality to entire nations, Herzfeld critiques this top-down idea arguing that it is focused on the wrong criteria for shared experience. Instead, he argues anthropologists should focus on units of shared cultural identity and experience. He conceptualizes this in terms of cultural intimacy. Cultural intimacy is defined by a sense of commonality, shared experience, and mutual vulnerability (Herzfeld 1997). People take ‘defiant pride’ in self-stereotypes and inside jokes which point at the group’s shared vulnerabilities (Herzfeld 2005: 3). Internet humor is rife with such self-deprecating jokes frequently taking the form of memes, usually an image with a minimal amount of text superimposed on it. If print capitalism allowed the creation of nationalism, then mass media and the global, albeit uneven, distribution of the Internet has fostered transnational communities built
from shared-interests and shared experiences, which now exhibit a growing sense of shared-commonality and cultural intimacy.

The Internet is populated with imagined communities unified by global digital media that fosters a sense of cultural intimacy. Digital media fosters a sense of commonality and shared cultural identity by highlighting shared interests and experiences. The Internet both facilitates and is generated by the global exchange media, ideology, finance, and technology. Appadurai (1996) argues that cultural ideas, technology, media, money, and people rapidly flow across global through landscapes of cultural exchange. He refers to the global cultural flows of each of these as specific -scapes: ideoscape (ideas), technoscape (technology), mediascape (media), financescape (money), and ethnoscape (people). The technology of the Internet fits into Appadurai’s technoscape, which he describes as capable of rapidly moving across boundaries with great fluidity; further, the pervasive nature of the Internet as a globalized cultural space has increased the fluidity of the financescape, mediascape, and ideoscape (Appadurai 1996: 34). As a social space, the Internet hosts and rapidly facilitates such cultural flows, networking people with shared experiences, interests, or ideological orientations. This networking creates global online communities, generating and sharing media on a large scale.

Miller and Slater (2000), an anthropologist and sociologist respectively, who orient their study of Internet technologies through the lens of material culture, note that the scale and speed of the diffusion of digital technology across the globe were remarkable. In the late 1990s, they observed Trinidadians naturally fitting the Internet into the daily lives effortlessly as it gave them a global platform for performing and sharing their core values and identity. They refer to this phenomenon as the “Internet-accelerated global culturescape” (Miller and Slater 2000: 2). This concept fits well within Appadurai’s framework of global cultural flows and highlights the
Internet as a tool of accelerating global cultural exchange. Digital media and the technologies, which facilitate its proliferation, accelerate global cultural flows particularly at the intersection of the mediascape, ideoscape, and technoscape.

The global interconnectedness of the 21st century requires anthropologists to consider global-local connections carefully (Coleman 2010). Digital media is viewed emically in terms of local forms of sociality as people focus on content now that the technology itself has faded into mundane status (Miller and Slater 2000: 2). Digital media promotes new formats for self-expression and self-presentation and unifies collective interests of geographically dispersed people (Coleman 2010: 490). The Internet hosts numerous imagined communities which evoke a sense of commonality and cultural intimacy through shared-interest, shared-experience, and shared-identity (Coleman 2010; Kozinets 2009; Fischer 1999). It is necessary to examine global digital media production and proliferation coupled with the local sociality from which it derives its meaning.

Transparency is one of the foundational ideals behind Facebook. In many ways, the fact that users’ accounts are expected to reflect who they are “in real life” was a bit revolutionary in 2004 when the company was founded. MySpace, Yahoo Groups, and the plethora of forums, message boards, chat groups, and instant messengers of the early 2000s not only allowed anonymity but were rife with fake accounts and incidents of single users with multiple accounts. Facebook’s emphasis on transparency and its policy of accounts being linked to a “.edu” email accounts in its first few years set a standard that continues today. Any user can report an account as fake and it will be investigated resulting in suspect accounts being suspended. Facebook has policies against users using names other than their own and offers a “nickname” option instead. Unlike other social media sites, businesses and social organizations, are not users. They can have
pages and groups that allow them to advertise and organize events in other ways through Facebook but they are not mixed in with Facebook users. Similarly, users are not intended to have multiple accounts. Ideally, every Facebook user represents a single real-life person who uses Facebook, but there are of course exceptions. The significance of this is how directly a Facebook account is tied to its user’s real-life identity. As the Facebook accounts are part of the networked public and linked to a real name, it is surprising to many, especially those watching from outside of Facebook, that users are willing to share so many details of their personal life and opinions that might otherwise be kept as private thoughts. Since grief has traditionally been a private process, disclosing grief in such a public way on Facebook is even more surprising and indicative of changes taking place.

In his work on social networking sites, Miller emphasizes the significant role of social support on Facebook. He argues that Facebook has evolved to take on the role of the meta-best friend of users: a social conglomerate of the user’s social network (friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors) which is always available to witness and share the user’s mood, thoughts, and experiences (2011: 170-172). While this social network may not consist of real-life friends, it creates the impression of constant interaction, a separate community that coexists alongside the user’s real life. This imagined community is no less real, and in some cases becomes more important to an individual’s well-being than the support system provided by his or her in-person communities. In these cases, online social interactions contribute to a sense of group solidarity, community, and in rare cases communitas.

But this imagined community comes at a price. Facebook is a platform of willing self-surveillance. The value of the wealth of data Facebook users produce to both Big Data companies and various governments is apparent. But why are individuals willingly exposing
themselves to this all-seeing eye? Boellstorff (2017) examines Facebook users’ heightened willingness to disclose publicly their private thoughts and emotions by drawing a comparison with confession. Drawing on Foucault’s panopticon, he argues that social media users have justified this heightened degree of surveillance because it has produced something of value (Boellstorff 2013). Boellstorff argues that Facebook users gain public recognition of their experience, recognition of their everyday life in all its gory details. Thus, Facebook acts as confessor with all the seeming intimacy of a meta-best friend earning the Facebook user recognition from their networked public, as suggested by the responses of many of my interlocuters, such as Susan Jones.

Anderson emphasizes the connection between regularly practiced media engagement and ritual practice. Similarly, social media users participate in mourning practices in a silent, private ceremony performed almost entirely in their head, but shared publicly with the 2.07 billion Facebook users. Contradicting the private nature of deep grief, a new social norm of incredibly public communal mourning. Yet religious imaginary invoked in this mass ceremony allows the performer to feel connected in that ephemeral moment to the 4.1 billion Internet users around the world and more specifically to their personal networks. Anderson argues that this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar. What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned? At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life. (1983:46).

While this is very much applicable to social media consumption with Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and the other digital media platforms replacing the newspaper, the constant availability of digital media is shifting the frame of time and space once again.
3.2 History and Development of Facebook: From Social Network to Digital Graveyard

To understand the mourning practices of Facebook, it is necessary to first examine Facebook as a social network and its context within the history of mourning on the Internet. From its opening in 2004, Facebook has been exemplar of best practice of the social aspects of what experts call “Web 2.0.” Like a phoenix rising from the ashes of the 2001 tech bubble collapse, Web 2.0 shifted away from the static web pages of the early Internet to sites intentionally designed to promote interactivity and user-generated content heralded as the “social web” (O’Reilly 2012). For the tech companies who survived the tech bubble of 2001, Web 2.0 became a rallying point. Companies hoping to weather the economic storm held the first Web 2.0 conference in October 2004 (O’Reilly 2012: 32). Rather than selling “software”, Web 2.0 brought users highly integrative web platforms and services. These changes decentralized the Internet. Internet companies selling software packages lost out to those whose primary “product” was the collective activity of their users, their data, and their attention (O’Reilly 2012).

Content creation and collaboration are hallmarks of contemporary web design (Kozinets 2009). The emphasis is on vertical integration, cooperation, and sharing rather than top-down Internet content (O’Reilley 2012). User-generated content is the text, images, and videos that are created and shared organically by users rather than by site owners or corporations. When content is a social object, it is deemed social media as it is media data which has taken on a social component. The majority of successful web services and platforms encourage this social interactivity linking content and identity (Hyde et al 2012). Increasingly, sophisticated user-generated content is shared on a massive scale, reused, adapted, and shared further to broader audiences. When a social media item is viewed, liked, or shared over one million times then it is safe to say it has “gone viral”; when this is rapidly happening, it is considered to be “trending”
with a lifespan of an hour to a week or two (Coleman 2010). The global scale and speed of communication have been the biggest selling points of digital communication since the advent of the Internet and both scale and speed have increased exponentially over the past two and half decades.

In terms of social media platforms, Facebook capitalizes on its users’ social networks and connectivity. Building a global platform from the off-site connections of its users. Social network analysis of Facebook in 2011 conducted by Backstorm et al. (2011) and Ugander et al. (2011), analyzed 69 billion connections and found that 99.6% of Facebook users are connected by five degrees of separation (Lars: 2011). Even when their scope was narrowed, they found 92% were connected by only four degrees of separation or less. Facebook relies on its users’ sense of community and belonging and the cultural intimacy its users share to create a global platform for sharing private family moments and deep personal emotions. Users are willing to disclose in this way, because they conceptualize their social media as communicating with their friends, family, neighbors, and trusted colleagues. Facebook is designed so that users experience a highly personalized imagined community.

A shift has occurred in the digital anthropology literature in terms of how platforms like Facebook are conceptualized and analyzed. Scholarly literature originally referred to these platforms as social networking sites with analysis focused on them as a type of community website. Outdated formats like online forums and Yahoo groups also fall into this category. But a transformation took place in both branding and scholarship, which has these platforms deemed social media sites. At approximately the same time, scholarship re-directed its focus from community studies to media studies. Perhaps this is because with 2.7 billion Facebook users it is hard to conceive of Facebook as a single community (Statistica 2020). But I argue that to truly
understand a digital cultural phenomenon, it is necessary to examine both the digital media and the community which feels a sense of shared cultural intimacy through it. The platform Facebook is the primary social space of numerous such imagined communities. I argue that instead of analyzing user-generated content, anthropologists should consider community generated media.

As a social networking site, Facebook links its users together, digitizing direct connections and in-direct connections between people who share a “friend” in common. Facebook is a digital platform for collaboratively writing one’s life story in mundane detail and sharing that story in text, image, and video, opening it up to the networked public for comment. Facebook’s mechanisms allow users to communicate their thoughts and feelings with other members of their network of “friends.”

When “The Facebook” went online at Harvard in February 2004, it was a campus-wide network with hooking up and hanging out as its primary agenda. According to Sarah Phillips (2007) at The Guardian:

> In February 2004 Mr Zuckerberg launched "The facebook", as it was originally known; the name taken from the sheets of paper distributed to freshmen, profiling students and staff. Within 24 hours, 1,200 Harvard students had signed up, and after one month, over half of the undergraduate population had a profile.

> Over the next year, it expanded to include select universities across the United States. By fall 2005, it was available to all universities in the United States. Facebook originally required a university email address ending in “.edu” to create an account. Facebook’s initial design intended for each account to represent a single college student and the account profile shared real life information about Facebook users.
Many of the customs and social expectations of Facebook developed during this period when Facebook was primarily populated with young adults. Facebook’s performative nature stems from its original collegiate uses. Facebook was a space for sharing funny, “in the moment” posts (Miller 2011). Students used Facebook to organize parties or simply announce their plans to hang out at a particular public place and wait for friends to show up. This low-commitment approach to socializing was ideally suited for the college setting. Facebook profiles rapidly were integrated into the young adult dating scene. Casually browsing the university network or friends of friends, allowed Facebook users to consider potential dates before-hand, effectively killing the blind date. It did not take long for this form of social media research, deemed “Facebook stalking,” to begin to affect future employment as well as dating prospects. Self-presentation on Facebook became a high-risk game. Experts advised that students keep their online presence clean but fun. Employers wanted to hire someone social and approachable but were unlikely to hire someone who might be an embarrassment. But, having no social media presence at all might make it look like you had something to hide. An issue which merits further ethnographic investigation particularly as it relates to and possibly conflicts with individual and cultural variation concerning the concept of privacy.

Facebook was eventually expanded to include high school students in late 2005 and then the general public in 2006. Facebook is now a global site that provides free satellite Internet to increase accessibility to potential users in Africa. But the performative nature and transparency design of accounts representing real people has remained a critical distinction of Facebook through this period of expansion.

According to its self-description, “Facebook's mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together,” allowing users to “stay connected to
friends and family” (Facebook Newsroom 2019). Facebook users document and share their daily lives, major life events, and their opinions on all aspects of life with their network of Facebook friends. For many Facebook users, Facebook is a part of their daily social lives. Each Facebook user has a Facebook Timeline which chronologically documents the brief narratives, images, and videos the user has shared. These autobiographical Timelines tell a curated story of the users' lives. Facebook allows its users to keep up with the latest news from their extended social network and maintain communication despite geographic distance.

As of March 2019, half of the world’s population is now connected to the Internet (Cerf and Lee 2019). Many people now live a good portion of their daily lives digitally engaged, connecting to people all around the globe. This has resulted in the emergence of rich social practices and rules for interaction in these digital spaces. As with all cultural spaces, digital spaces develop unique ritual behaviors, translating localized in-person ritual practices and adapting techniques learned from older websites to create new user-generated practices. Everyday practices of lived religion blur the line between the secular and sacred. This blurring of the lines is evident in emergent technological practices, such as social media prayer requests and digital memorials on social media platforms.

Facebook has facilitated the adaptation and growth of mourning practices in the digital realm. Rooted in local cultural values and traditions, these social practices replicate and reinforce cultural norms and kinship relations and extend their reach and effect. While doing so, the digital culture and design of Facebook are also reshaping the norms of mourning, extending the period of socially accepted public mourning and allowing a wider range of bereaved individuals to communicate emotion not considered socially acceptable in their offline public life. The

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1 This estimation was made at the "Our People-Centered Digital Future" live streamed web conference sponsored by Constellation Research by Vint Cerf and Sir Tim Berners Lee.
mourning traditions which emerge on Facebook represent a dialogue made possible by a pluralistic cultural space that fluidly connects local, regional, national, and global dimensions. Why are Facebook users more willing to publicly mourn and share their grief on Facebook, than they are in their face-to-face interactions? Understanding this discrepancy between local and digital social norms around mourning is a key focus of this project.

3.3 The Graveyard of the Internet

Why has Facebook been called “the graveyard of the Internet” and attracted so much press as the definitive platform for social mourning (BBC 2019; Forbes 2019; Gizmodo 2019; Irish Times 2019; Economic Times 2016), despite this being far from its original intent? Facebook’s mission is to “connect billions of people around the world, give them ways to share what matters most to them, and helps bring people closer together” (Newsroom 2019). While Facebook designers and programmers may not have intended their site to include mourning, the sensitivity of their preference algorithms recognize that memorializing a life and mourning its loss is something deeply meaningful that both matters to people and connects them. Mourning on Facebook allows users to “build community and connect in meaningful ways” even if it is an unintended consequence of a social web built on user-generated content, preferences, and attention.

Emerging online mourning practices are a crucial thread in the fabric of lived religion in the United States. According to Brubaker et al. (2013), mourning practices transitioned onto the digital landscape with the advent of the Internet. By 1996, researchers were already documenting the memorialization of the deceased on the early Internet (Roberts and Vidal 2000). Virtual mourning practices evolved from static memorial pages to online obits and guest books, to interactive social media memorials. Dynamic and interactive forms of mourning have developed
on SNS, and Facebook in particular, which merit in-depth investigation into the impact of direct and indirect participation in online mourning on individuals’ experience of grief. Miller (2011) describes a shift in Facebook posting. In the early years of Facebook, users’ posts were limited by custom to sharing only good news or “in the moment” statuses. Now Facebook posts include death, loss, and memorialization. When a Facebook user faces a health crisis, experiences a tragic accident, or is concerned about a family emergency, they post to Facebook in order to rapidly share that information with family and friends. Similarly, when a Facebook user loses a close family member or friend, she or he shares that sad news on Facebook.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 further exacerbated the need to communicate and connect with people online as public health restrictions prohibited many in-person social interactions including large social gatherings for funerals, memorials, and visitations with the family. It is important to note an emerging 2020 trend. Since March I have observed an increase in mourning social media posts on Instagram and Twitter. This change seems to be linked to the rapid social changes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, although the deaths being mourned are not limited specially to COVID deaths.

While a plethora of online mourning practices exists, I focus on Facebook as it has become a primary site for online communal grieving and commemoration. Other online sites of mourning and memorialization frequently link back to Facebook. Online obituaries, e-guest books, and funeral slideshows are shared on Facebook. Even private grief support forums frequently utilize Facebook and Facebook messenger in member communication and event coordination. While I focus on Facebook as my recruitment site and primary source of media content, I must acknowledge people do not live their lives relying solely on one communication platform. They inhabit and navigate a range of social media platforms and digital communication
tools that digital anthropologists Miller and Madinnou (2012) refer to as a polymedia ecology. Intentional choices are frequently made about when to respond publicly on Facebook and when to make a phone call or send a private message or text. The medium of communication and level of privacy selected communicate much all on their own. From utilitarian announcements to memorial posts full of raw emotions, Facebook is the platform of choice for communicating publicly following a death. To gain a holistic picture of participants’ grief experience, I consider the full polymedia ecology for communal and private grieving both on and offline. But, above all, Facebook is my primary field site.

Part of that communication of death is an invitation to communal mourning. Understanding communal mourning on and offline as a dialogue shaping the individual’s grief experience, rather than an isolated act of mourning, is essential to analyzing emerging death practices on Facebook. Brubaker et al. (2013) argue that rather than seeing digital memorials and the continued online interaction with the deceased’s social networking profiles as disruptive to the cultural traditions surrounding death, these new practices must be understood within their cultural context as an extension of the grieving process.

It is not unusual or unexpected for Facebook users to memorialize the dead. Public grieving on Facebook allows people to engage in the grieving process and to offer to support and share memories with the family. The networked public extends the allotted time and space for communal grieving. To adequately address the transition of grieving onto Facebook, the project must examine the digital and physical overlap. To accomplish this, the scope of my research included a physical community of grievers as well as those on Facebook.

The digital and analog are in dialogue (Horst and Miller 2012). Contemporary people live much of their everyday lives seamlessly gliding from in-person interactions and polymedia
communication (Miller and Madianou 2012). Offline localized culture is in dialogue with digital media and global media-driven communities. By examining how digital sociality interacts with local sociality, it is possible to understand the role of a global media-driven community in the lived experience of individuals.

3.4 The Posting Process in Communal Mourning

When Facebook users go to www.facebook.com, either on their computer or mobile device, they are brought to a personalized homepage that features a status update box front and center and a newsfeed below with content and status updates recently shared by their network. In the status update box, Facebook provides the prompt, “What’s on your mind?” This open-ended question allows Facebook users to share their thoughts and opinions on a diverse range of topics. For griever, this question provides the opportunity for them to share both the memories and emotions that are on their minds.

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2 This was the status update prompt question throughout the period of my fieldwork from January 2016 to December 2018. Facebook is constantly changing, and this prompt was recently changed to “What’s on your mind, [user preferred name]?” But the prompt as I document it here is what research participants saw and responded to in all the status update posts analyzed for this project.
This simple, open-ended question greets Facebook users every time they sign-on. Designed to meet users where-ever they are at, the question prompts users to share what they are thinking about, experiencing, and feeling. For bereaved Facebook users, the question “what’s on your mind?” opens a gateway to publicly disclosing their emotional state effectively sharing snippets of their grief with the undifferentiated public audience, emicly referred to as Facebook. Facebook users who are a part of this undifferentiated public will see these mourning posts in their newsfeed regardless of their own mourning status and many find it disruptive and emotionally disturbing to be faced with such posts during their causal scroll through non-grief.
related content. For others, it brings to mind the person that they have recently lost and compels them to share a memory.

The posting process begins with the crafting of the initial post by the poster who leads and defines the tone and purpose. The initial post may include text, images, and videos as well as numerous forms of metadata voluntarily shared by the poster. With the initial post, the poster makes several decisions, prompted by Facebook's design features, regarding post venue, post privacy, and post aesthetics and metadata, as well as sociolinguistic decisions on message, tone, and intention of the post. These decisions about tone, word choice, emoticon use, and venue shape the symbolic interaction for poster and audience alike. Given how quickly a public post can be made, many research participants acknowledge that these decisions are sometimes made automatically. In particular, research participants who were by their own accounts emotionally vulnerable, described very limited intentionality or agency in crafting their post, but rather, indicated that an aesthetics choice like selecting a somber background for the post was done because it “just felt right” or “made sense” to do so. Effective communication on social media requires a great deal of tacit knowledge and the built-in social reward system is an effective educator. The primary factor determining how often Facebook users utilized these aesthetic and meta-data features was how adept the user was at using them in their general Facebook posting practices. This use of emoticons and images of the deceased were the most common addition to the posts analyzed.
Figure 4 Metadata for Status Text Book
Once the status text box is open, posters follow the same general posting procedure. The poster begins by writing the text, choosing visual components, making choices about adding location or feeling and selecting the audience through privacy settings and tags. The text of the post sets the tone: emotional, memorial, informative, or religious.

The initial poster is offered a wide range of meta-data and aesthetic choices when crafting his/her post. It is possible to change the post’s background design or add emoticons to the text.

The poster can select the Feeling/Activity feature which has options for feeling: broken, lonely, incomplete, empty, lost, and depressed. This feature also allows posters to select activities such as attending a funeral which provides a candle emoticon.
It is also at this point that the initial poster can share pictures or videos of or related to the deceased, which are very common Facebook mourning practices. The poster will also frequently tag the deceased in images or in the text of the post especially if the post is being made as a status update. If the post is made on the deceased’s timeline, Facebook’s mechanics automatically tag the deceased.

Facebook is one communication platform among many in its users’ polymedia arsenal. It allows for private instant messages with text, picture, and live video feed options. It allows for public posts to be directed at specific users. It also allows users to make public announcements to their entire social network through the “status update” option. Users also have the option to join groups with a range of privacy options that allow group discussions on specific topics. It also has a Page feature which users can choose to follow. Pages, which are intended to be used by organizations rather than individual persons, share announcements, media, external links, scheduled events, and the ability to privately message the Page’s followers. These communication features can be accessed online through a user’s computer or on smart devices through Facebook’s mobile app.

When a Facebook user signs-in, the initial page is known as a newsfeed. Smart phone apps make it possible to remain signed-in permanently, but the app still opens to the newsfeed page. The newsfeed allows Facebook users to causally scroll through content “catching up” without “Facebook stalking” anyone in particular. The user’s newsfeed includes a running list of the posts made this week by Facebook friends, every page the user has liked, the people that the user follows, and the Facebook groups to which the user belongs (Oremus 2016). A highly specialized proprietary algorithm determines what content each Facebook user views, when and in what order. Posts are ranked by Facebook’s algorithm according to its calculation of the user’s
preferences and presented accordingly. This algorithm has evolved numerous times during Facebook’s seventeen-year history, growing increasingly complex with each update (Oremus 2016). Three geographic criteria are taken into consideration: current location, current city, and hometown. Facebook’s algorithm gives every post a personalized “relevancy score” for each Facebook user that determines if it will be seen (Constine 2016). This algorithm determines who will passively see a specific post and when. While anyone can actively seek out a specific post made by someone on their friend list, the majority of user activity on Facebook is spent passively scrolling through the newsfeed content which is determined by this algorithm and its “relevancy score”. It shapes what is seen and by whom. If a user did not interact with the deceased in life, post-mortem social media posts on the deceased’s Facebook profile are not likely to show up in the user’s newsfeed with any increased frequency and users may even miss that a Facebook friend has died because of these algorithms of preference and engagement.

Ideally, Facebook aims to be a platform for free speech, welcoming all ideas and favoring authentic communication over “misleading, sensational, or spammy” stories and giving users a custom-tailored experience (Lua 2017). Ethical questions have been raised regarding Facebook’s algorithm and their manipulation of it as they have conducted successful experiments demonstrating that slight alterations in a user’s newsfeed content has the capacity to influence mood and ideology to either broaden or narrow the user’s perspective (Pariser 2011). This capacity was investigated in the US for its link to Russia’s tampering with the presidential election of 2016 and in the UK in connection with its impact on the Brexit vote. The political and social disruptions of 2020 have similarly demonstrated that social media companies are not wholly beholden to the free use of their platform by their users. As corporations, not democratic nation-states, the freedom of speech is not a right granted to users in their terms of use. Facebook
and other social media companies have demonstrated that they are not above censorship and the utilization of their extensive user data to influence users’ emotions and beliefs, thus swaying elections and political action.

Tinia Bucher (2016) argues that users experience algorithms in terms of “the moods, affects and sensations that the algorithm helps to generate” rather than as mathematical abstractions (31). Facebook users have a phenomenologically awareness of its algorithm while it remains an invisible force in their social and emotional lives. Facebook users provide an immense amount of personal, social, and emotional data to feed Facebook’s preference algorithm and there is a feedback loop as Facebook’s algorithm uses that data to personalize the posts it presents to the user. Bucher argues, “the algorithmic imaginary – ways of thinking about what algorithms are, what they should be and how they function – is not just productive of different moods and sensations but plays a generative role in moulding the Facebook algorithm itself.” (Bucher 2016: 30).

Facebook users primarily communicate publicly by posting a status update which shows up on the user’s personal Timeline and in the newsfeed of their extended network on Facebook. These messages communicate the user’s current mood, activity, thoughts, or actions. Posting, which is also referred to as sharing, is the act of writing a message and publicly communicating that message to fellow Facebook users. These messages can be designated to have a range of audiences from public, which allows anyone with Internet access to read the message, to select friends. The preset privacy settings of “Friends only” and “Friends of Friends” allow Facebook users to communicate with their extended social network without speaking directly to any one person in particular. In addition to posting a Facebook status, users also frequently write public messages on the Facebook profiles of their friends. This is also known as writing on your
friend’s Timeline. These messages can be seen according to the friend’s privacy settings, but generally, all mutual friends can read these messages. Further, if a Facebook user mentions a friend in his/her Facebook status post, then that friend is “tagged” in the message. This makes the message show up in the activity of the mentioned friend. Facebook also allows users to post messages within a specific group or to a fan page. All public message options allow for other users to reply to the original message by posting a comment or by “liking” the message. The reaction feature, known colloquially as the “like button”, was enhanced in 2016 to include a greater range of emotional nuance. Users select one of the following:

Figure 6 Facebook Reaction Options (Pre-COVID)

To fully understand the Facebook interaction, the original message and all the subsequent comments and reactions must be taken into consideration as a whole. These can be viewed as the text of a public discussion.
In the spring of 2020, Facebook added a new reaction emoticon, the image of a concerned face hugging a heart. While this new symbol was added directly in response to COVID-19 and the social isolation experienced by Facebook users around the world, my online participant-observation over the past few months has revealed that it is a new favorite reaction of Facebook users responding to mourning posts and grief disclosures to different types of audiences.

Audience is a critical issue in the communication on Facebook in general and Facebook mourning in particular. Mourning practices, whether speaking to the deceased, to the larger mourning community, and even to Facebook as an entity, are public, performative actions that are meant for an audience. The purpose of Facebook, from design to use, is to share a user’s feelings, actions, and emotions, and thus it is important to tailor such posts to an intended audience. As such, posters are often very considerate of how people will react to their posts, and
those who participate in such posts are aware of their role. Once the poster initiates a cultural script by sharing the Facebook post, participation involves responding with a comment, responding to a previous comment, reacting with an emoticon, or sharing the post allowing it to be seen by a broader audience, opening up participation to a new network of people based on the sharer’s privacy settings.

Once the post is shared on Facebook, it becomes available for other Facebook users to engage with it; that is, the shrine has been built and is open for visitors. Four patterns of observation emerge in participant’s descriptions of their experiences visiting a Facebook Shrine. There is no one single way to respond to a Facebook post, but from my grief narrative interviews four patterns of observation emerged: intentional avoidance, silent observation, passive reaction, and active participation.

While there is a wide range of responses offline to such Facebook mourning practices, the overwhelming tendency is for online comments to be positive and encouraging. Users who feel uncomfortable or generally dislike mourning posts or prayer requests on Facebook primarily avoid the content rather than responding negatively to it on Facebook. These users intentionally avoid the posts utilizing mechanisms on Facebook that allow users to hide content, snooze content from a specific user for a month, hide content from a specific user, unfriend the user, or block the user. The last two options are usually seen as a last resort as unfriending or blocking someone on Facebook can have a negative impact on offline relationships as well. While the vast majority of publicly visible online responses to mourning posts, in terms of comments and reactions, remain positive, offline I have observed Facebook users negatively discussing the mourning posting habits of specific friends and family not only with me during private interviews but also with their friends and family. When Susan Jones was making highly
emotional unfiltered posts which she later had no recollection of making during my grief narrative interview with her, Susan’s sisters, nieces, nephews, husband, and friends (whom I also interviewed) all expressed concerns about the content of her posts and the frequency of them. Even one of Susan’s employees expressed her concern with me about Susan’s posts unprompted during a causal conversation about the topic of my research. The offline comments were a mixture of concern, critique, and pure gossip all of which a vulnerable bereaved Facebook user opens him or herself up to by making mourning status update posts. The silence of those who view such posts negatively demonstrates a unique degree of respect in this digital age, creating a sacred space in a secular digital platform usually reserved for sharing mundane and trivial content. It may also suggest there is a link between the type of person who disapproves of extensive emotional disclosure and mourning on Facebook and the type of person who thinks that it is inappropriate to directly critique a bereaved person, but further research would be necessary to determine the connection. Those intentionally avoiding mourning posts, utilize Facebook’s hide, snooze, unfriend, and block mechanisms to train Facebook’s algorithm and actively avoid mourning content. How do those intentionally avoiding mourning posts differ from users in the other three categories? Once they have been at it for a while, the mourning posts they see will be very few and far between. But not all Facebook users know how to accomplish this and not all users who prefer not to participate dislike the posts to that degree.

There are three levels of participation for the Facebook users who do not routinely hide such content. Silent observers are Facebook users who, aware of the death and mourning, read such posts but do not actively respond to them through reactions or comments. They remain silent. They do not comment or react to posts, even in the form of simple likes. There are several reasons for this, as reported by those who were silent observers. Some even went so far as to
actively avoid such posts. Silent observers are those who see the posts, but do not engage with it by reacting, commenting, or sharing such posts. The idea is that process of working through grief and condolences are deeply personal, and hence such interactions should be as well. Seeing a post would often prompt some respondents to privately contact the original poster, often offline. For some this also came from simply not knowing what to say, feeling that commenting often requires the observer to get involved in their own emotions at a time they might otherwise not want to. Further, seeing posts expressing grief or death are often simply a blip in their larger News Feed, and they might not be prepared for a performance of their own. So, they see the post, read its content, but do not interact or respond publicly. They may do so with the intention that it would be more meaningful to call, text, or visit the bereaved person than to respond like a like or cliché comment. For many silent observers, participating in grieving on Facebook feels inauthentic or lacks the meaning that they ascribe to offline communication. There does seem to be a hierarchy to this that in-person visits mean more, phone calls or letters are next, and private text messages are still considered more meaningful than public social media messages. However, this hierarchy of communication is not shared by all as some Facebook users feel that all the in-person visits and phone calls are overwhelming. This merits further investigation to determine if these preferences differ by age, comfort level with social media, or some other factor.

Others actively participate in mourning, commenting and offering their support and experience to the original poster and other mourners. Commenters blur the line between audience and participant. The cultural script provides audience participants with a range of responses which are primarily reiterations of the same set of idioms: “I’m so sorry for your loss.” “Thoughts and prayers” “God needed another angel” These types of response can become cliché
and add to the questions of authenticity. The audience participates by contributing a comment or emoticon reaction.

Many more Facebook users choose to engage with a post in a passive manner by choosing from one of six emoticon reactions. These emoticon reactions are a design feature that allows users to quickly acknowledge a post without typing out a comment. Originally, reactions were limited to the “like button” but, as explained in the introduction, they were expanded to include six separate emotional responses at the beginning of my research. The reaction selection was expanded again during the COVID-19 pandemic to add a seventh reaction “care” which depicts a smiling face wrapping its arms around a heart in a hug. Reactions primarily serve as an acknowledgement that the user observed the post, similar to body language which acknowledges that the listener heard the speaker.

However, some Facebook users find the six emoticon reactions frustratingly limiting. Facebook’s emoticon reactions are limited to the reactions of Like, Love, Care, Haha, Wow, Sad, and Angry. Mary Reddington, one of my research participants, expressed frustration at the confines of Facebook reactions, which are frequently inappropriate for responding to the darker emotions of mourning posts. When I asked her if she ever used Facebook’s emoticons reactions to acknowledge a death related post, she said:

> Well you know, that’s the bad thing about Facebook. The shortest response is to hit the like button, but do you like it that they are sad? Do you love it that they are unhappy? Do you love it that someone is hurting? The buttons don’t work for what you want to say. So, most of the time, I do nuttin’.

The six symbols for Facebook’s reactions utilize characters from the emoticon system, which is a widespread form of digital communication. Speaking broadly, emoticons convey a minimal emotional response. As it is impossible for Facebook users to see one another’s emotional response through facial expressions, emoticons used in comments are comparable to a
head nod, a smile, or a laugh. Commenters can include any of the 607 emoticons that Facebook recognizes to convey meaning through a pictograph. Of these 607, 66 are direct replacements for facial expressions, another 18 are hand gestures, and 35 convey body language or a physical interaction between two or more people. Additionally, there are 13 different kinds of hearts each with a slightly different meaning. Each of these symbols carries its own meaning and that meaning is not always as apparent as might be assumed given their pictographic nature, which can lead to confusion.

Ideally, the text of the comment supplies the necessary context, but that is not always the case. According to my content analysis of mourning status update and Facebook shrine posts most comments made in response to mourning posts are intended to convey support to the griever in some way. This frequently takes the form of emotional support, religious support such as offering prayers, or statements of grief solidarity. The third category of audience interaction is simply audience acknowledgement. This category includes those who “passively” interact with a post, that is not commenting but merely reacting to posts and comments. Prior to the expansion of Facebook’s reaction options, the Like button was generally interpreted by Facebook users as a minimal acknowledgement. A user was not liking that someone passed away or was grieving, but merely acknowledging that they read the person’s post. With expanded reaction options, a user can be sad about a mourning post, angry about a situation that led to a death, or express their love for the person posting. These reactions do serve as emotional validation for the post, but they remain an action of minimal meaning and effort. A user does not need to read the entirety of a long post to commit to liking it or being angry about it. Like the silent observers, many of these participants stated they did not know what to say, instead simply offering their support through likes, loves, and tears.
By word count and number of participants, more Facebook users engage with digital mourning practices by supporting others in the comments of mourning posts. Comments range from short statements of love, support, and solidarity to multiple paragraph comments sharing memories or fully written out prayers for the poster and bereaved family. Emoticons are very common in the comments section with a variety of hearts, prayer hands, and angels being the most frequently utilized. Intriguingly, the prayer hands emoticon was designed as a high five emoticon (D’Onfro 2015), but cultural consensus in the Mid-South is that this symbol is the hands of a person praying.

![Example of Prayer Emoji Usage](image)

Every component of the posting process is shaped by Facebook’s design.

3.5 Facebook’s Design

The Internet offers up an infinite space to write. Social media is not limited by a scarcity of space or the expenses of printing. Yet, cybersociality imposes its own limitations. Highly valuing the idioms that “less is more” and “a picture is worth a thousand words,” social media is limited by the attention span of its readers (consumers). Influenced by the textual minimalism of
Twitter and the visual prestige of Tumblr and Instagram, Facebook algorithms favor posts with shorter text and visual components such as images and videos. Posts frequently include an obligatory photo even if the text was the impetus for posting. Despite this standard, long memorial posts that receive a lot of attention and interaction are also favored by the algorithm. While longer political posts accomplish this by provoking outrage and conflict, the reach of mourning posts is primarily boosted by the expression of highly relatable, authentic emotional experience.

Designed to generate social recognition of life well-lived and capitalize on social connections, Facebook is a dynamic and interactive platform for memorialization. Facebook is a digital platform for collaboratively writing one’s own life story in text, image, and video interactions. When a Facebook user dies, her/his digital profile lives on. Over time, Facebook has become an ideal platform for examining digital memorials devoted to honoring the dead and actively rewriting their narrative. Unlike other online services, Facebook has no mechanism to delete a user or remove his/her account due to inactivity. When Facebook users die, their existing Facebook accounts live on and their Timelines may be spontaneously converted into a digital shrine, a space of communal and public grieving that allows participation unhindered by time and space. Access to this space is determined by the privacy settings of the deceased, though these settings can be adjusted.

Facebook is a social media site which emphasizes its users’ role in one another's lives, relying on traditionally defined social organization categories such as wife, brother, child, uncle, and friend. Many of the same mechanisms that create a positive space for expressing grief also make it difficult for users to move on as Facebook’s design features remind grievers of their loss and encourage continued mourning posting.
Facebook’s design is essential to understanding why Facebook, more than any other social media platform or website, is the Internet’s primary cyber graveyard. Facebook’s design and mechanics establish institutional practices common to the global Facebook user experience. These institutional processes are important to our understanding of Facebook’s mourning practices due to the influence these mechanics have on user generated social norms and cultural scripts. How do Facebook’s design features and algorithms shape mourning practices and users’ experiences engaging with mourning posts? What user-generated social norms dictate the interactions that occur on mourning posts?

One critical process that all Facebook users are familiar with is the creating and curation of a user profile. Profile creation is a rite of passage initiating new Facebook users. The public life offered by Facebook is one of constant scrutiny by peers and authority figures alike. A person’s exact words remain indelibly\(^3\) written for all time ruling out, or at least problematizing, later deniability; only meaning and intention remain open for later discussion and debates around misunderstanding (boyd 2007; Mallan et al. 2010; Horst 2012). This also creates a permanency in the face of death. A deceased Facebook user’s account is preserved providing them with an indelible legacy, which may be frozen by the family utilizing legal rights, but it can never be deleted. Facebook is a public space in which a person’s identity and community are user-generated with the platform’s design providing structural frameworks for interaction. Users “…write themselves and their community into being” (boyd 2007, 2). But once a user dies their ability to continue contributing to this creative process ceases. Their story continues to be told but by other people.

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\(^3\) Facebook users can delete messages from their wall and unlink the content to their profile. However, Facebook owns all content once it is posted, Facebook retains ownership of the content and therefore it may be achieved and there no longer public and searchable, but it is never truly deleted.
Taking this a step further, Mallan et al. (2010) discuss the crucial role of SNS in the process of identity exploration in adolescence. They describe Facebook profile creation as a significant rite of passage which requires users to definitively choose and publicly state their defining characteristics and views (Mallan et al. 2010). At thirteen, teenagers can legally have Facebook accounts. The process of profile creation asks users to define their gender, sexuality, religious affiliation, political views, relationship status, favorite movies, books, music, and quotes. Mallan et al. (2010) identify this as a formative experience for teenagers still in the process of figuring out the answers to those questions. So, if profile creation is a rite of passage, then the formal memorialization of an account by the family or the organic conversion of a Timeline into a shrine become a final rite.

After providing extensive personal information such as age and e-mail address, new Facebook users have an account, but the process is not truly over until they have friends. Like membership sponsors for a country club, the acceptance of “friends” is a key step of the user verification process. Adding pictures is another. A profile with no pictures and few friends is immediately suspect as a fake account to any discerning Facebook user. Thus, new users are immediately encouraged to add friends, share status updates, and upload pictures to complete their Facebook profile. While this initiation process provides tutorial functions, Facebook users are introduced to Facebook’s social norms and cultural scripts gradually by observing the interactions that play out on their newsfeeds. These norms and cultural scripts shape posting behavior in mourning practice, as we will see in later chapters.

4 My participant-observation indicates that some adolescents are not above lying about their age, but the public network nature of Facebook makes it harder to hide a Facebook account from parents. I came across numerous cases of underage Facebook users making use of Facebook with varying degrees of parental consent. Parenting attitudes regarding Facebook and social media vary greatly but cyberbully and sexual predators remain the chief concerns shared by parents regardless of their children’s ages.
Prior to Facebook, the question “Are you my friend? ‘Yes’ or ‘No’” was not one many young adults would consider regularly posing. But sending, accepting, and rejecting friendship requests is a part of Facebook’s design which has impacted relationship dynamics in unintended ways. boyd (2006) argues that this simplistic question introduced binary limitations into the complex social processes which surround social bonding thus generating new social norms and redefining the term “friend” for English speakers. The electronic “friendship” confirmation process has generated a new social ritual that is heavily weighted with symbolism despite its requirement of minimal action. boyd argues, “Friendship helps people write community into being in social network sites” (2008).

Over the years, Facebook has introduced several updates to this categorization process. Facebook users can choose to follow a person rather than ‘friend’ them. Once a friendship request is accepted, Facebook users have the option to label their new friends as a “close friend,” “acquaintance,” “family,” “co-worker” or any self-generated category they like. Facebook users can categorize each friend into multiple groups and can change these labels at any time. Despite these design changes, the impact of the binary model has endured. The categories help users not only organize their friends, but it also gives them a greater degree of control over their privacy settings of their content. They can determine the audiences for specific posts, images, videos, etc. and utilize these categories to share content specifically with family or close friends, which is useful if they want to make a mourning post and share it only with these members of their inner circle, but not perhaps share it with their coworkers or acquaintances.

It is possible to completely block a Facebook user, preventing them from viewing your content or contacting you in any way. Facebook users can also temporarily or permanently “hide” content from their friends. The friends’ content which appears in a user’s newsfeed does
so because the user checks on them, looks at them, and ultimately responds to them. Facebook users’ repetitive daily actions rather than abstract choices based on ideals determine Facebook algorithm’s assessment of their preferences which associated with their profile, effectively training Facebook as much as it trains you, and so in that sense, friends can easily get forgotten and left behind. Thus the socio-emotional lives of Facebook users are shaped by the algorithmic imaginary (Bucher 2016).

Boellstorff argues “friendships are the foundation of cybersociality” (2008, 157). He gives two qualifications, choice and egalitarianism, as the defining characteristics of friendship both online and in person (2010, 171). If Facebook users are “friends” with all the members of their social network, the implications for this online friendship in comparison to the hierarchical nature of in-person relationships must be taken into consideration. By design, all Facebook users are equal in that they all have the same functional abilities to make posts, to comment on other people’s posts, etc. But some Facebook users have considerably larger, more active, or more impactful networks. In the tech industry this is discussed in terms of “influence”. I would argue online influence is an emic measure of prestige while social capital is emically measured in terms of “trust”, another industry term describing how trustworthy information is considered by readers when it comes from a specific person or source. So, while all users have the same capacities, user influence and experience vary.

Is Facebook friendship egalitarian simply because users share equal access to Facebook’s services? On Facebook, all users have equal capacity to send, accept, or deny a friend request that would establish their online connection. This does imply choice, although that choice might be constrained by the social implications of refusing to accept someone’s Facebook friend request particularly if that requester is a person of authority. Can you actually deny your boss’
friend request? Yes, but it can create social tension or awkwardness in the workplace. Facebook’s friend system brings up questions of agency that will be addressed in Chapter 7, which are particularly important considering the ultimate vulnerability of mourning on Facebook given that your network includes people who might be empowered to authority over you.

Mallan et al. (2010), working specifically with Facebook, argue that it allows a lot of overlap between personal and professional spheres. Facebook allows users to connect with friends, family, classmates, and co-workers (Mallan et al. 2010, 264). Miller (2011) finds similar evidence of Facebook users in Trinidad concerned with navigating a social space that simultaneously creates business opportunities and invites potential professional embarrassment. He argues that on Facebook, the traditional boundaries between a person’s family and peer-group become blurred. Once discrete social circles, professional networks, kin networks, friends, and classmates are now intertwined and engaging in open public dialogue with one another in the comments of a Facebook user’s latest post.

Offline relationships can become strained by the transparency of and blurring of social groups in networked publics. Professional and familial social pressures and obligations impact decisions and relationships on the web or result in in-person consequences when users fail to take these into account. Social rules and cultural values from users’ offline culture impact social interactions on Facebook. “Friendship” and transparency, which are the two primary characteristics of Facebook, disrupt established dynamics of pre-existing social organization (Miller 2011). People’s vulnerable and public emotional displays are observed not just by intended audiences, like close friends and family, but also by acquaintances and professional colleagues. These online interactions can be perceived as uncomfortable “over-shares” and at times unprofessional.
The very nature of Facebook “friendships” poses a classic predicament of quantity versus quality. Shared connections and social bonds are the human capital generating the value of Facebook. Facebook as a social networking site categorizes, quantifies, and capitalizes the social bonds of already existing social networks. Yet, this opens the way for questioning the quality of interactions and relationships that online communities and social media platforms are capable of fostering. The primary purpose of Facebook is to foster content production, sharing, and enabling rapid communication in general.

Facebook’s design utilizes current location and current residence as factors that determine what content is seen (Oremus 2016). The location-based design of Facebook’s social networking mechanics creates built-in limitations for bottom-up research. The privacy settings of Facebook users determine how much of their content can be observed. This can be thought of in terms of circles of trust. “Me Only,” “Friends Only,” “Friend of a Friend,” and “Public” are the four major categories although it is possible for Facebook users to create their own categories to limit visible content from specific Facebook users or groups of users. For example, a Facebook user could create a category “family” and either post content only visible to their family or exclude their family from seeing the content. Relevant to this project, this means that if a deceased Facebook user’s privacy setting are not adjusted, it may exclude non-friends and outsiders from seeing, let alone partaking, in the Facebook shrine creation and maintenance process. At the same time, the deceased has no control over this after death: loved ones left in charge of their social media can change the privacy settings of the deceased’s Facebook profile as they see fit.

Life event announcements are a major way that Facebook users perform their identity and curate their public image. Facebook users make announcement posts for all major life events:
graduating high school, going to college, starting a new relationship, graduating college, getting a new job, moving to a new city, getting engaged, getting married, buying a house, traveling, getting a promotion, getting pregnant, finding out the baby’s gender, giving birth, all the milestone’s of the user’s children’s live, etc. Death is one such life event. The grief work on Facebook focuses on reconciling the deceased’s public image with the personal memories of the bereaved.

Life event announcements include relationship announcements that make a couple “Facebook official,” providing legitimacy to their relationship through a public announcement shared with the couple’s extended network on Facebook. Pregnancy announcements provide a similar layer of legitimacy through public proclamation. Breaking with traditional cultural taboos\(^5\) which caution against announcing pregnancies too early, publicly naming the child before it is born, and other overly public investments in an unborn child, Facebook users in the US announce pregnancies very early in some cases within days of the first pregnancy test and frequently announce the child’s name as soon as the gender has been medically determined. Many children’s first picture on Facebook is an ultrasound photo rather than the profile picture they painstakingly selected when they created their profile at the legally approved age of 13. Graduations, engagements, weddings, divorces, new jobs, new homes, and big moves all merit Facebook announcements. Major life events are made “Facebook official,” in a way that grants real-world legitimacy to the wider social network.

In this context, Facebook death announcements and posts sharing information regarding any in-person funeral services are a natural continuation of the cycle of Facebook life event announcements. In cases such as that of Trey and April mentioned in the Chapter 1, rumors of

\(^5\) A break with tradition that was commented on by several informants over 50 years old.
the death hit Facebook before the family was fully notified. But users will hold out hope, until an official announcement is made, usually by a family member or someone posting on behalf of the family at their request.

The “Share a Memory” Facebook feature appears on the homepage at the top of the Newsfeed. Facebook’s algorithm occasionally promotes users to share a “memory” which constitutes re-sharing a previous post that received a high number of comments and reactions. When the Facebook user first sees this “share a memory” prompt it is visible only to the user who is the original poster, but Facebook makes it easy for the user to share the memory along with some new text. While users can turn the function off completely, an intentional choice must be made to disable the function otherwise it continues to remind the user of previous events in their lives, things they may have forgotten or not thought of recently. Research participants report frequently posting about their deceased loved one in response to this “share a memory” reminders.

Facebook also automatically reminds Facebook users when it is their friend’s birthday, making it easy to wish a friend happy birthday. Facebook users can easily receive over a hundred birthday wishes which are usually very short messages carrying small variations of “happy birthday.” It serves as annual reminder for the Facebook friends of a deceased Facebook user. This triggers an annual outpour of commemoration. This automatic function continues providing annual birthday reminders until an account is officially memorialized. Many users, however, continue to have their birthday reminders shared with others long after their deaths, relics of a bygone era in Facebook’s design. This is but one feature that, while attempting to build meaningful connections between Facebook users, led many of those I interviewed to regard the feature with displeasure due to the reminder of unpleasant events.
One Facebook feature that many research participants mentioned, which existed at the
time but has since been discontinued, is the reconnect notification. When this feature was
available Facebook users were reminded to reconnect with close friends who they had not communicated with in a long time. Facebook users reported that it was particularly painful to receive this notification while they were grieving someone close to them. Others reported that they learned of the passing of a friend when they wrote a message on the person’s Timeline after receiving the notification. This feature was primarily replaced by the Friend anniversary reminder and the “share a memory” notification.

To the right is a death announcement posted by a mother in her early thirties who lost her first child on his sixteenth day of life. Abby Wood tagged her husband Jacob Wood’s Facebook account, making the post visible to both users’ Facebook friends. The post is simultaneously informational, emotional, and religious. Within the first two hours of the post, she had already received 330 comments and 338 reactions which included the sad face, the heart, and the new care reaction. Her post had also been shared by 20 Facebook users who felt the need to share her announcement.

What this single informational post does not reveal are the circumstances of the death. But the dozens of posts on Abby’s Facebook Timeline taken together tell her story. A health care worker, Abby was four and half months pregnant when the COVID-19 pandemic began. By early May, the strain of working on the frontlines of a pandemic was taking its toll. She was hospitalized for preeclampsia and put on bedrest at 26 weeks, which developed into HELLP syndrome putting both mom and baby at risk. At 28 weeks Abby gave birth via caesarian and her son was immediately rushed to the NICU. Abby’s posts from the NICU celebrated his young life as a miracle and continually asked for prayers which she received in abundance in the comments to her posts. Brooks was 2 weeks old before she was able to feed him for the first time. Despite the care and loving attention, he received in the NICU by health care providers and his parents
and the outpouring of prayers and support on Facebook, he passed away after 16 days in the NICU. Abby continued to cling to the comfort of her faith in her mourning posts following the above death announcement. Her posts expressed gratitude at the miracle that was Brooks’ short life. She shared images and information regarding his funeral which only a few family members were allowed to attend because of COVID-19 social distancing restrictions. In the three weeks since his passing, Abby’s posts have remained religiously focused and intent on celebrating her son as a miracle. Her references to him as an angel God has called home is a common religious motif, especially for children, which I will discuss in Chapter 4.

Abby’s pregnancy, childbirth, and the death of baby Brooks very much intersect with larger current events and demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic has more causalities than the deaths listed with the confirmed case load. But despite how the pandemic impacted Abby’s experience, the trajectory of her mourning on Facebook exemplifies a common pattern shared by those grieving a death that did not come quickly. Periods of hospitalization, treatments, and long-term care are all frequently shared on Facebook prior to the death announcement and inevitable mourning. In many ways, these pre-death posts are an equally important part of the grief narrative and they demonstrate the ways a Facebook user’s network of family and friends will rally around them to support them through prayer, encouragement, and offers of material and financial support. Many Facebook users consider highly value these posts. These pre-death posts also mean that the bereaved are not burdened with explaining the cause of death at the time of the death announcement when it might be hardest for them to discuss it. However, not all deaths come with this level of warning. Often, death comes unexpectedly such as in the case of the death of Fiona Fitzgerald, a young law student who died at 25 as a result of a hit and run pedestrian-automobile accident. Fiona was charismatic and incredibly influential on the lives of
her college friends who remained close even four years after graduation. I interviewed Megan Becker one of Fiona’s best friends about a year after her death. Megan’s grief narrative for Fiona began when she received a phone late one night that Fiona had passed away. Megan and her friends communicated by text with each other, but they each made mourning posts immediately following Fiona’s death and have continued to do so for the past four years. Megan’s most recent mourning post was sharing a Memory post that really highlights the importance of Fiona’s impact in her life and how much she misses her dear friend.
Figure 10 Mourning Status Update Memory Example

Each of Facebook’s features described above are designed to promote connectivity, these features each unintentionally motivate mourning posts. In an interview with Megan Becker, she
described her experience with the memory and birthday features on Facebook, since her best friend passed away the previous year. I asked her, “How do you normally post about her? Is it maybe a memory, or are you talking about your emotions?” Megan responded:

“So the one thing is if a Facebook share a memory thing comes up, you know ‘On this day...’, if it’s something that feels wholesome, I might share it if I feel particularly attached to that memory or that day, I’m really missing her, I’ll share it. Um... If, like on big days, so on her birthday, um, I posted that, I imagine like, on the one year [anniversary] of her death I’ll post something. I’d say the biggest thing is how I’m feeling about it, so if I feel like, I miss her a lot that day or if the memory makes me think something, or if something happens that really reminds me of her, I might bring her up. That’s probably like music or a movie or something like that. A movie we watched together or a song that makes me think of her. I’ll post that.”

Facebook’s automated features and days of personal significance, drive Megan to share meaningful memories. She also finds herself turning to Facebook when she comes across things that trigger her memory of her best friend. Memories of the deceased and associated feelings of grief have always been triggered by sensory experiences ascribed with meaning but having a platform and a drive to share that experience is an emerging trend.

Megan’s response is indicative of larger trends found in my interview and participant-observation data. From the profile creation rite of passage to mourning practices and the everyday identity performances and life event posts in between, social media lends itself to numerous posting behaviors which target memories, social relationships, and how users identify themselves based on these connections. Facebook’s features prompt grieving users to contemplate their loss and share the memories and emotions they are experiencing. Facebook’s algorithms and features are designed to facilitate social connections provide the social structure of Facebook’s mourning practices. User-generated social norms guide the posting process and expectations of social interactions in the post’s comments section.
3.6 Cyberpsychology of Mourning

A 2014 review of the work of cyber-psychologists on the mental health impact of communicating about death on Facebook for the bereaved indicates that “the results suggest that Facebook communication is both beneficial and challenging for bereaved users, which may produce a coping paradox” (Rossetto et al 2014). They found that digital memorials were primarily intended to “commemorate and remember the deceased” but the memorial sites also “provide site users an outlet for emotional expression, reminiscing, disclosure, paying tribute, continuing bonds, sharing grief, and establishing community following a loss” (Rossetto et al 2014). My research data supports each of these purposes, but it also verifies the potential harmful. In their analysis, Rossetto et al. argue that digital memorials on sites like Facebook “may produce unintended memorials that could comfort but also overwhelm loved ones (St. John, 2006), as they are not created for the sole purpose of memorialization by the bereaved (Roberts, 2006).” (2014, 976). But finding from my online participant-observation and Facebook post analysis do not support the claims that “Williams and Merten (2008) note a lack of interaction between individuals commenting on Facebook profiles of the deceased, and Kern, Forman, and Gil-Egui (2013) observe that the majority of postings on Facebook memorial pages are directed at the deceased rather than other community members” (Rossetto et al. 2014, 976).

Rossetto et al. (2014) refer to this abundance of data claiming that mourning on Facebook is beneficial and harmful for the bereaved as a coping paradox. In their study, they focused on “how people perceive their own and others’ use of social media as facilitating or impeding the grief process” (2014, 976). From this they go on to suggest that positive and negative experiences and content found in Facebook mourning posts is evidence of a healthy pattern of dual processing model of coping. They argue,
According to the DSM, there are two types of bereavement stressors: loss-oriented (i.e., concentration on the loss experience itself) and restoration-oriented stressors (i.e., struggle to reorient to a world without the deceased). As such, bereaved individuals practice loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping, and they oscillate within and between these orientations – confronting and avoiding the loss and/or restoration (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

Based on the content analyzed in the previous studies, Facebook seems to offer a space for both loss-oriented (e.g., emotional expression and discussing the death) and restoration-oriented (e.g., gaining support and continued bonds) coping that could in turn become additional stressors. For example, ongoing emotional expression or continued bonds may make it difficult for the bereaved to make sense of the death and reorient to their new worlds without the deceased. (Rossetto et al. 2014, 977).

These dual orientations are definitely evident in the content of Facebook posts I analyzed which include both messages that focus on the emotional loss and messages that focus on maintaining bonds with the dead and bonds with the living. Rossetto et al.’s study also found three major themes of post purpose, which are in keeping with the findings of my research: news dissemination (sharing and learning information), preservation (keeping the deceased’s memory live and maintaining social bonds), and community (witnesses of grief, supporters, solidarity). Their study explores which aspects of each of these types of communication were perceived as helpful by the bereaved and which was perceived as unhelpful. Their participants found that the misinformation, depersonalization, “pop-up” reminders, bandwagon mourners, and the challenge to privacy were unhelpful. Additionally, their participants found having a witness to their grief both helpful and unhelpful and I discuss my similar findings on the benefits and harmful impact of having grief witness in chapter 6 and 7.

3.7 Conclusion

Facebook’s design and user generated social norms influence patterns of posting behavior, creating cultural scripts for mourning and supporting the bereaved. Facebook features
designed by the programmers and designers of Facebook, the company have a big influence on how users engage with Facebook, the platform, and imagine Facebook as the online community. Many of these features designed to promote connectivity between members unintentionally encouraged mourning practices on Facebook. Facebook’s “What’s on your mind?” prompt creates a space for the bereaved to mourn the deceased or share their emotional state with their Facebook friends. Birthday, friendiversary, and share a memory features are reminders that encourage bereaved Facebook users to make posts honoring the deceased. As Facebook became increasingly aware of and sensitive to the role its design features played in its users’ mourning and grief experience, the company began changing its design in an attempt to improve user’s experience with mourning on Facebook.

The social norms of Facebook originate with the users themselves as the true content producers. While many social norms regarding posting, commenting, tagging, sharing images, and emoticons are shared across social media, there are other social norms that are localized. The use of religious language and offline social norms may vary depending on the culture of the user, but further research will be necessary to determine if there is localized variation in the social media social norms among English speakers in different regions of the world.
CHAPTER 4
SCRIPTED MOURNING ON FACEBOOK

Mourning is communal. A person can grieve alone, but mourning is a social act, because mourning is the expression of grief within socially accepted perimeters. Mourning on Facebook is performed following a cultural script which is greatly influenced by Facebook’s design and the social norms of its users. Examination of this cultural script reveals social norms and cultural values regarding death and grief. The times and spaces deemed socially appropriate for mourning are often liminal in nature as they connect both to death and painful emotions. Mourning is a socially acceptable outlet for emotional release, which facilitates emotional resilience healing.

In this chapter, I examine the communal mourning behaviors of Facebook users as cultural scripts. I utilize my extensive online observations, which I couple with quotes from in-depth grief narrative interviews which exemplify patterns in mourning practices on Facebook and statistical data from my survey of Facebook users, to demonstrate that there are three cultural scripts for mourning specific to Facebook. Mourning Status Updates allow Facebook users to share grief experience. Facebook Shrines facilitate remembering the dead, supporting the bereaved, imagining the dead and interacting with them. Private Grief Support Groups allow the bereaved to privately discuss their loss and grief experience with other grieving Facebook users in a support group setting. Next, I discuss the thematic trends I documented in the content of mourning posts that I observed during my fieldwork: talking to the deceased, talking about the deceased, talking about emotional experience, and supporting the bereaved. Then, I introduce the
mourning practices that I documented on Facebook during my fieldwork, which I divide into the above three categories. I discuss how each of these mourning practices follows a specific script that shapes the social interaction between the poster and commenters. I describe how each of these practices fits into the grief experience of Facebook users who participate in them. I draw on interview data to illuminate these practices and survey data to quantify how common of an occurrence they are. After that, I discuss how the interaction practices of these scripts fill critical psychosocial niches: visually signaling mourning, honoring the dead, and grief support.

4.1 Cultural Scripts for Mourning on Facebook

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I observed three distinct cultural scripts for communal mourning on Facebook: private groups on Facebook, Facebook status updates, and the deceased’s Facebook timeline. Each of these cultural scripts offers the bereaved a platform of communal mourning. Each script is directly tied to Facebook’s design and the venues for communication it supports. Each cultural script for mourning that I noted is facilitated by a specific virtual public venue within Facebook: the newsfeed, timeline, and group. The three venues vary in functionality and each offers its own pros and cons. Private Facebook groups offer the greatest degree of privacy. Posts made on the deceased’s timeline offer the least amount of privacy as the visibility of the post is primarily determined by the deceased user’s privacy settings. Status updates which are content that users share to the newsfeeds of their Facebook friends, followers, and the broader public according to their own privacy settings. Audience is also a significant variable in venue selection. Bereaved Facebook users navigate a plethora of posting options when deciding how and where to share their posts.

Facebook users can create public posts in one of two ways. Facebook users can visually signal their mourning in a status update that targets their Facebook friends as its audience. Given
the privacy settings discussed in Chapter 1, the initial poster can even adjust the post’s specific privacy settings to include a wider audience by making it public or a narrower audience by selecting an exclusive list of specific friends who are allowed to see it. The poster can also tag multiple people in the post drawing the attention of that friend and opening up the post’s privacy to include the friends of any users who were tagged. Facebook users can also make their post directly onto the Facebook Timeline of another Facebook user.

When Facebook users die, their existing Facebook accounts live on. Their Facebook Timelines may be converted into a digital memorial through communal posting of grief and mourning after the deceased’s passing. Memorialization on Facebook shares many similarities with ancestral and spontaneous shrines (Santino 2006); this inspired my use of the term "Facebook Shrines" for this study. In the acts of remembering and re-imagining their dead loved ones, Facebook users create a sacred space in what may seem like the most unlikely place, thus transforming digital spaces into spaces of communal mourning and solidarity.

Facebook shrines fit Santino’s definition of a shrine as “places of communion between the living and the dead” (Santino 2006: 12). They are spontaneous shrines due to their unofficial nature as they arise from a continued Facebook communication post-mortem. Sharing grief-related content over social media is a public display of mourning. Santino argues that, “Spontaneous shrines place deceased individuals back into the fabric of society, into the middle of areas of commerce and travel, into everyday life as it is being lived.” (2006: 13). Spontaneous Facebook Shrines allow the deceased to maintain their place in the networked fabric of everyday Facebook sociality.

As a genre of contemporary mourning, spontaneous shrines are, in Santino’s (2006) view, both commemorative and performative in nature. They present deeply personal memorialization
to an undifferentiated public inviting participation from the audience. More specifically, Facebook shrines are deeply personal yet public. The mourning practices of Facebook are performed before an undifferentiated audience and are open to audience participation both in comments and in contributing additional posts. While memorialization on Facebook is commemorative, it also lends itself to a socially obligatory performance of grief. The process transforms the deceased into an ancestor in the collective imagination of their Facebook friends.

Facebook Shrines are spontaneous shrines due to their unofficial nature as they arise from continued Facebook communication with deceased post-mortem. Friends and family are organically sharing grief-related content over social media as a public display of mourning. Raw emotions and a sense of reverence for the dead shape the communication which takes place in Facebook shrines. Sharing grief-related content over social media is a public display of mourning.

Each specific Timeline has its own privacy settings, but generally Facebook users allow their content to be seen by their friends. When a Facebook user tags another Facebook user it expands the viewership of the post to be the friends of both users. Whether writing the post directly on the deceased’s Timeline while scrolling through and looking at old posts, or tagging the deceased in a status update, the mechanics are the same. The mourning post is viewable by full network of the deceased and the poster, unless one of the users has set their page to allow for public visibility or incredibly restrictive visibility. This means a mourning post that is linked to the account of the deceased can not only be viewed by both networks but is also open to comment from the deceased and griever’s combined network of Facebook friends.

Facebook Shrines are special cases, as not everyone mourned on Facebook is a user and not every Facebook Timeline is spontaneously converted to a site of communal mourning upon a user’s death. Still fully functional and networked as the site of a social media user, the content of
Facebook Shrines is readily displayed in a Facebook user’s newsfeeds right alongside posts about cats, politics, and friend’s accomplishment of the latest of life’s milestones. Unlike religious centers, funeral homes, and cemeteries with clearly delineated boundaries, Facebook Shrines bring death and grief into the flow of everyday social media consumption.

Facebook shrines are generated by the intensity of mourning posts shared on Facebook, contextualized for each individual case. Facebook Shrines allow for networked memorialization, communal mourning at a distance. The collection of mourning posts on the Facebook Timeline of the deceased generates a sacred space for transforming the deceased into an ancestor.

Religious idioms provide insight into how everyday people engage with and enact their beliefs into action. These minimal units of religious thought are packaged, repackaged, borrowed, and thrown away as the need calls for it. It is through this reimagining of the deceased’s Facebook Timeline and the use of religious idioms reflective of the mourners’ (and to an extent the deceased’s) beliefs that allows for the transformation of a Timeline into a Shrine, and the creation of these as places of transformation.

A Facebook user’s timeline includes multiple images selected by the user including a personal profile picture that visually identifies the Facebook user along with her or his name. Any posts that the user recently posted as a status update will show up on this page as well. If the timeline has not been memorialized by the family, the prompt here reads “Write something to [user’s name]”. If the deceased’s account has been memorialized by the family, the prompt reads “Share a memory or thought about [user’s name]” Posting in this textbox makes the post show up on the friend’s timeline and the post becomes visible to the social network of both the poster and the friend based on their mutual privacy settings.
This prompt changes the framing of the initial post, directing the poster to write to another user rather than generally sharing what is on her or his mind with all of Facebook. A status update is like writing in a journal everyone can read, while writing on someone’s Timeline is closer to writing a letter that is read aloud in a public venue.

Facebook is an ideal platform for examining digital memorials devoted to honoring the dead and collectively re-imagining and actively rewriting their narrative. Unlike other online services, Facebook has no mechanism to automatically delete a user or remove an account due to inactivity. When Facebook users die, their existing Facebook accounts remain fully functional and their Timelines may be converted into a digital memorial, a space of communal mourning that allows participation unhindered by time and distance. While there are a range of responses offline to such Facebook mourning practices, the overwhelming tendency is for online comments to be positive and encouraging. Users who feel uncomfortable or generally dislike mourning or prayer requests on Facebook primarily avoid the content rather than responding negatively to it. This silence demonstrates a unique degree of respect in this digital age, creating a sacred space in a secular digital medium usually reserved for sharing mundane and trivial content.

Writing on the deceased’s Timeline is much less common than making a mourning status update post. In response to my online survey only 27% of the 260 respondents reported having written a message on the Facebook Timeline of a deceased friend. Even among my interviewees who were intentionally selected due to familiarity with the phenomenon, it is a less common practice than making a mourning status update, in part because not everyone who is mourned on a Facebook account had a Facebook account in life. Facebook shrine posts on average tagged 2.21 other people in them, bringing attention to these posts. I analyzed 1897 Facebook reactions to Facebook Shrine posts. On average, Facebook Shrine posts received 95 reactions per post:
39% of reactions were like, 35% of reactions were love, and 25% of reactions were sad. It is clear that Facebook users do not see the angry and wow reactions as appropriate responses for mourning status updates. The angry and haha reactions were used 0% of the time and the wow reaction was used only 14 times out of the 3,916 reactions I analyzed in the mourning category. This is supported by the fact that there were only 2 wow reactions and 23 haha reactions out of the 1,897 reactions that I analyzed from the Facebook Shrine sample and again 0 angry reactions.

However, six of thirty interviewees specifically mentioned that the practice made them uncomfortable especially when the message was addressed directly to the deceased. One interviewee, Brother Bobby Brown, a Methodist minister from Memphis, told me that he went so far as to remove deceased friends from his Facebook. He said, “As soon as get the news, I delete ‘em. One of my best friends, his sister called me to let me know. An’ as soon as I got off the phone with her, I went right away. I deleted him from my phone and on Facebook. I don't keep dead people on my feed.” Not everyone is as passionate about the issue as Bro. Bobby, but even among my interviewees only 54% confirmed that they made posts on the Timeline of a deceased Facebook friend.

Tagging another Facebook user in a status update post effectively accomplishes the same thing as posting directly onto a Facebook user’s Timeline, though it allows the poster to tag multiple friends. Once the tagging feature was full integrated it made it unnecessary to go to a Friend’s Timeline to share a post with them. However, writing a post on a Friend’s Timeline remains a significant part of mourning practices on Facebook. This is because visiting the deceased’s Facebook Timeline is itself a major mourning practice, particularly, in the early days after a death. Bereaved Facebook users continue to visit their deceased Facebook friend’s timeline to view pictures, videos, and old posts. Research participants report doing this to “feel
closer to the person” and leaving a public message on the Timeline is frequently a natural extension of this visit. Particularly in the first few months, Facebook users will sometimes address their post directly to the deceased.

Mourning status updates are the most common of the public mourning practices on Facebook. In instances where the deceased does not personally have a Facebook account, all public mourning takes place in the status updates of their loved ones. Mourning status updates are a cultural script that is gaining a normative status; as my survey confirms, a slim majority (57%) of Facebook users have already participated in this behavior. It is a behavior that 85% of my interviewees participated in during some point of their grieving process. Further, 96% of my interviewees confirmed that they commented on the mourning status updates of others, indicating that people who had experienced the loss of a loved one are highly likely to comment on the mourning posts of others. My survey of a broader sample of Facebook users confirms that only 3% of participants self-reported as “never” commenting on the emotional posts of others. Discussions with research participants indicate that some Facebook users will in fact make a stance in regard to not engaging with emotional content on Facebook, but these users are definitely in the minority.

The twenty Facebook Shrine posts I analyzed received a total of 489 comments. On average Facebook Shrine posts, received 26 comments per post. Comments from male Facebook users constituted 14% of observed comments. The forty Mourning Status Updates I analyzed received a total of 1529 comments. On average Mourning Status Updates, received 38 comments per post. 17% of the comments were from male Facebook users. I did in-depth textual analysis of 374 comments 55% included religious content, 51% included emotional content, 58% included statements of solidarity, 15% were memorial in nature. Textual analysis of the 309 comments
associated with Facebook Shrines indicate that 75% included religious content, 52% included emotional content, 67% included statements of solidarity, 11% were memorial in nature.

I analyzed 3,916 Facebook reactions to forty Mourning Status Updates. On average, mourning status updates received 98 reactions per post. Responses that “loved” the post made up 33% of reactions, 30% of reactions were like, 26% of reactions were sad, and 10% were the new care reaction. As the care reaction has only been available since March 2020, it was not an option on many of the Facebook Shrine posts I analyzed. But it is clear that it is becoming the new reaction of choice for the more recent mourning posts for which it was available. The comments of the mourning status updates that I analyzed were emotional 51% of the time.

While I found Facebook users were more likely to make such a stance regarding content they viewed as very negative and described as “toxic” “rants,” the majority of Facebook users I spoke with were much more open to people in their network making status updates regarding their grief or in memory of a loved one. It is important to note, that while it might be easy to assume that mourning status updates would take on a strong negative affect, several interview participants made a point to say that they tried to post only happy things. Sixty-two-year-old retired businesswoman Lacy Godwin, told me:

*I try to only post happy things. Good memories. When I’ve seen something that makes me think of the person, but in a good way. Rememberin’ all the good times. Even if it’s a bit bittersweet. I don’t post all that negative stuff. On Facebook, I only post good things. I share cute pictures of my grandson or some silly quiz I took. I post old pictures and share stories about the people, I love that are gone now. But I can’t stand when other people go on these rants, they can be about anything. But it’s just toxic, and who wants to see that? Show us stuff we want to see, not you gettn’ angry at the supermarket.*

I asked her, what she thought about posts that describe the pain someone is experiencing having just lost someone close them. She takes a breath,
It’s hard. It’s hard to see that. Especially when it’s someone you care about. Your heart goes out to ‘em. So yeah, I leave a comment something short. If it’s a person that makes a lot of those posts, over time I’ll stop commenting and maybe even hide it. Everybody’s got to grieve in their own way. I really believe that. And maybe that’s what works for them but when it gets to be too much, too often, too hard to see. I hide it. After I hide a time or two Facebook learns and it doesn’t show me anymore like that.

Facebook users who are uncomfortable with mourning status updates and other types of emotional disclosure can opt out. Lacy’s narrative exemplifies why someone might choose to hide this content rather than respond to it especially if the frequency of the content from a particular Facebook friend becomes too much. Her explanation also identifies the rationale behind users’ willingness to partake in mourning content even when it makes them uncomfortable. Ultimately, Facebook users are able to opt in or out of other peoples’ grief. They can choose to respond in an attempt to support the bereaved or demonstrate solidarity. But they equally have the choice to hide or ignore a post with minimal social consequences.

There is, however, a third venue for mourning on Facebook, which also relies heavily upon Facebook’s design. Facebook groups allow users with a shared interest or cause to identify with one another and interact in the group’s discussion area. Facebook groups can be private or public, but private Facebook groups have lent themselves to the formation of grief support groups. Most, if not all, online support groups and resource sites link back to Facebook. These groups frequently have public Facebook pages and private discussion groups. The private discussion groups serve as an online support group for people who have experienced similar losses. In terms of religion, these groups can be divided into religious denominations, secular-humanist, or atheist groups. Many groups are grassroots efforts, created by people who have experienced a specific loss and what to support others going through the same thing. Other groups are the intentional creation of therapist, social workers, and grief counselors as part of
their public outreach. I messaged the administrators of fifteen private support groups on Facebook and most were happy to support my research and let me know a little about their membership. Julie Sanders, the grief counselor who runs the Grief Recovery group, reported that most of her group’s membership was drawn from rural areas with limited access to grief counseling and support groups. The therapeutic significance of these groups cannot be understated, particularly as those who participated in these groups also reported a lack of access to similar grief support groups within a “two-hour drive”⁶ of their homes.

Four of my thirty interview participants participated in a private Facebook group while processing their grief. I know of 11 additional groups from participant-observation and informal interviews. These groups are primarily organized in one of two ways, either around the loss of a specific person or around a specific category of people, i.e. mothers who lost their only child or young widows.

Jessica Johnson, the wife of the late Judge Tom Johnson, never anticipated becoming a widow in her early forties. She had spent twelve happy years with her husband as pillars of their community, when a routine surgery turned into a fatal infection. In her interview, Jessica told me, “The outpour online of people praying for us and tellin’ us how much Tom had meant to them. It was great. But the thing that really, I mean really helped the most. It was my group, WAY, Widowed and Young. WAY was an online forum when I joined it, but it migrated to a private Facebook group and group chats on messenger. But what was really important about it, is that I found my people on there. People who’d really get me. I’d go on these and I could just be real and people would be there with me. No one really gets it. Widowed in your thirties or

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⁶ This translates to approximately a 100-mile radius.
forties, people don’t understand… like they just don’t know what to do with you. A lot of people tried to encourage me to date again, like right away.

Heather Holloway-Māhoe is a thirty-year-old licensed therapist in Eureka Springs, AR. She spoke with me about the death of her unborn daughter in her 36th week of pregnancy. She received extensive support from her friends and family on Facebook. When Heather learned her daughter had Sirenomelia she created a private Facebook group with its own hashtag combining her unborn daughter’s name with the word strong. The group allowed Heather and her husband to communicate updates and information about her pregnancy to friends and family who wanted to know without broadcasting the sensitive health information to everyone in their vast network. The hashtag symbolized her commitment to remain strong for her daughter even though doctors were adamant that her chances were very minimal. The group continues to be a private space for mourning as Heather still uses it to share memorial posts. She also mentioned that it was in another private support group for Sirenomelia where she found the special type of support that comes from people who have shared the same rare and terrible experience she was facing.

The fourth and final cultural script is the only one officially recognized by Facebook. After legal battles with the families of deceased Facebook users who wanted to have their deceased family member’s account closed, Facebook created a court ordered option that allows immediate family members to request that an account become permanently frozen in a way that prohibits the posting of new content on the deceased’s Timeline or tagging the deceased’s account in a status update. This official process is called memorializing the account and Facebook requires family members to submit an official death certificate and proof of close familial relationship. The memorialization of an account is the end of its life cycle.
The practices of communal mourning on a Facebook Shrine provide public recognition of the deceased Facebook user’s passing and the grieving Facebook user’s mourning status. Memorializing the account prohibits this spontaneous form of communal mourning, and instead acknowledges the Facebook user’s death adding the word “Remembering (User’s Name)”. It also removes the textbox for messages. For deceased Facebook users who selected a legacy contact prior to death, the legacy contact can adjust the privacy and content visibility of the profile or memorialize the profile. Not memorializing the page allows Facebook users to continue to post to the Facebook Shrine or tag the user in Mourning Status Updates.
Remembering Isabelle Bernard

We hope people who love Isabelle will find comfort in visiting her profile to remember and celebrate her life.

Learn more about the legacy contact setting and memorialized accounts on Facebook.

Figure 11 Facebook Timeline Memorialization Example
This image is an example provided in a *Facebook News Room* article written by Sheryl Sandberg (2019), which summarizes the new Memorialization and Tribute system placed on Facebook which adapt the Facebook Shrine to be more intentionally designed.

Each of Facebook’s mourning practices that I have discussed here honor the dead, allowing grieveres to commune with deceased and commemorate the deceased’s public identity while sharing treasured private memories. Over time, these commemorative posts gradually transform the deceased into an ancestor. Finally, these practices keep the deceased’s memory alive through periodic posts on holidays and anniversaries. The cultural scripts of Facebook are user-generated in nature, aimed at improving a user’s sense of community, keeping the living connected with the deceased, and allowing individuals to disclose their grief. These cultural scripts for mourning and dealing with the death of a Facebook user serve multiple purposes of indicating one’s place in the grief process in a socially recognizable way. Whether visually signaling mourning, honoring the dead, or requesting and offering grief support, these scripts ultimately facilitate socially acceptable, public grieving for the world to see, to rationalize, to internalize, and to support.

4.2 Mourning Post Trends

In the summer of 2017, I interviewed Mary Reddington, a 65-year-old lawyer in the privacy of her office at her law firm. Mary is a confident self-made woman who had recently lost her mother. She spoke of how her pursuit of a college degree and law degree had strained her relationship with her mother. She confided that she never had the closeness with her mother that her sister enjoyed. Mary told me that following her mother’s death she only made one Facebook post which was very formal and intended only share information regarding funeral details. She saw herself as an exception to the emotional posting tradition of mourning on Facebook but
acknowledged that her complicated relationship with her mother had impacted her emotional response to her death, which she considered to be very limited. Mary told me that her sister had made a few emotional posts honoring their mother, and she respected her need to do so, but felt no desire to make such posts herself. Indeed, her main priority following her mother’s death was her father’s wellbeing and at the time of the interview she and her husband had already asked her father to move in with them.

The interview was straightforward, and Mary clearly considered herself a person who respected other’s right to mourn on Facebook but saw no need to do it herself. I did not expect to receive the following message 14 months after we discussed her mother’s death in our grief narrative interview.

Sydney,
Don’t know if you want/need/can use an update to the information I provided earlier, but my dad passed away last month, and my experience was a bit different than the one I shared with you regarding my mother.
So, if relevant:
I posted Daddy’s deteriorating condition on FB as an informational message for friends and distant family. When he passed away, I posted that information and bragged on him a bit. Subsequently, I gave a link to the funeral home obituary/arrangements information. The other thing I did, however, was post his picture and the comment “Isn’t our daddy gorgeous?” I have NO IDEA why I did that. And I have no idea if it’s relevant to your study or not. For my purposes, upon reflection, my feelings about each parent were projected by my posts regarding their demise.
Mary Reddington

After receiving her email, I went to her Timeline and found the post she mentioned.
It is clear that Mary had a very different relationship to her father than she did to her mother. Mary’s father had supported her important life decisions. She had many positive, loving memories of him from childhood and they had remained close throughout her adult life. She had taken on the responsibility of his care after the death of her mother and brought him to live with her. She felt his passing deeply and the evidence of how she experienced the loss of her father differently from the loss of her mother is apparent in a change in posting patterns that surprising and confusing. Her Timeline also included posts prior to his death discussing him having a stroke, a bad fall, and his subsequent deteriorating health. She announced his death tagging her sister. But she also made celebratory post, which she wrote to me about bragging on
how gorgeous her daddy had been. She also made “happy heavenly birthday” posts on his birthday in 2019 and 2020. By contrast, she did not post to her Facebook Timeline about her mother’s passing or on her subsequent birthdays. This example demonstrates that how important a person’s relationship to the deceased is to their experience of the loss and how that translates into changes in mourning posting behaviors. Mary experienced the loss of her two parents differently and it impacted her motivation to mourn on Facebook.

Grieving Facebook users report a variety of motivations and experiences with mourning on Facebook. Some posts are meticulously crafted to celebrate the life of the deceased and honor his or her memory. Some Facebook users report being overwhelmed by emotion and sharing those raw emotions from the heart. Others barely recall writing the post, only the impact of the response it received. Several examples from my field data will illustrate these variations.

Susan Jones, a middle-aged woman who manages a local charity Round Rock, TX and lost her only son at the age of 19 in a boating accident, talks about being on autopilot when posting and only having a vague memory of doing so, an experience echoed by others in their grief narrative accounts. In her grief narrative, Susan focused on the importance of Facebook’s private grief support groups, which I will discuss later in this chapter, and the way her activist work has intersected with honoring her son’s memory.

Susan’s experience was rare, but the intensity of it was shared by two other interviewees who had lost their spouses. These two individuals mentioned rare instances shortly after the deaths of their husbands, when they were vaguely aware that they had made the posts just not certain of their own intention. They recalled those early days and weeks as a haze.

Comments in Mourning Status Updates and Facebook Shrines allow for nuance in how they show sympathy and support. The forty Mourning Status Updates I analyzed received a total
of 1529 comments. On average, Mourning Status Updates, received 38 comments per post. 17% of the comments were from male Facebook users. On Mourning Status Updates, I did textual analysis of 374 comments. Religious language was present on 55% of comments, with 51% having emotional content. Statements of solidarity made up 58% of comments, while 15% memorialized the dead. Comparison with 309 Facebook Shrine comments revealed these trends are largely consistent: 75% of comments had religious content, 52% contained emotional content, 67% had statements of solidarity, and 11% memorialized the deceased.

Emotional content dominates the mourning posts found on Facebook. In the immediate response to a death, these emotional posts are at their rawest. Over time, as posters begin healing and regain emotional composure and the emotional language of the post becomes more intentional. To summarize the emotional content related findings that I mentioned in the previous section, emotional content featured in 89% of Facebook Shrine posts and 80% of mourning status updates. Expressions of longing or missing the deceased was the most common form of emotional disclosure in Facebook shrine posts occurring in 79% of the posts analyzed followed by expressions of love which were present in 63% of Facebook Shrine posts. In my analysis of the comments left in response to Facebook Shrine posts, 52% of the comments of the Facebook Shrine posts I analyzed were emotional in nature. In my online survey, 57% respondents reported that they wrote about grief in their Facebook status updates. In my content analysis of mourning status updates were more likely to express a wide range of emotions: sadness (28%), raw grief (23%), happiness (20%), love (18%), or gratitude (18%). The comments of the mourning status updates that I analyzed were emotional 51% of the time. Of the comments on Facebook Shrine comments I analyzed, 52% were emotional in nature. Emotional content featured in 89% of Facebook Shrine posts and 80% of mourning status updates. Expressions of
longing or missing the deceased was the most common form of emotional disclosure in Facebook shrine posts 79% followed by expressions of love. The practice of sharing memories of the deceased on Facebook replicates practices of communal storytelling I have observed offline in at wakes, visitations, family gatherings, and community meals after the funeral. Early on members of the deceased’s extended friend and kin network share memories that highlight who the person was to them. These stories frequently exemplify characteristics the storyteller wants to ensure the deceased is remembered to have. This collaborative storytelling generates a rich ancestral narrative as previously separate parts of the deceased’s life are brought together through interactions between diverse members of the deceased’s network. In my survey, 57% of respondents confirmed that they had written about a deceased loved one on the person’s Facebook Timeline or tagging the person.

The rarest virtual mourning practice that I observed was the practice of speaking directly to the deceased in the post. These posts touch on an eerie reality. For non-memorialized accounts, the deceased’s account and Timeline is still fully functional. Writing letters to and speaking to the deceased are not unheard-of practices; some therapeutic practices even recommend writing letters to the deceased or talking to an empty chair for people suffering with grief complicated by unsolved negative emotions towards the deceased. Posters writing to the deceased are aware the person is dead and are not deluding themselves, but the question remains why are they writing posts to such a public platform? Why share the message on Facebook rather than mailing a letter that will never be delivered? It is an intriguing component of the mourning posts I observed on Facebook. The posters themselves did not have much insight to offer on their actions. It is an action which none of my interview participants acknowledged doing, despite the

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7 I counted posts and comments that used the word “love” “loved” or included hearts.
fact that I found evidence of five out of twenty-nine of them doing so. In my online survey, 27% of respondents confirmed that they had written a message to their deceased friend on the friend’s timeline or tagging the friend in a status update. Further research into this form of communicating directly with the deceased needs to be conducted to determine the motivations behind these posts, the impact these posts have on the poster, and why no one was willing to admit to making these types of posts despite the data to the contrary. In context of Facebook shrines, these practices are easily adapted: the deceased’s Facebook Timeline allows users to speak to the dead in a similar manner, 32% of the Facebook Shrine posts include messages that address the deceased. The phenomenon is less common in mourning status updates but it does occur in 18% of the mourning status update posts that I examined. It primarily occurs in mourning status updates in cases where the deceased did not have a Facebook account prior to death.

During my participant-observation, I noted several incidents of Facebook users making confessional status updates. This sub-genre was anticipated as it has been documented by Miller, Boellstroff, and others. These posts were a great source of concern for Facebook users. Both during grief narrative interviews and during more informal discussions during participant-observation, my research participants were concerned by the degree of emotional disclosure and willingness to expose information deemed inappropriate for public discourse. Younger participants primarily referred to the issue with these confessional posts as “TMI” which stands for “too much information.” The term is sometimes used by posters to warn of excessive disclosure of personal information. But it is also used as a critique when unnecessary and undesired personal information is overshared to an inappropriate audience. Females over 40 occasionally used the term TMI but they also referred to these confessional posts as “airing your
“dirty laundry” which was something all participants in this category agreed was inappropriate to do in public. They responded to these posts with a mixture of scandal and annoyance. Not all confessional status updates would qualify as TMI or as an airing of dirty laundry, but they were frequently given as one of the greatest complaints my research participants experienced. In my 28 in-depth grief narrative interviews, 36% of research participants actually listed it as a frequent rationale for permanently hiding the content of a Facebook friend from their newsfeed.

The confessional status update genre of posting emerges from an overly honest response to Facebook’s question, “What is on your mind?” Needing to have their experience witnessed, Facebook users share online personal information that is deemed inappropriate to publicly share offline. Posts sharing raw emotional status updates is a fairly common occurrence in Facebook mourning, especially in the early period of grieving. Such posts fit the model of confessional status updates, and Facebook users frequently report feeling uncomfortable when reading them, but they are also met with more sympathy and support.

4.3 Lived Religion in the Face of Death

According to grief narrative interview participant Jeff McDonald, “There’s, essentially a lot of syncretism that came out of this [his family’s mourning the death of his cousin on Facebook] for me in particular, that was kind of important. That there be plenty of acknowledgment of this kind of thing. A kind of blending of different beliefs.” He saw his aunts and mother adopting death beliefs from other cultures that they found meaningful and creating new symbols that were meaningful to them personally. They searched for heart shaped rocks. They saw cardinals as an omen of Tommy’s presence. When they came across feathers in their path or around their homes, they took it as a sign that Tommy was watching over them from heaven. Even though they were avowed Methodists, they planted purple irises near Tommy’s
grave and their homes in honor of the Greek goddess Iris, who they explained was a psychopomp and able to carry messages to the dead. Their belief represents a modern syncretization, as Iris was the ancient Greek goddess of rainbows and messenger to the gods. Though she did bring a message from Zeus to King Priam regarding the dead body of his son during the Iliad, I found no evidence that she allowed mortals to communicate with the dead in the original Greek myths though there is suggestion that she can freely travel to the underworld. Tommy’s mother Susan told me she got the idea of Iris as a psychopomp and messenger for the dead from a private grief support group on Facebook that is dedicated to parents who have lost a child. Susan and her family latched on to the idea because they found it comforting and it fit well with their ideas about Tommy watching over the family as a guardian angel and communicating with them through a variety of signs. It is significant as it reveals how new beliefs are adopted from beliefs from another culture, syncretized with previously held beliefs in the dead watching over and communicating with the deceased, and put into actions that create new physical traditions which are shared through social media.

Each of these beliefs and associated practices was well documented on their Facebook pages. When they found a feather, they took a picture and made a post about Tommy watching over them. When they brought a collection of heart-shaped rocks to Tommy’s grave they shared a picture of the tribute on Facebook. When the irises were planted first at Tommy’s grave, then at his mother’s house, and subsequently at the homes of various family members, each planting of irises was photographed and shared on Facebook, which in turn spread the idea among their local network that the iris plant was associated with mourning the dead. The next spring the irises were photographed and a Facebook post was made in Tommy’s memory. Interpretation of
signs of the deceased’s spiritual visitation, as well as the physical acts of remembrance, become intertwined with Facebook when the experience is shared there.

Facebook allows these invented and syncretized death traditions to spread from one bereaved family to another both through public Facebook posts and through the private grief support groups. In this way, individuals share their idioms of belief and the actions they have found most therapeutic with one another generating a lived religion that bridges the online, physical, and spiritual worlds. In doing so, they create new cultural scripts for mourning both on and offline that are part of participant’s lived religion.

Cultural scripts and social expectations direct grief’s psychological, physiological, and social manifestations. Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka argue that cultural scripts articulate:

> cultural norms, values, and practices in terms which are clear, precise, and accessible to cultural insiders and to cultural outsiders alike. This result is only possible because cultural scripts are formulated in a tightly constrained, yet expressively flexible, metalanguage consisting of simple words and grammatical patterns which have equivalents in all languages. (2004: 153).

They argue that cultural scripts can be understood with a careful study of speech practices and social interaction norms.

The idioms of belief which play such a central role to lived religion are the “simple words” of Goddard and Wierzbicka’s cultural scripts. Pertinent to my research, social media follows its own grammatical patterns and metalanguage rules regarding post length, post metadata, and where to post specific content. These cultural norms for social media communication are understood and followed by users on a tacit level. Knowing where to make a post is tacit knowledge acquired during the assimilation process to any social media platform. Missteps give a user away as a novice, but rarely earn the poster greater social sanction than eye
rolls or mildly annoyed comments. This tacit knowledge informs the cultural scripts of communal mourning, and is something my interlocutors were often keenly aware of.

Piety and religious language factors heavily into the ritual discourse I observed. The espoused beliefs frequently align closer to the broad belief system of American lived religion than they do to the theological traditions of participant’s religious affiliation. I analyzed 19 Facebook Shrine posts and 40 Mourning Status Updates made by research participants. There were 724 comments and 1965 reactions associated with the random sample of 19 Facebook Shrine posts all of which I coded for gender. I also collected data on which emotional reaction was used the gender of the person reacting. Additionally, I did in-depth textual analysis similar to the textual analysis I did with the original posts for the comments of every third post included in my sample. From the seven selected posts, I was able to conduct in-depth analysis of the texts of 309 individual comments. There were 1529 comments and 3916 reactions associated with the 40 Mourning Status Updates all of which I coded for gender. I also collected data on which emotional reaction was used the gender of the person reacting. Additionally, I did in-depth textual analysis similar to the textual analysis I did with the original posts for the comments of every fourth post included in my sample. From the 10 selected posts, I was able to conduct in-depth analysis the texts of 374 individual comments. I analyzed a total of 2,253 comments and 5,881 reactions associated with these 59 posts. I conducted in-depth linguistic analysis of a random sample of 683 comments to identify trends in the language used. Patterns of idioms of belief and idioms of grief emerged in this analysis.

Upon analysis of a random sample of data of mourning posts and related comments, common idioms range from “holding you in grace,” "He lives with his bestie angel in heaven", and "my angel.” At times, the communication becomes more personal, focusing on the presence
of the deceased, such as "your spirit seems close by" or "Tommy is still watching over our citizens!" But whether the status reassures ("They will remain in our heart forever"), invokes the deceased in daily life ("Wishing you success today in Tommy's honor and memory!") or promises continued memorialization ("They will remain in our heart forever"), such idioms are focused on the lived religious and spiritual beliefs of the respondents and reliant on the cultural comprehension of the original poster.

Idioms of belief about death, grief, and the afterlife were frequently embedded into both the initial post and comments. In fact, 42% of initial Facebook Shrine posts and 50% of Mourning Status Updates were religious or spiritual in nature. By contrast, 75% of Facebook Shrine comments and 55% of Mourning Status Update comments analyzed were religious. These religious comments were made regardless of the nature of the initial post. Posts about grief, death, or honoring the memory of a loved one invite religious comments even if the initial poster did not frame his/her post in a religious way. In fact 21% of Facebook shrine posts and 20% of mourning status updates focused on sharing a memory or story about the deceased. When the initial post did include religious language it primarily took one of three forms: discussing the dead in a religious context such as “God needed another angel” or as describing what the deceased is doing in heaven “Joe’s up there fishin’ in heaven with Jesus now”; discussing a dead loved one “watching over” someone or something; or a more generalized prayer request for the bereaved family such as “Please pray for us.”

Prayer was a major theme both in the initial post requesting prayer and in the comments as the participatory audience frequently included messages indicating that the commenter was praying for the poster. I coded for prayer as both offers to prayer and requests for prayers. Prayer was mentioned in 18% of Mourning Status Updates and 45% of comments.
mentioned in 21% of Facebook Shrine posts and 67% of comments. Thirty-seven percent of Facebook shrine posts included an emoji, though one stood out. The prayer hands emoji 🙏 was included in 13% comments and occasionally it was the sole content of a comment. Some commenters even go so far as to write out a prayer and post it as a comment. This was rare but did occur once in the random sample and was mentioned in two grief narrative interviews. The example from the random sample reads: "Most gracious Heavenly Father, please provide comfort and strength to those left among us who mourn the earthly loss of those now with you. Amen." Other replying comments simply included the word, “Amen,” which conveyed that the initial post resonated with the commenter on a deep, spiritual level.

A few other common phrases were used instead of prayer or in addition to prayer, “thoughts and prayers,” “sending love,” “sending healing energy,” “praying for healing” and “healing thoughts”. While these comments are intended to express a similar sentiment, they are sometimes utilized as a secular option to avoid using “prayer” either because the commenter is not particularly religious or because they are concerned the person they are responding to is not particularly religious. These comments are far less common than the explicit use of prayer: it occurs in only 5% of Facebook Shrine comments and 8% of Mourning Status Update comments.

While the majority of my research participants identified as Protestants, I found that commenters left these religious comments on posts even if they were aware the original poster practiced a different faith. Linguistic indicators showed a degree of variation as Muslims frequently left prayers and poetry by Rumi occasionally written in Arabic or Farsi. People who identified as new age or neo-pagan framed their religious support in terms of “sending love and healing energy” while non-religious people used secular phrasing like simply saying “I’m thinking of you and your family.” Such inter-faith dialogue was generally received warmly by
recipients whom I interviewed. As Cassandra Stone, a Texas neopagan in her late twenties put it, “Even if they talk about Jesus and say they are praying for me, that’s fine! If they are praying for me, that means they really care, and that means something to me.”

When I asked Stephine Wilson, a Native American nurse from Oklahoma, if she felt comforted by people’s comments online. She said, “Yeah, when Stacy Facebook\(^8\) says “I’m praying for you,” or asks “can I come see you.” Then I think she means it. But yeah, I think there were people praying for me and I thought that’s great that they would. (Pray) On my behalf, the highest power they have is to pray for you.”

This sentiment was echoed by twenty-two of the twenty-nine grief narrative interview participants who felt that people on Facebook were sincere in their promises to pray for them. Though seven of the twenty-nine, primarily participants under thirty-five, did pose concerns over the sincerity and authenticity of prayer on Facebook, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5.

A major trend concerning the religious imagination concerning the deceased is the idea that loved ones watch over the living. This was framed in a lot of different ways. “God must have needed another angel.” “I know you are watching over us.” “I could feel your presence today.” Directionally speaking, the dead reside above and nearby according to the idioms of belief I documented. Many of the Facebook posts I observed supported the idea that the dead become angels when they die, or at least the good dead people who were well loved. The use of the term angel was primarily meant to acknowledge the deceased as a good or innocent ancestor. Many cultures around the world have a concept of the honored dead who live on in the memory of their loved ones and watch over them, in the mourning posts I documented these honored dead are frequently referred to as angels. The afterlife cosmology supported by the idioms of belief I

\(^8\) A generic name she used to mean an average Facebook user.
documented, does not fall in line with the religious teachings of any specific organized religion. Many research participants, religious leaders and laity alike, commented on this with varying levels of frustration. For example, of the five of twenty-nine grief narrative interviewees who disagreed with the popular use of the term angel on Facebook, those following mainline Protestant denominations were more likely to be accepting of these beliefs as benign. Research participants who followed evangelical protestant denominations took a more hardline stance opposing this “misuse” of the term angel. The two neopagans I interviewed were unbothered, but the two non-religious interview participants were both offended as it was a further instance of religious language permeating discourse. During my participant-observation, I came across a Facebook grief support group that was primarily dedicated to discussing death and grief in non-religious terms. The group’s founders explained that most grief support groups were so steeped in religious thought and language that it was detrimental to the grieving process of non-religious people.

Speaking to the deceased is a unique form of reverent and emotional-driven communication among the bereaved. The bereaved may speak to the dead privately, audibly or in-audibly in a prayer-like manner. Some therapists even recommend that the bereaved write letters to the deceased. The deceased’s Facebook Timeline allows users to speak to the dead in a similar manner; 32% of the Facebook Shrine posts include messages that address the deceased. The phenomenon is less common in mourning status updates, but it does occur in 18% of the mourning status update posts that I examined. It primarily occurs in mourning status updates in cases where the deceased did not have a Facebook account prior to death.

Posts which talk about the deceased, but not to the deceased, are far more common: 83% of mourning status updates and 79% of Facebook shrine posts. Only 16% of Facebook shrines
posts and 30% of mourning status updates were informational including death announcements and posts sharing obituaries and funeral details.

An offline taboo that set the social norm for posting behavior is the rule that you “don’t speak ill of the dead.” Many participants gave this as the justification for why comments remained generally positive even when the deceased was generally disliked. In many cultures around the world, it is in poor taste to speak ill of the dead, and the same applies to Facebook shrines. The airing of grievances has a place, but it is not in the permanence of Facebook, where users have the ability to curate what appears on their Timelines. Facebook users report that speaking ill of the dead has the same negative connotation as it does in real life. Yet these are rare, almost unheard of, except in perceived instances of misinformation or slight. Thus, by protecting sacred spaces, the community contributes to the transformation of a mundane shrine into something more sacred, reserved only for commemoration and remembrance.

The narrative process of transforming the deceased into an ancestor works by not only emphasizing the deceased’s positive attributes but also by reframing the deceased’s attributes which were perceived as negative in life as positive hindsight. The traditional taboo against “speaking ill of the dead” serves to keep Facebook Shrines surprisingly positive for social media discourse, with a few exceptions that are discussed in Chapter 7.

Many research participants reported feeling uncomfortable and even disturbed by the mourning posts made by their Facebook friends. But no one reported ever saying anything negative to the poster, on Facebook or in-person. In fact, when I asked if they ever complained, interview participants were very adamant that they would never say anything, even if it upset them. Time and again, I heard the phrase, “everybody’s gotta grieve in their own way.” A concise and compassionate idiom of belief that expresses both a belief in the individuality of
grief and a deep respect for the person’s well-being. In this context, grief is visualized as a very individual journey. Family, friends, and the community at large can support the bereaved. They can, and should, do things to help them, but they cannot grieve for them. As one sweet grandmother put it, “I can bake ‘em a pie. I can clean their house or take their kids to school. But the one thing I can’t do is grieve for ‘em.”

Figure 13 Lived Religion Word Cloud

This word cloud was created from the most common religious phrases and words used in the Mourning Status Updates and Facebook Shrine posts that I collected. A wealth of religious
idioms pertaining to death, grief, and the afterlife are culturally available to the Facebook users who contributed directly and indirectly to this project. Bereaved Facebook users come into contact with a plethora of idioms of belief during their liminal state of grief. The community shares death and grief belief on Facebook and in-person that they think will help the bereaved. The bereaved then must choose to engage with idioms of belief they find useful, reject those they disagree with, and in some cases persevere despite all of idioms of belief shared by others that they find upsetting or feel strongly disagree with their beliefs.

Religious idioms provide insight into how everyday people engage with and enact their beliefs into action. These minimal units of religious thought are packaged, repackaged, borrowed, and thrown away as the need calls for it. Mourning posts often are informed by the religious views of the deceased, the mourner(s), and the community all at once, reflecting either a single belief or a melding of things. In the Mid-South region, the setting of this research, the deeply Christian beliefs of many informants and the deceased often meant that mourning posts utilized religious phrases and the deceased’s timeline became a space of religious reimagining. The dead person was often described as an angel or guardian, looking down and protecting the living, and messages are often written directly to the deceased. These posts to the deceased reflect the language used in prayer, with religious idioms that reflect both lived religion and more codified religious language.

Facebook’s design influences the posting trends and cultural scripts I have documented in this chapter. These trends fill critical psychosocial niches, and do so in open, public ways. They allow Facebook users to visually signal that they are mourning, whether they are freshly mourning or still mourning after years. They allow the living to honor the dead in ways that they see fit, and it allows them to seek and offer grief support at these various stages of grief. Using
cultural scripts, Facebook’s design allows users to create personally meaningful ways to connect and grieve with others.

Yet despite the variations in motivations, experiences, and communication styles I have documented, each mourning post follows similar speech practices that are largely defined by social interaction norms and the design of Facebook. Individual Facebook users choose how to enact specific posting behaviors that fit their specific needs in the moment, drawing on a cultural script of mourning on Facebook and enacting idioms of belief, grief, and solidarity in their posts. These posting behaviors are highly customizable and open to interpretation. As such, I analyze the posting behaviors associated with these mourning practices as a posting process. This process of mourning posts on Facebook takes place in three stages: the initial post, audience observation of the post, and audience engagement.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates the cultural scripts for mourning on Facebook are the user-generated strategies for visually signaling mourning status, honoring the memory of the deceased, communing with the dead, and supporting the bereaved. These cultural scripts fill a psychosocial niche for disclosure and public acknowledgement of grief experience, which simultaneously promotes social cohesion within the extended kin and friend network represented by the deceased’s Facebook network. The cultural scripts for mourning on Facebook function on three levels—the social, emotional, and spiritual. I analyze each of these in the subsequent chapters.
In those first few hours, days, weeks, I went back to his page half hoping it wasn’t real. Like a nightmare or a sick joke. I’d go to his page to hope someone would say they had gotten it wrong it wasn’t really Tommy that died. I hoping he’d say surprise, I’m here, I’m fine. But I knew that wasn’t ... I knew. So, I went to his page so I could see him. I could watch videos and hear his voice one more time. I went there so I could be with him. And then once I got there, I’d see all these posts. [She pauses and wipes tears from her eyes.] Tommy touched so many lives. I saw what everyone was posting. I’d share a memory too. I’d comment and let them know what it meant to me or comfort his mom and tell her how much I missed Tommy too. I’d read my friend’s posts and smile and remember it too. [She means the memory that her friend shared] I’d add some detail they forgot. – Becky Jones

Becky Jones is a twenty-two-year-old hairdresser originally from Poison Springs, TX.

She always asked me about my research as she cut my hair, and one day in late August 2016, she shared with me the story of her how a close friend of hers from high school had recently passed away in a car wreck in Poison Springs. What struck me most about her story was how Tommy’s Facebook had become a place of solace for her. Becky said she was comforted seeing how Tommy’s memory was being kept alive and knowing that so many people were praying for Tommy and his mother. In subsequent informal chats, Becky told me that she continued to go to Tommy’s page and look through the images when she needed to feel close to him. With time, she said her visits became less and less frequent.

The mourning practices of Facebook users in the Mid-South region of the United States represent a rich part of the participants’ lived religion. Posted on the deceased’s Timeline,
mourning posts and symbolic interactions that take place in the comments and reactions constitute a generative process for building a Facebook Shrine. Bereaved Facebook users who return to the deceased’s Timeline seeking to be closer to the deceased are making pilgrimages to the shrine just as people do at shrines, gravesites, and other memorials offline. The deceased’s Facebook friends build the shrine together through the process of posting and commenting. In the early days after a loss, there are 25, 50, or in rare cases over 100 posts a week which remain active as people continue to comment on them. Facebook users visit the deceased’s Timeline, making a virtual pilgrimage to be nearer to the deceased, to hold on to their memories, or cling to the dead person’s digital presence.

In the previous chapter I argued that mourning on Facebook is performed following a cultural script; in this chapter I argue that it is greatly influenced by a participant’s lived religion. As discussed in Chapter 2, lived religion provides for understanding religion as it is enacted, and to analyze belief systems through human action rather than theology. Orsi (1997) argues that lay people draw on inherited, appropriated, and improvised religious idioms to utilize and discard as the circumstances of their lives dictate. As this chapter will show, Facebook’s mourning practices adapt cultural traditions for mourning the dead to the virtual space of Facebook. To understand the meaning of these emergent traditions and their impact on user experience, I examine them not as new digital practices, but as continuation of older rituals adapted to the language of digital media. These Facebook practices build on cultural scripts of identity performance and emotional disclosure. Facebook users invoke ritual actions and idioms of belief in moments of social necessity and convenience, then discard them when they are no longer needed. Visiting the deceased’s timeline and posting or commenting on the posts of others is a ritual process in the lived religion of participants. In this context, visiting the Timeline, posting,
and commenting become ritual acts of pilgrimage. The religious language and grief idioms invoke cultural beliefs about death, grief, and life after death. Facebook’s mourning rituals and Facebook shrines are digital embodiments of lived religion.

In this chapter, I discuss the religious aspects of mourning on Facebook focusing on the ritual process that creates Facebook Shrines. I examine posting and social interaction in the comments as ritual action. Then I analyze the religious language and imagery frequently evoked in mourning posts. I endeavor to understand how bereaved Facebook users engage with idioms of belief, reject them, and persevere despite the proliferation of religious language and idioms of belief that they encounter during their liminal state of grief. Next, I discuss how the deceased’s Timeline serves as a site for pilgrimage in the days immediately following a death. Utilizing three case examples, I demonstrate how it is spontaneously converted into a shrine by friends and family members who flood the Timeline with public messages. I argue that this pilgrimage and posting activity follows a ritual cycle: a flood of unfiltered emotional posts, collaboratively crafting the deceased’s life narrative, and keeping the deceased’s memory. I argue that in the middle phase of this cycle Facebook users create an official narrative regarding the deceased’s public persona, life history, death, and legacy. I conclude that it is this ritual process, the use of religious language, and the interaction with the deceased’s make the virtual space a sacred one tied deeply to the users’ lived religion online.

5.1 Ritual Process

Death disrupts Facebook’s design for a social media community that mirrors offline reality as the accounts of deceased Facebook users remain live. In order to bring the digital in line with physical reality, the Deceased’s timeline must undergo a transformation. When the user dies and the Timeline lives on, it creates a separation between the account and its user. Drawing
on Arnold van Gennep’s (1909) discussion of liminality and Victor Turner’s (1969) theory of the significance of the ritual process in navigating liminality, I argue the Facebook Timeline of the deceased enters a liminal stage where it no longer reflects reality, on a site that strives to be a transparent reflection of users’ offline lives and social connections. A ritual process of online mourning is necessary to address this liminal disruption. Ordinary Timelines are transformed into Facebook Shrines only through the ritual content production produced by users who make a pilgrimage to the deceased’s Timeline which becomes a space of remembrance and a place where “pilgrims” can interact with other grievers by making mourning posts. Once the Timeline’s recent activity is filled with mourning posts and death announcements, it is obvious to any Facebook user that the person the account belongs to is dead. This prevents the most disturbing online interaction with the deceased’s Timeline: publicly posting a message to a friend who is not known to be dead. While some Facebook users did report that Facebook Shrine posts made them uncomfortable, it does not compare to the horrified response of Facebook users who have found out a friend is dead after causally posting a public message tagging a deceased friend.

Twenty-nine-year old law student Taylor Stone, who participated in my online survey and was informally interviewed, messaged me: “Kerry Sun (a fellow survey participant and mutual acquaintance) remarked (on Facebook) that ‘my shoulder will forever be in your profile pic’ and that made me think of you and your research.” Feeling rather philosophical when I noted this in my fieldnotes, I wrote, death strikes us—creating permanence in our instantaneous lives. We can continue talking to the dead person because the mechanisms are still there. But the dead remain frozen in time. An agent is no longer able to manage his or her identity; instead it exists permanently in that last moment of self-expression. Death is a total loss of agency. The identity exists forever, now to be acted upon, never again able to act.
In an interview, Megan Becker, a 26-year old math teacher, was similarly struck by the juxtaposition of death’s permanence with the instant and ephemeral world of digital communication. When describing the emotional impact of the loss of her best friend, she told me, “It destroyed me. She was still a part of my everyday life. She will never open the last Snapchat that I sent her. It felt very overwhelming to me, every time I opened my Snapchat to see that one unopened message.” Knowing that the last message she sent would never be opened, was a powerful reminder of her loss. In a world where people do not have to be physically present to be connected, it is the reality that a loved one will never again open a message or send a reply that brings home the disconnection of death. The deceased have left behind a digital footprint, but all that remains is that digital object, because the active agent behind it is gone.

When Facebook users are struck by these moments of discontinuity the idea that the other user is frozen, their last messages left unread speak to a sense of liminality that the permanence of Facebook in the face of death creates. It speaks of a longing for interaction with the deceased and a painful reminder that no matter how much they try the deceased can never respond. The asynchronous nature of social media means that you can still leave a message, but the interaction will always remain incomplete, unread.

Facebook’s communal mourning rituals follow a three-stage ritual cycle. This liminal discontinuity is particularly evident when the posts and comments generated by these rituals are collected in one place, namely the Facebook Shrine. An experiential shift occurs in the way many participants feel about the emotional work of posting over the course of this ritual cycle. In the special cases of Facebook Shrines, the three stages of the ritual cycle become clear: 

*pilgrimage, building the shrine, maintaining the shrine.*
Pilgrimage, the first stage in the ritual cycle of a Facebook Shrine, is the spontaneous and repetitive visitation of the deceased Facebook Timeline by bereaved Facebook users. The liminality of the deceased’s Facebook account creates the opportunity and need for a ritual process that will eventually give bereaved Facebook users the closure they need. A virtual liminal space, the deceased’s Timeline serves as a site for pilgrimage in the days immediately following a death. The repeated pilgrimages to the Timeline and the ritual process that surrounds it spontaneously converts Timelines into a shrine. Friends and family members flood the Timeline with public messages and join together in their grief. The Timeline allows for continual communion with the dead, a way for the family to reach out and leave a message as well as engage with others’ memories and grief. This pilgrimage can take place at any time, allowing for ongoing and continual support, a presence that does not fade until the family of the deceased takes it down. It is often accompanied by a communal eruption of powerful raw emotions documented in posts and their comments in the days and weeks immediately following a death. Shock, disbelief, confirmation, devastation, raw pain, guilt, shame, and anger fill the earliest posts of the Facebook Shrine. In this first stage, these unfiltered emotional posts stand in stark contrast to the factual and official announcements of the death and funeral, which are also made during this stage and shared on the deceased’s Timeline. In the accounts of grief narrative interviews, it becomes apparent that these seemingly objective and emotionless announcement posts are in fact incredibly emotional acts for the friends and family members who are attempting to present a strong face while making the necessary official announcements on behalf of the family. Pam Landry, whose case is explored in Chapter 6, detailed her taking on the role of family matriarch, describing making the death announcement and making official announcements as a deeply emotional process. Mary Reddington, whose case was described in
Chapter 4, shared to the obituary and linked to the funeral home website for both her mother and father in order to avoid making overly emotional posts. Stephine Wilson, better detailed in Chapter 6, argued that being able to make the announcement once on Facebook, rather than calling the entire extended family individually, alleviated a lot of the emotional burden of communicating about the death.

The groundwork for the beginning of the second stage of ritual posting may begin as early as the planning of the funeral and visitation as close family and friends are asked how the deceased lived, died, and would want to be represented in funerary rites. Building the shrine, the second stage of the ritual, is a matter of transforming the deceased from loved one to an ancestor. A vital part of the ritual process is developing a unified official ancestral narrative that defines who the deceased was as a person and what the deceased meant to the lives of the bereaved. It relies on carefully selected memories that support the narrative. These memories are shared on Facebook as well as in-person at funeral events and informal memorial gatherings. On Facebook, users work to reconcile the person that they knew individually with the deceased’s online presence and all the parts of the person that they never knew. Previously disparate parts of the deceased’s social network are now connected by their shared loss. They share stories, pictures, and videos while offering emotional comfort as they stand in the solidarity of their loss. This second stage is a long and sometimes painful collective re-imaging of the deceased, which frequently involves finding the hidden virtue in characteristics seen as vices in life. This is the longest stage though the time required varies greatly depending on the grief experience of the mourners involved. This is also the stage which invites that greatest degree of potential conflict, particularly, familial conflict as the lived experiences and relationships of individual’s are devalued in favor of honoring the communal narrative which is frequently an idealized
composite. I will address the discrepancies and conflicts of communal mourning and individual grief in greater detail in chapters 5 and 6.

Once the process of building a new narrative for the deceased as ancestor is complete, the shrine’s third ritual stage begins. The third stage is that of shrine maintenance. For physical shrines, shrine maintenance involves cleaning the shrine, bringing flowers or other mementos particularly on holidays or days of significance to the shrine. For the virtual shrine, maintenance involves a similar recognition and remembrance on special days. The deceased’s birthday is particularly significant, as are family-oriented holidays and the life events of loved ones. These maintenance posts are primarily posted by the closest female members of the deceased’s social network. Examples include Pam Landry and Mary Reddington, mentioned above, who are both the eldest daughters in their families, and Gina McDonald, the eldest of four sisters who made the death announcement post when her only brother passed away. Chapter 4’s Abby Wood is a mother who makes the death announcement for her infant son. In Tabitha Jackson’s case, described below, an example is given highlighting the consequences of a daughter being denied the right to announce her mother’s death.

5.2 “Humans need rituals; I just think we do.”

My first structured grief narrative interview was with Dr. Alice Wolfe, a professor of gender studies at Louisiana State University. Her husband, Diego Guevara passed away in 2014. I selected Dr. Wolfe to be interviewed as she had already taken my survey and I knew Diego’s Facebook Shrine was still active. After concluding the narrative account of her experience as a caregiver during her husband’s illness and as a young widow in the year and half that had

9 I have altered her name, her husband’s name, university and specialty to protect her privacy.
elapsed since his death, Dr. Wolfe told me what helped her most with the loss of her husband. “I would recommend grief counseling,” she began her response returning to her previous discussion of her positive experience with counseling. Then with a bit of uncertainty in her voice she went on to say, “um, I also did some things that were my own rituals that I think helped.” I nodded reassuringly, and she continued,

“I am a firm believer that, Humans need rituals, I just think we do. I think that it’s been part of our psyche for so long that they comfort us, even if we don’t realize that they comfort us. And so, if you’re not religious or if you don’t have some way that the ritual exists that you can tap into, I think that you need to invent your own rituals. And nobody can dictate what those are to you... figure out something that might make you feel better, and then go do that thing. I think that has the power to heal so much more than we give it credit for. They are so powerful in important ways. And I think that what’s out there is all this religious stuff, so that if you’re not religious...well, they don’t know what to tell you, so. So, nobody says to you, like, what would be something that would make you feel better. Like, in a ritualistic sense, what would make you feel better? Go do that! You invent the ritual that works for you, and then you just [do it], you make the rules, right? So, you know, I have a Christmas ornament that I put on the tree every year that’s kind of this memorial thing. And I um I made this cement and ceramic tile standing stone of my garden with his favorite colors... I had to design it, and um, you know, and it’s something I did with my hands, right, and, it’s out there in my yard, I see it, and so, these kind of little things.... Things.... That work! Right? Also, I light a candle for him every year on the day that he died.

Dr. Wolfe gave several online and offline examples of these rituals that helped her. Immediately after her husband’s death, making mourning posts and visiting his Timeline helped her. As time went on, her interest in mourning on Facebook faded, a common occurrence I will discuss later in this chapter and in more detail in Chapter 6. She described making ceramic tile with her own hands for the yard that she keeps out in her garden. She also mentioned annual memorials such as keeping a Christmas ornament on her tree to remind her of her husband. She lights a candle on the anniversary of his death, and makes an obligatory Facebook post.
The rituals Dr. Wolfe is describing are rituals of lived religion. As she so succinctly put it, “Human’s need rituals.” This need for ritual, the need to “do something” as many of my male interview participants phrased it, is a critical social and psychological function of religion. The relationship between religion and death is so deeply embedded into the history of humanity that the oldest evidence of humans practicing religion comes from pre-historic burial practices (Paige 2018). Culture is constantly changing, but life, death, and the human need to “do something” that allows individuals and communities to “make sense” of their loss remains an important psychosocial need that ritual addresses. The emergence of Facebook’s mourning practices fills this niche in the lived religion of participants in my research.

As rituals of lived religion, Facebook’s mourning practices are symbolic enactments of beliefs and values. Posting and social interaction in the comments become ritual actions. A wealth of religious idioms pertaining to death, grief, and the afterlife are culturally available to the Facebook users who contributed directly and indirectly to this project. I evaluate mourning behaviors on Facebook as symbolic acts, to assess the deeper meaning behind participation. To do so, it is necessary to unpack mourning on Facebook through analysis of the figurative language and religious symbolism invoked in the posts and comments. Facebook Shrine posts and mourning status update posts are analyzed here within the context provided by participants in their grief narrative interviews, informal online interviews, and gleaned through participant-observation on Facebook.

Death, especially when it is unexpected, is often greeted with raw emotion from those who experience the passing of a loved one. Death creates complex reactions, mixtures of

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10 An idiom used by both men and women, the need to “do something” was discussed by every male interview participant compared to only a third of female interview participants.
11 This idiom was frequently employed by participants both during grief narrative interviews and during participant-observation. Participants used the phrase “make sense” when discussing their attempts to find meaning in their loss.
emotions that are at times paradoxical and incomplete, that take time to process and understand or fully express themselves. At the onset of Facebook shrines, this is evident. Many posts become disclosures of raw emotion, of the feelings that come from never being able to see or speak to a person again to the anger or confusion or sadness of their sudden passing, and sometimes even their expected passing. This was true in the cases where the death was anticipated, such as in the case of Dr. Wolfe’s husband, and in cases of sudden or unexpected death, such as in the case of Chapter 4’s Abby Wood and Susan Jones’ sons. The cause of death, be it disease or sudden accident, often shapes how these raw emotion disclosures take place at the onset of Shrine creation, but spontaneous shrines are almost universally formed with this type of post. Raw emotion disclosures involve “laying it all on the table,” that is, the expression of all their emotions and thoughts regarding the death.
The work of grief takes place as Facebook users individually and collectively attempt to make sense of their loss. A snapshot of this labor is captured in mourning status updates and on Facebook Shrines as the bereaved begin to collaboratively craft the deceased’s life narrative. In the middle phase of this ritual cycle Facebook users create an official narrative regarding the deceased’s public persona, life history, death, and legacy. Chapter 4’s Jeff McDonald highlighted how quickly the community surrounding his cousin formed a cohesive narrative that seemed
alien to the cousin he knew. When Tabitha Jackson’s mother died, past students and co-workers came together to share memories and honor the impact that her mother had made on their lives as an elementary teacher.

In addition to not speaking ill of the dead, over time the tone and language regarding the deceased on Facebook often changes. While the information they use is often true, elements may change to reflect a specific portrayal of the deceased, according to multiple interviewees such as with Jeff McDonald. Thus, in the creation of a narrative of the deceased’s life, the narrative changes to become more positive, something to be proud of. The person becomes an honored ancestor, whose life and behaviors were something to be admired, where clear lapses in this virtue are taught as teachable moments rather than the indiscretions they might have been characterized in life such as Jeff’s cousin Tommy’s life.

In the case of Jeff McDonald, he related how his cousin Tommy became instantly reimagined as what he described as a “different person” altogether. With many different narratives coming together from different parts of his life, the person described on Facebook and at his cousin’s funeral created a person Jeff said he “did not know.” The many issues his cousin had in life—the DUIs hidden from his parents, the car accidents, frivolous spending habits, and seemingly trivial care of his things—disappeared overnight. Never once mentioned on Facebook, this extension of silence continued to real life, where these issues have become taboo, in the same vein as “not speaking ill of the dead.” The sudden nature of his cousin’s death seemed, in Jeff’s eyes, to have cemented this silence, making his cousin an honored ancestor to be remembered in scholarships and charity efforts in his home community, as well as regulatory changes regarding substance abuse and motor vehicles in the wider state.
One of the most clearly stated objectives of the last stage of the ritual cycle is keeping the deceased’s memory alive. Medical anthropologists who work with illness narratives argue that narrative sharing social interactions have therapeutic value. The narrative process and its therapeutic potential are at the heart of psychological “talk therapy” and it is being adapted into other areas of biomedicine. Anthropologists Cheryl Mattingly’s (1998) work with the therapeutic narrative technique of occupational therapists exhibits therapeutic narratives at work within a biomedical context. Mattingly demonstrates the way in which a patient and occupational therapist employ “narrative sense-making” as part of the therapeutic process (1998: 67).

Mattingly explains that occupational therapists "treat clients with physical disabilities but this treatment was evidently not confined to the physical body. They treated the ‘whole person’…” (1998: 49). As part of the therapeutic process, patients and occupational therapists gradually recast physical problems into phenomenological ones through a form of vulnerable healing. During this healing process occupational the therapist works with the patient to slowly rewrite the patient's life narrative to generate a shared understanding of the patient’s experience of illness or disability and the patient’s narrative of potential-self. Mattingly refers to this effort of shared story-making as therapeutic emplotment and demonstrates its potential healing power as it is practiced in occupational therapy.

Psychologist James Pennebaker conducted a research project with students to test the therapeutic value of expressing negative experiences into short narratives. He found “the act of translating upsetting experiences into words is associated with better physical and mental health in virtually all societies” (Pennebaker 2003: 18). Pennebaker argues the act of concealment is stressful and demonstrates the way in which deception strains social relationships and has negative physical and mental health consequences (2003: 9). Pennebaker’s findings indicate
there is therapeutic value in writing about an illness experience, even if the writer never intends to allow anyone to read his/her narrative. Does this therapeutic value transfer to social media? Facebook Shrine participants want to tell their story. They want the recognition of their loss and validation of their emotional experience from their social network. I discuss this aspect in greater detail in Chapter 7, highlighting several ethnographic examples from Facebook Shrines.

Facebook mourning practices are commemorative as they honor and celebrate the deceased. The communal and public nature of this commemoration makes it necessary to reconcile the deceased’s public self-presentation, with the griever’s personal memories of private interactions. Sharing these personal memories with the deceased’s social network on Facebook, previously separate social circles collaboratively write a narrative that transforms the deceased in the memory of participants. Facebook Shrine posters not only tell stories to their audience, they also co-create story-like structures with their audience through their interaction in the comments. The storytelling process that unfolds on Facebook Shrines is a therapeutic emplotment, which provides a platform for post-traumatic growth and provides a sense of communitas.

Therapeutic emplotment on Facebook creates opportunities for post-traumatic growth through the co-creation of the deceased’s ancestral narrative. The therapeutic emplotment of Facebook Shrines also allows for a renegotiation of the griever’s social identity. Facebook allows more people to join into this co-creation process, which opens up the healing process to a larger audience but there is still a hierarchy among participants, which becomes divisive in situations with unresolved conflicts in relationship dynamics, such as in the case of Alice Wolfe. The loss of identity, agency, and dignity which occurs following a death is evident in early Facebook Shrine “raw emotion” posts. The degree of this loss is directly linked to factors of
complicated grief. Death marks a social disruption that ruptures the social order built on kinship. It disrupts social identities built on the foundation of relationship to the deceased.

When Tabitha Jackson lost her mom, the family followed her mom’s wishes for a simple memorial and cremation. She put together a short slide show for the visitation and her brother selected a few songs for the short secular memorial service. But what Tabitha found the most cathartic was what happened after the service. After the funeral, she spent the evening with her immediate family, which included her brother, father, maternal uncle, husband, sister-in-law, and a few cousins who came in from out of town. They went to the family cabin out in the woods so they could be alone together. They sat around drinking and telling stories about her mom into the early hours of the morning. Tabitha said,

“It was so good to be there and remember the good times, before mom got so sick. We all told stories and laughed. My uncle told us stories from when mom was a kid, things I’d never heard anything about.” I asked her, “Why do you think that helped the most?” She responded, “Well, I think hearing about all the good things, even things I never knew... I think that helped me remember her. It got rough at the end: mom was really young, but she had dementia and that got so bad. She died from sepsis because she couldn’t take care of herself. You know, she was incontinent, and she got sepsis. That was hard.” Her voice broke and she looked into the distance for a minute, “It’s hard to see your mom like that. But that night when we were just together, tellen’ all those old stories. It really helped me remember her. The real her.”

She paused for a long moment and then continued, “There was some good stories about her on Facebook too. Mom taught 3rd grade for a long time and people started posting all these stories about when they had her as a teacher. And those were mostly ok, because those were like, ‘I loved how you read this book to me, how you sang this song, and you taught me my multiplication table.’ My favorite was a story posted by my old basketball coach. He had mom in school and he said, ‘I loved the way you read old yeller to my class. It completely ruined me for the movie.’ All the little stories like that about how she touched people’s lives for all those years.”
One Facebook post, I observed during my participant-observation read "Sarah Lee watch over them and bless us as we all gather for this joyous event. Love you!" Elevated to the role of guardian ancestral spirit, the deceased Sarah Lee was included in the festivities as the honored dead might be invoked in any ancestral religion. But I do note that the poster is a middle aged, white female from Texas who aligns herself with the Methodist Protestant tradition according to her Facebook profile: the elevation of the dead to honored ancestor is not usually a rite of Protestant Christianity. Yet with Facebook Shrines and Shrine maintenance such as in Sarah Lee’s example, these online rituals fulfill this role. I observed similar phenomena in the case of Tommy Jones, the son of Susan Jones and nephew of Gina McDonald.

Created spontaneously through posts made in raw emotional states, Facebook Shrines allow participants to work through their emotions together as they co-create narratives that transform the deceased into an honored ancestor. After regaining emotional composure, renegotiating their identity, and reclaiming their agency over their posting behavior, Facebook users no longer need or want to make mourning posts on the deceased’s Timeline with the same frequency. They transition their activity towards maintenance posts made on special days to keep the deceased’s memory alive.

The emotional disclosure of Facebook Shrine posts serves as a visual indicator signaling the Facebook user’s mourning status. This visual indicator is a mechanism that allows Facebook users to seek support and gain social recognition of the Facebook user’s mourning status. Ethnographic evidence of emotional disclosure posts and emic accounts of raw emotions indicates like Alice Wolfe’s that the experience of “writing it out” on Facebook is cathartic, particularly when the poster’s mourning status, grief experience, and social status align to public expectations.
The narrative of the deceased changes over time as grievers’ experience changes in their grief. This narrative change is necessary for the transformation from person to ancestor and it is a crucial part of the efficacy of this therapeutic emplotment process. For primary grievers, a loss of identity, agency, and dignity which occurs following a death is frequently evident in early Facebook Shrine posts and in their inaccurate remembrance of their posting behaviors immediately following the death. The degree of this loss is directly linked to factors of complicated grief. Facebook Shrines offer avenue for reclaiming identity, agency, and dignity through therapeutic emplotment. This is also evident over time in Facebook Shrine posts with the greatest evidence of progress is a dramatic decline in Facebook Shrine activity as it transitions into anniversary and special day memorial posts.

Spontaneously, shrines emerge around a deceased person’s Facebook Timeline organically as bereaved Facebook users use Facebook as a platform for communal mourning. Many of the Facebook mourning practices described in this chapter can occur without linking to the deceased’s Facebook account, and often do when the deceased did not have a Facebook account. But when this content is connected to the deceased’s account, it is all collected in a single digital space dedicated to preserving the memory of the deceased. The non-memorialized Facebook account of the deceased person allows Facebook’s mourning practices to be organized within the communal space of the deceased’s Facebook Timeline. As informative, commemorative, mourning update posts are shared on the Timeline alongside public messages to the deceased, the deceased’s Facebook Timeline is transformed from social media’s traditional ego-centered social identity performance to a dynamic multifaceted site of communal mourning and communing with the dead.
Facebook shrines are spontaneous shrines which utilize ritualized performances of grief to generate a sacred space for transforming the deceased into an ancestor. Facebook Shrines generate a sense of solidarity understood emically through the phrase, “we are going through this together”. For active participants, Facebook Shrines and the narratives constructed on them play a critical role in their efforts to make sense of their loss and re-imagine their loved as an ancestor. This re-imagining helps create a sense of communal grieving, giving everyone a common point of focus: this central point creates grief solidarity for the community, and gives them a sense that their grief is meaningful. By helping others and helping re-imagine the deceased as an ancestor, the community grieving aspect is a meaningful act.

Mourners are able to support one another through their posts and comments on the Timeline by expressing solidarity. The grief solidarity shared in this communal mourning offers its greatest potential for healing when it generates a feel of communitas among ritual participants. This ritual process transforms an ordinary Timeline into a sacred space for honoring and remembering the dead. Overtime, the Timeline becomes a shrine to the deceased.

5.3 Making Virtual Space Sacred

Like the reality it reflects, virtual spaces are made sacred through ritual action and the beliefs that inspire them. Culture influences the idea of what qualifies a specific space as spiritually significant. Physical shrines and sacred spaces are made much in the same way as virtual spaces are made sacred. Important events, such as death, often act as a catalyst for this process, as in the case of John Lennon’s death and the shrine that stands to this day, acting as a spiritual locus by which fans and mourners continue to remember the man who was shot and killed in 1981 in New York City. Virtual shrines follow the same rules yet remove the problem of geographical distance. In lieu of a physical location, Facebook shrines are substituted, and the
same social norms that apply in making the physical shrine sacrosanct apply to virtual shrines. It is through ritual performance and religious language used to honor the dead that virtual space is made sacred.

When a Facebook Shrine is spontaneously generated in the networked public space of the deceased’s Timeline, a bit of the sacred is found amongst the daily routine of Facebook. Facebook users evoke religious idioms, putting their faith to practice in acts of communal mourning and grief solidarity. They transform the mundane Facebook Timeline of their deceased loved one into a sacred space for communion and commemoration. They collectively re-imagine their loved one, re-writing the deceased’s public presentation of self.

In *Authentic Fakes*, David Chidester wrote, “Whether defined as a specialized social institution dealing in the supernatural or as a symbolic system revolving around the sacred, religion represents resources and strategies for being human” (Chidester 2005: 30). In my observations and analysis, I noted that the lived religion enacted in the special cases of Facebook Shrines represent a modern adaptation of mourning rituals to virtual space providing new resources and strategies for managing grief and loss across a geographically dispersed community. Death rituals offer the bereaved an opportunity for communal mourning and social support, thus bolstering grief resilience. Performing grief publicly on Facebook allows mourners to curate the deceased’s digital legacy, reconciling the person the bereaved knew with that person’s online public self-presentation, thus allowing them to re-imagine the deceased as an honored ancestor and their Facebook profile a shrine. While this offers new opportunities for emotional health intervention and resilience in the face of bereavement, it also is a very public exposure in a vulnerable time.
Many of the Facebook mourning practices I have described can occur without linking to the deceased’s Facebook account, and often do when the deceased does not have a Facebook account. The Facebook account of the deceased person allows Facebook’s mourning practices to be organized within the communal space of the deceased’s Facebook Timeline. As informative, commemorative, mourning update posts are shared on the Timeline alongside public messages to the deceased, the deceased’s Facebook Timeline is transformed from social media’s traditional ego-centered social performance of self-image to a dynamic multifaceted site of communal mourning and communing with the dead. Facebook shrines are created by family and friends. Unlike a grave in the cemetery or even a virtual guestbook at a funeral home, these digital memorials are social spaces for mourning generated by the act of mourning itself. Ritualized performance of grief and a shared belief in respecting the memory of deceased and the experience of griever lends itself to the transformation of the deceased’s Timeline into a sacred space for commemorating the dead. In these special cases, a community of griever arises around the deceased’s transformed Timeline allowing griever to communally mourn at a distance. This community of griever collectively re-imagines the deceased through their communal mourning and actively rewrites the deceased’s life narrative, transforming the deceased into an ancestor, in the traditional sense. According to Jack Santino (2006) spontaneous shrines share two qualities: commemoration and performativity. These two primarily qualities are clearly present in all Facebook Shrine cases examined for this dissertation. However, the Facebook Shrine cases deviate from Santino’s definition of spontaneous shrines as he emphasizes that the performative component is aimed at addressing a social issue, which frequently becomes a political one. This is true in some Facebook Shrine cases; it is not true in all. Susan Jones leverages her social
network and her son Tommy’s Facebook Shrine to gain the political capital she needs to pass a law to “ensure it never happens again.” But this is a rare exception, far from being the norm. Close friends of Stephine Wilson utilized their daughters Facebook Shrine as a platform of sharing the story of their faith. In central Arkansas, another family used their daughter’s Facebook Shrine to speak out against social media vigilante justice against the woman who killed their daughter in a hit-and-run. Of the twelve Facebook Shrine cases I examined for this study, only two were used to address legal or political issues. One was intentionally used to address the socio-religious issue of keeping faith after losing your child. What I would argue is that instead of the performative element addressing political or social issues, the performative aspect addressed issues of community and solidarity. Collective efforts centered on helping those closest to the deceased as a way to honor the deceased’s memory.

Santino writes “The public aspects of the shrines are due to the social conditions that caused the deaths and the political issues they reference.” Public mourning on Facebook serves many purposes: publicly signaling mourning status, publicly performing grief out of social obligation, communal mourning despite geographic distance, public transformation of the deceased into an ancestor. When appropriate Facebook Shrines do serve as a reference to the social conditions that caused the death but that is only one of several rationales generating mourning on Facebook.

5.4 Conclusion

Death rituals are a human universal. The mourning practices of Facebook represent a diffusion of old rituals into virtual space rather than an invented tradition. This does not give the rituals more or less legitimacy. But it is important to acknowledge the degree to which the practices are a continuation of existing traditions in a new context, not a disruption of tradition.
by digital technology. Many traditions have emerged on Facebook that adapt previously well-documented ritual traditions and social performances to the realm of virtual sociality.

Any patterned behavior can become a social ritual, but what makes Facebook’s mourning practices meaningful is the content and the way that content is experienced as meaningful by participants because of the social interaction it symbolizes. Rituals are symbolic, performative, and transformative patterned behaviors which enact cultural values and beliefs in ways which engage the religious imagination. It is the capacity of Facebook’s mourning practices to accomplish just that which makes these user generated rituals truly significant despite their virtual nature, or perhaps, even because of it. The true test of a ritual’s efficacy is the ritual’s capacity to not only convey meaning, but to have that meaning adopted into the lived religion of participants.

As rituals of lived religion, Facebook’s mourning practices are symbolic enactments of beliefs and values. Grieving Facebook users report a variety of motivations and experiences with mourning on Facebook. Some posts are meticulously crafted to celebrate the life of the deceased and honor his or her memory. Some Facebook users report being overwhelmed by emotion and sharing those raw emotions from the heart. Others barely recall writing the post, only the impact of the response it received. Yet despite these variations in motivations and communication styles, each mourning post follows a similar speech practices largely defined by social interaction norms and the design of Facebook, but highly customizable. Individual Facebook users choose to enact specific ritual behaviors that fit their specific needs in the moment.

The religious idioms invoked in mourning posts shape the grief experience of Facebook users. As rituals of lived religion, the idioms of belief that are expressed by Facebook users in
public mourning posts are invoked in moments of social necessity and convenience and then
discarded when they are no longer needed.

Ritual rarely presents itself so readily as a cultural text to be read and interpreted as it
does on Facebook. Facebook posting rituals, mundane and mourning alike, produce media as
their material culture. Posting is itself an ephemeral ritual that remains open-ended as long as the
content remains accessible and open to comment. Facebook documents the interactive portion of
these communal mourning practices and the media that they produce. But it is far from
transparent. Timelines serve as memorials for the deceased, while mourning status updates are an
outlet for expressing raw emotions. The physical distance that the virtual ritual provides is seen
as comforting by many participants and the religious language invoked in these interactions is
identified as powerful and a sign of how deeply the commenter cares.

My research shows that the ritual process, the use of religious language, and the
interaction with the deceased’s Timeline as a site of pilgrimage transforms the Timeline into a
shrine. Communal grieving on Facebook Shrines allows grievers to collectively engage in re-
writing the deceased’s life narrative, transforming the deceased from person to ancestor; a
process which strengthens bonds weakened by death, generates new relationships between the
deceased’s previously discrete social spheres and, ideally, offers an opportunity for healing as
participants undergo the ritual process of the separation of loss, the liminality of grief, and re-
integration into the extended kin and friend network through pilgrimage to the Facebook Shrine,
affirmations of grief solidarity in communal mourning, and assurance of the deceased’s legacy.
The texts of mourning posts and the comments that they receive contain the extensive use of religious language, something not unexpected for people who live in the mid-South region of
the United States. In this the figurative language that is religious in nature draws on death-related idioms of belief which commenters offer to the bereaved in scripted ritual acts of support and solidarity, as demonstrated in the examples of Alice Wolfe, Mary Reddington, and Gina McDonald. At the death of her brother, Gina and her sisters’ Facebook accounts were flooded with posts from friends and families offering their condolences, posts that were Mourning Status Updates and her brother’s Facebook profile quickly became a Facebook Shrine. The comments seen here demonstrate the religious nature of both posts and comments. In this context Facebook posts, comments, and reactions can best be understood as ritual actions guided by a need to invoke and share related idioms of belief.

Hope Amason, an anthropologist at Central Washington University who was raised in and obtained her PhD in the Mid-South, suggested to me in the question and answer discussion of my 2018 AAA paper that the posters in my study were more willing to utilize religious language as they primarily reside in Southern communities which are more comfortable including religious language in public discourse. She confirmed that her Facebook friends in the Pacific Northwest do not use nearly as much religious language in their mourning posts as her Facebook friends from the South. This does support my hypothesis that much of the religious nature of these practices is linked to the religiosity of Southern culture. It supports Horst and Miller’s (2012) framework of social media being a localized experience on a global platform. Preliminary data supports the claim that the Facebook user’s local in-person culture influences the language of their mourning posts, but further research will be necessary to systematically make regional comparisons of the texts of mourning post.
CHAPTER 6
KINWORK AND GRIEF SOLIDARITY

Late one summer afternoon I went to a local coffee shop in Farmerville, Louisiana. In the center of the coffee shop right in front of the door was a large, wooden round table that still held the scent of tobacco from a time with smoking was still allowed indoors, taking up the center of the diner where older men sat drinking black coffee and having heated discussions about how to solve the world’s problems, it was about as far as you could get from Starbucks. It was there that I met Will Rider, a 56 year old from Northern Louisiana. He is a leader in his church and community. Though he is from a small town, he has traveled extensively.

While discussing my project one afternoon at a local coffee shop, he told me, “Friends create communities. It’s friendships that define a community. That’s why Facebook works. Facebook is a place you can go to and catch up with old friends. Even friends that have moved off and live far away. I got Facebook when I went to my thirty-year class reunion, and now I can keep up with what all my friends and their kids are doing. Friends I hadn’t seen in thirty years, and there they are on Facebook. Yeah, it’s where I learned that few of ‘em died. And that’s scary. They are the same age as me, and it makes me wonder… Why? Why they’ve passed so early.” He paused and laughed to himself, “Yes, I still think 56 is pretty young. Too young to die. So I wonder, what kind of lives they lived. Did they live too hard, too fast? But mostly, I focus on life.”
Like the small-town coffee shop where we met, Facebook is a gathering space for public discussions and “shooting the bull.” Be it coffee shops, bars, football games, or ancient wells; people have always been drawn to communal gathering spaces which requires low social commitment and offers chance meetings, lively discussions, and even the opportunity for romance. Facebook takes the model of that the local gathering place and exports it to the world extending the geographical limitations of casual friendship. Anthony Cohen (1985) argues community is symbolically constructed not based on geographic proximity but by belonging. He argues that community teaches its members how to be social and the nature of friendship and kinship while facilitating culture acquisition (Cohen 1985: 15). Digital platforms can offer space for socialization, but online communities are created by friends.

Mourning rituals on Facebook play a significant role in structuring community life, providing guidelines for behavior, and promoting solidarity that bonds mourners together as a community. In this chapter, I discuss the communal aspects of mourning on Facebook and their therapeutic role for deceased’s extended network of kin and friends and the broader community. I describe the sense of community produced on Facebook by these ritual performances of grief and mourning focusing on how this sense of community is intensified on Facebook Shrines. I begin by discussing how the mourning practices of Facebook allow for communal mourning at a distance. I argue that mourning on Facebook bypasses traditional geographical limits through the creation of these communities. Then I assess these online interactions in terms of the grief support and solidarity which arise from them. I discuss how the ritual performance of grief on Facebook generates a sense of solidarity that is frequently expressed with the phrase, “we are going through this together.” Bonds of solidarity transform online shared space into a truly community-centered platform, built on connection, support, and grief processing. Next, I discuss
the gendered nature of this activity focusing on the female familial responsibilities for “keeping
the memory alive,” “keeping the family together,” and “just checkin’ in on everybody.” I analyze
the gendered nature of these responsibilities in terms of a digital extension of kinwork, providing
contrasting perspectives and experiences, which range from views of Facebook as a convenient
tool of kinwork and Facebook as an additional emotional and social burden. I also introduce my
observations of a hierarchy of grief on Facebook based on official social statuses. Finally, I
conclude by discussing the community of grievers that emerges from the kinwork labor of
maintaining social bonds and building new ones through Facebook in efforts to support the
bereaved and demonstrate grief solidarity.

6.1 Ritual Action: Community Support, Activism, and Grief Solidarity

Many participants expressed a need to “do something” in response to a death. People
close to the deceased and broader community members all reported this shared need. Frequently,
this took the form of physically doing something to help friends, family, community members hit
hardest by the loss. Off Facebook, I observed people bringing food to the immediate family and
raising money to cover the funeral and other expenses for those who had lost a loved one.
Church members reached out to their pastor’s widow to help her find new accommodations after
his passing and reassure her that she was a valued member of the congregation. These actions,
driven by their religious conviction and friendship, are both lived religion in action and public
displays of belief and conviction. While these activities frequently appeared to be acts occurring
off Facebook, it was during the grief narrative interviews that I learned just how instrumental
Facebook has become as a way to organize these events. Funds were raised to help a young
widow pay for her husband’s funeral; the schedule for bringing by dishes to an elderly gentleman
were organized on Facebook; even funeral arrangements were frequently coordinated and
communicated over Facebook. The bereaved also frequently reported wanting to do something to keep themselves busy. Alice Wolfe made the memorial steppingstone for her garden with her own hands. Susan Jones created memorial events and successfully pushed to get a law passed in honor of her son’s memory. Staying active and finding a way to help those closest to the deceased are valued as positive outlets for expressing grief. As Bro. Bobby Brown told me, “the healthiest families, you know them right away. The healthiest families are all so busy looking after one another that they don’t have time to squabble or let their grief turn ugly.” In this way, doing something for others is in fact healing for yourself.

Facebook shrines serve as shared spaces for communing with the deceased, but they also are spaces for communing with other Facebook users who share their loss. While a bereaved Facebook user goes to a Facebook Shrine to engage with memories of the deceased, once there Facebook users find the posts of fellow bereaved Facebook users, which allow them to interact with others who share their experience of loss. Facebook shrines offer the bereaved an intimate community that shares the sense of loss. Both friends and family members of the deceased report that supporting others who share their loss positively impacts their own grief process as well. This happened when local radio personality Roger Wilkes passed away.

I interviewed Amanda Hubert and her husband Anthony on consecutive afternoons. They both spoke to me about the death of D.J. Wilkes. Much beloved by his community, Roger remarried in his late forties and moved to Houston to live with his new wife and her two children. Before relocating to Houston, he was an active member of the community theater and a volunteer firefighter. Roger had lived in Houston for two years and his wife Jess was expecting when he suddenly died of a heart attack one morning while jogging. Amanda recalled her shock, “We had just seen Roger and Jess a month or two before. He was still so young, and fit. He had
lost a lot of weight about ten years ago and he ran every day. But I guess that doesn’t erase years of smoking.”

A local celebrity back home in Crossett, Arkansas, Roger’s Facebook page was inundated with messages within the first few hours after his passing. According to Amanda, many of those early messages communicated sympathy, while others expressed shocked and disbelief. Recalling her experience, she said, “But really, everyone was waiting. Waiting for news. Waiting for the family to say something. Waiting for something official. Everyone wanted to know ‘What happened?’” Even though the news had spread quickly, friends back in Crossett were waiting for someone in the family make an official announcement on Facebook. Amanda said, “And Jess did eventually post something, kinda tellin’ everyone what happened and how the services were going to be handled. But Anthony and I had already talked to her on the phone by then. So, we knew. We already knew it was true. When she posted, there was this outpour. Everybody offering to help, wanting to be there for her and the kids.” After Roger’s wife Jess made her official post as a status update that tagged (linked to) Roger’s Timeline, people in both their networks began responding immediately both in the comments section of Jess’ post and by making posts of their own on Roger’s Timeline. According to both Amanda and Anthony’s accounts, it rapidly became a site of pilgrimage and mourning posts. During our interview Anthony pulled out his phone to show me some of the posts. They included messages of grief, “the world lost a good man today,” “we miss you so much Roger,” and grief solidarity “Jess, I know there are no words right now, but know Roger will be missed by so many.”

When I asked Anthony about his response to Roger’s death, his immediate focus was on his frustration that,

“We were just too far to do something. That’s really where Facebook came in, cause like you know, I wanted to do something,
to help Jess [Roger’s wife]. So, me and a couple guys from the [fire] department made a GoFundMe page we shared on Facebook so people could donate and Amanda and some of our friends from the theater and a bunch of people from the radio organized this big event for Jess to come down and get the money. We just wanted to do something to help Jess. Funerals are expensive and here she was with two kids and one on the way, so we wanted her to know she wasn’t alone.”

Anthony reported that they shared the GoFundMe link on Roger’s Facebook Shrine as well as on the Facebook pages of the local fire department, radio station, and theater. According to Anthony, they raised more than enough money to cover funeral costs and ensure that Jess and the kids had a little padding to help with the adjustment to a single income.

Amanda said, “Facebook was so big. Roger, I guess, he knew everybody. He was the kind of guy everybody he met felt like they knew him. When he lived here, we played trivia with him once a week and then we did theater together too. I was just in shock, so devastated and everyone on Facebook they just got started telling all these great Roger stories. Everyone had a different story to tell. It was great sharing all that and really seeing how people rallied around Jess. Just so much love. All that love and joy, Roger put into people’s lives all those years, here they were giving it back to his family. You know, to support them. I mean really support them. People all over the country, sharing their stories and sending in money for Jess and the kids.”

Anthony summed it up, “A life well-lived.”

Facebook shrines, like the one that emerged on Roger’s Facebook Timeline, are communities of grievers which allow Facebook users to communally grieve and memorialize the deceased at a distance and turn posts into rallying points for support and informal social intervention. The sense of solidarity generated through the posting rituals of grief performance Facebook Shrines builds a community of grievers.

Facebook users consistently reported that the ability to participate in communal mourning practices online allowed them to feel connected despite the distance. Facebook allows people not
physically present to participate in communal mourning and hence to satisfy their need to honor the dead, and any obligation they feel to be seen honoring the dead. It allows people who share the loss to re-connect and support one another through their mourning process. It also fosters new connections between previously separate portions of the deceased’s social network such as in the case of Susan Jones connecting with her son’s college friends in Chapter 4. While this extension of communal mourning positively affects the reported grief experience of individuals who have moved away from their families and home communities, it also constitutes additional social expectations in response to death, particularly for close family members. The kinwork that surrounds death and mourning now includes a Facebook dimension, a responsibility which disproportionately falls upon the shoulders of female family members. People across the world can share personal and communal mourning rituals to express their grief, replicating real-world practices while simultaneously creating new ones. Death rituals offer the bereaved an opportunity for communal mourning and social support, thus bolstering grief resilience, even at a distance.

In 2016, Arkansas revised its laws regarding driving aquatic vehicles while intoxicated. Called Tommy’s Law, this was prompted after the death of Susan Jones’ son Tommy in a boating accident in 2013. The driver, intoxicated, killed Tommy and his best friend Olivia, prompting swift online calls and petitions to enact harsher punishments against those who drive while under the influence. Susan led the effort, inciting local calls to action on Facebook and getting local politicians involved until the state legislature passed the law, which was streamed on Facebook and ended up with very visible roadside signs outside of her hometown announcing the passing of the law, in memory of Tommy. The same year, Oklahoma, Olivia’s home state, passed a similar law.
Facebook facilitated not just the grieving process for Susan and Tommy’s college friends, but the movement to “do something.” Acting as a group, they circulated petitions and contacted legislators to enact political change. The effort was entirely public, with posts made regularly on Facebook on Tommy’s wall and by individuals such as Susan to keep the momentum going. Communal grief enacted change, and in Tommy’s case, it received little resistance. After that law was passed, it had a deep impact on Tommy’s family. In my grief narrative interview with him, Jeff McDonald, Tommy’s cousin, had this to say about the passing of Tommy’s law, “A lot of people made of Tommy’s death something that it shouldn’t have been, but I think in the end the laws that were passed kind of give it meaning. Essentially, something came of the tragedy, something, happened that made it worth it, that gave it meaning.” The Tommy’s law enforced safer boating practices and harsher penalties driving a boat inebriated. A similar law was passed in Missouri in honor of Tommy’s best friend Olivia who passed away in the same accident through the joint efforts of their families and friends. For the families of Tommy and Olivia, passing these laws and raising awareness about the dangers of alcohol and drug use while operating a boat gave meaning to their loss.

On May 25, 2020, Minneapolis Police killed resident George Floyd via cardiopulmonary arrest in what would spark, according to the New York Times, one of the largest mass protests in U.S. history (Buchanan et al. 2020). Rising against countless cases of police brutality in African-American communities across the United States, protesters who recorded the restraint methods that led to Floyd’s death also recorded these protests. These videos showed countless episodes of peaceful protest, violent police response, and violent looting, shifting public opinion towards police reform and renewed effort into promoting anti-racist causes. Without social media, the effect of these deaths and protests would not be nearly so amplified. Several research interview
and survey research participants joined in the mass grieving and protests. George Floyd’s death shows how unrelated communities and grievers can be connected by death and how death creates a community of grievers.

These protests began as acts of communal grief. Organized online on places such as Facebook, what might have been a funeral march attended by hundreds saw thousands join, with thousands more watching online. These protests became multi-day events, where social media activism was spurred by near-constant fact-checking against attempted distortions of the facts by factions either interested in maintaining the status quo or promoting white supremacy. This fact checking, driven by communal grief felt worldwide, largely by people who had never met George Floyd of his family, became the impetus of a movement still very much alive and well.

Social media like Facebook grants communities the ability to mourn at a distance and act, making the action of mourning less passive and focused on change and transformation. Death being a social event, the aftermath of these deaths is very much what Anthony Hubert was talking about when he described the need to “do something.” Even if viewers could not attend protests in Minneapolis, they could donate time, money, and energy to larger causes or organized their own local protests. It granted grief solidarity, the family and friends of Floyd in Minneapolis and Houston being surrounded by global support in the memory of their deceased friend, father, brother, and son. Facebook was central to that and made it visible for all.

Willow Campbell studied anthropology as an undergrad and was happy to participate in my study. She was a thirty-year-old full time stay at home mom and a leader in her conservative Lutheran church. We met in her church on a quiet afternoon. I conducted the interview in her church’s fellowship hall, while my son played in the church’s nursery. I began my interview with Willow Campbell by reminding her of the focus of my study as she filled out her consent form.
My description sparked her interest as she recalled my survey that she had responded to a few months earlier. She said, “Yeah, yeah, exactly! Social media as a tool for grieving. I think really, people are looking for comfort from people that can’t be physically near. And I wonder if that’s like, I dunno, it almost feels like a substitute for physical comfort, but it works!” I went on to ask her if there was a particular person she had lost since Facebook whom she wanted to talk about. She answered:

“The only person that was truly, truly close to me that I’ve lost, and thankfully that I... I’ve lost since I’ve had a Facebook.... Is Abby. Her story was all over the news. She’s one of my best friends, since fifth grade, and she was killed a few years ago, 2014, I think. And we did use a lot of Facebooking especially because it made the news, because the woman [who hit Lauren with her automobile] fled and they had to track her down and put her in jail and all that stuff...it was a weird circumstance honestly, because she passed away and I’m airing my grievances and seeking comfort or something on social media. But it was complicated. I mean, that was a witch hunt! I mean geez. And I didn’t participate in that part. I don’t do Internet justice! But you know...”

She paused a moment thinking back on the implications. Intrigued by what she meant, I inquired further, “It was a witch hunt? What do you mean by witch hunt?”

Willow took a deep breath, “OK, so, so, it probably would help to know the story... So there was like a crazy busy turn, and she was in the left-hand turn lane on her scooter and she couldn’t turn because it was oncoming traffic, and this lady was Facebooking, like taking videos on Facebook, and she slammed into her and killed her immediately. But she didn’t stop, she slammed into her and carried her body for 400 yards, and people were trying to flag her down, They were like getting out of their cars and trying to wave her down and yelling at her to stop and yelling at her ‘you have a scooter on your hood!’ But she was doing that Facebook live video feed thing and she didn’t stop. And she finally did stop, she was like, ‘well she hit me!’ But you can see the skid, from where Abby was dragged, I mean like... everything. She tried to deny it. But none of the bystanders, none of the police, nobody believed her.”
According to eyewitness accounts documented in local newspapers, TV news programs, Facebook, and eventually the legal system, Abby Ross died following an automobile accident. Abby was driving a scooter and she was in the left turn lane waiting to turn left, when she was struck from behind by a woman driving a mid-size car. The women who hit her was video recording herself using Facebook’s live-streaming feature. Her eyes on her phone, she did not notice that she had hit someone and failed to heed the car horns, shouts, and waving arms of witnesses. Her car dragged Abby for several hundred feet until finally stopping at a very busy intersection. After being charged with vehicular manslaughter and given a court date, the driver skipped her court date and went into hiding. Rather than waiting for the police, people on Facebook actively attempted to track the woman down, engaging in what Willow referred to as Internet justice.

“But the lady, they took her to court. They [the judge] said here’s your date come back over we are going to charge you with vehicular manslaughter. We’re gonna sentence you and all that, it's a big two-part deal. In between that she fled, they tracked her down to Little Rock and she was hiding and somebody gave her away, anyway so it was this big deal, then she went on the news and said ‘This girl hit me,’ and Lauren's family went on there saying ‘We forgive you,’ but I mean we were so gracious but this lady was crazy. She was posting Facebook videos all the time, she was taking Facebook videos all the time. And she deleted her Facebook when she realized it was incriminating because she was Facebooking, like live Facebooking, or whatever, while she hit her. So she deleted her Facebook. So that's why I think this is great for your paper. Because Facebook is part of the crime, and part of the cause of death. Anyway, so it did turn out to be a big ordeal because, Abby was, when you grow up in Conway you're called a townie, so there were so many of us still in college who had known her forever, there were so many people in her community who had known her whole life. We were just super devastated. And then there was a small group of people who were posting this lady's Facebook and screenshotting all the shit this lady was posting and all the shit she's done.” Willow’s eyes went wide, and I laughed, “Sorry! My pastor curses in the church all the time, so it's ok.” I smile and say, “Yeah” to reassure her I’m not offended. She
continues, “So there was this small, small percentage of her friends who were using Facebook as sort of like a tool to track this woman down. Have you seen her? Turn her in. She needs to go to jail.”

I asked, “So they had like a picture of her or something?” Willow says, “They had everything! They had mugshots, they had her Facebook screenshots. We knew who this woman was. They had her car, her license plate, everything. I, I think they thought they would have closure if they found her, you know what I mean? And there is still not closure. You know what I mean. You kind of crest this hill and you're still always on the downhill. You never really land, you know, so I'm on the downhill now, but I think some people needed that boost, you know?” I responded, “Yeah, yeah. And maybe, it was just kind of something to focus on?” Willow answered, “Yeah, yeah it was distracting, but it was an issue too, a real issue, because she [Abby] did deserve justice, to have this lady [punished], because it wasn’t her first infraction either. So you know, the scales were not in her favor, and the people really just wanted her caught and in jail. And I think there were many reasons for that.” Willow paused for a moment reflecting.

Then she added, “It was a big deal, too. And it was weird because people who didn't even know her jumping in on like THV like ‘find her!’ It's crazy. It got people all riled up and people didn’t even know her, and the people who knew her best, I think most of us couldn't participate in that vigilante because I don't want to say we were more grief-stricken and devastated but it feels that way. I’m not saying I knew her better, I deserve to grieve more, but that's all that consumed us, none of us thought past that. I hope that makes sense.” I responded, “You were still in the midst of your…” She responded, “Shock, it was still shock really. And I don’t know how people are able to get over it that fast. That they were able to move on, yeah. But maybe I wanted to sit in that shock for a minute. Maybe they move on faster than I do? But also there’s just some part of me that just doesn't believe in vigilante justice like that, like there’s a small part of me that does, but in this case the police will find her, she’s one lady, she can’t go far. She posts on Facebook every five seconds. And so, I think, it's so often that vigilante justice gets the wrong people, do you remember the Boston bombing where people were like 'It's these guys, they have backpacks!' Thanks Internet, they were just wearing a backpack. And it turns out that it wasn't those guys, it was these two brothers. It wasn't even close to the guys. So it's not something to participate in. So in odd cases like that, like in my case, when Facebook is tied in with the murder and the grief, it's hard to separate them.”

I ask, “So were you watching, what those people were posting?” She responded enthusiastically, “Oh my gosh, yes! I was
just glued, glued to it, just I maybe didn't want to feel alone. I had to just turn it off sometimes. And this is, this is how I would decompress, I would just hold my kids during their naptime and I would just rock them and sing my favorite hymns to them. You can't keep yourself jacked up, your adrenaline has to turn off at some point. And you know, when I was glued to it, it was every development. Have they caught her killer? Is there any new news about Abby? Has her family put out another statement? And of course they haven't. I was in contact with them. But I was still glued. What other friend hasn't heard? Have they just now found out? It was sensationalized. Honestly!” Based on the sound of her voice and her body language, I could tell that Willow was getting hyped up just by recalling it. We both took a couple of deep breaths, sighed, and our mood and energy shifted, and she said, “I think it showed me the depth and the breadth of Lauren’s relationships. Which was really interesting to look back and say ‘I didn't know you knew her.’ ‘Oh my gosh I didn't know she…’ And that was always so interesting, and that was one of the sweet bits.” I asked her, “Do you think it surprised you how far her impact reached? How many lives she touched?” She responded, “Yeah, I kinda knew she knew everyone, that's kind of how they [Abby and her family] are, but it was really great to see it and I think that's what sort of helped me, when I was on the crest of that hill, the day of her funeral, no it was visitation, I went up and I was talking to her brothers and I hugged her mom and we were just looking at her, just a bunch of us girls, like her core group of girls, like five of us and we all rode together, and we made sure not to wear black because she was so bright and flashy, and her brother in fact described her as suave and fabulous, so I wore like a bright yellow dress and one my girlfriends wore chartreuse, all five of us, we were rainbow colored, and her brother came up and said "She talked about you all the time and she loved you so dearly" and I was like, that's it, that's what I needed to know, that I can be loved by somebody and I can love somebody, and be confident in that love. Just to know that I can do that, I'm ok. And I think that's all the reassurance I needed. No amount of "Facebook Justice" would have done that.”

The virtual and physical realities of Willow’s narrative paint a clear picture of how deeply Facebook is interwoven into the lives and deaths of its users. The accident that resulted in Abby’s death is an intense example of distracted driving. While waiting in the turning lane to turn left on her scooter, Abby was struck from behind by car whose driver was recording herself
and streaming that video footage live on Facebook. Witnesses attempted to flag down and stop the driver, but they also got out of their cars to record and photography the accident as it was happening. When the driver failed to appear for her court date, Abby’s extended social network leapt into action to track down the driver who was still actively posting on Facebook in the midst of an on-going manhunt. After she was apprehended, the driver continued to claim that Abby hit her, refusing to accept responsibility. Abby’s family made official statements forgiving the driver, which Willow called a gracious act of faith. But Internet outrage and attempts at vigilante justice continued. Once the driver was back in custody and justice was served, Abby’s family, close friends, and community were able to focus on mourning Abby and begin healing.

It was meaningful for Willow to be able to see how many people’s lives were touched by her friend Abby in her short 26 years. She understood the surge of Facebook posts on Abby’s Timeline and the attempted to track down Abby’s killer as proof of how many people cared about Abby and shared in her loss. But in hindsight, she was also acutely aware of how the sensationalized dimensions of the Facebook activity in response to her friend’s death kept her in a state of high adrenaline, actively maintaining the momentum of crisis. Rather than engage in unnecessary Internet justice, Willow “wanted to sit in” her shock. She found a quiet comfort in singing old church hymns as she rocked her children to sleep. But it was attending Abby’s visitation with her close girlfriends and hearing Abby’s brother tell her that Abby loved her that brought her the healing she desperately needed. Hearing Abby’s brother confirm the closeness and meaning of her relationship with Abby, was powerfully comforting to her in a way that all the hype of Facebook had not been.
6.2 Grief Solidarity

In special cases, the deceased’s Facebook Timeline is transformed into a spontaneous Facebook shrine as Facebook friends re-write the deceased’s life story as an ancestral narrative. This re-narration is a collaborative process which re-enforces social cohesion which is experienced and described within the framework of grief solidarity between those who share a loss. Drawing on Raphaëlle Rabanes’s (2019) concept of lateral solidarity as capable of counteracting of hierarchies, I define solidarity here in terms of shared experience that allows people to become collaborators, in light of, perhaps even in spite of, traditional barriers created by social hierarchy and perceived authority.

I interviewed Megan Becker in the home of a close friend in Monroe, LA. She came to Monroe from Boston through the Teach for America program. Ms. Becker, as she is known to her students, is a young, lively mathematics teacher. Our interview primarily focused on the sudden loss of her best friend from college who was struck by an automobile when walking to her car after a night at the bar with work colleagues.

“I had a close friend die in September [2016]. Her name was Fiona Fitzgerald. We met our freshman year of college, and we were just super close. We both went to college at Penn State. I would say that I had very few college memories that don’t include her. We were roommates our senior year, we shared an apartment. I would say that we hung out every single day. And then even when I moved away, after college when I moved here to Louisiana, we still talked, we still Skyped one another, SnapChatted. She was a huge support for me when I felt like teaching had been a huge mistake, she sent me texts, and she sent me care packages, and, um, just all kinds of things. So we stayed super close, after college.”
I asked, “When did you first learn about her passing?” She responded, “It was Labor Day weekend of this past September. It was the Saturday morning of Labor Day weekend, I was at the high school trying to things ready for the upcoming week, just trying to get ahead. And I got a text from one of our close mutual friends [Joey] from college, asking if I could call her because it was an emergency. And she said that there was a car accident and that she didn’t have a lot of details, but that Fiona did not make it.”

I followed up asking her, “Do you think that it was helpful that she asked you to call and then she told you, instead of telling you in the text message?” Megan responded, ‘Yeah, I think so. I would say that I knew right away that something was wrong, I remember that all her text said was “Please call me as soon as you can.” I knew that she wasn’t joking, but I felt like there was a chance that she’d say “Just kidding.” She and I didn’t talk very long, but it was helpful for me to hear her say that. And also we made plans. So we all hung out in a kind of similar friend circle but there were people that she was closer to and that I was closer to, and so that friend that called, Joey, I knew that Joey was calling people but I knew that there were some people I would be calling because she wouldn’t be, so that was good for me as well.”

“And so everyone you contacted, were all those phone calls?” I asked. She said, “Yeah. And I sent some texts that said like, “Call me when you can” if some people didn’t just pick up.” Then I asked, “And did you make any plans with any of these friends as you called them or was it just notification?” Megan responded, “I would say it was just notification. At that point we just didn’t have a lot of information, but we knew that information would be coming, so like, the closest friend that I called, Amy, she and I probably did more like planning talk, where we talked like, ‘Ok do you want to come up to Pennsylvania? Like, what do you want to do? Should we like do this or that, then she said you hang up but call me later tonight?’ So she and I talked plans, but for other people around the friend group, it was more a notification and a ‘I’ll talk to you more once either of us hear more.’”

Megan continued, “Since the funeral, talking with some of my friends has been helpful for me. So that’s been good. Um, I
sometimes still cry a little bit, and I do a lot of prayer about it, and that has been helpful as well.” I asked, “And the friends that you’re talking to about it, are they mutual friends?” She answered, “Mmhmm, yeah, they’re friends that Fiona and I were both close to in college.”

While people participate in funerals face-to-face in real time, in a shared physical space, the virtual space of Facebook shrines facilitates the much longer process of grieving. Megan tells me that she keeps up with her close friends through phone calls, texts, Skype, Snapchat, and Facebook. She mentions that she makes Facebook posts about Fiona when she comes across a memory or something really reminds her of Fiona. This support network was important to Megan. Since she can no longer reach out to Fiona to tell her “hey this song reminds me of you,” she instead posts about it on Fiona’s Facebook Timeline. She also keeps up with her friends’ Facebook posts about Fiona.

She explained, “I would normally like the status or the post or whatever it is, and I would comment if I’m like directly connected to whatever they posted about, so if it’s like a memory I really was connected to, I might add something to it.” Then she added, “But if it’s just like a ‘I miss you Fiona’ post I would normally just like it, I wouldn’t comment.” Megan went on to say, “I would say that when I want to express grief, I’ll often, post something about it, either I’ll Tweet something or post something about it on Facebook. I’ll often pray like in that moment, um, and I think that the next thing that I’ll do is text someone close to me, um, and just say how I’m feeling, like I’m having a hard time right now.”

This process of making a social media post, saying a prayer, and then reaching out to a close friend via text shows a complex pattern of communication and connection when faced with a need to express grief. It was one of the most methodical and healthy patterns I came across in this research and it was deeply intertwined with her faith, her network of support, and her self-awareness of what worked for her. It is important to note that she felt supported by close friends
and family and reassured by her faith. Even with those twin pillars she felt supported in her grief, processing the loss was still hard for Megan.

When I asked her, “When you, you’re not the one posting, when it’s a friend or a family member of hers, and it just comes up in your News Feed and it just comes up, how does that affect you?,” she pulled back and inhaled sharply as if even thinking about it was painful. Then Megan responded, “It feels like I’m being kicked. It feels like a physical reaction still, and my stomach kind of hurts a little bit. And I still feel that longing and that desire to still have her around.” After gathering her thoughts for a moment, she continued, “You have to understand, Fiona was the linchpin. The central person bringing everyone together. Fiona was the glue!”

I ask her, “How do you think the loss has affected your friends, as a whole, as a group?” She picks up her refrain, “I think it destroyed all of us. Fiona, we didn’t really discuss this until after she had died, but she was very much the kind of central piece of the group. She was the one that everybody centered around and the one that held everybody together. So the whole friend group without Fiona is just like two separate friend groups, and we all get along like it’s fine, but there’s a group of us who more naturally get along than the other group and we all don’t necessarily go out of our way to intermingle and don’t go out of our way to talk. And we still talk and things like that. But um… So, like, one friend lives in, she now lives in DC, and I’m not planning a trip to see her in DC. But my friend who still lives in Pittsburgh, even if I didn’t have family there, I’d be planning a trip to visit her. So, we’re sigh, so, Fiona was the one that, was the reason we hung out as a big group was because of Fiona, and everybody loved Fiona and she was everybody’s friend. And I think that it really really hurt some of my friends so. My one friend Julie had just hung out with her the weekend before, Fiona had visited her in Boston, and that was really brutal for her. My friend Amy, um, it was also brutal for her, we, me, Fiona, and Amy talked a lot and we were in group text and went to each other for advice when we needed it. And Amy, I think was really hit hard. She really didn’t expect it, and really was processing through, just struggling with how to process through it. So I would say it really destroyed, Joey, she kind of had to be the messenger for all of it, so I think that was really hard and brutal for her, so I would say it destroyed us. And like, we’re ok, and we’re not, I would say we’re not angry, um, I would say we all processed it together when we went at the funeral and we handled it well together and interestingly Fiona was still the glue at her funeral, um, even though she wasn’t there, and it
was, um, just, a good group of people processing this together. And so we’re still friends and still talk to those people and one girl’s getting married and I’ll go to her wedding and stuff like that, but Fiona was the glue that made that one big group.”

I followed up asking, “Do you still, you know you said there were two groups, do you still talk to the people in the other group? Megan replied, “Yes, mmhm. It’s not as regular as the group I’m closer to, but it’s like, 21st century talking to each other, so it’s like SnapChatting a lot or like, we share things on Facebook and stuff like that. And some of my friends, we still check in on each other, kind of like, “How are you doing? Are you handling Fiona’s death ok?” But that’s checking in within the close groups. So that’s one group check-in with each other and the other group only check-in with each other, with one exception. There’s one girl who goes across the groups to check in. It’s nice she’s tryin’ but she’s no Fiona.”

At the end of college years, many people prune their social networks and remain close to the few close friends who really meant something to them. Fiona was a charismatic person who held together a large group of girl friends who would have otherwise been two small tight-knit groups. She “was the glue.” Her death brought all these girls back together again. Megan says, “they handled it well together.” Their sense of belonging and solidarity are echoed in Facebook posts, both those made by Megan and her friends and the posts made by other participants in this project. I observed the phrase “we are going through this together” in the comments across a wide range of mourning posts. Similarly, many commenters would let posters know, “you’re not alone” or “we are here for you.”

In summary, I emphasize again that the sense of togetherness generated in the communal mourning rituals allows a community to arise through the networked space of the deceased’s Facebook Timeline. The community that emerges on Timelines-turned-Facebook Shrines is a community of grievers. Evident in the posts and comments associated with Facebook Shrines, the community of grievers supports one another online by recognizing the grief experience of the primary poster and offering emotional support. But interview participant’s grief narratives reveal
that this community of grievers, while organized online, frequently takes this a step further and supports one another offline as well. Communal mourning and a support network surrounding the bereaved in solidarity are not new or unusual aspects of social organization that follow a death. However, the fact that this community of grievers is not physically bound and can therefore facilitate mourning and support grievers regardless of geographic distance is a particular adaptation well-suited to globally mobile and increasingly urban populations which find themselves greatly removed from the communities of their birth. The communal mourning practices of Facebook allow users to participate remotely in a community of grievers.

Facebook Shrines also generate an imagined community. The virtual mourning rituals of Facebook allow specific geographically dispersed networks to transcend beyond imagined community to genuine cultural intimacy. The implications for this are global as the technology extends the limits of what constitutes community beyond geographic closeness. Based on the ethnographic evidence I have collected, Facebook Shrine posts are capable of initiating community action which includes political activism. The digital/physical divide is constantly permeated as community action which begins online frequently leads to in-person action and these in-person events are frequently shared online. This pattern of cycling between in-person and digital communal mourning and grief inspired action draws in non-Facebook users and Facebook users who were initially hesitant towards Facebook Shrine participation.

6.3 Gendered Dynamics of Mourning on Facebook

The communal dimensions of grief and mourning revealed other layers to Facebook mourning, namely the importance of gender to the dynamics of grief. According a 2018 Pew Research study of social media use in the United States, an estimated 54% of Facebook users in the US are female. However, 76% of survey respondents self-identified as female and 73% of
Interview Participants were women. Of the randomly selected posts identified during participant-observation, 81% were made by women. Women constituted 85.5% of the Facebook users commenting on these posts. Gender analysis of Facebook users was based on analysis of their name, profile picture, and self-selected publicly identified gender on Facebook.

Figure 16 Gender of Posters
Of the 22 women interviewed as part of this study, 19 of them framed their death and family crisis related responsibilities within a gendered context which they linked to their specific roles as mothers, daughters, and sisters. These women most commonly described their role online as a continuation of their familial duties offline. Pam Landry of Little Rock, AR, a 59-year old bookkeeper, said following the death of her mother,

“Everyone started looking to me as matriarch, with mom gone, I kind of took on that role. Selling the house, the car, handling funeral arrangements, checking-in with everyone that they were holding up ok. Facebook was more of the same. I announced mom’s death, made the first official post on behalf of the family, thanked everyone for their condolences and support on behalf of the family. It’s an oldest daughter thing, you know. The oldest girl handles these things and keeps the family together. So, when mom passed that was me. I even started looking after her brother.” She laughed, “We all take care of each other, but you know what I mean.”
Her official role providing updates on Facebook began while her mother was still in the hospital. During our interview in her office, she told me, “A lot of people knew that my mom was sick, so we [Pam and her sister] would update Facebook. I would also call personal friends, but you get to where you can’t call everybody and so me and my sister would put updates on Facebook and then when she passed away, we also posted on Facebook. Because there was a lot of people out there that we didn’t call or you know, word of mouth, somebody that might know my sister knows one of my mom’s friends, my mom was friend, she was a rock, so she had tons of friends.”

Pam indicated that Facebook status updates throughout the entire illness and later death helped her manage her stress level by allowing quick communication with friends and family as a whole, rather than having to individually message people or make emotional phone calls. Not only did it help manage her stress and quicken communication, but it helped her privatize her emotions, saying, “Oh yeah, because it’s easier, at that point in time it’s easier to type, to put it on Facebook than to talk because I don’t, because when I start talking about it, I get upset. Facebook you’re not gonna, you can be crying and typing. And nobody knows.”

Social media allows families to rapidly communicate updates and funeral information without the emotional exhausting work of making individual calls. It also allows people not physically present to participate in communal mourning. While this extension of communal mourning positively affects the reported grief experience of many individuals, it also constitutes a transformation of kinship roles and expectations in response to death as online grief performance increasingly becomes a social expectation. These emerging online kinship roles and responsibilities are gendered. The women in this study were more like to report actively participating in mourning on Facebook. Women participants were also more likely to continue making mourning posts for longer periods of time. The response mourning posts receive is also gendered. Three out of four comments analyzed for this study were made by women and women
were also three times more likely to acknowledge a mourning post using one of Facebook’s emoticon reactions.

In many ways, the roles and expectations associated with mourning practices of Facebook are an extension of the in-person kinship roles and expectations surrounding times of family crisis or following a death in much of the mid-South region. Communicating officially on behalf of the family, organizing events and social support, and honoring the memory of the deceased are all traditional familial expectations, which fall heavily on the shoulders of female family members. But the social expectation of extended public mourning on Facebook, constitutes a shift in cultural norms. While displays of emotion may run high during the funeral and the days leading up to it, family members are not expected to publicly perform their mourning after the official communal mourning rituals of the visitation and funeral are complete. Online grief performance is increasingly becoming a social expectation and many research participants reported feeling uncomfortable with the emerging kinship roles on Facebook surrounding the death of a loved one.

Talking through how her family dealt with the death of her husband, LSU historian Alice Wolf indicated that the loss of her husband Diego brought to light issues of identity and status as his aunt attempted to assert her dominance over Alice after his death. He was the only male of a predominantly traditional Mexican family and thus patriarch, and after his death, the power structure of the family changed. Alice said, “But then like suddenly, it was like I didn’t exist. Cause here was his aunt, divvying out the things for other people, and it’s like, technically this belongs to me. I feel like it was an interesting moment to really figure out where you rank in the family. So, like all of the sudden, like I didn’t exist anymore. I was invisible, you know.” With the exception of Diego’s niece and nephew, whom she helped raise, the rest of Diego’s family
excluded Alice, especially after she remarried years later. To Diego’s sister, this was particularly insulting, with Alice indicating, “She was like, essentially, I was supposed to be widowed, I was a relic. A relic forever. I was 40. Can you think about what is like to be alone for the rest of your life? He wouldn’t want that.” Communication since then has been tense, with the family even moving Diego’s elderly mother to a different nursing home and not telling Alice, who regularly wrote letters to her. Yet despite this, the sister in question lost her first husband and remarried, highlighting for Alice a hypocrisy within the otherwise accepted system.

Understanding Alice’s role as a widow and her place in social hierarchy of her husband’s family deeply impacted her grief experience. She continued her narrative, telling me the role Facebook played and how family dynamics shaped her experience with mourning on Facebook. Like Pam, Facebook was a way of keeping the family up to date with regard to Diego’s health and ultimately his passing. After his death, there was the typical outpouring of support, including Mourning Status Updates and Facebook Shrine posts about the last time fellow grievers saw him, about what he meant to them, about how much he would be missed. In all of this, Alice realized she did not want to take part, as a large part of it seemed to be a kind of grief-related arms race, where posts became more elaborate and attempted to one-up others. For Alice, it was insulting, because while the family had lost a son, nephew, and brother, she had lost a husband, and while they were thousands of miles away, she had to continue to live in the same space she shared with Diego for years after his passing. This arms race eventually led to resentment that Diego had a Facebook page at all but presented a catch-22. Alice remarked, “I really started to feel like... increasingly I wish it wasn’t there, I’ve actually thought about taking the page down several times. But I think there’d be angry people, if I took it down. I think there would be really hostile people, who I think, for them it is still this cathartic outlet...” Thus Diego’s page became locked
in time for a period, reminding her and others of events like his birthday or apps he had installed on Facebook, and still listing him as married. Alice herself remained Facebook-married to Diego for six months after his death, in part because of pressure she felt from the family. Thus changing her relationship status ended up being a significant moment in Alice’s grief process. It was not only an important symbolic step that eased communications with friends, it also immediately changed her user experience on Facebook as Facebook’s algorithm naturally distances users who are no longer in a relationship together.

Alice’s relationship with her husband’s family proved to be a significant factor in her experience. She describes a pressure to perform. While she found mourning on Facebook therapeutic in the early stages of her grief process, she found the experience coercive as time progressed. She felt trapped by the expectations of her deceased husband’s family.

Kinwork is vital to maintaining social cohesion of the family and extended kin and friend groups. Facebook is a tool of kinwork that allows its users to keep up with the lives of their family, friends, and extended networks. Facebook speeds up family communications and allows its users to share family photos, life announcements, and holiday greetings through one central platform reducing the time requirement of letter and card writing. It facilitates the planning of family events like holiday and birthday parties through its group chat and event functions. It also allows its users to gain social capital from successful family events and holidays when the pictures and stories on Facebook for all their friends and family to see.

While Facebook offers its users many conveniences which facilitate kinwork, particularly Facebook activities become a new manifestations of the social obligation kinwork. Once kinwork is transitioned to Facebook, it becomes something that is expected. In my grief narrative interviews, kinwork obligations and social expectations to participant in mourning on Facebook
was mentioned by 52% of interviewees. Male interview participants were less likely to discuss Facebook activity as a social obligation or familial expectation only a third did so, by comparison 57% of female interview participants did so. There was variability in the degree of discomfort people expressed in regard to these obligations and it is an area that merits further investigation to determine the degree to which Facebook aids kinwork or creates new kinwork as well as to the degree to which Facebook expands kinship responsibilities to male family members. There is a social obligation and expectation of appropriate mourning on Facebook. In particular, female interview participants talked a lot about the role they played keeping the deceased’s memory alive and keeping the family together after the death.

While time marches on from the passing of the deceased, remembrance of the dead becomes a semiannual occurrence. The dead remains with the living in memory, and thus with regards to Facebook shrines, becomes a point to maintain and upkeep the Facebook Shrine. Maintenance becomes a matter of upkeep of a Facebook shrine so that the living can continue to post, to read, and to participate in the continuation of that Shrine. These occur on important anniversaries, such as dating, marriage, birth, or death, or on important holidays that remind the living of the dead. These and other important days become points in time where the living actively engage the Facebook Shrine and continue posting.

While not all direct participants in Facebook mourning practices are women, the majority are. Historical and cross-culturally, it has frequently been noted that women play a crucial role in death practices, with noted exceptions. Women take on the primary responsibility for Facebook Shrine maintenance. In her grief narrative interview, Pam Landry noted that as the oldest daughter she took on many family responsibilities when her mother became terminally ill and these responsibilities only expanded following her mother’s death. In the mid-South, familial
duty is frequently gendered. Traditional, social norms and familial expectations about gender and care giving roles persist, especially outside of urban areas. Female research participants spoke about this most often in terms of obligation. Interestingly, a third of male research participants mentioned feeling powerless to disagree with their female relatives regarding Facebook mourning. Brother Bobby Brown stands as an excellent example of this power struggle.

Of the twelve Facebook Shrine cases, I considered women were the dominant posters in eleven cases, one case was not. Sharron Benton died in the spring of 2015 leaving behind her husband Jerry Benton and her 19-year-old son Craig. Jerry fell apart. Even before her death he began posting to Facebook about the vivid details of her declining health and his emotional state as her sole care giver. The year before his mother’s death, Craig got a job out-of-state and moved in with his girlfriend. Jerry was alone. At the time of our interview, he told me that he hadn’t spoken to his siblings in years. He also told me that he and his wife had become estranged from her sisters during to her illness. A retired schoolteacher, Jerry lacked familial support, was out of touch with colleagues, and rejected offers of support from his minister and church. There are a lot of complicated mental health issues and social vulnerabilities that Jerry Benton is facing that are outside my expertise. What I can speak to is social media use, the warning signs that are evident in his case, and how it is an exception to my rule of female dominated mourning on Facebook that may indicate why it is so important that widowers have female family members to support them through mourning on Facebook.

When I interviewed him more than two years after his wife’s passing, he had recent begun actively using both his and his wife’s accounts. He regularly posts and comments using her account. He makes a post with his account and then comment on his own post using her account. He will also comment on other people’s post using her account. This behavior escalated
in the two years following our interview in both scope and frequency. He has now renamed her account “Sharron Morgan” Jerry Benton” and posts as her several times a day. In these posts, he will tag himself and others so that at the top of the post reads: “Sharron Morgan Jerry Benton is with Jerry Benton and 6 others.” Jerry would make an emotional post about his wife tagging her account and then comment as Sharron thanking everyone for their loving responses. But he extends this rare posting behavior beyond the scope of mourning posts. One post he made with her account, tagged his son. The text read “Sharron ……………….praying for you!…………….” The post also included an image which combined a recent picture of Craig and the message “praying for you while you get your wisdom teeth pulled!” Without context, this post appears to be from Craig’s mother, which is why many find it unnerving. Jerry’s explanation for his behavior is that his wife simply has more friends than he did and he was to make sure that they see whatever it is he is posting. In the interview, he was dismissive as though it was a non-issue. But his posting behavior is a major break with social norms. In informal interviews and grief narrative interviews, his co-workers and friends reported that they find this behavior very disturbing to witness. Many of whom reported that they hid his content, unfollowed, and even unfriend one or both accounts.

While I am not a mental healthcare provider, it was clear to me that Jerry’s behavior was a result of a weakened support network and an utter lack of appropriate familial females to maintain the integrity of the shrine or the family’s social identity. His chief issue is a degradation of his social health following the loss of this wife and it has played out in painful detail for a networked public audience. His son could theoretically have attempted to step in and resolve the situation but given the cultural context it was not unexpected that he did not. Based on the

12 Morgan was her maiden name, which she kept as a middle name with they married.
familial responsibilities that were consistently reported in grief narrative interviews a daughter would know it was her duty to step in, while there is less social expectation for a son to intervene given typical gender dynamics of the kinwork of grief and mourning on Facebook for the Mid-South. Which was exactly what Jerry’s son did. He moved away and Jerry reports constant struggles to communicate with Craig. Craig responds to his father’s upsetting social media use by “taking a break from Facebook.” Observers know something is wrong, but there is not an appropriate family member to step up. He and his wife alienated much of their female family members, both his and her sisters in particular.

Things began to change in early 2019. Jerry’s mourning posts decreased in frequency. The latest mourning post he made was to acknowledge his anniversary, bringing his mourning activity much more in line with what I have documented in the other Facebook Shrine cases at the end of the ritual cycle. What brought on this change? In February of 2019, Craig married his long-time girlfriend and moved back home. He and his wife now live less than thirty minutes away from Jerry. Even Jerry’s mourning has shifted to the maintenance stage of the ritual cycle, though he continues to make posts using his wife’s account.

Grief more commonly has the power to bring families together. Stephine Wilson, a 45-year-old social worker, mother, and preacher’s wife, described not just the death of her cousin but also the grief of her close friends following the loss of their son. She discussed several local accidents, health crises, and deaths. I spoke with Stephine at kitchen table in the Methodist parsonage she shared with her husband and two children. Her grief narrative focused on prolonged illness of her mother and her cousin Jimmy’s recent death after a long fight with HIV. Facebook played a major role in her family’s communication as she updated everyone on her mother’s health and her cousins in New Orleans updated everyone on the status of Jimmy’s
health. Stephine remarked on how supported she felt by everyone’s comments on Facebook and how important it was to her and her mother to know that so many good people really cared and were praying for her recovery. After two long years of extensive treatment, Stephine’s mother’s cancer went into remission. It was later that winter that her cousin Jimmy died. Stephine describes feeling supported by the community on Facebook when her cousin died, but she also describes feeling united as a community, particularly a spiritual community in the public mourning and prayer request posts with which she engaged. This emotional performance serves as a rite of solidarity for Stephine and her spiritual community.

She also spoke at length about the community’s response on Facebook after local boy, a member of her church, had a traumatic automobile accident.

When talking about his mother’s prayer requests posts on Facebook, Stephine said,

“and what a miracle, I mean, oh my gosh, what a divine intervention that was, and I mean, we all kept up with it, and that would be a good one for you, Glenda, she just kept us updated on Facebook, and um. Everybody kept up with it and really came together for their family. And to the point that there was a parade when he came home, and um, I think that being able to surround and give the support that you need, and alerting people and letting people know what’s going and what’s needed. And when you believe in prayer and get the prayer chains going, and you know, cuz truly I believe that God listens, and that’s a big part of that, that the prayer requests happen. And when I say prayers happen, they happen, I’m praying, and I believe that most people are the same way. And I think in those moments we’re united, that grief process hits all of us and we understand that. Death and taxes, it happens to us all. It’s gonna happen to all of us, and it’s one of those things that’s going to happen and it’s the one thing we can all relate to, that fear that we’re not sure what’s gonna happen and that fear of what am I going to do, what’s going to happen next, and how am I going to survive, how am I going to get through this?”

Stephine went on to say that “amidst all the uncertain that death and fear that death is coming with major accidents and terminal illnesses, it’s just so important to know that people are
there for you and that we are all in this together as a community, praying and supporting each other.”

This sense of coming together as a spiritual community support one another is an important part of the grief solidarity found in the community of grievers that emerge on Facebook. Beginning with the need to keep the family together by re-enforcing social bonds and supporting one another, the community focuses on supporting the bereaved family and it re-enforces their solidarity in their time of grief.

While I was speaking to Stephine Wilson about how useful she found Facebook both for communicating information with the family about her mother’s illness and keeping up with her cousin’s fight with cancer and family plans following his death, she was adamant about how important Facebook was to her as a platform that allowed her to do the work of kinwork. Even outside of the critical times of life-threatening illness and mourning, she used it to keep up with everyone. She argued that one of the most important things Facebook offered her was a communication channel that allowed her to keep up with family news and have the time to privately process socially shocking news so that her public responses on Facebook and later in-person can be comforting and supportive. She told me,

“Several times at the [family] reunion the other day, I was just thankful for Facebook because that’s how we know about one another’s lives. And things that I feel like we would have kept secret and would have felt shameful about before, now that are so much more in the open. Like I have a cousin, who is my generation, but we’re probably like third or second cousins—we share a great-grandmother and a great grandfather. But her husband left her, this last year. Well that’s not something that you want to have to go through telling each and every family member about, but we were all able to see on Facebook that she changed her relationship status, so there was no awkwardness. So before [Facebook] people would have kept that a secret, maybe, or, or there would have been awkward conversations with people asking, ‘Oh, where’s your husband?’ Instead we can bypass all that and be like, very supportive and encouraging and ask things like ‘What
can I do? How can I help?’ You know, whatever. I was able to reach out to her when it happened and do things to help before the reunion. But we aren’t super close and I think without Facebook maybe, probably, I wouldn’t have known until we got to the reunion and it would have been awkward. I would probably have made a face or she’d have been able to tell I was shocked. But this way I already knew, I guess, instead of awkward it being awkward I was able to be supportive instead.

I think it’s the same way with mourning, I guess. We find out the person is dead and we have our chance to really compose what we want to say in our post and I always make sure to reach out and contact the person. Give ‘em call, go see ‘em, send ‘em a message depending on how well I know them. But if you are just talking to someone and you ask about her husband and you find out he is dead right there… then you’re in shock, you’re grieving instead of focused on how you can help.”

Stephine was enthusiastic about the solidarity and support she and her friends and family received on Facebook. She also was adamant that for her Facebook was a highly convenient way to manage her kinwork duties and keep up with her extended family and spiritual community. But her positive experience was only shared by approximately 40% of interview participants; 8% were ambivalent reporting both positive and negative aspects of their use of Facebook during a time of mourning. Stephine Wilson enthusiastically embraced online mourning and kinwork on Facebook, 52% of interview participants reported feeling burdened by the pressure to mourning on Facebook. For Alice Wolfe and Tabitha Jackson, the kinwork obligations and social expectations of public mourning on Facebook were uncomfortable burdens that added to their distress.

In the gender analysis of Facebook Shrines, it is apparent that male participation occurs at a fairly steady rate of 1 in 5. 21% of the original posters in my random sample of twenty Facebook Shrines are male. This was one of the variables I utilized to verify the validity of my random sample as representative of the fully collection. For the full collection of Facebook Shrine posts, 20.6% of the original posters were male. This 1 male to every 4 female
participation ratio held true in the analysis of the gender of those reacting to the post which was 20% male but dropped to 14% of commenters.

Similar gender analysis of a representative sample of the Mourning Status posts in my collection reveals that men are slightly less likely to post a Mourning Status Update than to post to a Facebook Shrine. Gender analysis of the original posters indicates that only 13% of Mourning Status Update posters were men. Males made up 17% of the commenters and 21% of the reaction participation. Analysis of the reactions from Facebook Shrine posts indicates that 53% of reactions by men were the generic “Like” reaction compared to the “Like” reaction only being selected 35% of the time by women who engaged with Facebook Shrine posts. In similar analysis of the reactions to Mourning Status posts, 43.4% of reactions by male users were the “Like” compared to “Likes” making up only 27% of female reactions. Statistical analysis confirms what interviews suggested: kinwork of grief is a gendered activity. Mourning on Facebook is a space largely ruled by women.

6.4 Community of Grievers

The community of grievers is created through the ritual practices of mourning and kinwork discussed above. It is maintained primarily by female family members of the deceased. Wagner (2014) argues that a sense of community first emerges on the deceased’s Facebook timeline\(^\text{13}\) during the days immediately following a death, when family members use the deceased’s page. My research indicates that in these early days posts made on or tagging the deceased’s Timeline are used to communicate official information such as announcing the death, the obituary, and plans for funeral and memorial events and friends use the page to communicate

\(^{13}\) Wagner refers to these pages as a “memorial Facebook page,” but I call them Facebook Shrines to differentiate from Facebook pages which have been “memorialized” an official Facebook company term for the process of permanently freezing the account of the deceased.
their sympathy, support, and solidarity to the family. The interactivity of Facebook allows friends and family members to be in dialogue, friends can ask questions about the events and family members could put out requests for things like pictures and videos to include in the memorial. This pre-event interactivity allows previously separate members of the deceased’s network to communicate prior to meeting in-person at funerals, memorials, or visitations.

Wagner argues that due to interactions on Facebook Timelines of the deceased:

… bonds are not only strengthened between mourners but are created. The benefits for mourners are potentially substantial. If a Facebook memorial has an active community of mourners from the start, it is likely that the connections established on the page allow mourners to feel less isolated at the funerals/services themselves, as they are now surrounded by acquaintances rather than strangers. (Wagner 2014: 11).

My findings support Wagner’s claims and building on his work, I argue that meaningful interactions which take place on Facebook Shrines generate a sense of solidarity that strengthens and creates social bonds critical to the development of a community of grievers through the Facebook Shrine. This dynamic relationship between online communication and in-person memorial events continues as long as the memorial endures. It is seen in the case of the Facebook Shrines of Roger Wilkes, Tommy Jones, and for the example with little April Edison whose story was introduced in Chapter 1. These communities also show their potential in terms of facilitating mourning at distance for individuals who live far away from the deceased and his or her family, allowing friends and family to share their grief and show their support even at great physical distances. As attending funerals and memorials in-person has become harder now than ever with the COVID-19 health crisis, the importance of virtual mourning rituals of Facebook and the online community of grievers that it fosters is apparent.
In-person community events are often born out of online conversations, promoted through social media, and documented and celebrated online. Anthony Hubert describes how this happened with the online fund raiser that originated out of a desire to Roger Wilkie’s widow. Friends talking on Facebook decided to create an online fund raiser. The promoted the idea and raised funds through their social media accounts and Roger’s Facebook Shrine. Then they held an in-person event to given his widow the money and images and videos from the event were shared on Facebook. Susan Jones’ scavenger hunt and scholarship fund also followed this pattern of beginning online, culminating in an in-person event and then numerous posts resulting from the event. It is for that reason that ethnographic studies must consider both offline, physical, localized sociality and digital media and the social interactions that they represent. By examining how digital sociality interacts with local sociality, it is possible to understand the role of a global media-driven community in the lived experience of individuals. Social media and the cultural traditions for mourning which surround its use, foster a sense of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005) in online imagined communities (Anderson 1983).

Focusing on the role of communal grieving and social support in individual grief experience, I investigate the shifting nature of identity, social status, and kinship within social networks following a death. I coupled visual and textual analysis of social media content with participant-observation and in-depth grief narrative interviews, a technique I designed adapting illness narrative interviews to fit the specifics of grief experience. My textual analysis focused on emotional disclosure, support seeking behaviors, memorialization, religious language and symbolism, and prayer requests. This chapter found that grief solidarity and kinwork form a community of grievers through communal mourning at a distance.
The Internet of 2020 is proliferated with global media-driven communities which produce, share, consume, and re-imagine digital media. As a cultural region, the Internet can best be understood within the context of globalism which created it and continues to drive it. Digital technology has expanded the available modes of communication. Multiple layers of communication can coincide. The social networking site, Facebook, is a dynamic platform which generates a public space for networked audiences. It allows for generalized rapid mass communication: from making informational death announcements to emotional status updates to calls for support. Facebook’s capacities take on localized nuances as the platform is adapted to meet the demands of user’s local cultures particularly in a time of crisis such as that following a death.

Still raw from loss, Tommy’s family’s first Thanksgiving without him threatened to be the last. Everyone awaited his mother Susan’s arrival with apprehension but put on cheery, welcoming faces when she walked in. She wore a beautiful purple flower pinned to her sweater. Her sister Julia complimented her on the flower. Susan perked up right away seeing her opening, “The Internet says to plant irises. They help open up communication with the dead. I planted irises at the graveside and my house too. Iris is Greek. She brought the dead to the afterlife and carries their messages back to their loved ones.” She paused waiting for reactions and affirmations. “She’s the goddess of rainbows.” Her nephew offered, stifling bemusement and confusion at his very Protestant aunt’s newfound interest in a pagan goddess. Giving him a stern look, Susan’s niece added “Iris was in charge of communication too. That’s probably how she helps.” Susan nodded and patted her shoulder getting up from the table, softly repeating “Rainbows and Irises…” as she walked away. In the following days, Susan added rainbows to her grown list of psychopompic symbols. In the months that followed, irises were planted at the
homes of Susan’s two sisters. Susan, her sisters, and her niece all shared afterlife memes with spiritual language and iris and/or rainbow imagery.

Susan is a Southern woman in her early forties who has lived her entire life in Arkansas and adamantly professes Christian faith as a life-long member of the United Methodist Church. As she dealt with the loss of her young son, she joined multiple Facebook groups specifically for grieving mothers. In her words, these groups were her “salvation” during the darkest times of her grief. As global online communities with international memberships, these Facebook groups exposed Susan to a lot of new afterlife beliefs and symbolism, many of which she adopted as her own and introduced to her extended family.

In-person, culture is localized by the very nature of being physical and therefore geographically defined. Digital media and virtual worlds are intrinsically global and geographically unbounded. Traditionally, cultural regions primarily orient a research project spatially and situate an ethnographic project within the historical and broader cultural context. Cultural regions are organizational categories with a shared historical context and similar cultures, environments, and local political-economic dynamics (Lederman 2008: 315). Guyer (2004) argues that regional focuses guarantee a degree of accountability and grounding in all the relevant scholarship and local intellectual and artistic work. In recent decades, anthropologists have raised concerns regarding the limitations of geographically based cultural regions in an increasingly technologically global society. Appadurai (1996: 358) warns that certain cultural regions have become attached to specific “gatekeeping” concepts. Geographic categories are linked to an understanding of community as a group of people who interact face-to-face. According to Richard Bartle (2004) in Designing Virtual Worlds, the strength of a community is measured in the value community members see in being part of the community, in the amount of
time and work they are willing to put into the community is shared goals and projects, and in the
level of trust and capacity to understand one another and feel understood. The two highest levels
of community, Bartle terms communities of commitment and spiritual communities are highly
applicable to the community of grievers noted in this chapter. Bartle’s community of
commitment is noted by members’ willingness to invest a significant time and effort for the
benefit of the community. His spiritual community emerges from a community of commitment
when “members understand and trust each other so implicitly that they can communicate almost
intuitively” (Bartle 2004: 218). The communities of grievers that emerge on Facebook Shrines
are foraged with the robust community strength and many of them form as communities of
commitment dedicated to mourning and the work of grief. In rare cases, they are elevated, at
least for a time, to spiritual communities in which trust and understand allows members to shape
each other’s beliefs, mourning practices, and grief experience. It is the level of community
virtual world designers can only dream of creating and the type of connectivity that Facebook is
so eager to claim responsibility for, but the best thing Facebook can do to maintain it is to
acknowledge that is the users who are generating the value in these communities and allow them
to mourn and work through their grief together.

6.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the mourning practices of Facebook are a global, digital solution to a need
for communal mourning across increasingly dispersed networks. Social support for the bereaved
is the hallmark of the community activity that occurs on Facebook in response to a death.
Solidarity, which is greatly valued among many digital communities, is easily adapted in online
mourning practices to the concept of grief solidarity, which is described emicly through the
idiom “we are all going through this together.” Being able to grieve together is the most
beneficial aspect of mourning on Facebook. The community of griever that emerges on Facebook offers participants emotional comfort, and grief solidarity around the shared experience of the loss of a loved one. From raising money to sponsoring legislation, these grief communities are capable of mobilizing people into action. Media, schema, and ritual performance unite to generate cultural intimacy fostered in online communities through media rituals. The shared the experience of a loss can bring a group of friends closer together, as we saw particularly in the cases of Willow Campbell, Anthony and Amanda Hubert, and Stephine Wilson. Alternatively, the shared experience of loss can result in a splintering of a group as we saw in the case of Meagan Becker who was the group’s lynchpin. Shared experience and grief solidarity require that mourners give emotional disclosures, an act that focuses on individual grief.
CHAPTER 7
EMOTIONAL DISCLOSURE

As mentioned in chapters 5 and 6, Dr. Alice Wolfe lost her husband to cancer in her mid-thirties. She found that taking on the role of widow at such a young age posed its own challenges including the fact that most of her friends and peers had difficulty relating to her as they had no comparable losses. In her grief narrative, Dr. Wolfe laments the loss of historic traditions for visually signaling a mourner’s status.

“He was ill for more than a year, from the moment he’s diagnosed until he died, [meant that] when[ever] I saw people, people [from] work, family, friends... The very first thing they would ask was ‘how’s he doing?’ Then he died, and suddenly no one would mention him, at all... He went from being the center of every conversation to none at all. It was as if he was dreamed. No one wanted to bring him up, because they didn’t know if I was ready to talk about him, yet. And at first, I wasn’t. But then, when I finally was, there was no way for them to know that. I didn’t want to have to always be the one who brought him up. It felt like they didn’t want to talk about him, anymore. Really, I think they were just afraid to bring him up, afraid it would upset me. We don’t have any way for people to know where you’re at. No visual markers or cues to indicate your level of mourning. In the past, widows wore veils and black to signal their level of mourning. And everyone just knew. It was plain to see. But we’ve lost that... People need a way to show what they are feeling without having to say it.”

Dr. Wolfe identifies a need to visually signal mourning. She mentions how she wishes people would talk about her husband now that she is open to it, but they do not know where she is at with her mourning. Dr. Wolfe is one of my interlocutors who rarely participated in Facebook mourning practices at the time I interviewed her. She reported that when she did make
a mourning post, she usually did so more out of social obligation than personal desire. Alice Wolfe also noted that posting on her husband’s Timeline deeply connected her to her family, especially her in-laws. Over time, posting there became a way to demonstrate to them that she still cared and shared in their grief.

For many, the cultural scripts of mourning on Facebook offer people a way to show what they are feeling without saying it out loud during in-person interactions. Mourning status updates signal to the bereaved’s network their current emotional status and where they are in the grief process. Many grievers report the therapeutic value of such public emotional disclosure. But some Facebook users, like Dr. Wolfe, who have participated in mourning on Facebook, find it an unsatisfactory way to express their grief or signal their mourning status; yet, they continue to make the shrine maintenance posts out of some sense of obligations to kin.

In this chapter, I discuss mourning on Facebook as therapeutic emotional disclosure while acknowledging the performative pressure and hierarchical constraints of mourning on Facebook that generate risks of vulnerability from the exposure of personal and interpersonal conflicts. Biocultural medical anthropologists and linguistic psychologists have written extensively about the therapeutic value of “writing it out”. The grief narratives of active posters of mourning status updates support the value of writing it out for their experiential health. But there is a vital distinction between writing out emotions in a private journal and publicly broadcasting them on a social media platform. I first address this issue; then I discuss the emotional and social risks of such public exposure beginning with the unfortunate tendency of emotional disclosure, mourning, and supportive commenting on Facebook to become highly pressurized and performative. I also address the questions Facebook users raise about the authenticity of such emotional performances. Next, I describe the conflicts that arise when
individuals stray from the cultural scripts for this ritual process and when individual’s grief experience does not match their official social status and place in the hierarchy of grief. I examine examples of the competition which emerges when the hierarchy of official social statuses fail to match the emotional attachment and grief experience of the bereaved. Then I discuss the examples of conflicts that arise when family members and friends fail to meet consensus in the collaborative writing of the ancestral narrative phase of this cycle regarding the official narrative concerning the deceased’s public persona, life history, death, and legacy. Finally, I conclude the chapter by discussing the social health impact of communal mourning and by summarizing the potential health benefits, risks, and applications for grief work.

7.1 Emotional Disclosure: Visually Signaling Mourning

I began my research with an online survey of general Facebook users that addressed their posting habits and experiences with sharing emotions on Facebook. My goal with this survey was to establish a baseline for social norms for sharing emotions on Facebook, which allowed me to then focus in my interviews on how grieving is different from other forms of emotional disclosure on Facebook. The sample of the survey was made up of general Facebook users without indication that the research was focused on grief and death. The survey began with general questions about sharing emotions and then concluded with questions specific to my research focused on mourning: writing about grief, writing about the dead, speaking to the dead, and commenting on the mourning posts of others. According to my online survey of Facebook users who posted behaviors and shared emotions on Facebook, Facebook users were less likely to disclose negative emotions in general than neutral or positive emotions. They were asked, “Which emotions have you expressed in your Facebook status? Check All that Apply: Happiness, Anger, Excitement, Grief, Joy, Anxiety, Angst, Stress, Surprise, Sadness,
Disappointment, and Other (please specify).” Negative emotions like anger or sadness were less likely to be shared on Facebook, 50% self-reported posting about feelings of sadness or anger, 35% post about disappointment, 35% post about anxieties, and 18% post when feeling angst. Positive emotions by far outpaced these with 91% respondents self-reporting posting about happiness, 79% about excitement, and 68% about joy. In this section, I evaluate the emotional disclosure aspect of mourning posts and the impact of such emotional posts on individuals. Which emotions receive the most attention in terms of comments and reactions? How important is the emotional intensity of the post?

Where Americans in mourning once wore black and grieving women once covered their faces with lace veils, they now present a brave face to the world.14 While this norm has held for much of the 20th century according to Jessica Mittford’s (1998) study of Death in America, but Facebook has become an obvious 21st century exception. Facebook users have new cultural scripts for publicly sharing the state of their grief and having their loss publicly acknowledged. The self-exposure and vulnerability of such emotional disclosure may seem shocking to outsiders. Even some Facebook users voice their concerns about this emerging practice. But for participants, these posts allow them to discuss their grief on their terms from the privacy of their homes without having to present their emotional vulnerability to friends, family, and co-workers while they are face to face. Despite the very public venue of this new tradition, many participants report feeling more comfortable given the distance that the screen provides.

When discussing why it is easier to write about these complex feelings on Facebook than it is to say them in-person, another research participant, Susan Jones told me during a semi-structured interview in her kitchen,

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“Alone, in the privacy of my own home, I can go on Facebook and write what I’m feeling. Curl-up on my couch, in the dark and cry. Alone. Write it all out, from the very heart of all those raw emotions. It lets people know where I’m at, y’ know, without having to say it all out loud. Without having to get into all those messy emotions in-person. Face to face [she makes an unpleasant face] it’s too much. Toooooo raw. [She sighs heavily] I can’t talk about it, I just can’t. But if I put it on Facebook then people know. I say it once, not a hundred times for each new person who cares enough to ask how I’m doing. With Facebook, they know.”

Updating her Facebook friends about her mourning status was a safe way for Susan to signal her grief to a broad social network without having to have the same conversation face-to-face with countless concerned individuals. She also felt more comfortable, exposing her emotional vulnerability from the privacy of her home. When I asked her how well this strategy worked, she went on to say, “No, they know. They must know, because they don’t ask. They only talk about the good things, the charity work I’m doing, and stuff like that. If I’ve had a particularly bad night, my sisters will call, check-in on me, y’ know.” Just as wearing all black or a widow’s veil, once publicly signaled a mourner’s status, sharing an emotional status update on Facebook signals fellow Facebook users and allows them to adapt their behavior and communications accordingly both on and offline. Susan’s comments were made early on when she still eagerly embraced the emerging traditions for mourning on Facebook. When I formally interviewed her utilizing my grief narrative interview schedule two years after her son’s death, Susan said her Facebook Shrines posts had dramatically decreased and were primarily limited to holiday posts and activists posts while she was working to pass a boating law and raise funds for a scholarship fund in her son’s honor. At that point, she rarely made mourning status updates or disclosed her emotions publicly on Facebook.

The raw emotion of the posts made early in the mourning process expose the mourner’s vulnerable emotional state to public gaze and comment. While the majority of Facebook users
acknowledge feeling uncomfortable reading these emotional posts, it is rare for anyone to comment negatively. Facebook users who prolifically post mourning status updates, semi-regular posts regarding their grief status, recount feeling loved and comforted by the comments and reactions they received. This has the potential to create a reinforcing social feedback loop. In need of emotional comfort, users who feel comforted by the responses they get will continue to frequently make mourning status update posts until the positive response they receive begins to wane overtime. A few participants commented on their awareness of a decrease in the number of comments and reactions their posts received over time with a hint of melancholy. But, for most, the decrease in the frequency of their posting mourning status updates and the decrease in attention those posts received was a natural decline that matched the pattern of their own grief experience.

These accounts of emotional disclosure draw attention to the difficulty of discussing death, grief, and the deceased in their in-person interactions and the importance of having a cultural script for visually signaling their grief status that frees them from discussing their emotions in-person. These accounts are representative of a larger social deficit; most research participants acknowledge this unmet need in some way. The need to signal grieving and grieve openly is a psychosocial need that was left unaddressed by the American way of death (Mitford 1998; Doughty 2014). The emergence of mourning practices on Facebook fill this niche of grieving publicly and having it acknowledged in the lived religion of participants. Facebook mourning practices are a communication strategy that provides emotional support to the bereaved, visually signaling the poster’s mourning status, and transforming the deceased’s Timeline into a digital memorial.
Pam Landry, previously mentioned in chapters 5 and 6, lost her mother to kidney failure a year before our interview. When asked how she decided to post a status update or write a message on the mother’s timeline, Pam said,

*I’ve never thought too hard about it really. I guess I’d say it really depends what I’m posting about. If I just want to say I’m having a hard time, that I’ve been really down lately missing mom. Then I’d post it as a status update, but if I wanted to say something about mom. Share an old picture or tell a story about her. Then I’d post it on her Timeline. Or if I was making an announcement about funeral arrangements or something.*

Most interview participants echoed this in their own way. Respondents indicated a need to respond and show their compassion for the grief of others, and to an extent, this justified their reaching out with their own statuses as a form of reciprocation.

Chloe Halliday, a student in her early twenties, lost her father during her junior year while attending the Louisiana Tech. A year later, she was eager to tell me her story and she agreed to meet with me at a sushi bar off campus for lunch. The small venue, frequently loud and packed at night, was quiet and cozy for our early afternoon interview. When I asked her about why she thought Facebook was important to her grieving process, she said,

*“If I talk about him, I cry. I don’t want other people to see me crying, but sometimes I need to talk about him. To remember him. So, I tell Facebook, instead of trying to explain it to some else who simply won’t understand. I mean, how many people under twenty-five have lost their dad? What’s there to say? On Facebook, they like it or whatever, but I don’t have to listen to them, not know what to say. Sometimes, people even surprise you and say something genuinely sweet, when they’ve had time to think about it.”*

Like an artist, performing to express something without intentional consideration of future audiences, Chloe is performing her emotions on Facebook in an unfiltered way because she feels it is the best way to be heard. It is like participating in talk therapy, a support group, or
therapeutic journaling. With or without an anticipated response from anyone specific, there is benefit in talking through the emotional experience of loss. With Facebook serving as a meta-best friend, there is no need to pay $100 a session to psychotherapist to be heard. For Chloe, Facebook allowed her the space she needed to share her grief without facing the vulnerability of crying in front of someone else. Just as importantly, Facebook also gave Chloe’s Facebook friends the time they needed to formulate something meaningful to say that adequately represented the support they wanted to offer. It is also important to note Chloe’s use of the word genuine as a marker of the high quality she found these comments to have. The benefits of these disclosures were exemplified in the need to “write it out.”

The emotional disclosure of Facebook Shrine posts serves as a visual indicator signaling the Facebook user’s mourning status. This visual indictor is a mechanism that allows Facebook users to seek support and gain social recognition of the Facebook user’s mourning status. Social recognition of the Facebook Shrine ritual involves a highly public vulnerability, which secondary griever report finding very uncomfortable. As a visual indicator, mourning status update posts remind the griever’s social network and grief community where they are in their grief process. This is reflected in equal measure through Susan Jones’ need to post and engage with her grief publicly, and Alice Wolfe’s kin-based pressure to do so early on, though ultimately this faded in time.

As mentioned in Chapter 6, collaboratively writing the deceased’ ancestral narrative while mourning on Facebook can be deeply therapeutic. However, this communal process requires group consensus and some individuals may feel the “official” narrative conflicts with their personal memories and the stories they find meaningful. Facebook mourning practices are commemorative as they honor and celebrate the deceased. The communal and public nature of
this commemoration makes it necessary to reconcile the deceased’s public self-presentation, with the griever’s personal memories of private interactions. Sharing these personal memories with the deceased’s social network on Facebook, previously separate social circles collaboratively write a narrative that transforms the deceased in the memory of participants. Facebook Shrine posters not only tell stories to their audience, they also co-create story-like structures with their audience through their interaction in the comments. The storytelling process that unfolds on Facebook Shrines is a therapeutic emplotment, which provides a platform for post-traumatic growth.

Created spontaneously through posts made in raw emotional states, Facebook Shrines allow participants to work through their emotions together as they co-create narratives that transform the deceased into an honored ancestor. After regaining emotional composure, renegotiating their identity, and reclaiming their agency over their posting behavior, Facebook users no longer need or want to make mourning posts on the deceased’s Timeline with the same frequency. They transition their activity towards maintenance posts made on special days to keep the deceased’s memory alive.

7.2 Vulnerable Confessions: Public Exposure in a Time of Vulnerability

Tom Boellstorff’s (2017, 2013) concept of social media as a virtual confessional also has highly relevant applications to these findings, particularly when coupled with Daniel Miller’s (2011: 170-172) conceptualization of Facebook as a meta-best friend capable of witnessing and validating suffering to explain why some Facebook users are willing to share such vulnerable emotional experiences. Susan Jones uses Facebook as a safe way to communicate her grief to her network without facing the vulnerability of one on one in-person conversations. Jerry Benton
similarly uses Facebook to stay maintain his attachment to his wife and her network. Pam Landry also felt validation having her grief witnessed and acknowledged.

Comparative analysis of research participants’ grief narratives reveals critical insights into the relationship between ritual participation and agency in Facebook’s mourning practices. To understand the impact of the Facebook ritualistic performance of grief on the well-being of participants, I focus on intentionality, self-control, and agency in ritual practices, all of which increase the vulnerability of participants. The central question is how do these rituals affect agency and grief resilience for the bereaved? I draw on ethnographic examples of agency temporarily lost and regained and the implications of this transformation for grief resilience. I will conclude by asking how this public reassessment of the deceased’s life and self-presentation is a denial of the deceased's agency over their digital legacy.

Having followed Susan’s mourning posts during my online participant-observation for over a year after she took my online survey and having already interviewed two of her family members and other members of her community and network, I was aware Susan had been prolific in her posting about her emotions as she struggled with the loss of her only son. But when I asked her about posting on Facebook in this more public way, she responded that she,

“didn’t remember doing that much.” She eventually admitted to being aware that she had done it “only afterwards when I read all of the things people said in comments.” She repeatedly described her emotions on the early days of her loss as raw. She said, “Everything was just so raw, there are lot of things I don’t remember.” She continued, “I don’t remember a lot. Huge lapses in my memory. I don’t know what I wore to the funeral. I don’t remember everyday things like food. I do remember this video one of the kids posted on Facebook. I forget who did it, of [Tommy] chasing his friends down by the lake. Had to have been the fall before the accident. So many people commented on that, and I remember stuff like that. But I don’t remember making any posts, just that people left comments afterwards. So many of his friends kept in touch with me, all these girls he’d known since
kindergarten and school. But in those early days the emotion was still too raw, I don’t remember past them to what I might have done or how often. I don’t think it was much, but I don’t know.”

The textual evidence on Facebook supports the accounts of Susan’s friends and family who say she frequently made highly emotional posts in those early days and responded emotionally to the posts of others. These posts, often several paragraphs long, involve raw emotion and stream of consciousness retrospectives about the impact Tommy Jones [Susan’s son] had on their lives. According to Susan’s nephew Jeff, many of these reimaginings painted Tommy in a different light than he remembered him. He also found the posts that spoke directly to Tommy rather than to the living family to be disconcerting. Not only did these posts intentionally portray Tommy in a certain light, they invited others to participate in the grieving process, with many sharing their own posts and commenting on the posts of others in a way that ultimately fed on itself in the weeks and months after Tommy’s death in May 2013. In doing so there was also a level of escalation, with people increasingly posting pictures and even videos as a way to continue to participate.

Agency is the ability to change culture and behavior (Ortner 2006). Agency is a facet of conscious experience, vital to health outcomes and ritual efficacy. A dynamic relationship between participation, agency, and intentionality shape ritual experience. Analysis of the grief narratives of my research participants provide critical insights into ritual participation and agency in Facebook’s mourning practices. Two other research participants who have suffered profound losses reported similar memory loss and a lack of control over their posting behaviors similar to those identified by Susan. Facebook mourning rituals preserve these moments of vulnerability for both individual and community; shared with the grieving community yet also allow an outlet for these uncontrollable moments.
A temporary loss of agency is evident in the grief narratives which describe ritual participation that lacks intentionality. Recovering this degree of self-control over Facebook posting behaviors becomes another step in the healing process for bereaved Facebook users. While intentional participation facilitates participant’s *sense of agency*, feelings of a lack of control, and in rare cases a lack of memory, stemming from unintentional participation, can diminish a participant’s *sense of agency*.

In the case of Facebook mourning practices, the perception of poster as agent is problematized by the loss of agency reported by some chief mourners experiencing the “raw emotions” of complicated grief, particularly as they report memory loss and a lack intentionality when making mourning posts. Transformations of agency and emotional healing in virtual ritual performances of grief occur overtime as the relationships between participation, intentionality, and agency evolve throughout the recovery process.

During my interview with Tabitha Jackson, she expressed disdain at the perception she was expected to grieve publicly on Facebook. The family did not immediately announce her mother’s death, and in their absence members of the community and distant family inaccurately announced the death instead. Not only did extended family incorrectly state that there would not be a funeral, outsiders from the family announced the death and funeral before Tabitha could, as if attempting to gain legitimacy. Thus, Tabitha had to get on Facebook and clarify, based on a feeling of expectation, a need by the public to get an official statement from the family.

Regarding this expectation, Tabitha said, “*It was like, ya’ know, people just expected me to lose my shit on the Internet, and I was like... that’s not what I want, ya’ know, I just wanted to sit back. Kinda pissed me off.*”
Tabitha found the expectation that she would “lose her shit” on Facebook to be something that added to her emotional burden. It was an expectation that she made every effort to not conform to, but she acknowledged the pressure to publicly mourn on Facebook was intense. She was thankful that her brother and her husband supported her decision to not engage mourning on Facebook. In her case, mourning on Facebook proved deeply upsetting and alienating. Despite the positive and supportive messages left on her mother’s Facebook page in the days following her death, mourning on Facebook negatively impacted Tabitha’s grief experience.

Tabitha’s loss was antagonized by conflicts over social norms and expectations that are still being developed. Most research participants agree that it is important to wait and allow a close family member to be the first person to officially announce a death. But this is an emerging social norm and people often respond quickly and emotionally when they are shocked to hear someone they know died. In this regard people seem more interested in reporting the death first, rather than waiting for the facts.

Cases such as Pam and Tabitha show a kind of ritual exposure of vulnerability, revealing to the public the otherwise private grief of close family in the wake of death. Facebook users who prolifically post Mourning Status Updates recount feeling loved and comforted by the comments and reactions they received, even in cases of extreme reluctance to post such statuses.

Social networks and personal relationships are important in determining the therapeutic potential of these emerging mourning practices. Unmet expectations and familial conflicts over emotional authority in public mourning can quickly make these practices divisive. To understand how the ritual performance of grief impacts health, I examine it on two levels. First, the performance ritualistically exposes emotional vulnerability in order to receive social recognition.
Second, there is confluence of social hierarchy, kinship, and gender in how grief is valued on Facebook.

The performance of emotion on Facebook following the death of a close friend or family member is a public exposure in a time of great emotional and social vulnerability. This ritualistically exposed emotional vulnerability allows participants to receive social recognition within the socially accepted bounds of the mourning ritual. As death and grief are acknowledged as sacred, the Facebook user can expose his or her emotional vulnerability without fear of reprisal as long as it is within the accepted bounds of the culture script.

In contrast to the research participants discussed above, who questioned the authenticity of these confessional posts and the sympathy they receive, Facebook users who prolifically post mourning status updates were much more likely to recount feeling loved and comforted by the comments and reactions they received. Susan reported feeling relief and love when she exposed her vulnerabilities to private Facebook grief support groups, relief she might not otherwise be able to receive in real life. Knowing there are limits both socially and personally to the feelings she feels she can express, such posts allow her an outlet for otherwise volatile emotions. Similarly, Pam Landry reported feeling supported while her mother was in the hospital and in the days following her death by the outpouring of care and concern from friends and family on Facebook.

According to Pennebaker (2003) the therapeutic efficacy of “writing it out” is well established in the field of psychology, but publicly sharing those feelings on Facebook is quite different from writing them in a private diary. By publicly sharing their grief, Facebook users expose their vulnerability and their audience responds with recognition and support. When a Facebook user shares his or her grief experience on Facebook, he or she is enacting Facebook’s
posting ritual as part of his or her public mourning. The emerging mourning practices of Facebook constitute a ritualized public performance of grief. Writing and sharing a Facebook post that references the loss of a loved one opens the Facebook posting ritual to a ritual script of grief disclosure and recognition.

7.3 Performance of Grief

The tradition of writing a private note of sympathy to the bereaved stands in stark contrast to the very public act of offering sympathy in the comments of a Facebook post. Emotion, specifically grief and sympathy, is performed in the mourning rituals of Facebook. Increasingly, bereaved Facebook users are faced with social expectations regarding their participation in Facebook’s mourning practices. As such, in this section I analyze this posting behavior as a performance focusing on emotional disclosure. Then I discuss pressure to perform and how it relates to kinship roles and the social hierarchy around grief. Facebook posts are a way for Facebook users to perform their social identity. In the case of Facebook users visually signaling their mourning status, this performance reveals a great deal about the poster’s identity, kinship-based social status, and cultural values, these performances of grief occasionally also bring to light insights regarding conflicts between the social norms of Facebook and the social of norms and values of Facebook users’ offline culture. Visually signaling their grief to everyone in their social network following this new cultural script allows Facebook users to gain public acknowledgement of their mourning status. Yet Facebook users themselves raise questions regarding the authenticity of such performances. The actors of this performance are held to social expectations based on publicly acknowledged official relationships rather than actor’s reported grief experience.
As I was concluding my interview with Jeff McDonald, nephew of Susan Jones, his mother brought his five-month-old son to him on the back porch. After his mother shut the screen door behind her, I asked, “Is there anything else you want to add, anything else you think is important I know?” He smiled, bouncing his baby on his knee, he asked, “I think my son is cute, don’t you agree?” I with laughter in my voice, cooed at the baby, “He sure is.” Then taking a more serious tone, I asked, “What are you going to teach him about death?” Jeff replied, “I’m gonna teach him that it will happen in its own time, and that when it happens, that necromancy is bad.” I knew from previous conversations that Jeff loved fantasy and science fiction, but that last comment definitely merited follow up, attempting to remain neutral to his use of the word necromancy, I simply asked, “What do you mean by that?” Jeff laughs, “Death should be final.”

I pushed a little harder, “That’s not what you meant by ‘necromancy is bad,’ is it?” Jeff laughs,

“Oh, you really want me to answer that? Hm, if you want necromancy in the kind of traditional fantasy sense, then bringing the dead back to life is horrible, that kind of Frankenstein shit. But if you want it in the kind of traditional magic sense, then speaking to the dead is only a way to hasten your own demise. Because, the dead don’t belong in this realm. Keeping people alive when they no longer are, it doesn’t help anybody. Certainly not my Aunt Susan.”

I nod somberly, then ask, “Do you think that is at the heart of your problem…with what’s going on, on Facebook?” He looked up from playing with his son to look me in the eyes, really pondering the connection,

“Yeah, I would it say it kind of is.” Nodding and responding with more enthusiasm, “I would say that there is a cathartic element and good remembrance: that’s one thing. But the whole tragic public grieving aspect I feel, it might give you a short-term pay-off, but it’s essentially turning it [public grieving]
into an emotional vampire, where you’re going to Facebook to vent all these emotions, not for yourself, or not so you can get rid of the emotion but so you can get kind of an emotional high, there’s feedback loop, you’re getting affirmation from all the likes that you’re getting because you’re making all these depressing posts about how much you’re grieving and how much you’re overcoming it, and all these things. Essentially, it’s just a show, kind of like, in The Book of Matthew, when Jesus said don’t be like the Pharisees, who cover themselves in dust and rags and mud and go out in public to pray so that they can be seen praying and being pitiful, that instead you should do in private, behind closed doors. That’s one of the parts of the Gospels that really speaks to me.”

Jeff felt the public display of mourning for a Facebook audience encouraged some people to go beyond posting for cathartic purposes. He saw a level of performativity that he found detrimental for both the poster and their family members who were being painfully reminded of their own grief. Several research participants raised questions concerning the authenticity and superficiality on Facebook in general and mourning on Facebook in particular. Dr. Wolfe framed this in terms of “putting on a show” and how she felt like it had become “a contest.” Jeff was critical of performativity of mourning on Facebook as he saw that it created a feedback loop that rewarded a drama performance of painful emotions.

Facebook’s mourning practices are a ritual performance of grief and family, a special subset of social media identity performance. In these posts, such as in Jeff’s case, Facebook users are sharing their emotional vulnerability and loss. Emotion, specifically grief and sympathy, are performed in the mourning rituals of Facebook. But this performance also reveals a second very personal side of public identity: family. Familial relationships and the emotional connections shared or even found lacking become an integral part of the performance of grief on Facebook. Family, even more than friendship, is highly valued, which is rare in other digital contexts. But Facebook’s emphasis on official relationships remains a central part of the performance.
From the raw emotions of shock, horror, and disbelief in the earliest stages of mourning on Facebook to the reverence of memorial maintenance posts years after a death, Facebook’s mourning rituals provide participants with a cultural script for performing the emotional work and kinship responsibilities following the death of a family member. While Jeff’s opinion was not one shared by many interview subjects who most actively participated in public mourning on Facebook, the issue of performativity and authenticity were brought up as major concerns primarily by interview subjects under 50.

For my grief narrative interviewees in their 40s, three out of five questioned the authenticity of mourning on Facebook or mentioned feeling burdened by the expectations and pressure to perform their grief in a specific way. The two who did not were Stephine Wilson and Amanda Herbert who both had very positive grief solidarity and communitas experiences which could well account for their less cynical outlook.

All interviewees under 40 questioned the authenticity of at least some aspect of mourning on Facebook. For interview participants under 40, the question of authenticity and how to both be authentic and appear genuine was a major concern that influenced how they commented, reacted or chose to respond offline. Interviewee’s in this age group were highly critical of the posting and commenting behavior others and themselves. Ten out of the 13 interviewees under 40 described in great detail the efforts that they went to in order to ensure their responses were genuine and meaningful. Brother Bobby Brown wrote out his prayers in the comments to avoid the pitfall of promising to pray for someone and then forgetting to do it. George Michaels discussed how he and his wife agonized over the right thing to say when a friend from school committed suicide. Maggie Rivera had a personal policy to always send a private message or visit a grieving friend in person in addition to commenting and reacting to the person’s post.
When twenty-two-year-old Chloe Halliday described way she preferred mourning and receiving support online she said, “Sometimes, people even surprise you and say something genuinely sweet, when they’ve had time to think about it.” Here she was indicating that taking the time to respond in a genuine and thoughtful way was something she highly valued. Further, her experience of genuineness in the responses she received directly influenced how positively she considered the process of mourning on Facebook.

Younger research participants, people 18 to 30, were much more likely to express concern over the authenticity of posts and comments that they had read. Tori Adams, a 30-year-old mother of two whom I interviewed in Austin, described most comments as cliché. She said,

“People just don’t know what to say, know that don’t. I’m twenty-five [she means 25 at the time] and my best friend is dead. You aren’t supposed to die when you’re twenty-five and they just don’t know what to say. Ah, so yeah, they just revert back to all these clichés. ‘She’s in a better place’, ‘God needed another angel’, ‘she was too good for this world’, all this bullshit!” She paused, “I mean, I know they mean well, but like half the shit they say is wrong, like people don’t become angels when they die. That’s not what happens. That isn’t in the Bible anywhere, people just make that stuff up. Like, this friend of mine from college, her daughter died, and people are commenting, ‘RIP baby girl’ ‘God needs another angel’. That’s not helping. It might be making it worse, ‘cus it might make people blame God. But like, also it is just so damn superficial. They don’t know what to say, so they come up with these clichés. I remember reading the comments to one of my posts right after Abby passed away and thinking how much it sounds like they are just going through the motions.”

Beyond questioning the authenticity of the comments, some participants in this age group also questioned the authenticity of the emotions expressed in some mourning posts. George Michaels, a 25-year-old teacher from Oklahoma, expressed a lot of concern over excessive mourning posts that he felt were attention-seeking. He said,

“Everyone grieves in their own way I guess. But some people are just too much on Facebook. They post all this death
stuff too much. I respect it, especially early on when everyone is still really in shock and they don’t know what to say but they are going to say something anyway. But there gets to be a point, where it is just about the attention they are getting. Sometimes one of these pops up, and I read it and I can tell the person is hurting and if we’re close, I’ll even try to reach, give ‘em call, something, ya’ know? But, I hate to say this, but sometimes, it just feels fake. When it’s the hundredth post this week or when they are like too at me I’ve lost someone too and its like their kindergarten teacher and last week it was their dog. They gotta figure out how to get their shit handled. They need more help than Facebook can provide, and maybe that is the thing. Maybe they are doing all this for attention cus’ they don’t have anybody close to them they can talk to, like I talk to Kay [his wife] but also maybe they just kinda like the positive feedback they get when they make these. So I get to a point where, what I do is I hide these posts and unfollow people are excessively making them.”

Several participants, including Pam Landry, Jeff McDonald, and Gina McDonald described similar policies of hiding content or unfollowing people who engage in excessive grief posting, but they each made it clear that they would never unfriend someone because of how they were grieving. The phrase “everybody’s gotta grieve in their own way” was frequently used in these instances to acknowledge that while the participant disagreed with what someone was doing they respected their right to grieve.

While the primary concern was regarding the frequently repetitive nature of comments left in support of mourning posts that left them questioning the authenticity of sympathy and superficiality of it all, research participants did also frequently note that they felt like they did not know what to say generally in response to death and this perceived deficit stemmed from not knowing what to say in-person. Others questioned the authenticity of grief posts, particularly posts they deemed as attention seeking. While supportive of emotional posts deemed genuine, posts that research participants deemed inauthentic, “just doing it for show”, or otherwise attention seeking, were not given the same degree of respect and support as authentic posts.
When mourning posts were made in excessive frequency, the majority of research participants reported that they used Facebook’s “hide content” and “unfollow” mechanics to ensure that they saw fewer of these posts.

In any religious tradition it is possible to raise questions regarding rituals as enactments of genuine religious sentiment or simply as a process of going through the motions. The fact that this was a concern for participants and that many of them had developed their own personal rules to maintain the integrity of their social media interactions speaks to how seriously they take grief related posts. The idiom may be ‘you don’t speak ill of the dead,’ but in practice research participants primarily followed the guideline that you should respect people’s right to grieve in their own way, with very few exceptions.

Several research participants raised questions concerning the authenticity and superficiality on Facebook in general and mourning on Facebook in particular. Alice framed this in terms of “putting on a show” and how she felt like it had become “a contest”. Jeff McDonald, a high school teacher in East Texas, was critical of performances of mourning on Facebook, stating that it created a feedback loop that ultimately fed on itself. He said,

“Essentially, it’s just a show, kind of like in the Book of Matthew, when Jesus said don’t be like the Pharisees, who cover themselves in dust and rags and mud and go out in public to pray so that they can be seen praying and being pitiful, that instead you should do in private, behind closed doors.”

Jeff saw a level of performativity that he found hurtful for both the performer making that post and for other family members who were being painfully reminded of their own grief.

Online Mourning requires mourners to perform their social identity and relationship with the deceased. Talking through how her husband’s family dealt with his death, the previous mentioned Dr. Alice Wolfe said,
“In a lot of ways, Diego was actually the patriarch of the family. He was the baby of the family, but he was the only boy. His mom’s sister didn’t have any children. And she basically helped to raise Diego. Those two sisters, they had often lived together. In fact, when I first met Diego, they were all living together. I think, it was an interesting situation, of him kinda being the authority. They had given him this authority figure. He was kind of the man of the house and he spoke English, so he translated a lot for them, so the fact that he could to go out and interface with the English-speaking world that gave him a lot of authority. But also, being from this Mexican culture, this sort of being the favored son, the only son. I think they just couldn’t conceptualize that he was going to be gone. And I think, they were thinking, ‘OK, what can I get, what are things that I think of as his, something of his that was very distinctive. Something that was his.’ They were all thinking ‘what is something that I’d want that was distinctively his?’”

She reenacted her confusion, highlighting how that confusion gave way to defiance as she recounted her reaction,

“But then like suddenly, it was like I didn’t exist. Cause here was his aunt and she was like, she was divvying out the things for other people, and its like ….‘HEY! I mean like, like technically, this belongs to me. Soooo, I wanna decide what gets given away. So, in that regard. I feel like it was an interesting moment to really figure out where you rank in the family. So, like all of the sudden, like I didn’t exist anymore. I was invisible, you know. It was like all the sudden, I didn’t count. And I was like, oh umm, that’s interesting. So I had to be like, ‘I get a say here.’ So umm, they basically cut me out. Except for the niece and nephew who I basically helped raised, they really think of me as a mother, everybody else has basically washed their hands of me. And his sister, kinda goes back and forth between wanting to talk with me on Facebook and engage with me and say she understands why I did what I did, cause the other thing is that I’ve gotten remarried. That really made his sister go ape shit. She was like, essentially, I was supposed to be widowed, I was a relic. A relic forever. I was 40. Can you think about what is like to be alone for the rest of your life? He wouldn’t want that. But she is back and forth with me about wanting to engage with me and not. But there’s a lot of history there. There’s a 20-year history. I’ve known this family for more than 20 years now. And I was the most reliable of all of them. I was the person they always knew they could count on. So when they need me, they still reach out to me. Then they push me away again, like o but this is so awful what you did. You turned your
back on the family, that you would get married again. The niece and nephew live here, they come over all the time. They come over for Christmas. I see the family that’s here a lot. But there is still the tension. And I’m like, I didn’t disown you, you disowned me. Right? Right! Don’t get mad and say, ‘you never write, when you didn’t give me your address.’ I’d write if you would tell me where you live. But the last thing that I sent to her [her late husband’s mother who is in a nursing home] returned. So they moved her, and didn’t tell me. But, I have a clean conscience about it. It wasn’t my doing. I certainly always tried to behave with them in a way that we could all always try to have a relationship.”

Understanding Dr. Wolfe’s role as a widow and her place in social hierarchy of her husband’s family deeply impacted her grief experience. She continued her narrative, telling me the role Facebook played and how family dynamics shaped her experience with mourning on Facebook. She said,

“So, um, he had a page and he kept the page when he was alive and um, uh, when he was sick and in the hospital and stuff I would often post on his page and my page, right, so like, we had some friends that weren’t in common, you know, they would know where to look, so, kind of starting when he got sick I was in the habit of kind of posting, and then um, particularly in the end at the hospital, like. If you think about it, it’s nice, you don’t have to get 74 phone calls, right, it’s just a way you can distribute information, and nobody has to call you and your phone, it frees that up, so... And in the immediate aftermath of him dying, um, I think there was lots of us that posted quite a bit. And it was just kind of working through it, you know, ‘can’t believe you’re gone’, ‘you were just here’, ‘I just saw you’, ‘I miss you’, um... Stuff like that. I posted poetry, songs, little inspirational things that reminded me of him.”

I nod reassuringly, and Alice continues,

“But at some point, I realized, I didn’t want to mourn in public. I started to really feel like it was a contest. There is this judging element in social media. But yeah, increasingly, I started to feel like I really wished it wasn’t there [her husband’s Facebook page] but it was still cathartic for people. And, and I did some of that in the beginning, and then I just started to feel like... I didn’t want to mourn in public, you know, I, I, I felt very much like... it was very much like a contest, I, I started to feel like it was a
contest about whose post was more… you know, gut-wrenching, heartbreak, you know, and I just started to really feel like, you know I’d post something, and then like, his niece, not the one who moved here, the one who’s still in California, she would post something and I’d be like, ‘Oh, has she one-upped me by the length of her post?’ I started to feel like… there is a judging element to social media, and I didn’t want to grieve in public like that, right? I knew what I was feeling, and, you know—ah, I’m not a person to put my opinions on Facebook anyway. Some people think Facebook is a place for you to like, to just vomit your opinions on whatever you want, like, you clearly need a forum for that, and I don’t think Facebook is it. Like, share your puppies or your good news, or like, whatever, but like, I don’t need your opinions vomited on me, and I started to feel like, it [mourning on Facebook] was getting me too close to this space.”

“I felt like… It’s ok to say you miss the person, it’s ok to say I thought of you today, but like, when we get into what felt like a contest, that was where I started to be like, you know, you don’t know what it’s like to come home and be in the bed that we shared together and not have him be there, right? You know and maybe I can’t articulate that, and maybe I don’t want to articulate that. That’s private, right? And so, and so, increasingly I kind of pulled back and stopped posting, but other people kept posting. And… uh, I almost always still post something on his page on the day that he died, like, you know, “I miss you” or whatever, but I really started to feel like... increasingly I wish it wasn’t there, I’ve actually thought about taking the page down several times.” She sighed heavily, “But um…. I think there’d be angry people, I think if I took it down, I think there would be really hostile people. People, who I think, for them it is still this cathartic outlet... but, and particularly there were several times I almost took it down when, you know, it sent these automated messages, it said that the computer was still doing stuff, right, so he was posting on people’s walls... you know, ‘he wants you to take this poll’, you know, “I took the the astro-quiz, and I’m this! What are you?” things like that and that was clearly like, some kind of spam thing, right? But that was disturbing. It was really disturbing to see it come up in my feed, um…. And I’m really not cool with Facebook, Facebook should have some way... I mean, maybe... I know that you can turn it off, but that just freezes it in time. You wouldn’t be able to still post stuff. So, you’d want it so people could still post, but it wouldn’t generate any of this garbage, you know, like... it’s disturbing. It’s just really disturbing. Facebook needs to know it’s really disturbing.”

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15 I mentioned this issue along several other design features that users found disturbing in this context in a funding proposal to Facebook. Facebook created a new design feature called the legacy contact shortly after the
I asked her if she thought it was likely she would delete or freeze his account, she responded,

“You know, just because that’s not my way of grieving and my way of finding closure, I don’t want to take that away from other people, and so, you know, like I think that it does fulfill a need, I mean clearly it does, otherwise people wouldn’t post, clearly.... Clearly it fulfills a need, and I wouldn’t want to take that away from somebody, but I wouldn’t choose it for myself and I guess it’s hard for me to be in the position now, like, I feel like I would turn it off, I would make it go away, but to do that I know that I would be intentionally doing something to make people unhappy, so unfortunately it puts me in the position of saying...

“Ok, I’m going to have to decide whether or not to pull the plug or not, right, whether or not to keep the page going... which is weird.”

Alice continued to reflect on it,

“Actually, when I changed my relationship status, it’s not doing it so much anymore. And so, now, unless I go to his site, I don’t necessarily know that somebody has posted. Which actually has helped, I almost wish I had known that earlier, I almost would have turned it off, but you know, again, that’s part of that public grieving, you know: when are you able to change your status, you know, it’s like you’ve reached a new place in your grief.”

I asked her, “What is the process for changing your status? Are you effectively ‘ending the relationship,’ basically ‘breaking up’ as far as Facebook is concerned?”

She half laughed, “Not breaking up...” She paused, “huh? Well, yeah! But it is, but it is, yeah! Yeah, that’s right. Yeah, so, his page still says “Married to” and me, and of course, I had “Widowed” for a while, you know, which I thought was acceptable, you know, but I mean you can’t have something like, married to whoever and grieving this other person, right? I mean, Facebook, God!” She groaned, “What is there, like, seventy-five different sexual orientations, or like, things that you can do like? They can’t nuance this a little bit? They can’t come up with something that something that gives you the ability to say, “Ok, yes, there was this other person, they’re gone, and yes, I still love them, I’ll always love them, there’s a place for them, but my life doesn’t have to be frozen in time of this person either,” like... It review of my proposal, which addresses this issue among others. This was my first interview and it informed that proposal.
could say, ‘Married to whoever this new person is, but still grieving so-and-so, you know’...you know?”

Family conflicts over a widow’s role and appropriate behavior pre-date social media, but in Dr. Wolfe’s case the conflict is transferred into the virtual realm and made much more public. The conflict is also exacerbated by her decision to officially change her relationship status as she was no longer married. Preserved and a matter of public record, these family conflicts are intensified as Facebook allows people to publicly take sides. The binary thinking in Facebook’s design—you are married or widowed—fails to consider the complexity of human experience. Dr. Wolfe is a widow, she remarried, but that does not mean she forgets her first husband. The limitations of the binary design linked to American assumptions of serial monogamy complicate Dr. Wolfe’s efforts to move forward in her grief process and introduce a new point of conflict for her with her in-laws.

From there I asked her when she had felt comfortable changing her status. She thought about it a bit, “Um... Maybe, maybe six months after he died.” Then she took a long pause,

Cuz’ I think the other thing, too, is I think that we also get ingrained that, like, well Facebook is so interested in what you do, right, it’s like, ‘Status: what are you doing now?’ So somehow it’s like, well, my status isn’t actually accurate, I’m not still married to him, right? He’s dead, right? He’s dead, even on Facebook, right? So like...It was very weird...” I nod along and agree, “yeah” and then she continues, “Mmmhmm... so yeah, the other thing was, I was still occasionally getting e-mails from, like, friends who had been, like, out of the loop, right? And it’s like, ‘We don’t understand: his page still says he’s married to you, and like, is he sick, I don’t understand!’ Like, so, people who were late to the news. And I thought maybe if I put ‘Widow’ then they’ll realize, yeah, no, it’s true, it’s legit. It’s true, and that was the other thing: because I left the page up, and didn’t even go in and say, like, ‘I’m dead’ on his page, right? So, if you didn’t know when you came across his page, you’d think he was still alive, right? Cuz’... There’s no bar at the top of the page that says like, ‘This is a Memorial Page’ or, you know, ‘I passed away October, October 12th’...
Changing her relationship status ended up being a significant moment in Alice’s grief process. It was not only an important symbolic step that eased communications with friends, it also immediately changed her user experience on Facebook as Facebook’s algorithm naturally distances users who are no longer in a relationship together.

Dr. Wolfe’s relationship with her husband’s family also proved to be a significant factor in her experience. They were the “people” she felt like she was competing with when she made public mourning posts. But they were also the “people” for whom she intentionally kept Diego’s Facebook page up-to-date even though she really wanted to close the account. She also reiterated later in the interview that she continued to feel pressure to post, particularly on important days like the anniversary of his death, his birthday, and on holidays. She felt like it was important to his family members that she publicly mourn on his page on those days as his widow.

When Alice eventually remarried, Diego’s family was furious. Many of them cut her out of their lives, only to turn to her when they were in desperate need of her help in navigating financial or legal situation as Diego had previously handled such matters for his extended family. At each stage, status, particularly, official status on Facebook was a meaningful symbol both in Dr. Wolfe’s grief process and in her relationship with Diego’s family after his death.

Personal relationships are messy, as meaning is ascribed to one’s status. Is Dr. Wolfe a widow or a wife? To her first husband’s family, she was and should have remained a widow, yet Dr. Wolfe, in her myriad of experiences, lives beyond such a binary choice: she can be both at once. Listed as Diego’s wife, Dr. Wolfe’s account was still linked to his, once she listed herself as a widow Facebook removed the connection of her account to his. But now that she is remarried, Facebook lists her current marriage and there is no immediate indication on her profile that she was married and widowed.
The pressure she felt from her husband’s kin network is part of the larger system many users say they felt to publicly display their grief in different ways. The appearance of grieving, for many, is something users like Alice Wolfe feel the need to do, enforced by those around them. It is those posts that get the most responses, that get the most interaction, no matter how grating or painful it is to make them. It reinforces the social collective’s idea of the user as mourning, and in the case of Dr. Wolfe, it was her in-laws pressuring her to remain the widow in perpetuity. Authentic emotion mattered more to her than merely doing it for show.

Authenticity is an important value many interlocutors reported wanting in their interviews, fearing that they would be seen as fake or insincere. The influencer movement across all social media platforms is based almost entirely on the need of the audience to feel authenticity from the user’s posts, whether they are posting images of their hike across America’s national parks, baking a pop culture-inspired cake, or playing a popular video game for their followers. Grief, whether raw displays of emotion or upsetting truths, is a performative display of grief that grants authenticity to the emotion and thus validity.

As one of my interview participants, Tonya Hill said that “Who you are on Facebook, is who you are in real life.” At the very least, there is an assumption that you should be the person you are on Facebook. Facebook emphasizes transparency, but this lends itself to identity performance which is an attempt to balance the need for authenticity and the pressure to perform an ideal version of yourself.

Within the need to play out emotions publicly, and in an authentic manner, also plays into users’ feelings of agency or loss of agency. It is necessary to consider these issues of agency and coercion as factors in how individuals experience their grief performance on Facebook. The feeling of being forced into these displays is one many expressed by many in my study, but their
interaction with that coercion differed remarkably. Susan Jones leaned into her grief and the reactions she received through these displays, to the point many times she barely remembered making the posts. The forum—whether in her Timeline or in private Facebook groups focused on grief—and the reaction she received from these posts made gave her a strong sense of agency and validity. Jerry Benton reported similar validity, as he lacked it elsewhere in his life, despite the severe breaches of social protocol he enacted through posting through his deceased wife’s account.

Other users, such as Alice Wolfe, felt a loss of agency. Dr. Wolfe felt pressured by her husband’s family, meaning that posts were for them more than for her. The act of changing her status to widowed and then updating her status to married on Facebook was a way to reclaim her agency, much to their chagrin, but to the acceptance of her larger Facebook network, though almost all were unaware of her struggles.

Similarly, those watching the status updates of others reported agency as an issue they struggled with. Jeff McDonald, nephew of Susan Jones, reported feeling a loss of agency in his ability to express his own feelings while observing his aunt posting as if only her emotions mattered, as if she was the only one who lost Tommy. Jeff’s mom, Gina also commented on how she felt unable to express her true feelings on Facebook because her sister insisted, she had no right to grieve as Gina still had two living children. Jeff reported that based on the way Susan treated his mother, his aunts and uncle, and his sister seemed to suggest that none of them were allowed the agency to fully mourning and grieve Tommy on their own terms as Susan used her grief to dominate conversations on and offline. Online Susan’s emotional performance was for others who gave her support, while her interactions with her husband and siblings soured considerably. Though Jeff acknowledged that Susan’s behavior was rooted in her grief, and at
the constant reminder that her siblings still had children and grandchildren and Susan did not, he was still deeply hurt by her behavior and his own loss of agency that distorted his need to grieve in a less public space. It created a competition for validity for the emotions users feel. This is exemplified in the example of Tabitha Jackson.

7.4 Conflict and Competition

Tabitha Jackson, discussed in Chapter 5, suffered a severe breach of protocol when her extended family announced the death of her mother and then made claims about her wants and wishes, a loss of agency she fears she may never overcome. It has shaped her feelings on online death practices to have experienced this, and though it took a large show of agency to overcome this and reassert her control over her mother’s death and narrative, the lack of agency was shocking and severe.

Tabitha’s experience exemplifies how a loss of control and dissatisfaction with the public mourning for her mother’s death actually caused more harm than good. Her grief was complicated by conflicts over social norms and expectations that are still being developed. Most research participants agree that it is important to wait and allow a close family member to be the first person to officially announce a death. But this is an emerging social norm and people often respond quickly and emotionally when they are shocked to hear someone they know died. Information, even incomplete or inaccurate information, spreads much faster on social media. In this regard people seem more interested in reporting the death first, rather than waiting for the facts. Being first carries a degree of prestige which fails to consider the feelings of loved ones or fully grasp the emotional impact of finding out someone close to you has passed away in a gossipy social media post.
Tabitha was very critical of her both her cousin-in-law and a friend of her brother’s Facebook posts. It hurt her that her brother’s old classmate put her emotional response to the death of a friend’s mom before the emotional of the woman’s children. While death is a communal event, not all grief responses are weighed equally: those who knew the deceased in passing may have a strong reaction, but it is not the same as having been that person’s daughter, son, or husband. To Tabitha, indeed to many respondents with similar experiences, this breach of announcing the death disrupted the natural order and social hierarchy of grief, and demeaned Tabitha’s individual experience.

Family dynamics still are a major factor in Tabitha’s grief experience. Of her immediate family, Tabitha considers herself the biggest social media user. She considered it her right as a daughter to announce her mother’s death on Facebook and is offended when she feels that right has been taken away by her cousin and brother’s high school classmate. Despite this, she still felt a degree of responsibility to correct the misinformation put forward by her cousin. It is important to note that she does this in spite of her own desire to “just sit back” and not post or engage. Tabitha found the expectation that she would “lose her shit” on Facebook to be something that added to her emotional burden. It was an expectation that she made every effort not conform with, but she acknowledged the pressure to mourn publicly on Facebook was intense. She was thankful that her brother and her husband supported her decision to not engage in mourning on Facebook, acknowledging it would be expected. In her case, mourning on Facebook proved deeply upsetting and alienating. Despite the positive and supportive messages left on her mother’s Facebook page in the days following her death, mourning on Facebook negatively impacted Tabitha’s grief experience.
The question of what makes mourning practices on Facebook cathartic or harmful, came up in several interviews. Just as George Michaels expressed his concern about the mental health issues behind people excessively posting about grief on Facebook, many research participants who did not frequently make mourning posts shared these concerns for the well-being of friends and family.

There is a lot to be learned from the conflict that arises from not following the unwritten rules of mourning on Facebook. I came across such a case while conducting my fieldwork. I met with Brother Bobby Brown, a Methodist minister in his forties, who is very active on social media, in the home of a mutual family friend, who my husband and I stayed with while we were in Memphis, Tennessee. My friend offered us the use of her dining room for the interview while she spent the afternoon in her backyard playing with my son and her two dogs. It afforded us relative privacy and comfortable surroundings for our conversation. Brother Bobby Brown enthusiastically supported my project when he discussed it informally in the early planning stages. When we met for our interview, I had intended to discuss his perspective on my project as a minister, a topic we did indeed cover. However, his cousin had recently died by suicide and the role Facebook played in his family’s response was very much on his mind, so I quickly switched gears to follow the methodology of my grief narrative interview.

I asked, “Can you tell me a little bit about him?” Bro. Bobby said, “His name is Jay Hinton.” He took a deep breath, masking emotion that was barely audible, “and he died by suicide on Sunday.” Not aware that Bobby had lost someone so recently, I took a moment’s pause to prepare myself, nodding reassuringly and meeting his eyes. With very little prompting, Bobby continued:

*He died of suicide, but his family members, like his mother and the aunt that he’s closest too, are sort of a subset of my family,*
Brother Bobby Brown’s narrative reveals complicated family dynamics and a struggle within the family to control the narrative of his cousin’s death. As an educated, middle class minister living in Memphis, Brother Brown’s view of suicide and the appropriate pastoral response to suicide differed widely from the attitude of his aunts and cousins living in the rural Ozarks facing shock and stigmatization. But beyond the drastic disagreement over the cause of Jay Hinton’s death were issues concerning who had the closest claim to Jay, who determined how he was remembered, and, ultimately, a disagreement on who had the right to post on Facebook. Even though Bobby’s message was made as a status update, without tagging Jay’s account, his right to mourning in the way he wanted to mourn was called into question by other family members who were perceived to be closer relations to Jay, primarily Jay’s sister, mother, and aunt.
The conflict that ensued following Bobby’s post demonstrates what happens when a person chooses to ignore the social norms and hierarchy of grief that regulates the cultural scripts for grief performance on Facebook. Guided by his offline cultural values and assured by his offline status and prestige, Bro. Bobby Brown felt confident publicly taking a stance that directly contradicted the narrative supported by his family members. However, he faced strong social sanctions both online and offline.

He had a lot more to say about what made for healthy mourning and what opened the door to harmful mourning. In my interview with him, I followed up on his opinions about deleting deceased Facebook friends, asking, “When you come across other people making Facebook posts about their grief, what’s your reaction?” He said, “I go into pastor mode. Um, I appreciate that they are trying to move through their grief and I am happy that they are doing that, even if they are doing that in ways that I wouldn’t. I’m always happy to see people expressing their feelings, as long as it's in a healthy way.” I asked, “Is there a point at which you would become concerned that it is not healthy?” He shrugged with his hands outstretched, “Yeah, I mean like with my cousin, after I posted that thing, somebody, his sister posted on it, in a response to it, in all caps, ‘GET THE FACTS STRAIGHT BEFORE YOU POST SOMETHING!’ And then later, someone had said something to me on there, because I'd shared my number and I noted that I had never shared it with him. And she said, well Dr. Brown, you can’t save everybody anyway, just trying to say something nice to me. And his sister gets on there, ‘HE WOULD NEVER DO THAT TO HIS FAMILY! YOU DON’T KNOW WHO HE IS!’” Brother Brown shook his head and sighed, “That's not healthy. That's transforming into rage against strangers. And against people close to you simply for refusing to buy into a delusion based upon stigmatization [of suicide]. And it could possibly endanger whoever they decided, in
their group think, had been responsible for the murder. And that stuff happens where I come from, so I was not going to participate, even by proxy in that kind of blood vengeance.”

From his cousin Abby’s expression of rage in the comments to Bobby’s refusal to delete the post to the collective unfriending of Bobby by so many of his extended family members, each act was in its own way performative. Even Bobby’s original post, sharing the death of his cousin as a way to offer pastoral support to others contemplating suicide, was in its own way performative as he was using his cousin’s death as the framing tool for his status update that targeted others facing similar struggles. The public nature of the conflict and the fact that a wide range of friends and family chimed and took sides escalated the confrontation quickly.

Evident in each of these family conflicts and those discussed in previous sections in context of the performance of grief, is that so much of grieving and mourning is about the living rather than the deceased. Each individual bereaved person is in the process of navigating their grief and how their loss has impacted them personally. Beyond the loss of the person, the bereaved experience a loss of status, and possibly a loss of agency or control over how their emotions are performed and mourned. The conflicts which emerge in these cases are interpersonal conflicts between the living as they attempt to navigate what it means to be living when the deceased is no longer alive. With mourning on Facebook, these conflicts play out a much more public stage than they previously might have.

7.5 Whose Mourning Matters: Hierarchy of Grief

What is interesting here is the degree of “claiming” of the deceased by the posters of the pictures, as if they are proving the nature of their relationship to the community of mourners through photographic evidence. The photos which typically surface on memorial pages are not only a means of working through grief, but are also an assertion of legitimacy and a form of
emotional currency, presented publicly to cement one’s status as a mourner and maintain one’s hold on the deceased’s memory. (Wagner 2014: 12).

While bereavement is defined as an objective valuation of loss, the extent to which society acknowledges a person's grief defines the magnitude to which is it socially acceptable for the person to display mourning (Corr, Nabe, and Corr 2008). This value system generates a hierarchy of grief which is not always reflective of individual's experience of bereavement as it is dependent upon official relationships and publicly acknowledged social statuses.

In the United States, it is commonly noted that when it comes to grief, every person experiences and expresses grief in “their own way.” Yet, even in this individualistic society, individual grief experience is shaped by public mourning practices and the social rules that guide them. Emerging mourning practices on Facebook are an expansion of communal mourning that offer a new venue for obtaining public recognition of grief. Communal mourning on Facebook is an opportunity for eliciting emotional support which facilitates resilience, according to interviewees like Susan Jones but a denial of grief recognition in public mourning venues influences new mental health vulnerabilities, as the downfall of Jerry Benton before his son’s return into his life indicates.

When tragedy strikes, social dynamics, and family politics can turn the right to public mourning into a hierarchical system, valuing the grief of specific individuals over all others. These grief hierarchies place greater value on the individual's social status and recognized familial relationship to the deceased, downplaying the significance of emotional attachment. Whose grief experience is valued and whose grief is marginalized? Who has the right to claim public recognition of their grief? These traditional issues of family psychology have been complicated with the rise of social media and the emergence of Facebook death
practices, which quantifies social recognition of the value of a griever’s experience. The hierarchical value placed on individual’s grief experience has a marginalizing effect for bereaved people whose emotional attachment and loss is not adequately represented by official kinship relationships.

Reflecting on his findings regarding the hierarchy which exists among Facebook mourners, Wagner writes:

With few exceptions, Facebook users implicitly recognize a hierarchy of grief to be at play on these memorials. The spouse and children of the deceased are at the top of the pyramid, the parents on the next level down, other immediate family members below, close friends down still another step, and acquaintances are at the bottom. The recognition of this hierarchy is evident in the fact that those who express sympathy do so toward the groups above, rather than below them. The spouse, children, and parents of the deceased rarely express sympathy to other mourners, as if recognizing their own dominance of the hierarchy. Spouses and family instead tend to direct their messages to the deceased, personally. Occasionally, a family member will direct a reply to the post of a friend of the deceased who seems to be going through a particularly rough time with the loss, providing a stamp of legitimacy to the friend’s grief with their significant social capital (Wagner 2014: 12-13).

I take this argument as step further, noting that this performance of grief takes place within a social hierarchy which strictly follows a hierarchical evaluation of official social statuses based on the bereaved’s official relationship with the deceased. In death, this value system merges with the offline familial hierarchy which privileges biological relationships over affinity and affection. It privileges a mother over an aunt, a sister over a cousin. Friendship is honored but through a fictive kinship model. While cousins who are as emotionally and socially close as siblings may experience the intense grief of siblings, on Facebook their grief experience is rarely acknowledged as such. Facebook’s social hierarchy of grief not only privileges official relationship statuses, but it also enforces a system for evaluating those official relationship
statuses that privileges the mainstream American model of kinship and its emphasis on nuclear families.

The confluence of social hierarchy, kinship, and the preferential treatment official statuses and publicly acknowledged relationships receive on Facebook shape how grief is valued on Facebook. This hierarchy of grief affects the recognition posters receive on Facebook. When there is a disconnect between the participant’s experience of grief and the value placed on it by others, it negatively influences the participant’s emotional recovery, and thus, well-being. This appears time and time again in interviews, where there is a hierarchy of grief and where grief is not valued equally: Jeff McDonald, Tabitha Jackson, and Bobby Brown all encounter situations where their grief was not valued, and it affected their well-being. Another such instances highlights how Facebook’s mourning practices can become harmful rather than therapeutic, as highlighted in the case of Jeff’s mother Gina McDonald.

Gina’s case represents a denial of full participation in Facebook’s mourning practices based on social status which diminishes her agency and complicates her self-reported grief experience. This denial of social recognition of grief experience based on social status hinders the individual’s recovery process rather than facilitating it. Gina reported feeling that her ability to express publicly her grief was highly constrained. She told me, “Anytime, I acknowledge my own pain publicly, even in the slightest way, it filled my sister with rage. ‘How dare [you] mourn him [her nephew Tommy]?’ ‘How could I possibly know her pain when I had three children safely at home in their beds?’” Sounding somewhat defeated she admitted, “Of course, I didn’t know her pain. But I had loved him, I loved him like my own. I was his favorite Auntie, the one he’d come to.” She laughed, though she had tears in her eyes, “I was the one he came to when he needed something, when something was wrong. I let him get away with murder...” her voice
drifted with a mixture of masked emotions, “There are things his mother never knew about, still doesn’t know about, will never know about.” Gina’s close friend, Pam summed it up, “Gina is silenced, and it isn’t healthy. It’s like Susan’s made her feel like she doesn’t deserve to get to mourn.” When I asked if she made many mourning posts herself, Gina sighed, “No, Susan wouldn’t like that. It’s her thing. I comment on everybody else’s. And on special days, holidays I do say something. But I say something about missing Daddy too.” In the hierarchical power struggle, Gina’s grief was denied in favor of her sister’s official status as mother of the deceased despite or perhaps even because of the genuine closeness and loss Gina felt. Gina’s son and friend Pam both commented on the negative impact that they felt this had on Gina’s ability to process her grief. Gina’s grief was complicated by her inability to full express herself on Facebook and the guilt she felt over her close relationship with her nephew and her living children.

While bereavement is defined as an objective valuation of loss, the extent to which society acknowledges a person's grief defines the magnitude to which is it socially acceptable for the person to display mourning (Corr, Nabe, and Corr 2000). Communal mourning on Facebook is an opportunity for eliciting emotional support which facilitates resilience, but a denial of grief recognition in public mourning venues influences new mental health vulnerabilities.

When tragedy strikes, social dynamics, and family politics can turn the right to public mourning into a hierarchical system, valuing the grief of specific individuals over all others. These grief hierarchies place greater value on the individual's social status and recognized familial relationship to the deceased, downplaying the significance of emotional attachment. Whose grief experience is valued and whose grief is marginalized? Who has the right to claim to public recognition of their grief? These traditional issues of family psychology
have been complicated with the rise of social media and the emergence of Facebook death practices, which quantifies social recognition of the value of a griever’s experience.

In a follow up conversation on Facebook messenger with Bro. Bobby Brown two years after our initial interview, he wrote, “I kept the post and most of the extended family unfriended me. They still ‘believe’ it to be an unsolved murder. No one talks about it now. Peace through silence.” I asked him, “Are there family gatherings you attend with them?” He responded, “Yeah, they see me, when I perform marriages or funerals for the family, or when I attend one. No one says anything.” He concluded, “Separating online was easier for them—I think they’d rather love me at a distance than risk coming to hate me through social media.” Unable to reconcile their disagreement over the narrative of Jay’s death, Bobby’s extended family choose to unfriend him on Facebook, the highest form of social sanction one Facebook user can do to another. However, this online shunning has not prohibited Bobby remaining an active member of the family offline.

In a situation like Tabitha’s, what can be done? The family can put social pressure on the offending family member both on Facebook and in-person. But in extreme cases, the family can officially request that Facebook take down the deceased’s page through a legal process requiring a close family member to present Facebook with a copy of the death certificate. This is exceedingly rare; of the 190 people who directly participated in this study through the online survey, a grief narrative interview, or an informal interview, one such case presented itself. That was the case of Tabitha’s mother. She and her brother were so hurt by online interactions surrounding her mother’s death that they officially requested her Facebook account and its timeline to be closed. This interaction negatively impacted their social health.
7.6 Social Health and Impact: Loss, Agency, Vulnerability Exposed

Death disrupts the social order. Those whose status and social identity is dependent upon the deceased experience a separation or withdraw from society immediately following the death, a period of liminality during which their identity is ambiguous, and reintegration after they have reclaimed their identity. Thus, death creates a loss of agency, agency which must be reclaimed through the grief process, a process which is by its nature one of vulnerability.

A willingness to ritualistically expose emotional vulnerability to gain the support necessary to endure this transformation of identity. Couching mourning posts in religious language, which pays proper respect to the dead, ensures that observers and commenters remember to respect the poster’s grief process, regardless of how uncomfortable it might make observers feel. It is in this need for transformation that cultural scripts defined by the community and often using idioms of belief that drives Facebook users to public displays of grief and vulnerability, but also opens them to social coercion.

In the wake of death, conflict often arises regarding life after the deceased. Whether it is how to remember them or preexisting conflict in the deceased’s social network, the living navigates the positive and negative bonds of kinwork and community. The need to perform kinwork often requires that grievers take part in actions that they may not feel comfortable with or feel is an invasion of their grief and privacy, as several cases in this project have highlighted. Who the dead belong to, and how to remember them, is an ongoing process and one that requires active participation by many, against their will if necessary. This social coercion creates discomfort but may help others find validity for their own emotions.

The self is the locus in which social factors manifestation effecting well-being a tangible way. At the level of the individual, identity, agency, and dignity are the major factors of what I
call social health. These factors are complex, and indicative of an individual’s embodied experience. The embodied experience of identity, agency, and dignity are aspects of social life which shape individual’s resistance, resilience, and recovery. They also allow for the individual to manage their self-identity, and the strength of their social health helps or hurts that process.

Social health at the individual level stems from an individual’s self-image and his experience of his embodied self. If there is a disparity between how a person perceives herself and how others perceive her, it creates internal turmoil, psychological distress, and interpersonal conflicts. An empowered acceptance of her social self and a harmonious integration of self-image and embodied self is a positive indicator for an individual’s social health. This empowered acceptance lends itself to resilience, resistance, and well-being. Psychological well-being is rooted in self-actualization. But I extend it a step further, actualization and acceptance of the social self are essential to social health. An internal transformation that shines through as strength and confidence, known colloquially as “owning it.” It must be noted here that this empowered acceptance and the resilience associated with it, does not excuse or condone systemic neglect, prejudice, or structural violence.

The study of social health, and the factors surrounding it, are a subject of further study. My dissertation explores the role of social media in grief experience and resilience in rural communities with inadequate mental health resources. Both mechanisms are free to Facebook users and available without geographic constraints, though limited by Internet access. For individuals experiencing complicated grief who live in rural areas without access to grief support groups or mental health specialists, online support groups have become a valuable alternative.
Facebook, while incredibly useful to some in the grieving process, generates new ambivalences, bringing family conflicts and emotional vulnerabilities into public sight. It opens each person’s reaction to grief to public view and comment by friends and family.

Family dynamics are played out in the performance of emotion on Facebook. Each family member is prescribed a role and a set of social expectations for how their grief and sympathy should be expressed on Facebook. As shown in Chapters 6 and 7, women are the gate keepers and enforcers of the social rules of these emerging rites and manage the kinwork side of grief. Female family members shoulder much of the responsibility for communicating on Facebook on behalf of the family and for keeping the deceased’s memory alive.

Thus, Mourning Status Updates are an outlet for expressing raw emotions. The physical distance that the virtual ritual on Facebook Shrines provides is seen as comforting by participants. These commemorative rituals allow grievers to collectively remember and reimage their dead loved one. The ritual cycle of Facebook Shrines allows for a gradual transformation of the deceased into an honored ancestor, revisited time and again ritualistically on important dates or in times of emotional vulnerability for the living. It is a very public, emotional ritual process, but also an uncomfortable reminder that grief is not resolved in a week, contrasting with American norms of not publicly acknowledging grief after the short grieving period allotted after a funeral.

The posts which build Facebook Shrines also generate a collaborative narrative process in this effort to create and curate the deceased’s life story and keep the deceased’s memory alive. When this process goes well it can foster a digital version of Mattingly’s therapeutic emplotment. However, when familial conflicts, social media-driven egotism, and social pressure to publicly perform grief online in a way that is incompatible with an individual’s personal
experience or level of comfort with public displays of emotion on Facebook, then the results can be far more harmful than beneficial for the individual. It is important to note that for many research participants their feelings about the benefits and risks of public mourning on Facebook changed as time went on. These are ego-driven performances that become a competition of grief and often force people to take sides in family conflicts. For some like Susan Jones and Pam Landry, the frequency and emotional intensity of posts natural diminished until all that remained were the Facebook Shrine maintenance posts made on holidays, birthdays, and death anniversaries. For others, like Dr. Alice Wolfe and Tabitha Jackson, there was a point of swift departure where they began to dislike and dread the pressure to continue to make these posts.

7.7 Conclusion

The mourning practices of Facebook offer Facebook users an outlet for emotional disclosure, validation, and social support. But it comes at a cost. Mourners are publicly exposing their emotional states during a time of great vulnerability and the social pressure to participate is intense. Emotional disclosure in Facebook posts becomes a performance of grief. This performance comes with many social expectations with a user’s role being assigned based on a hierarchy of grief. The grief performance must conform to expectations based on the user’s official relationship to the deceased. Some research participants report that the pressure to perform and social expectations of the performance conflict with and complicate their grief experience. They also questioned the authenticity of such performances.
CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION

Over the last seven chapters, I have explored the emerging prominence of digital mourning rituals and their importance to individual and communal grieving for Facebook users. In this chapter, I outline the significant findings of my research, its theoretical significance to anthropology, and potential future directions of continued research.

8.1 Significant Findings

The practices of mourning on Facebook have both negative and positive consequences for the grief experience of participants and the user experience of non-participants. The public purpose of Facebook Shrines is to honor the dead utilizing cultural scripts that are acceptable to the community of grievers. Negative traits of the dead fall by the wayside in most cases as most deceased are reimagined and honored in positive ways. Exceptions to this script are usually to make a point—the nature of the death was highly negative or perhaps the death offers teachable moment or an example of a breach of social trust.

It becomes important for many mourners for their dead to be honored and remembered publicly. Honoring their dead loved ones by means of a Facebook Shrine helps facilitate their grief process. Doing so allows Facebook grievers to process their grief and help others process their grief and do so together. It also allows the community to transform the deceased into an honored ancestor.
This transformation process is important and is facilitated by the transformation of the Facebook Shrine into a site that is returned to time and again on anniversaries and when specific memories remind the living of the dead. Similar to returning to the graveside or the place of the deceased’s death, Facebook users are able to access the deceased’s Facebook Shrine anytime, and anywhere they have Internet access. The Facebook Shrine becomes a cultural touchstone for the community of grievers: even years after the fact, people still leave memorializing messages. The preservation of the memory of the deceased, the transformation into an honored ancestor, and the Facebook Shrine itself are not for the family alone, but for the community at large. With the transformation comes a narrative of a person’s life, an accepted official version that may or may not reflect the actual person but one that allows the community of grievers to honor the dead. These are ancestral narratives.

Ancestral narratives are narratives of the deceased’s life events that prescribe meaning to the life and death for those left behind. The deceased has little say in the matter, as these narratives are built almost exclusively by the community of grievers through the process of publicly sharing details on the Facebook Shrine. Ancestral narratives allow the grievers to process their grief for themselves and for the public: such a display shows the importance of community and the act of sharing, and reinforces it to the grievers themselves. At times, these narratives might ring false, or are co-opted by certain parties in such a way that exclude others. The seemingly paradoxical nature of public performance of grief was commonly reported in interviews, yet despite feeling this conflict at work mourners still felt the need to perform, for themselves, for others, and for the sake of the deceased.

The performance of grief and sympathy on Facebook raises questions of authenticity for observers and participants alike. The social pressure to participate negates the ritual’s benefits for
some, while the hierarchical social value that Facebook mourning practices place on official relationship statuses leaves others unsatisfied with the recognition that their grief receives. These posts serve as a visual indicator of someone’s grief status, like widows wearing black.

Facebook mourning practices constitute a ritualistic performance of grief. Grief performance visually signals the bereaved Facebook user’s mourning status to their extended social network. Such performances are met with an outpouring of sympathy, support, and a recognition of the original poster’s loss. Conversely grief performance can become constrained under social pressure to conform to social expectations for Facebook’s mourning practices and emerging obligations linked to a person’s social role and status of the kinship hierarchy.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this project regarding emotional disclosure: that posting on Facebook regarding your grief, be it a mourning status update or a Facebook Shrine post, is a therapeutic confession of vulnerability and that the performance of grief is an important aspect in Facebook mourning. Both elements ensure the growth and solidification of the grieving community. Visually signaling mourning is a performance of grief that indicates that you are mourning to others and suffer with them. It creates a sense of *communitas* to show this vulnerability.

This also creates another finding of significance: there is a hierarchy of grief. While a community may perform grief together, through kinwork grief becomes automatically ranked, forming and then validating this hierarchy of grief. The hierarchy is based on official relationship statuses and those closest to the deceased are perceived to have the greatest right to grieve and have control over determining whose grief is valid and whose is not. The power of this hierarchy is enhanced in online grieving perhaps as compared to offline, which may contribute to complicated grief, social stress, and performance anxiety in some cases. This labor is primarily
taken on by female family members and informants reported that the roles of eldest daughter, mother, and wife carried much of this burden. Each death has its own hierarchy of which grievers take precedent, and how they approach granting legitimacy to the grief of others. For many, this performance of grief and identity also includes a performance of lived religion, an enactment of beliefs about death and the afterlife that offer comfort and confirm their belonging to the community at-large. But it also creates stress in cases where participants feel pressure to perform their emotions in inauthentic ways or more publicly than they wish to.

My research explored the social design of Facebook. Designed to draw in and keep users engaged, Facebook’s complex algorithm was not designed to facilitate emerging death practices. My research illustrates that social media users took a system designed for social interaction and invented novel ways of using it that fulfill a need in their lives. Since the emergence of mourning on Facebook, Facebook has built mechanics around the death of its users, but the company has been playing catch up with the user-generated mourning practices since their inception. In digital anthropology this behavior is not an uncommon observation to make, but the specific intersection of social media and death practices, and how user’s participation in these activities actually drove Facebook to build systems to support it is itself a new contribution: it shows the social media reacting to users in how it designs its media.

My research also highlights how Facebook’s intended design which focuses on engaging users and encouraging people to share emotionally-charged content as it garners greater engagement than informational posts. What was not intended was that users would expose their emotions in a time of vulnerability and grief. Not only did they display these emotions, but they did so as a performative act in front of an undifferentiated public audience, albeit one curated by Facebook’s “friend” mechanic. Through small subtle design, social behavior is encouraged even
when conventional knowledge says grief is private, and users often engage socially during this
time. Vulnerability in a social setting like Facebook is a proxy for authenticity, an elusive trait in
a performative space. This finding confirms older research regarding the social web, while
exposing new dimensions of social media design and use.

Death and mourning are well-researched topics in the anthropology of religion, as are
rituals surrounding social interaction and death. My research contributes to this branch of
anthropology in multiple ways: through identifying online healing rituals, by exploring how
digital spaces become ancestral shrines to the dead, by outlining how cultural scripts promote a
specific language of grieving online based in religious language, and by exploring how these
idioms of belief and interactions promote the adoption of new beliefs into users’ lived religions.

Cultures from around the world have ways of remembering the dead and creating shrines
to promote remembrance of the dead, but Facebook Shrines are a unique and growing practice.
While in life Facebook Timelines allowed users to curate their own lives, in death that curation
requires others to do it for them, and this curation is a community effort, one done through active
engagement and re-remembrance of the dead person’s life. A novel tool in the cultural complex
for managing death and remembrance, social media becomes a necessary arena for
anthropologists studying death and bereavement to explore. More specifically, the process of
memorialization that occurs on Facebook is vital to the the grief process of Facebook users.

Further, Facebook’s use of media promotes specific ideas, phrases, and beliefs over
others. Including images, reactions, emojis, and words, idioms of belief wrapped in religious
language demonstrates the power of Facebook’s medium to shape religious language and show
how people express their belief. Media has always had the power to systematize how belief is
expressed, but Facebook democratizes the process taking the power out of the hands of a few
relational specialists and allowing users to create new idioms of belief and generate new practices. There are limits to this democratization as mourning on Facebook re-enforces offline hierarchies valuing official relationships. This novel way of creating and sharing new idioms of belief warrants further research from anthropologists, and its rapidly evolving nature suggests it will continue to grow.

Finally, grieving Facebook users shared new beliefs they adopted from grieving on Facebook, an extension of new idioms of belief. Reinforced through sharing these beliefs on Facebook, grieverers adopt new beliefs not just in digital use but in their daily lives, seeing their loved ones in actions they previously would not have learned from their preferred religions or included in their lived religion. I contribute to the literature on lived religion by showing how new beliefs and lived mourning practices are adopted and actively evolve through the grieving process and Facebook use.

My contributions to the literature medical and psychological anthropology focus on grief support and mental health. I divide these contributions into two categories, contributions to understanding individual grief experience and contributions to understanding communal mourning and how a community processes grief.

Many individual reported finding “writing it out” therapeutic and similarly saw community acknowledgment and support as validating for their grief. Both medical and digital anthropology have noted that writing it out helps the writer at times, while my research is unique in the study of performative writing as therapy. Conversely, most of my informants reported pressure to perform, and felt as if this pressure exploited their vulnerability, itself a unique contribution to medical anthropology. As an extension of this related to mental health and grief support, those who felt this pressure in a wholly negative sense felt either that they lost agency
and thus control of their grief. Some of my data suggests that the performative nature of this grief made griever uncomfortable in part because it seemed inauthentic. In sum, the individual health and healing of grievers is both positively and negatively affected through mourning on Facebook based on my data.

With respect to community, social media uniquely builds an imagined community of grievers. Solidarity is built through grief, and grief solidarity through community building and performative grief is a significant contribution to how medical anthropology studies death, whether in general or on social media. This performance builds a community and highlights connections and conflict, good or bad, within the family and friend circles. Facebook provides a unique way of preserving these conflicts. It also highlights the disparity in social hierarchies of grief, giving preference to official relationship—immediate family—rather than extended or fictive kin. This disparity grants or denies legitimacy in grief, and makes the public and performative nature of Facebook particularly harmful to grief and mental health.

By identifying both positive and negative outcomes, my research contributes to a multitude of topics in medical anthropology topics, but particularly to an understanding of social health. Just as physical and mental health are well-documented facets of an individual’s health, so too is social health. When a person’s social support network is strong, their social health is strengthened, which in turn reinforces their mental and physical health. When social support is lacking, social health falters and with it the other two parts of composite health. All three elements are important to well-being and particularly to the well-being of a person in mourning and the social support that derives from a Facebook Shrine enhances overall well-being.

Finally, these practices are commemorative, performative, and cathartic. Facebook mourning practices are commemorative as they honor and celebrate the deceased. Facebook
mourning practices are performative as they are public rituals taking place on a platform dedicated to performances of social identity. Facebook practices are cathartic in their most efficacious form as rituals of emotional healing that promote grief resilience.

8.2 Theoretical Significance

This project has yielded quite a few findings that are theoretically significant, focused primarily on what is derived from cultural scripts for mourning on Facebook. These function on three primary levels: emotional disclosure, lived religion, and community. Each one allows for a different level of identity and community maintenance, and has significance for key frameworks in digital anthropology, the anthropology of religion, medical anthropology, and the anthropology gender and kinship.

The design of Facebook made digital mourning possible and may be construed as an unintended consequence. Facebook is built on the social connections of its users. It markets this connectivity and users’ willingness to engage with the site in order to engage one another’s content. This is Facebook’s primary commodity. Building off Boellstroff’s (2017) concept of vulnerable confessions, I found that Facebook’s design encourages people to disclose emotional vulnerability in a performative way to an undifferentiated public audience out of a need to have their suffering acknowledged. These confessions are coupled with the imagined community of Facebook which explains how users imagine their collective Facebook network as meta-best friend, as Miller (2011) suggests. This cultural intimacy of Facebook’s user experience explains why users are willing to make such public vulnerable confessions: they are encouraged by people to expose emotional vulnerability in a performative way to an undifferentiated public audience, creating a feedback loop of sharing, seeing, and reacting that feeds into itself. This is a power
example of Bucher’s (2016) algorithmic imaginary deeply impacting users’ phenomenonlocal reality.

Therapeutic emplotment (Mattingly 1998) on Facebook creates opportunities for post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) through the co-creation of the deceased’s ancestral narrative. Evaluating the posts of Facebook Shrines as a narrative process of therapeutic emplotment, I consider the emotional disclosure of Facebook Shrine posts within the context of the narrative transformations which are occurring in these posts. The narrative process of transforming the deceased into an ancestor works not only by emphasizing the deceased’s positive attributes but also by reframing the deceased’s negative attributes into positives. This reframing allows for a greater degree of acceptance of the deceased’s ancestral narrative and the post-mortem healing of unresolved conflicts. This reframing is absolutely necessary for the transformation from person to ancestor and it is a crucial part of the efficacy of the Facebook Shrine therapeutic emplotment process. Transforming the deceased into one of the honored dead, mourners promise to “keep the deceased’s memory alive”, an effort that grievers can devote themselves to as they pull themselves out of the darker emotions of grief. Reframed in this way, the deceased becomes an ancestor. The final stages of the Facebook Shrine ritual cycle are Shrine maintenance. In this maintenance stage, Facebook users fulfill their promise of keeping the deceased’s memory alive, by making remembrance posts on special days: birthdays, significant anniversaries, and holidays.

In their review of the psychological scholarship on digital mourning, cyberpsychologists Kelly R. Rossetto, Pamela J. Lannutti, and Elena C. Strauman (2014) found an abundance of data claiming that mourning on Facebook is both beneficial and harmful for the bereaved. They referred to this as a coping paradox. My research confirms their findings, Facebook offers a
space of emotional disclosure and catharsis, but it comes at a price that includes a loss of privacy and the bereaved opening themselves to narratives and imaginings of the dead that may conflict with their perspective. Facebook offers numerous mechanisms for connecting with the deceased but also provides numerous reminders that might make distancing and letting go harder.

Additionally, Rossetto et al. (2014) found that having a witness to one’s grief can be both helpful and unhelpful. I discussed the benefits and harmful impact of having grief witness in chapters 6 and 7. In particular, my discussions of the pressure to perform grief in accordance with the expectations of others, conflicts with other users, and the social hierarchy of grief eliminates many of these unhelpful aspects of mourning on Facebook. While my discussion of the growing social expectation that the first mourning post should be an official announcement by the family or someone who has been authorized to make a post on the family’s behalf, clearly indicates that misinformation is a problem and that users are developing their own social norms to try to regulate this very unhelpful behavior.

Recent work taken up by anthropologist Tammy Kohn and her interdisciplinary team at the University of Melbourne looks at digital commemoration on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as a means to express grief, solidarity, and community and even grieving from afar in her most recent co-authored publication on mourning during the COVID-19 crisis (Nansen, Gibbs, Allison, Kohn 2020).

Many of the accounts presented in this dissertation draw attention to the difficulty discussing death, grief, and the deceased in-person interactions. These accounts are representative of a larger social deficit and an unmet need that most research participants acknowledged. Drawing on the work of David Hall (1997) and Robert Orsi (1985), I found that the emergence of mourning practices on Facebook fulfill the need to talk about the deceased and
their grief in the lived religion of participants. Facebook mourning practices are a virtual ritual process that visually signals the poster’s mourning status and transforms the deceased’s Timeline into a digital memorial.

The initial research on digital memorials was primarily conducted by scholars of Informatics and Computer Science, who focused on identity creation, the management of digital data post-mortem, and the effect of digital memorial content on user experience on SNS (Carroll and Romano 2010; Brubaker et al. 2013; Brubaker & Hayes 2011). The computer science studies give little attention to the connection between digital memorials, the participants’ grief experience, and their lived religion. My research expands the scholarship in this area by focusing on how Facebook’s design not only impacts mourning on Facebook but unintentionally prompts them to fill that space with familiar religious language and ideas. Thus, it adds to this body of work on user experience and design. My research focuses on which features are useful to mourners and which such as reconnect notifications might actually be detrimental to allowing Facebook users to grieve on their own terms.

Building on Ellen Badone’s (1990) work on popular faith, my findings regarding communal mourning without clergy are significant to the anthropology of religion and religious studies as it demonstrates how new beliefs are shared among lay people and how the even temporary adoption of these beliefs influences ritual actions of personal and community-wide significance. Further, building on Arnold van Gennep’s (1909) discussion of liminality and Victor Turner’s (1969) framework of the ritual process for navigating liminality, I found that the Facebook Timeline of the deceased enters a liminal stage and that the ritual process of mourning on Facebook includes a pilgrimage to the deceased Timeline, emotionally charged and religiously worded mourning posts which were frequently accompanied by cathartic experiences.
of grief solidarity and support, and the spontaneous conversion of the Timeline into a shrine, fitting Jack Santino’s (2006) theoretical model of the spontaneous shrines.

As invented traditions (Hobsbawn 1984; Anderson 2006), memorials on Facebook share much in common with both traditional ancestral shrines and Santino’s contemporary physical spontaneous shrines; these similarities inspired the term "Facebook Shrines" for this project. Facebook Shrines allow for networked memorialization, and these public expressions of grief are also frequently used as both a space of individual performance and community support.

For my work, I apply Herzfeld’s (2004) cultural intimacy by replacing the state with Facebook and individual citizens with individual Facebook users. Facebook’s design is intended to create cultural intimacy among its users as community and connectivity are part of its mission. But it is important to remember that as a site whose value is user-generated, individual users play just as important of a role in defining the use and characteristics of cultural intimacy on Facebook as the designers do. Facebook is generated in an algorithmic imaginary duet between users and the developers and designers the company employees.

In Wagner’s MA thesis (2014), an anthropological study of mourning on Facebook, we share conferrable findings on the community of mourners and social hierarchy of grief. However, my study expands our understanding of the communal aspects of grief by focusing on the ritual process that creates community and the role of community in developing an official narrative of the life of the deceased individual. My work also expands our understanding of the grief experiences of individual mourners, and the impact of the social expectations of grief performance on the grief processes. I also cover family conflicts and note how Facebook contributes to very public family differences. The hierarchy of grief on Facebook is based on valuing official relationships based on mainstream American ideas of kinship that do not value
extended or fictive kin, despite variations in actual relationships and values that were expressed by individuals and families in my study. Hierarchy of grief is directly tied to family conflicts and the reported experience of complicated grief.

The death of someone close leaves a person vulnerable. In their annual review of the “Anthropology at the Beginning and End of Life,” Kaufman and Morgan (2005) note that death rituals traditionally served to re-establish social bonds, improve the sense of solidarity within a kin group, and provide the necessary support to the chief grievers. The emotional work of grieving is a long process, particularly for those experiencing complicated grief. Until the transformational work that is necessary for healing is done, the griever is vulnerable not only socially and emotionally, but he or she is also at risk for major health complications.

My project demonstrates that the mourning practices on Facebook are a contemporary recreation of the intent of traditional death rituals, but in a way that is well-suited to the highly mobile and digital society of the early 21st century. The ways in which grief performance on Facebook stands in contrast to in-person mourning are incredibly important as those differences are indicative of an emerging social need being filled by this new incarnation of old traditions. The ultimate goal of these grief performances is to build and rebuild community in the wake of death and the loss of social agents.

When mourning posts tag the deceased or are written directly on the deceased’s Timeline, it allows Facebook users to communally mourn and experience a sense grief solidarity. Distance is no issue in this setting, expanding the overall reach of the grieving process over regions and cultures. This sense of community creates a greater sense of solidarity over distance and keeps the ties that bind from fraying and isolating grievers. In grief, there is solidarity, and within that solidarity, community is built and kinwork generated.
Yet this is a volatile process, and the community’s shattering by death can test bonds of 
kinwork and community. Mourning and death related posts on Facebook can escalate, especially 
in the wake of a public tragedy. This can create a negative feedback loop or even result in 
attempts at vigilante justice, both of which are harmful for the healing process of all involved. 
While these are extreme cases, they test the community of grievers and the hierarchy of grief, at 
times highlighting the unfair treatment of some grievers by others within the hierarchy. Yet at 
other times, this creates more solidarity, by allowing people to see each other at their most 
vulnerable, recognize their common humanity, and grieve together, no matter how far apart. 

Public mourning is a labor of kinwork. Building on the work of Gilligan and di Leonardo 
(Gilligan 1982; di Leonardo 1987), I analyzed public mourning on Facebook through the lens of 
kinwork. This labor is primarily taken on by female family members and informants reported 
that the roles of eldest daughter, mother, and wife carried much of this burden. Facebook proved 
to be an efficient tool of kinwork and much of its continued significance in American sociality is 
tied to its utility as a platform of maintaining kin and friend networks.

8.3 Future Directions

To conclude, my research creates multiple opportunities for future directions in 
anthropological research. My current sample drew heavily on white Southerners and was 
disproportionately made up of women. To some extent this bias is linked to the demographics of 
Facebook itself, but it is also likely the result of my positionality and how Facebook’s algorithms 
impacted my recruitment methods. While I provided explanations regarding why women are 
more likely to take part in mourning on Facebook, future research would benefit a more diverse 
sample that includes larger participation from men and ethnic minority groups. More 
importantly, expanding beyond a predominantly white sample would allow me to explore how
different ethnic communities utilize grief on Facebook: several examples within my research confirm non-white groups use Facebook for grieving, but I believe further research is needed to determine if there is significant variation along ethnic or racial lines. Finally, diversifying the sample in order to exam how religious affiliation and social economic status impact public mourning is another significant avenue for future research.

Another significant way to expand the sample in future research is to conduct grief narrative interviews with people who prefer to mourn privately or who chose not to participate online. While these individuals’ experience of their grief may be just as strong, they have not succumb to the public pressure of public display of grief. It would be significant to understand why they have chosen to not participate in Facebook mourning practices especially if they do utilize Facebook for other purposes.

Another direction of future research would involve exploring Facebook Groups more fully. Facebook Shrines and Mourning Status Updates received plentiful examples, and while several informants were members of Facebook Groups dedicated to grief, I was not able to adequately study these groups due to their strict privacy settings, which prevented my direct participant-observation. In interviews, my informants have stated clearly they are allowed to express emotions that might not be acceptable in common Facebook parlance, leading me to believe that further research would reveal a stark contrast to the language and focus of Facebook Shrines and Mourning Status Updates I found in this project.

Textual analysis was key to my project, and I believe further targeted textual analysis would reveal further nuance. In particular, future research should focus on the variation in idioms of belief and the language choices of different demographic groups and regions beyond the American Mid-South, and how these are shaped by culture and performance. The pervasive use
of religious language such as referring to the deceased as angels who watch over the living merits further study to determine if such phenomena are wide-spread on the Internet or limited to one region, nation, ethnicity, or religious group. Similarly, other forms of media beyond text would also be informative to study such as the images and videos shared in these posts. Given my methods for this project, I believe this would be a worthwhile expansion and reveal deeper nuance. An emerging trend I observed in 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic and associated social changes, was an increase in public mourning of personal losses on social media platforms other than Facebook; primarily Twitter and Instagram. Examining differences between these platforms will be a fruitful direction for future research.

A final future direction of research would be to continue longitudinal analysis of the grievers’ accounts of catharsis, memory loss, and automatic writing as it pertains to disclosing their grief on Facebook. While several interviews have demonstrated a kind of automatic response, that is a display they made into habit, some reported not remembering having made such posts. Overtime, post-behaviors changed, and self-awareness of mourning posting behavior led some participants to decrease their posting frequency to obligatory posts only. This raises questions of agency and consciousness in regard to trauma and loss which require further exploration. Mourning on Facebook invites anthropologists to consider community and kinship, individual and communal mourning, and how the intersection of user-generated social norms and corporate web design impacts user experience. These topics have long been points of interest for anthropologists; researching them in the social setting of Facebook allows for consideration of how new traditions are built from old social structures and customs. It is necessary to consider the impact of social media and digital technology on all aspects of sociality and well-being for anthropology to claim its voice in the study of cyberculture in the 21st century.
Complicated Grief - A form of grief noted in clinical psychology that is notably deeper than most grief, to the point of being debilitating to both physical and mental health.

Cultural Scripts - Units of cultural or regional metalanguage that articulate cultural norms, values, and practices in terms which are clear, precise, and accessible to cultural insiders and to cultural outsiders alike.

Facebook Groups - Facebook organizations that allow users with a shared interest or cause to identify with one another and interact in the group’s discussion area. Facebook groups can be private or public. One of the primary units of study for this project.

Facebook Messages - Also called Facebook Messenger. A private messaging service, not unlike text messaging or emailing, where users send text, images, and other forms of media to one another in individual or group message settings. Messenger also allows users to do voice and video chats.

Facebook Newsfeed - Also called a Newsfeed. The initial page all users see when signing onto Facebook, on both the website and app versions. Newsfeeds are a conglomeration of posts and content from the hours, days, and week, inviting the user to interact with everything that appears on their Newsfeed. These include other users’ posts, posts from pages and groups, and the activity of others on Facebook the user might find interesting, as determined by an algorithm based on use and interest.

Facebook Post - A post is a piece of media shared by a user, group, or page. It primarily contains text, but can include information such as images, links, location, and allows users to tag friends or pages.

Facebook Memory - A post on Facebook from over a year ago. Facebook often advertises these to users to elicit engagement, as a reminder of the past.

Facebook Shrine - A Facebook user’s Facebook Timeline that has been transformed after their death, allowing their friends and loved ones to share grief and preserve memories of that user’s life. One of the primary units of study for this project.
Facebook Timeline - Also called a Timeline. A Facebook user’s page, which contains all posts they’ve made, a list of interests, relations, and groups that they can choose to display for others. Privacy is entirely determined by the user.

Friendiversary - The anniversary of two Facebook users becoming “friends” on Facebook, a feature of Facebook meant to create engagement between friends.

Mourning Status Update - A Facebook post expressing grief and mourning. The post is done on the user’s Timeline, may share a Memory of the deceased, and may tag the deceased and others. One of the primary units of study for this project.

Post-traumatic growth - Long-term positive personal changes that may develop following a stressful life event or loss; it is a term used frequently in the grief therapy literature.

Psychopomp - Term for a spiritual guide, often relating to death. In the classical sense, a psychopomp guided spirits to the Greek Underworld—Hermes, Iris, and other deities—but this has been expanded by later scholars to include other cultures and cultural beliefs.

Polymedia ecology - A term referring to the range of media available to media users, and how situations inform them to choose one media over another. Whether text, images, sound, video, or other sources, specific situations inform what media they use based on availability.

Social Networking Site (SNS) - A website designed for users to interact with one another, often with user-generated content
APPENDIX 2
SHARING FEELINGS ON FACEBOOK SURVEY QUESTIONS

Q5 In what year were you born?

Q6 What is your gender?

Q7 Which race/ethnicity best describes you?

Q8 What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

Q9 How long have you had a Facebook Account?

Q10 How do you primarily access your Facebook Account?

Q11 About how often do you view or access Facebook?

Q12 How do you primarily post content to your Facebook Account?

Q13 How frequently do you share emotional content on Facebook?

Q14 How frequently do you respond to the emotional posts of others?

Q15 Which emotions have you expressed in your Facebook status? Check All that Apply

Q16 Please list the two emotions you share most frequently.

Q17 How frequently do you request prayers in your Facebook Status
Q18 How frequently do you respond to the prayer requests of others?

Q19 Have you ever written a Facebook post about a deceased Facebook user?

Q20 Do you ever write messages to a deceased Facebook friend on their Facebook page?
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