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The Relationship Between Grief & Social Media  
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**Online vs Offline: The Impact of Social Media on the  
Processing and Understanding of One's Grief**

A Senior Honors Thesis  
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### Abstract

The present study investigated how college students used their social media to present their grief, and answer the question of whether dealing with grief publicly on social media helped or hindered the grieving process and impact how we understand the experience. The seventeen participants for the study were recruited from the greater Boston area – thirteen students and four mental health professionals. All participants were interviewed and the responses were then coded and analysed using a thematic analyses. Results from the findings point to both positive and negative effects of using social media to process grief – the positive being catharsis, community, and raising awareness and the negative being social capital and attention, and obligatory social media posts. The thesis also explored how those positive and negative aspects of grieving online interact with each other in individuals' grieving processes. The results propose that future studies should continue to explore each of the aspects put forth as well as examine more closely what makes individuals take to social media to process intimate personal experiences such as grief.

Key words: social media, college students, grief, young adults.

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## **CHAPTER 1: Problem Statement and Significance**

Social media is one of the most prevalent, global uses of the Internet today. As measured thus far in 2018, of the 4.021 billion people who use the Internet, 3.196 billion have social media profiles, and, the number of social media users is presently growing at 13% per year (Chaffey, 2018). Social media sites are used for both personal and professional networking, and have found their way into everyday use in almost all parts of our lives. It has made the world smaller, but also more complicated. People today exist both online and offline, relationships are developed and built online and offline, and identities are explored both online and offline. Social media has transformed what it means to be a part of the world today. As danah boyd, put forth in her keynote address at the TLT Symposium in 2009, in the case of teenagers, often times social media replaces the after school hangout space, therefore playing an integral part of their relationship building processes. As per boyd,

At the end of the day, what these sites boil down to is a public space where people can hang out. A great space to coordinate information, to share all sorts of photos and media, and there's a lot of ways in which you can think about that as a public space (keynote address).

The recent scandals regarding privacy concerns, and the selling of information to big data companies demonstrates quite clearly that people often treat social media as a private online journal. People share their achievements, relationships, photos, and often times even emotions as personal as their grief on social media. Social media companies have also responded in turn and developed more features to allow for people to have ostensibly more 'holistic' lives online, specifically thinking about Facebook developing the trending news feature, developing messenger as a stand alone platform, or even with allowing for folks to grieve online when loved ones have passed, in the case of building the memorialisation ability for profiles of deceased users. Because of its all-pervasive nature, social media has a

huge impact on the ways in which people engage with the world around them and their own selves.

The present study is contextualised broadly, in exploring the relationship between online and offline identities in college students. During my research, I investigated the following questions - how do online and offline identities intersect, if at all? How does the sharing of one's life, specifically one's emotions, on social media impact the way one communicates in the offline world? How does the culture of updating and sharing one's life on social media impact their lives offline?

These questions become even more important with the added conditions of the functions of social media today. Social media has become a revolutionary platform for activism whether through organising protests - as in the case of the women's march, spreading campaigns – as in the case of #MeToo, or the recent school shootings and issues of gun control; social media is increasingly being used to discuss and provide a public platform to centre topics that are incredibly important and inherently difficult to process and deal with. It therefore often becomes very charged and gives people the space to feel more than just happiness – social media can become a place of grief, a place of remembrance, and a place of resistance.

In light of this context, my study then further explored how one's social media shapes the relationship between any grief one experiences and one's portrayal of the same on one's social media, and how these ideas tie into how one's identity online and offline. The study explored the following questions with specific regard to grief and social media - how does the culture of updating and sharing one's experiences on social media play into the process of coming to terms with loss? Does dealing with grief publicly on social media either replace dealing with it in 'real' life or, does it create the illusion of dealing with and processing grief when it is actually, in reality, just a distraction? If social media does in fact help or hinder the

grieving process and impact how we understand the experience, does it then confirm that one's online identity is as valid as one's offline one?

Through my research, I examined these questions by conducting in-depth interviews with both college students and mental health professionals. I wanted to first establish what the process of experiencing and dealing with grief online was, with which I wanted to better understand the important and intensity of the role social media played in participants' lives. Along with the social context for my study, I was also motivated by my own experiences with grief, and processing it online, and I wanted to explore whether my experience was one that could be generalised. To do this I first familiarised myself with how social media is used in a larger context, and then focused on how college students most used it. Following this I studied literature and theories about grief in general, and then studied grief more specialised to college students and people who fall within the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. After studying the existing literature, I interviewed thirteen college students about their experiences with presenting their grief online, and four mental health professionals to complement and provide an added framework to the students' experiences.

Given the prevalence of social media and the rate of its growth, one would be remiss to not better understand what role it plays in our lives, and the ways in which it impacts our emotions. Furthermore, given that social media is now expanding its features to include more 'real life' applications – in the specific example of grief considering the memorialising feature, it is important to have more research understanding how these tools are impacting young adults and students, at a time in their life that is already characterised by instability and change. Moreover, social media is often criticised by older generations who believe it to be less valid as a communicative platform due to the lack of complete face-to-face communication. However, social media has different roles for different age groups. Many college-aged adults today have grown up with social media, i.e. it has already shaped a lot of

their relationships and experiences – how does this generation that communicates in memes, and emojis relate to virtual communication and processing of emotions in a different type of public space? The qualitative approach in the study was used to understand and answer these exact questions. The following chapters review the literature that contextualises the premise of the present study, detail the methodology, and, illustrate and discuss the results found from the research in an auto-ethnographical manner, drawing the study back to the inspiration for the study – my own experience with grief.

## **CHAPTER 2: Literature Review**

The review of literature for the present study will explore the growth and usage of social media since its inception, the development of the online identity, the role of social media in a college setting, an introduction to grief theories, the representation of grief online, and grief as experienced by college students.

### **I. Social Media Growth**

The desire to have a social component to technology has existed since the beginning of the Internet, with platforms like CompuServe in the 1970s, or Bulletin Board Systems even before that. The ability to communicate with people via the Internet was an inherent part of the technology from its inception (Digital Trends Staff, 2016). In the modern day of the Internet, social networking sites have become one of the primary uses of the Internet for the general public, with over 81% of Americans having a social media profile, and users globally spending an estimated 135 minutes of their day on social media (Statista, 2017).

One of the biggest reasons for the constant rise in social media use is the ease of accessibility of social media with the advent of mobile devices and therefore mobile Internet. As of 2017, 100% of all Americans between the ages of 18-29 owned a cell phone of some kind and 92% of those cell phones were smartphones (Pew Research Center, 2017). Furthermore, 96% of all students enrolled in some kind of college setting owned a cell phone, with 80% of those phones being smartphones (Pew Research Center, 2017). These statistics demonstrate that young adults today are consuming a lot of social media and Internet content from a mobile device. In fact, the millennial generation spends about 185 minutes on average per day accessing the Internet through their phones (Statista, 2016). It therefore comes as no surprise that the population that spends the most time online via mobile in North America is adolescents and young adults aged 16-24 years (Statista, 2017). Additionally, as important as



recognising the prevalence of the Internet and social media in the lives of young adults is recognising which platforms are most used by them.

As reported on Statista, measured in Feb 2017, Snapchat and Facebook are the most used platforms of social media amongst populations aged 12-24 in the United States today with 79% and 76% of that population using the platforms, respectively. Narrowing down to the specific demographic of college students, we see that as of 2016, 77% of adults in college use Facebook, and 88% of people aged 18-29 use Facebook i.e. both these populations use at least one form of social media (Pew Research Center, 2017). Evident from these statistics is that Facebook today is one of the most utilised platforms of social media, if not the most utilised platform - in fact, as of the third quarter of 2017, Facebook had 2.07 billion active monthly users (Statista, 2017).

## **II. The Development of the Online Identity**

As psychologist Sherry Turkle argues in her book *Life on Screen* (1995), today cyberspace is its own world and social space. It has its own norms, relationships, and practices. Many people believe that their lives online are “more real than [their] real life” (p. 10). While a lot of Turkle’s research for the book was based on identities formed in MUDs (multi-player realtime virtual worlds), her arguments are extremely relevant to present day social media practices. She argues that virtual spaces have the ability to provide us with a safe space within which to expose the parts of ourselves we are missing, so that we can begin to accept ourselves as we truly are (1995). Turkle also has more recent research that plays into our understanding of how modern day online identities are formed. In a 2012 TED Talk, Turkle explained that the rise of technology meant that often this meant younger folk were connecting less well to each other in person but rather focusing on their online world and spending increasing amounts of time while together in person, alone online.

John Suler (2015), like many researchers, argues that cyberspace, i.e. the world on the other side of our screens, is an extension of our psyches. The Internet and cyberspace often reflect back the society that created it, and similarly, cyberspace often reflects back to us our own personalities, beliefs, lifestyles and ideas. And, similar to Turkle, he posits that online environments can provide the space within which to acknowledge and register previously unrecognised parts of one's identity. He takes this one step further, putting forth that this can ultimately lead to actualisation of the self in traditional psychological terms, as well as a more individuated, cohesive sense of self. Cyberspace, according to Suler, gives us the opportunity to deconstruct and reassemble how we interact with, understand and construct our 'realities' - and therefore, also our identities.

Virtual spaces allow alternate perspectives of ourselves, resulting in the activation of what Suler refers to as the observing self. The observing self results in heightened self, and behavioural, awareness (Suler, 2015). Therefore, having online as well as offline identities can result in an enhanced understanding of our own identities, and working through technology might be the step forward in our identity development. As Suler posits,

We will reach the understanding that the very process of moving back and forth between the two realms can be our evolutionary step forward in the development of human identity, perhaps, even in our understanding of this thing called self (p. 94).

An increasing number of people are beginning to experience their identities as a collection of roles that need to be mixed and matched, resulting in a diverse set of demands that need to be accommodated by the individual (Turkle, 1995). Cyberspace provides the flexibility to make that negotiation happen, in a way that other places don't (Suler, 2015). It gives an individual the opportunity to experiment with their usual forms of self-expression, but with new people and situations. This allows the person to view himself or herself from a new lens. Due to all these factors, an individual usually becomes less inhibited when he or

she is online, and tends to express himself or herself more freely - what Suler calls the “online disinhibition effect” (p. 96).

Corroborating this danah boyd in her 2014 book, while specifically referencing teens, talked about how often the context for identity formation online complicates the process. Most often, people are responding to a variety of social settings and groups all together in one space. While boyd argued this for teens, the situation is also translatable to the adult (and especially young adult) social media world - many times people may be presenting a part of their identity that is meant specifically for only one subset of their online audience. However, due to the nature of social media, this content might be accessed by other subsets of their audience who are a part of their social media that the content is actively not meant for. This can often result in miscommunication regarding people’s identities online. boyd states a lot of different types of identity work are done simultaneously on different platforms, some anonymous and crafted, and others directly tied to one’s offline identity – a capacity carried on from the beginning of the Internet.

The experimental nature and the freedom to explore one’s identity on the Internet, during its infancy, stemmed from the anonymity that it provided to it’s users; an anonymity that, online, also contributed to the dismantling of social hierarchies based on gender, race, ethnicity and other socially constructed demographic markers. However, as Andrew White in *Digital Media and Society* (2014), points out, there were differing views on the type of identity that the Internet created. He elaborates that Sherry Turkle posited the “voluntarist identity” while Mark Poster argued for the “post-structuralist identity” (p. 29). The voluntarist identity is summarised by the phrase ‘you are who you pretend to be’. Not developed in isolation, the voluntarist identity was formed through interactions with others in the network and needed a cohesive, coherent narrative to feel real to the people who came in contact with it. Therefore the voluntarist identity was inherently more dependent on the

community of the Internet, and was reflexive. The post-structuralist identity, while concurring with a lot of the voluntarist theory, questioned the cohesiveness, and reflexivity that the voluntarist theory proposed.

What tied both types of identities together was that they were both predicated on the assumption those experimental online identities were disembodied by nature (2014). However, through case studies White demonstrates that while the identities may have been intended to be disembodied and disconnected, the participants who interacted with those identities believed them to be ‘real’ i.e. the reality of someone’s identity offline was potentially important to their online identity - online and offline identities were, and continue to be, inextricably linked.

White quotes philosopher Jaron Lanier from his 2011 manifesto – when the concept of individual webpages first arose in the early 1990s, they still retained a flavour of personhood, rather than being completely digital. As the idea of online identities displayed through social media developed, so did the process of ‘formatting one’s identity’. Facebook went so far as to organise people into “multiple-choice identities” (2014, p. 38). And, the way in which one communicated their non-anonymous online identity developed further with the rise of commercial social media.

### **III. Social Media in a College Setting**

Wang et al., (2012) argue that social media provides a platform for inter-personal support, that helps combat feelings of isolation in college students. Given how social media can function, they put forth that inter-personal support, and socio-emotional needs can drive and moderate media use. As Wang et al, have graphically described in Table 1, social media forms an intimate connection between an individual’s socio-emotional needs and the gratification of those same needs. This link and feedback forms a reinforcing loop that in turn

informs an individual's social media usage and why people often keep going back to social media for validation.

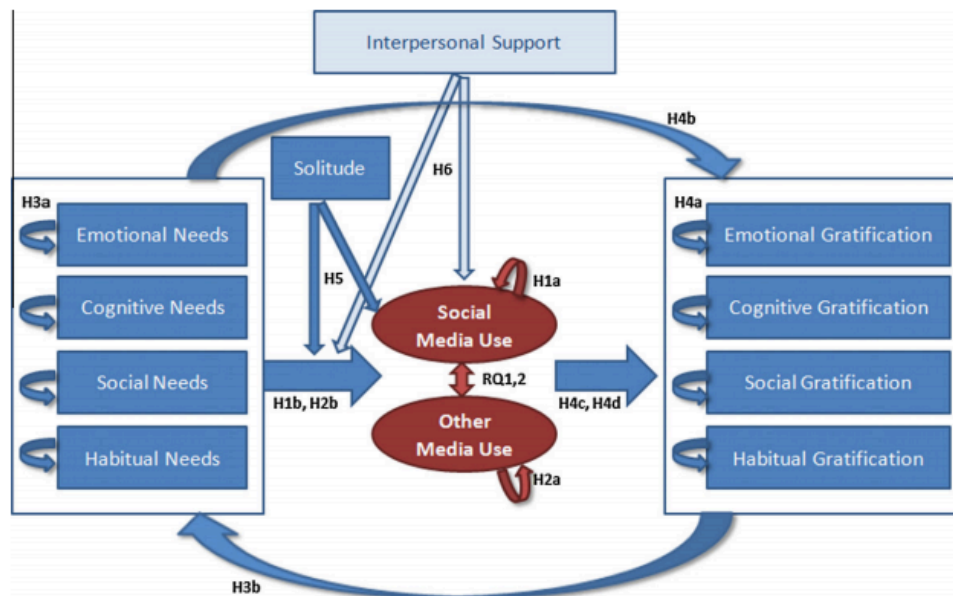


Fig. 1. The conceptual model of reciprocal dynamic influences of social media use, other media use, needs, and gratifications.

Table 1: Interpersonal Support p. 1831

One of the main reasons that social media works so well to help a students' social relationships and build that support system is because of how it reduces the costs of developing and maintaining relationships i.e. it reduces the time and effort needed (DeAndrea et al., 2011). Additionally, using social media seems to correlate with increasing social capital in college students, thereby making it an influential component of campus life to a student (2011). Also, the capacity that social media allows students to connect with other students online prior to physically coming to college also allows them to begin the process of building relationships before college begins, which helps students construct a more expansive social network than they might have otherwise had (2011).

As Park and Lee posit, one of the biggest reasons that Facebook is especially popular with college students is because of its ability to help with impression management, especially

considering one of the primary purposes of Facebook is to maintain friendships and build a community (2014). This is especially useful in a campus setting where Facebook can be used to circulate news about, and events on, campus and campus life. When students come to college they are allowed the opportunity to present themselves in anyway they choose and as a consequence, a student's social media and their peers reaction to that social media can impact how comfortable they feel in the college setting. Their social media can be read as a representation of their personality and can inform their social circles offline as well. As a consequence, a student's ability to control their image online directly impacts their psychological comfort because of the ways in which it helps them achieve their relational goals (Park and Lee, 2014).

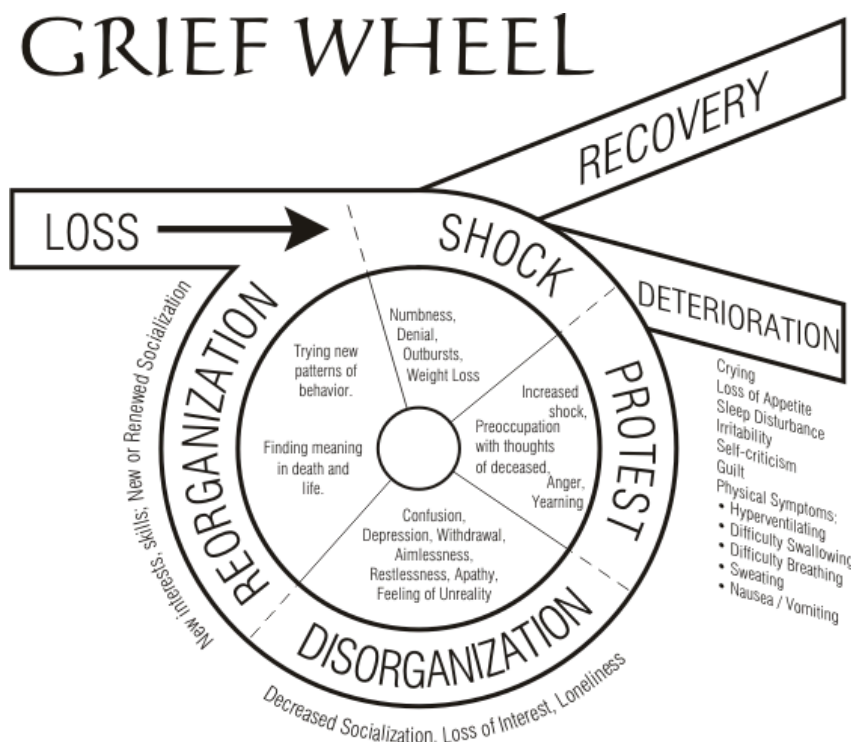
Also important to acknowledge, is the research Arnett (2000) proposes that there is another developmental period between adolescence and adulthood, called 'emerging adulthood'. Arnett argues many people in college do not identify either as adolescents or as young adults (2000). This is a phase in an individual's life marked by exploration of one's forming identity, and constant change. Individuals are transitioning from childhood to adulthood, and therefore are starting to be more responsible for themselves, and explore how their adult selves are going to fit into the world and society around them. Additionally, they are also often times attempting to reconcile whom those adult selves are. Given the conclusions boyd (2014) drew about identity formation in teenagers, similar conclusions can also be drawn about young adults use of social media to explore their identity given that both groups of individuals are working to a better understanding of their identity as well as attempting to find their social place in the world. Putting together these factors, it comes as no surprise that social media forms an important component of a college student's life and perception of themselves. A student's self perception has an impact on their success, with a

prevalent line of research today exploring the connection between an optimistic outlook and collegiate success.

### **IV. Introduction to Grief**

The first prominent theory of grief was Kübler-Ross' theory of the five stages of grief that she first put forth in 1969. She proposed the five stages of grief were – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, not as a prescribed order of the five stages, rather as five components of what people who live with grief experience (Kübler-Ross, Kessler 2007). Kübler-Ross and Kessler, in their book, also outline some parts of life after also explaining some of the outcomes of living with grief – for example, it can often result in a creation of a fantasy of what might have been with the deceased had they not passed. Kübler-Ross and Kessler mention multiple such outcomes and explain how the five stages play into the processing of one's grief (2007). However, the misinterpretation claimed of Kübler-Ross' work on grief led to research that criticised both the ostensible 'prescription' of what grief looks like, as well as the linear direction that ends in acceptance.

With many possible origins, grief in adults is a complex state, that according to Parkes and Prigerson (2010), most resembles a physical injury rather than a mental illness. Following a broad pattern, by and large, grief begins with numbness, moves on to pining, then disorganisation and despair, and then finally acceptance. As Fulton argues, while referencing psychologist Lindemann, in *Understanding Bereavement and Grief* (edited by Linzer, 1977), the duration of the grief reaction i.e. before accepting the situation, as well as the manner in which the individual adapted to their new found social environment depended on the success of what Lindemann termed "grief work" (p. 4). Grief work was defined through the following - "emancipation from bondage to the deceased, readjustment to the environment in which the deceased is missing, and the formation of new relationships" (p. 4).



*Note: taken from [www.gbcmpk.org](http://www.gbcmpk.org)*

Grief does not exist alone as a concept - equally important, and connected are the ideas of bereavement and mourning. Peter Marris (Linzer, 1977), explains bereavement as “a crisis in the meaning of the lives of those deeply affected by [a] loss; and grief as the process of recovery from that loss” (p. 22). He also argues that dealing with grief is learned not when we stop caring for the ones we have lost, but rather when we rehabilitate the abstraction of the important aspects of our relationship with the deceased. Sol Nemzoff (Linzer, 1977) describes mourning as “the gradual working through of a complex of explosive and potentially self destructive feelings of grief which could easily destroy and individual if released all at once” (p. 33).

As all of the mentioned researchers, doctors and theorists have argued, grief, bereavement and loss have very real impacts on the individual processing them. The self-



destructive feelings of grief that Nemzoff described can also be concretely demonstrated through the behavioural and emotional impact failure to resolve a loss can have on an individual. Unresolved grief often results in hampered energy levels, and in extreme cases, stress and mental paralysis, restricting them from performing even their normal routines (Schneider, 1984). Additionally, times of stress can also make the resolution of grief and loss more difficult, for example, “the loss of a parent at the time children leave home can diminish the capacity to resolve feelings about either or both” (Schneider, 1984, p. 17).

Having contextualised grief stemming from bereavement, in order to obtain a holistic picture of grief, one need also understand grief stemming from non-bereavement loss - e.g. job loss. Papa et al. (2014), mentioned the study by Harvey & Miller (1998) where the latter put forth the possibility that an individual may also experience grief post a loss that changes their self-aspect or self-definition. Papa et al., through their study demonstrated that grief stemming from loss in general had many commonalities with the effects that grief stemming from bereavement had on an individual (2014). Their studies challenge the conventionally prescribed methods of grief resolution i.e. emotional processing, and suggest that a more pertinent method of resolving grief might lie in restructuring and rebuilding of one's post grief identity (Papa et al., 2014). Specifically, they suggest that

grief resolution may be a process of identity re-consolidation facilitated by meaningful engagement in self-defining activities that compensate for disrupting losses without the explicit need for emotional processing (p. 143).

This said, grief is not a sole result of death and loss in that manner. Relationships ending, job losses, big life changes can also cause an individual to experience grief. Papa et al. posit that the results from their study could also be put forth and relevant to people who were grieving non-bereavement losses – specifically populations who had been through divorces as well as job-losses.

Experiencing a loss, and dealing with said grief is in many ways a reformation of one's identity. The former identity the individual held based on life with the person they lost, has to now be replaced by the new identity of life without that person (Sanders, 1999). Bereaved individuals have often said that a big part of their own self died with the deceased individual. Identity defined in this context is very similar to how it was defined in previous sections - a fairly consistent set of assumptions about one's own self on the basis of which we make decisions, choices, and plans for our lives (Parkes and Weiss, 1983). Further, in addition to a temporarily fractured identity, loss of a significant attachment in one's life also results in a diminished sense of wholeness (Schneider 1984). It is the process of mourning, and the grief work that teaches the individual how to feel whole again. Often, as is a part of the grieving process, it is through the new relationships and rehabilitation of aspects of the lost relationship that the individual learns to resolve the feeling of incompleteness and move forward into healing and acceptance.

### **V. Grief Online**

Lingel (2013) argues that portrayal of grief online, as an emerging socio-cultural phenomenon is one that can be placed into the larger picture, and new manifestation of mourning rituals. There is a precedent for the relevance and function of online portrayals of grief, with regards to its social context. For one, as put forth by Walters (1994), loss in itself is both private and public in nature (similar to our lives online), in the way that we mourn the ones we lost both in public (specifically in the case of death) at funerals, as well as behind closed doors. Furthermore, Lingel, referencing Metcalf and Huntington (1991) identifies a tension between the cultural practices surrounding grief and one's individual feelings and emotions. As a consequence, it is often hard to detail whether the emotions are motivating the rituals, or vice versa due to the subtle feedback that differentiates the two. Lingel argues that it is "this subtle feedback between individual feelings and collective rituals [that] serves as

an apt description [for] the halting, iterative Internet discussions where online grief is being individually interpreted and shared” (p. 190).

Exploring various cultural practices with respect to grief is difficult because of the various methods different cultures have developed to mourn their loved ones. Traditionally, in some cultural practices, the funeral home served as the ‘platform’ where one could and did process their grief more publicly. In Judaism, one might “sit shiva” for a week – every night one will spend time with family and friends. In Hinduism, there are many alterations to the way in which a family might function – what roles an individual might play, therefore also becoming a public display of grief although in a different manner.

However, processing grief online affords someone who is grieving the ability to craft individual responses to that grief in a less restrictive space than that which is provided by the funeral home (or in other public spheres), considering the social and cultural obligations that come hand in hand with the space. Contrary to the idea that grieving online is in anyway shallow, or less important, the space lends itself to become a “real gathering place where friends can grieve together - and where the deceased continues to in some sense, exist” (Lingel, 2013, p. 193). In fact Lingel, quoting Miller (2010), posits that given the familiarity of Facebook as a space where friends interact with each other, in some cases it might feel more genuine to grieve a loved one on Facebook rather than a physical space such as a cemetery that is so removed from their relationship (2013).

Further, as Moore et al. (2017) explain, the motivations for grieving a loved online are manifold,

- (a) sharing information with family or friends and (sometimes) beginning a dialog, (b) discussing the deceased’s death with others, (c) discussing death with a broader mourning community, and (d) commemorating and continuing connection to the deceased (p. 8-10).

Each kind of motivation typically results in a different kind of communication taking place between the individual sharing on social media and their audience. Moreover, as Moore et al., posit, different social media mourning behaviours correspond directly with different phases in the process of bereavement illustrated and developed by Hogan et al (1996), wherein they put forth the idea that the phases of bereavement overlap with each other and might recur i.e. the process isn't linear. Moore et al., argue that the actions one takes to grieve on social media follow a similar pattern where an individual might be communicating and experiencing different phases of the bereavement process at the same time (2017).

As Moore et al., demonstrate through interviews with their study subjects, social media makes some phases of the bereavement process easier - for example, announcing to the public the death of a loved one, and then needing to make multiple calls to inform people who wish to attend the funeral is made easier by a single Facebook post that can reach that same audience. Therefore, the capacity to engage in mourning on social media gives the mourner more control over the narrative i.e. how information is transmitted to whom, and by what medium – be that controlling who finds out first, or, as mentioned before, reaching the information to a large audience in one post.

Additionally, the ability to grieve from behind the screen allowed mourners the freedom to express themselves as they wish without having to deal with the face-to-face interaction (2017). It also provides a good platform and way through which to open a conversation about the deceased, thereby making grieving online the first step to beginning a conversation about an individual's grief. Furthermore, what makes social media communications more attractive than even a text message conversation about grief is that the nature of the space implies that people did not feel burdened to respond to a message or comment on social media, like they would have had a friend reached out via text messaging

(2017). This could mean that social media also helps one talk about grief because it allows the individual to talk about grief in a more veiled way.

Finally, mourning on social media also helps to demonstrate to individuals that they are not mourning alone. As Moore et al. demonstrate, having a community of people who are grieving with the individual publicly and online, helps the mourner feel less alone in their experience. This community sharing often results in new relationships forming, which can possibly tie back to the process of grieving where one attempts to build new relationships in order to readjust to their new environment without their loved one (2017). This said, while community sharing has its positive aspects, it also can result in one major negative outcome - a feeling of violated privacy. Be it a lack of image control, relative or friends over stepping boundaries, or inappropriate displays of grief, public grieving on social media can also result in a mourner spending more time working on damage control of the effects of the aforementioned rather than focusing on processing their own grief.

These are not the only drawbacks of grieving online, as demonstrated by Rosetto et al. (2015). Many times, the deceased might have also had a social media profile that is kept alive after their passing. As Brubaker et al. (2013), posit, social media (specifically in their study, Facebook) “is associated with an expansion of death-related experiences – temporally, spatially, and socially” (p. 152). They put forth that social media profiles can have similar functions to objects and spaces the deceased inhabited, thereby allowing those mourning to maintain their attachment to the deceased. This means that there is the ability to keep open the communication with the deceased even after they have passed on. As Rosetto et al. posit, often keeping open the communication with one’s deceased loved one on social media can be harmful if the bereaved individual does not realise that the relationship is their construct, and is different than the relationship that existed when the deceased was alive. Keeping the deceased’s social media alive might hamper with the bereaved individual’s ability to

differentiate between the past and the present, resulting in a continuing (and harmful) bond between the deceased and them.

### **VI. Grief in a College Setting**

College students are subject to multiple stimuli of grief – many experience homesickness as grief, other have left behind friends, past loves, etc. It is also universally accepted that students are exposed to high amount of stress during their time at college, be it academic performance, social situations, or the transitional stressors of growing into adults. Additionally, in many cases, leaving for college is the first time that children have left home for an extended time period. How then does grief experienced during the college years impact an individual, given that the context in which they are experiencing and processing grief (as demonstrated in the previous section) makes the resolution of grief more difficult? Additionally, as Parkes and Prigerson argue (2010),

...systematic study of the effectiveness of social support is complicated by the fact that distressed people may attract more social support than those who are less upset, and the presence of other people may increase loneliness rather than reducing it (p. 190).

What impact then does living in a social space (such as a college campus) have, when a person needs to function efficiently and effectively, to fulfil a daily routine, and therefore not always be able to communicate their grief to the people and support system around them?

Cox et al., (2015), in their study explain, quoting Balk (2008) that anywhere between a quarter to almost half of most college students have experienced some kind of grief in their recent past. From their own study, they found by the end of their collegiate career at least 60% of college students have experienced some form of loss. Further, continuing to quote Balk (2008), they argue that for some percentage of this population, the grieving process is temporary and will be resolved within six months, however, for the remaining, the grief

might be more complicated and can result in negative impact on their academic success and personal development, because, as put forth before, this loss occurs on top of already present psychological stress. Balk (2010) found during his interviews with bereaved students that by and large grieving students typically find grief to be harder, last longer, and result in them feeling sadder than anticipated.

As Galasso explains, often bereaved college students are experiencing grief for the first time, and so find themselves overwhelmed at the new emotions and experience they are going through, while still attending class, socialising, completing work and attending to their responsibilities (2013). If many of these students are away from home, this then also adds to the complications of dealing processing these complicated emotions. Furthermore, the stages of grief of disorientation and disorganisation would severely impact a student's ability to socialise, and form new connections - a stage that is absolutely essential to a bereaved individual learning how to readapt to their new social environment. Working through this stage allows them to get to the last stage of the process- the acceptance. This is important, because the student, having successfully worked through a traumatic event can now use this model to combat any future trauma they might encounter (2013).

This literature review was broadly divided into two sections. The first was focused on social media and highlighted work that examined social media and it's growth, as well as how people's identities offline tie in with their identities online, as well as how those identities are explored on social media platforms. Finally, the discussion about social media was concluded by exploring how young adults used their social media and why social media was impactful in a college setting. The second section focused more on grief, initially focusing on theorists' work about grief relating not only to how people experience it but how people live with grief, bereavement or the general experience of loss. This was followed by a discussion of the how people grieve online and the ways in which online spaces add to, and

detract from the grieving process. Finally, this chapter concluded by placing these ideas of grief in the context of a college setting therefore contextualising the basis of the present study – how college students present their grief on social media and how social media helps or hinders their grieving process.



### **CHAPTER 3: Methodology**

I conducted the present study to begin to ascertain the impact that social media has on the grieving process. The study was designed with a qualitative approach in mind, and I collected the data primarily by means of in-depth, in-person interviews, that ran for a minimum of twenty minutes, and did not exceed an hour. Qualitative analysis is “particularly useful for revealing the rich symbolic world that underlies needs, desires, meanings and choice” (Kozinets, 2002 p.2). And, since my research was based on answering questions of how social media affects grieving and the ways in which it helped and/or hindered that process, rather than seeking quantifiable answers, my study was more suited to a qualitative analysis, rather than quantitative one.

My questions for both students and mental health professionals were each categorised into three sections. For students, the interviews opened with their experience with social media, followed by how they understood the relationship between their social media and their identities, ending with how they specifically used social media to process and heal from their experience of grief, if they did at all. The overarching theme that connected the three sections was participants’ relationships between their social media and their emotions. I used the interviews with mental health professionals to gain an outsider perspective on the same of process, and so for mental health professionals, the interview was structured by first exploring the counsellors experiences with grief counselling, focusing on how college students interacted with grief, and how circumstances surrounding grief affected how college students experience grief. The interview then proceeded to explore counsellors’ understanding of social media and the part it played in students’ lives. Finally, the questions focused on the relationship between grief and social media for students from the counsellors’ perspective.

After completing and receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I drew my sample. In selecting the sample, I decided to talk with both participants who had experienced grief or loss, and had taken to social media to help process it, as well as grief counsellors and psychologists who have experience in helping one heal after a loss. In order to have a sample of a reasonable size, I decided to take my  $n=30$ , and split that up into recruiting 15 students and 15 counsellors. I limited the sample of students I drew from to students from Tufts. Additionally, I did not recruit any students who had experienced a grief or loss anytime in the three months prior to the interview. The primary reason for this was that those three months are when the experience (and therefore emotional impact) is often more raw for participants, and given that the nature of my study was inherently emotional, I wanted to account for the comfort and emotional well-being of my participants as much as possible. Furthermore, while I framed the Facebook advertisement around grief and loss, I did not define grief specifically, therefore allowing grief for loss of a loved one - either death, or a break up, trauma, or political events to all be considered for my study. The reason for this was primarily that I wanted to account for the complexity of grief as an emotion, what causes it, as well as the variety of ways in which it manifests itself.

My recruitment method was based on purposeful convenience sampling. In order to put the word out to students, I posted in the Tufts class groups of '18, '19, '20 and '21, twice, to find participants and interviewed all those who reached out to me through the Facebook advertisement. In order to recruit mental health professionals, I used the portal *Psychology Today* and emailed them a standard, pre-composed message. The interviews with students were conducted in a variety of spaces, usually rooms in neutral locations like Tisch Library, or buildings on campus such as CLIC, and in the case of the counsellors, interviews were conducted in their offices. Ultimately, due to difficulty in scheduling, the total sample ended up being 17 people - 13 students and 4 mental health professionals.

I based my interview style off the concept of in-depth interviewing as well as Holstein and Gubrium's 'active interviewing'. While I had questions that structured the interview itself, the conversations between my participants and I inevitably were more detailed and nuanced. As Douglas (1985) poses, in-depth interviewing encourages mutual sharing from both the interviewer and the interviewee, especially in the context of an emotionally charged atmosphere such as this one. In addition, active interviewing counteracts the criticisms traditional interview styles have been subject to of "their lack of attention to the social context and the interactional dynamics of the interview" (Marvasti 2016). As he argues, "the interview process is no longer limited to the simple give-and-take of asking and answering questions...qualitative researchers are moving beyond technical and procedural matters and into the realm of meaning, interaction, and social context" (Marvasti 2016).

Once I recorded my interviews, I re-listened to all the interviews and transcribed them manually to familiarise myself more with the data, as well as begin looking for themes in the content. I categorised and reported my data thematically by splitting the data I collected into student specific and counsellor specific. The student specific data was arranged in the following manner:

- Social media usage and emotional impact
- Social media and current events
- Intersection of their social media and identity
- The relationship between their grief and social media

The data were grouped in this way both to represent the interview, but also because it represented how participants viewed their own social media usage and the way in which social media impacted their lives. Within social media and grief specifically, I found the following themes on the basis of what about social media helped their grieving process and what hindered it.

- Community
- Catharsis

- Bringing awareness
- Social capital & attention
- Obligatory social media posts

In the case of reporting counsellor data, since I spoke with only four counsellors, after describing the common ideas they wrote a short paragraph detailing each counsellor's perspective and insights. I chose to report my data in this way because each counselling style is quite different and the counsellors mirrored that in their interviews as well; further, reporting each counsellor's results individually allowed me the added nuance of their experiences as practitioners. I then conducted a thematic analysis to look for emergent themes in the interviews. My aim was to find what each of the respondents had in common - i.e. similarities and differences between students' responses, as well as looking at the similarities and differences between counsellor and students interviews. I based my analysis methods of Guess et. al's (2012) Applied Thematic Analysis method, which while not novel, combines theories off phenomenology, grounded theory and is based on the concept of applied research. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis "essentially independent of theory and epistemology and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches", therefore being quite apt for the inter-disciplinary nature of my study.

Furthermore, I also used an auto-ethnographical approach to add a second layer of analysis and discuss the results of my study. The primary reason I chose this approach was given the personal connection I had to my study, and considering that my own experiences with grief and loss with social media were sometimes a part of the interview as much as my participants' experiences were, along with the other motivation for undertaking this study stemming from the existent representations of grief in the media. Marvasti (2004), in his book, illustrates that three core aspects of ethnography are "involvement with and participation in the topic being studied, attention to the social context of data collection, and

sensitivity to how the subjects are represented in the research text”. And, as Kozinets (2002) pointed out in his article,

Ethnography is an inherently open-ended practice... That is, it relies heavily on “the acuity of the researcher as instrument” (Sherry 1991, p. 572) and is more visibly affected by researcher interests and skills than most other types of research.

Ethnography also uses metaphorical, hermeneutic and analytic interpretation of data (see, e.g., Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, Spiggle 1994, Thompson 1997)... is grounded in knowledge of the local, the particularistic, and the specific. p.3

“Selfless auto-ethnography” is not ethnography” because of how auto ethnography inherently holds the methodological foundation of the researcher’s body (Spry 2016).

## **CHAPTER 4: Results**

For this research study, I interviewed seventeen participants - thirteen students and four counsellors - the former about their specific experiences relating to expressing and interacting with grief on social media, and the latter about their observations of how young adults navigate grief and social media, and their thoughts on how those two intersect. The students were all between the ages of 18-22 years old, and can be grouped in the recently termed 'emerging adulthood' developmental stage. Of the four counsellors, three of them had specific experience in working with grief (with people in multiple age groups), and the fourth while not specialising in grief, expressed she enjoyed working with college students and young adults the most.

### **Students**

The participants were all specifically the ages of 19, 20, or 22 – they were first years, sophomores and seniors in college. There were three male participants and ten female. For this study I did not record racial and ethnic background because my study focused primarily on how of developmental phase and the environment of college affected participants relationship with their social media, and grief, rather than explore how people of different races and cultures differed in their social media use, and their relationship with grief based on their racial, and cultural backgrounds.

### **Social Media Use & Impact**

All thirteen students expressed they engaged with their social media regularly in that they went on the sites at least once a day, everyday if not for more often. All the participants viewed each platform with not only different functions for themselves, but also as ways to get different kinds of information about others - be it their peers, family, or events. The interviews with the students all revealed the most used social media platforms were Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat with one participant who also used Twitter actively.

Across the board participants reported they used Facebook primarily for organising their social, and extra-curricular lives: staying up to date with events on campus, promoting their own club events, and organising outings with friends. Most participants expressed Facebook being purely functional on a daily basis rather than gaining active happiness from the platform, as well as contextualising the importance of Facebook as a platform had to a college campus setting.

Participant: “Facebook is all ads and videos at this point, in my experience...I don’t know if I would have Facebook if I wasn’t at college... If there was a way that everyone could get my information and message me without Facebook, like please.”

Additionally, participants had a more extensive Facebook network where they were connected with their parents, extended family and occasionally even old high school teachers, and so considered Facebook the platform where they projected a more sanitised image. Many participants also found it was their main news source - a reality some were happy with, and others not. Of all the social media platforms that came up during the interviews, in all cases except one, Facebook was the most curated, and the platform participants exerted most control over.

Instagram was used primarily as a picture and content sharing platform. Contrasting how Facebook was seen, Instagram was seen more as the platform for to connect with peers. While there was little to no attachment to Facebook amongst most participants, many actively enjoyed their Instagram account. They also felt that Instagram was more direct than Facebook was and that they could actually see what their peers were doing.

Participant: “I’m very connected to my Instagram. I always talk about how I’d love to delete all my social media ... but I don’t know if I could let go of my Instagram. I feel like it’s a beautiful catalogue of a lot of really great memories.”

Participant: “I like Instagram because it’s really direct, it’s like you know, it’s like posting photos...everyone kind of talks about how Instagram’s gotten worse because y’know they have the algorithms and not the chronological timeline or whatever, I mean I don’t really care that much. I like that I can, I can actually see what people are up to, if they choose to post things, I think that’s fun”

Another important part of Instagram culture that many participants brought up was the idea of a ‘finsta’.

Participant: It’s a private, secure account that a very small group of people follow. It’s really funny because finsta represents ‘fake Instagram’ but is more real than my actual Instagram because all the posts there are either screen shots from my family group chat of my mom roasting us pretty much or my dad sending ridiculous things out of context, posts about my mental health which are mostly about my anxiety and my depression and me venting about it, or posts about my sex life.

Finstas across the board for those participants who had those accounts represented a more true reality about their lives, and seemed to have evolved organically as a counter to the extremely curated and picture perfect nature of the platform.

This said, there were also participants who didn’t connect with the Instagram platform at all, and were more connected with Facebook and Snapchat as a second social media they used. Snapchat was also a popular medium amongst the participants, where some considered it, similar to Instagram, a more direct view of what their peers were doing. They found Snapchat to be a more intimate space and less necessarily public because of how the platform is set up. Most participants reported checking Snapchat only when they were sent a snap by a friend.

When posed the question of why participants used their social media and what purpose it served, the theme of ‘FOMO’ (Fear of Missing Out) stood out. Participants often found themselves going back to social media because they saw it as an intrinsic part of the present social network and life.

Participant: “[I’m on social media because] I guess everyone else is, and it’s weird if you’re not. That sounds bad but, everyone is and when you start to be friends with them the first thing you do is follow them on Instagram, and it’s like I guess just kind of how to stay connected in today’s society.”

Some participants also found a link between their pre-existing mental state and their social media usage, explaining that on days when they were less emotionally well, they found themselves using social media to (unsuccessfully) fill in that role usually by spending



multiple hours on social media platforms “mindlessly scrolling through [their] newsfeeds”.

This would in turn result in them experiencing feelings of envy and disappointment because of the comparison they often drew between their own lives and the perceived lives of their social media connections.

And, on the flip side, on days they were doing better, they found themselves not going to social media as much.

Participant: “I find that I go on social media more when I’m bored. And... I’m already in that mode when I’m defaulting to something that I don’t want to be doing anyway...it definitely exacerbates that a little bit... You know when I’m busy, and I got things going on, and stuff like that, I don’t go on social media as much, so I’m less likely to care about it at all, or more likely to not care about it.”

Participant: “Lately, I’ve been doing really well emotionally - I’ve actually used social media less, and had less time for it, and cared less. I’ve been on it, and not been very engaged while doing it at all, whereas before I might have been more bored and given it more attention - checking it out of habit.”

This said, there were participants who were very specific about needing to stay away from social media when they were upset. In that vein, the results also demonstrated how social media was akin to a physical space that participants felt they had to avoid if they were trying to avoid a friend, or ex-partner.

Participant: “If I had disagreement with a friend, I have to be off social media, they can’t know I’m online - it definitely negatively impacts me in that regard... If I’m in a bad mood I can’t look at my phone, can’t be near my phone, it makes me more upset.”

Participant: “Definitely I had to re-evaluate my use of social media after I broke up with my long term partner, because seeing him and seeing people posting was very emotional for me. Two weeks ago I was super set off by a post I saw on Instagram, and my whole night revolved around that, and blocking people.”

All participants stated that social media did impact their emotions both positively and negatively- whether that were being happy at good news a friend shared, or feeling negatively about news or current events. They also added that oftentimes if they were already upset, seeing other people live seemingly more interesting or ‘better’ lives worsened their moods. Additionally, each individual had a different stimulus that would impact their emotions,

ranging from current events, to think pieces, to even a message from an old friend or ex-partner.

In talking with participants about how long negative impacts of social media on their emotions lasted, participants also reported varying amounts of time, ranging anywhere from a few moments to constantly feeling down or stressed while the stimulus was present. In one case, content seen on social media impacted the physical health of the participant as well.

Participant: Yes- during last election cycle, [I had a] strong emotional response to a lot of news to the point where I was manifesting physical symptoms of stress with abdominal pain and chronic headaches. And, after going through that, I've kind of taken a little bit of a step back and am a little more detached.

Furthermore, one participant mentioned how when social media impacted her emotions that only lasted a few moments, whereas when it negatively impacted her, it stayed with her for a longer period of time: something she attributed to her personality and how she interacted with her social media rather than being inherent to social media.

What stands out from these results is how there was no single consensus either about social media platforms, or the impact they had on participants' emotions. All of the participants expressed varying amounts of connectedness to their social media, and varying functions from it. This said, Facebook was the most universal platform in terms of functionality, and all participants except one not only described not liking Facebook, but also making active efforts to spend less time on the site.

### **Social Media and Current Events**

All participants saw their social media as inherently connected to their perceptions about current events. All except two participants expressed they did get their news from Facebook, and of the two, one participant mentioned using Facebook extensively for news prior to an intentional change to use social media less. The topics that participants mentioned that they associated the most with social media were gun violence and control, police brutality, the 2016 election cycle. As with their general social media use, there was no single

answer to how participants saw the interaction between their social media and current events.

While many participants expressed discontentment with having Facebook be their primary news source, and cited accessibility as one of the reasons they used Facebook, some also actively enjoyed certain aspects of getting news from Facebook.

Participant: “I really don’t like the way it’s used, especially knowing Facebook- the algorithms and things like that, it’s designed so you don’t interact in a healthy way with people who disagree with you ever... I think it’s really unproductive for discussing current events and world events ... it creates this stagnation where people get in fights on the Internet and then attribute everything that happens on the Internet to what happens in real life so they don’t have meaningful conversations about those things. The big issue is the echo chamber, you post something that you align with politically, and people who agree with you are going to see it.”

Participant: “I like to read articles and read a lot of stuff- for instance when the Aziz Ansari case blew up, I had a lot of thoughts and lot of people I wanted to talk about it with - so I read a ton of stuff - in that way I like social media because everyone can write whatever they want and you can read all of it, hear everyone’s opinions whether they’ll tell it to you or not and you can read it that way - that is helpful. With politics, I don’t know, it’s just a good way to talk to more people than you’ve time to talk to day to day - I can’t have that many conversations in the campus centre with 200 people that I can read [their opinions] all very quickly and synthesise them and go about the rest of my day, having all those thoughts.”

One aspect of news being reported on social media that was also interesting to note was how often there is a battle of quality over quantity in the reporting of news, and the latter usually wins out. As one participant put it, the way news is often communicated on social media encourages viewers to think about that piece of news more, rather than critically, with nuance and detail. While most participants did not mention a lot of the issues social media (specifically Facebook) has been having off late, one participant did mention (prior to the Cambridge Analytica scandal) the following:

Participant: “[we know] you can buy elections on Facebook, like they haven’t proved that yet but I mean, it’s - there’s a lot of evidence - Russia and all that, I mean it’s going to come out soon.”

And as the participant predicted, it did, with the Cambridge Analytica scandal coming to light around a short month and a half after the interview. This said, many participants even with the advent of fake news, etc., did not necessarily stop their use of Facebook and social media

as a news source. Rather, as in the case of the participant whose health was affected by the negativity of social media prior to the 2016 election cycle, it was usually emotional reactions that stopped them from engaging with social media within the capacity of a news source.

### **Intersection of their Social Media and Identity**

Participants reported a definite connection between their social media and their identities - some going as far as to say that was necessarily the case. All of them also agreed that their social media while forming a part of their identity did not represent their whole identity, and that some platforms depending on their preferences represented them more truthfully than others.

Participant: “I think of it kind of like I think about clothing, insofar as its something that someone like would choose and curate and cultivate, but I don’t think I am the clothing that I wear, and I don’t think the manner in which I conduct myself on social media is much more than a style. You know, you can tell a lot about someone from their style, but you don’t know them.”

Participant: “When you get to pick how you look to the world, you obviously are going to look better than you feel you look in your everyday life. I don’t know - I wear comfy clothes and don’t try very hard, five days out of the week, typically. If you take ten pictures on the weekend that’s it for the week, y’know what I mean?”

The idea of social media being helpful in formation and discovery of one’s identity was also prevalent. Social media’s wide reach and accessibility was instrumental in allowing individuals a positive picture of their own future selves. Consequently, despite the narratives of social media being a place of curation, and “fake” lives, some participants did feel its reality.

Participant: “Social media is real to me. Its not a different part of me -it’s helping me feel more comfortable being who I am because I know that there are people out there who comfortable being who they are and are living their best life and are happy - it let’s me know that it’s okay and I can do that too.”

One other aspect that came up regarding how participants presented themselves on social media was their audience - each individual was very aware of whom their audience was in each platform and were moulding and shaping their presences on the basis of who

would see it. As one participant reported, this was the precise reason finstas were so common - they provided a private space where only a trusted circle would view what she was posting, thereby creating a comfortable space for her to share more personal experiences.

### **The relationship between their grief and social media**

Five main themes stood out with each interview regarding the relationship between participants' grief and their usage of social media. The first three- community, catharsis and raising awareness were what about social media they found helpful, while the last two were what were frustrating and hurtful.

#### *Community*

The biggest help social media provided to individuals was to provide a community within which to grieve or find support from. Across the board participants all talked about how social media helped them feel less alone in what they were going through and allowed them the space within which either ask for help from others or alternately find solidarity (specifically in the case of the participant who was discussing a school shooting). One participant mentioned how friends and family of the deceased used Facebook to create a group about 200 people large where they shared photos and anecdotes - effectively turning the Facebook group into a mourning as well as celebratory space. Other participants mentioned how they found it helpful when people would send them messages of support or offering assistance.

Participant: “[My mother] passed during the summer, and then I came back for Fall semester, and so all fall semester I was posting more regularly about her. I needed people to comment and be like ‘you’re being strong’, ‘you’re being brave’, whatever and I needed that reassurance that I was doing what was the best I could. And I think it was very helpful in the sense that I needed recognition...”

Participant: “I took to social media to cope with my grief a little bit, and also connect with other people... I don’t normally use Facebook or any other social media for that type of thing... but when this happened to me and I was at a farther distance, and the people who were closest to me couldn’t relate as heavily then taking to social media and seeing what other people posted and their messages and pictures of her really helped me.

### *Catharsis*

Many participants mentioned sharing on social media because they found the experience and ability to share their feelings extremely cathartic. They found sharing on social media gave them an outlet through which to document them, which was also helpful in their healing processes. Most participants expressed using social media towards the beginning of their grieving processes, and so often social media would be a platform wherein they could fully express either their sadness, or denial or anger.

Participant: “So the post I started [said] ‘This is not happening, this can’t be, I just talked to her’, I was very much in a stage of denial at that point, I felt very removed from the situation... I definitely needed to have that space, it was such an event afterwards that led to all this mourning, and I definitely needed this stage of preparation where I prepared my mind for that.”

### *Raising Awareness*

Participants also expressed using social media to raise awareness either about the nature of the passing - in one case suicide, or gun control as was the case with two participants. Another participant also expressed how a group of the deceased’s friends and family started a scholarship in his honour, and so her social media posts related specifically to that with raising awareness about the scholarship and possible donations for it.

Participant (referencing a school shooting): “I think I’ve used social media to make myself feel better about it now that I’ve been at college - because before everyone I knew, understood exactly how I was feeling and everyone I knew felt exactly the same way. Going to college when people did not have that same experience, I thought it was powerful to be able to share how I felt and have the people around me have an understanding of what I was going through.”

### *Social Capital & Attention*

Across the board, one of the main hurtful aspects of social media was the vast number of posts by people who either were not very close to the deceased or in many cases, treated them poorly, or had bullied them in the past, or the deceased didn’t like. Participants expressed a frustration at seeing those posts while also expressing an entitlement that those

individuals felt at being able to ‘use’ somebody’s death to further their own social media presence.

Participant: “What I objected to in lot of posts I saw was it felt really impersonal, and it felt like ‘here’s me posting for social capital even though I don’t know this boy - I’m going to boil his life down to these two sentences that I came up with right now’ - I don’t like that and didn’t want to do that and didn’t want other people to see it and feel like that’s what I was trying to do, because it feels really disrespectful”

One participant specifically expressed a lot of discontentment with people who constantly posted pieces about gun control and school shootings when never having been through that experience for themselves, and felt like often those people were overpowering voices of individuals who have been more personally and severely impacted by gun violence in the United States.

Participant: “Every time there’s another one of these mass shootings, it brings me back to that day and I get goosebumps whenever I open my Facebook and see an article about it, and I just remember being in my classroom on lockdown and hearing helicopters above me - so that’s an ongoing grieving process - seeing that so frequently.”

### *Obligatory social media posts*

Finally, many participants expressed feeling obligated to post on social media. One participant expressed how he felt the need to prove his closeness to the deceased because people who were far less closer to her than he was had posted about her passing. Others mentioned feeling the need to acknowledge publicly this happened. Further, not only was there a pressure to craft a post at all, there was also the pressure of what the content was going to be. Participants mentioned writing and editing a post multiple times before finally deciding to post it, and still not feeling entirely comfortable having shared something so personal on their social media.

Participant: “I wrote the post, deleted it, drafted it again, and came up with a final message : This is important, it’s good for our school, he’d be excited about it, think about how much it’d mean to him and other people - share and donate if you can. Once I came up with something I liked and felt comfortable with, I put it away.”

### **Counsellors**

Of the four counsellors I spoke with, three of them listed grief as a specialisation for their practice, and the fourth while not specialising in grief mentioned that working with college students was her favourite part of her practice.

The four counsellors I spoke with corroborated a lot, if not all of what the students mentioned going through during their grieving and healing processes. All of them concurred that grief was an extremely individual experience and generalising it was hard if not for completely impossible. They also mentioned the way in which people grieved had very little to do with their ages per se, rather had more to do with personality, support, and experiences thus far. In thinking about the general developmental period - emerging adulthood, the counsellors all agreed that the displacement and instability that characterised how many young adults feel during this time could often be exacerbated by the loss of somebody close to them, or a traumatic experience. Additionally, they also agreed that grief often caused young adults in this developmental phase to feel more isolated from their peers due to their higher understanding and connection to ideas of mortality, and death. Regarding social media, all counsellors despite their personal feelings towards social media (whether for themselves or for their clients), agreed that social media was absolutely widespread and a fact of life, and definitely impacted and is a part of its users' identities.

In the next few paragraphs, I detail the knowledge that each counsellor brought to the conversation that was unique to them, and was not covered by other participants.

### **Doctor One**

The first doctor highlighted the specifics of emotional and pragmatic impact of a loss that one experiences. With emotional impact of a loss, he illustrated the following considerations as significant factors in how people grieve - the nature of the loss (was it sudden, or expected), and, the relationship with the deceased (was it a straightforward



relationship where one misses the deceased, or a complicated relationship that brings up feelings of relief, anger, guilt along with processing the loss itself). For the pragmatic impact, he specified how in the case of students, often, thinking about practical considerations such as finances and the future of one's education also comes into play and influences how they understand and process the loss.

In terms of social media, the participant also mentioned the geographically widespread nature of social media, specifically with respect to mobility and accessibility. He also mentioned the growth of social media as a news source, and acknowledged people's opinions and the presentation of news online as an influence in how young adults engaged with their world. Furthermore, the participant also mentioned the changing ideas of privacy -

Participant: "I think people in my generation were initially horrified by what people were saying and putting out there for everybody to see. Privacy changes dramatically. Even in my line of work – with counselling and so forth where privacy is highly valued and protected - legally protected – when I see younger people, they might want to text, they might want to email, they might want to use a lot of fairly insecure means. Do you Skype? No – it's not HIPPA compliant, y'know? But you know there isn't a worry, for a lot of people – for better or worse.

The participant went as far as to state that often, people on social media care more about their image and controlling their image than being aware of their privacy i.e. the ability to control one's image becomes more important than keeping information private.

When it came to understanding the relationship between grief and social media, he mentioned the idea of coded sharing – emojis, short phrases, and the idea that the viewer would have to know the person who posted about the deceased to know what they were talking about. He also elaborated that in his experience, the purpose behind sharing on social media usually boiled down to personal reflection, gaining social support, and/or status. He likened personal reflection to journaling albeit in a more public form, therefore also gaining public and social validation and support for the event in question. Lastly, he mentioned how often posting on social media about a loss can also be for status – "I'm kind of important

because I'm going through a big deal", which while often is usually about something the social media user has achieved, can also be about grief.

### **Doctor Two**

Doctor two elaborated on the effect of being in college and experiencing a loss – elucidating how often times experiencing a loss at college reinforces a lack of a feeling of safety. He explained that the transition both to and post college exists within the context of a certain isolation that comes due to the slow removal of one's safety net. As a consequence, often grief experienced during this time can be especially impactful for an individual.

Participant: "When I see college students or young adults [handle their grief], it might be one of the initial times where they really are confronting and getting to know deeply their emotional experience better, and also that they might be avoiding things about their emotional experience."

He also added that one aspect of grieving he had noticed about the way young adults grieved was that often they were less inclined to cry, or feel their whole emotional load because they worried it made them less of an adult to do so, and that in his practice working against that fear had been a part of his job.

Surrounding the topic of social media and identity, Doctor two added that social media absolutely added to one's construction of one's identity because of the manner in which the latter is built and developed. He also mentioned that oftentimes, other behaviours and identities are projected onto a social media user, especially when they post online. He explained that once content was posted online, it then became public and therefore subject to various interpretations therefore in some ways having all those interpretations contribute to the user who posted the content's online identity.

### **Doctor Three**

Doctor three brought to the table some more ideas about what living with a loss can often look like, specifically talking about how often those who are mourning a loved one constantly pressure themselves to find the "right way" to deal with said loss, and often beat

themselves up about it. Often this can come from an idea (or lack thereof) of what living with grief looks like. They often put down timelines and impose self-made structures on how they need to be dealing with the loss. Additionally, he added some nuance to the ideas about how young adults who are grieving often feel alienated from their peers -

Participant: “That can be really alienating... not only thinking about what would I do without this person, but also like what kind of world is it that my 19 year old brother can be dead? Or what kind of world is it in which this friend from home could have taken their own life or my mom is dead at 50? You know whatever it’s a whole level of kind of weighty-meaning questions that are just on a different order... Lots of young people are thinking about that kind of stuff but there’s a different intensity and kind of urgency to it [that are now less abstract]”

Many participants had also felt the need for spaces to talk about their grief more and talk about their experiences of dealing with, and living with grief more and Doctor three corroborated that linking it with the same ideas of living with grief. He mentioned –

Participant: “I feel like a lot of people in trying to navigate life after a loss, maybe there’s some ideas of ‘I should be this way, or I should be this’... maybe in the immediate aftermath of a loss if you’re embedded in a religious or cultural context maybe there’s some cultural norms given through that, but I think kind of the living with the loss on-going, there’s very little about that. Anywhere really. And so, when your interview subjects are talking about – they’re resonating with your thing about wanting space [to talk about death and grief], I think that’s right, I think that’s it – I think people do want it, but A) don’t necessarily even know it’s okay to want that, or know what kind of space would be okay for that, which I think is kind of an interesting opportunity with social media is that I think it can be one of those spaces.

### **Doctor Four**

Lastly, Doctor four provided the following considerations to the conversation. She pointed out that while experiencing grief during one’s college years did often result in young adults feeling out of step with their peers, at the same time it meant those relationships that lasted through the period of mourning and grieving were doubly strengthened and much more intimate for the experience. Doctor four was also the only participant to specifically bring up the dopamine effect with respect to social media i.e. the validation from likes and instant gratification and the consequent high resulting from it. With respect to grieving on social media, Doctor four framed the use of social media in a very unique manner – rather than

separating social media from the grieving process to answer the question of whether it helped or hindered, she advocated for the idea that social media was an extension of one's psyche, implying that any action one takes on social media comes from an actual impulse one had. This automatically integrated social media into one's healing process (rather than separating it) if one chose to use it.

### **Conclusion**

Both students and counsellors agreed that social media had both positive and negative impacts on processing of grief. The three main positive takeaways from how social media helped process grief from students, were catharsis, community, and raising awareness. The main two negative aspects were social capital & attention, and obligatory social media posts. Many participants also mentioned how it was often very hard to get any distance and separation from the loss because the number of posts on social media about the deceased. Further, all participants expressed a desire to see and find more places wherein to feel and talk about their grief that are not only therapeutic places. The counsellors not only corroborated these behaviours and observations but also provided explanations for them. One interesting observation as a researcher was to see how between the four counsellors, every student's experience with grief and social media was validated in some form. And, each counsellor not only demonstrated their own personality and style of counselling grief during the interview, they also reiterated the individual nature of grief and loss.

Thirteen students and four counsellors took part in this study, and in this chapter I discussed the findings from the in-depth interviews conducted with these seventeen individuals. The chapter delineated the students' social media use and how social media interacted with their emotions, engagement with current events, and finally their experiences with grief. Their experiences with grief were further broken down into how social media helped and hindered their grieving process. It also discussed how the interviews with the

counsellors both corroborated as well as contextualised a lot of the feelings that the students expressed. The chapter finally elaborated on some individual notes each counsellor brought to the understanding of grief in adults in a college setting.

Furthermore, on a more personal note, this study lent itself to a lot of self-reflection, given my experiences with grief when my mother passed away two years ago, and how I had used my own social media during that time. The process of interviewing and talking with other students was a healing and learning process in itself. While I'd begun this project with the intention of establishing whether my experience with social media and grief could be generalised (as much as grief can be), I found myself learning far more about myself than I had anticipated. Through working on my thesis, I found it began integrating into my healing process and eventually this project became yet another way of engaging with, and understanding my emotions. In the spirit of how much my own experience became a part of this project, I chose to discuss my results in the form of a letter to my mother- a practice I started after my mother passed away to keep connected with her.

## CHAPTER 5: Discussion

Dear Ma,

It's been more than a few months since I last wrote you - sorry about that. I'd say things have gotten busier - and they have - but you and I both know that's not the reason I haven't written. I guess off late, I found less and less of a need to, because I thought it was important I learn to reach out to the other people I still have around me for help. To keep you updated- I've been doing a thesis in my senior year - one that actually is connected with you. I've been studying grief- perhaps stemming from a desire to understand it more? Or perhaps because I just wanted more of a reason to keep thinking about you where it wasn't 'me being distracted', or 'me not working'.

It's been the perfect way to keep thinking of you but also learn to use those memories in a more positive way- because the product of all this thinking isn't me breaking down and feeling hopeless - it's finding a solution - it's understanding more of what this whole experience has been for me, and also how other people related (or didn't) to my experience. I've learned so much about grief, and social media, but more than that, I've had the chance to listen to so many people's stories - and I'm so grateful for their generosity; to take time out of your day, and week and schedule to talk about something so personal and be *that* vulnerable (whether they knew me prior to the study or not) is not a small ask. I can only hope my project honours their stories - and in that spirit, I thought I'd tell you their stories, and what I've studied over these last few months.

Talking with multiple people - many strangers and some friends about this experience, and going more in depth into what happened, what I was feeling, why I chose to take to social media to express my sadness rather than reach out via WhatsApp to the family was hard, to say the least. But, each person who came forward and shared their story with me inspired me and gave me the energy and ability to share my own story with them as well. It's

interesting because one of the most important takeaways I have from my study is the need for a space in which to talk about death and grief after the event in question happened, and through our conversations and through this study, my participants and I all found a space for just that. Interestingly, almost every participant at the end of my talking with them expressed either how they had been looking for this kind of space, or even that while they had been uncertain about this experience coming in, it had turned out to be a good experience and one they were happy about. I don't think I've ever realised how much our society neither wants to engage with death after a certain point, nor has real systems in place to necessarily allow that. One possible exception to that is therapy and group therapy, but then we'd also have to consider the sad reality of how stigmatised therapy itself is, and how prone to not asking for help we are.

This is where thinking about social media becomes very interesting, because it is one place where people really are quite loud. Social media is one of the most honest representations of humanity - not in how people present themselves on it (because if we've established anything, our images online are *quite* curated), but in why they choose to present themselves a certain way, and in how they behave when no one is looking - be that when that's in a group where they're anonymous or their identity means less, or most of their decision and actions happen behind the screen (as is in the case of posting a photo, or status update). It's easy enough to have multiple problems with how social media is so fake, and is the worst of humanity (which is today's media would have us believe is truly the case), but I think people often forget that social media is a product of our society.

Ultimately, it is a product of us - we created it, we form it, we form the space. It just cannot be so different and so malicious and all of these things, because then we'd have to face the reality that maybe we are all of those things - and no one really wants to do that, and also, I don't believe that's truly the case. If you then look at why social media is the way it is,

to my mind, there's two parts to that. I wonder if, for one, our society can be too restrictive, and that flip side comes out on social media when you have the extra anonymity, compounded by being behind a screen, and therefore, less accountability. I think some of those people who want that anonymity, perhaps have a mean streak they choose to indulge. The idea that all the awful people get together and hang out online doesn't really make very much sense. Realistically, I think all of us have mean streaks that we can choose to indulge - and often most of us don't - I think social media can sometimes just make it easier to indulge it. The aspect to social media that we need to understand is what social media lends itself to, and why it does so in that manner. We can then recognise how we want to use it and be actively mindful about that. This said, I think while social media does lend itself to things like attention, superficiality and 'like' validation, I think it also helps more serious things as well.

When it comes down to it, I think humans have an intrinsic need for attention - I think that's just part of the human experience, and I don't think that should be as villainised as it is. If we didn't crave or need attention, we wouldn't be the social creatures we are - we wouldn't need relationships, we wouldn't need comforting in tough situations. I will say I think social media lends itself very well to that attention. When people have passed away, both with people I spoke to and for myself, one of the biggest things we all noticed was how many people posted about that death or event. In fact multiple people told me how people who the friend who passed away didn't like would post about this death, and it frustrated them so much, because it felt like they were using that death to gain social capital. Or, in the case of politics, people would often use posts to make sure they proved how liberal they were.

I think those people would say they're doing it to honour this person, but there's definitely something about status there, there's this idea of 'I know this person who passed - I'm impacted by this too'. What's interesting here is that from what the people I spoke to



said, this didn't happen only on social media. It also happened offline. However, I think social media makes that type of an interaction easier, because it makes it more accessible and more visible. Ultimately, the conclusion I came to was that it's not that these harder experiences of grief happened more with social media but rather that social media makes it more visible. The accessibility of social media makes those worse responses more common, not because the medium encourages it, but because the medium exposes us to it.

Thinking about people's responses is a whole other can of worms though. I think there are some different parts to it... I wonder how different dynamics and relationships impact this. In terms of people's responses - sometimes people would respond in a great way - 'I hope you're doing okay', 'you're so brave', that sort of thing - in my experience a lot of times people would just give me a lot of advice especially when they saw me primarily as your daughter. Dear God, if I had a dollar for every time I was told to keep doing something because you would be proud of me for it - I'd probably be able to pay for half of college. While people meant well, it was a very interesting experiment to see how many of those individuals cared enough to ask me what I needed from them and how many decided they wanted to help and so did whatever popped into their head. This is where I think social media again lent itself to that type of reaction, because social media is already so focused on the individual: when your name is tied to a response and recorded for everyone to see you want to make sure you're saying and doing the right things, right?

Grieving is inherently public and private and social media is inherently public and private and there is a connection there that is too profound to let go off just for the sake of it, in that yeah it kind of sucked with some parts of it when I did post, but I do also know how much it gave me. I know much it gave me to have all these people come together and support me - I needed to hear I was being brave because I didn't feel like I was. And I needed to know that people saw that in me, because at the time I didn't have the ability to see that in

myself, but if I saw for that moment that I was brave enough to cope, then whenever it was hard, I had a moment of bravery to fall back on. And social media while making the negativity more accessible also made the positivity and support more accessible. So, I think when you look at the impacts it has, it's important to recognise the power it can have if it can help with something as debilitating as grief is. The other really interesting thing I learned about grief was this analogy I now use in my head to explain to somebody what it's like to live with grief. Assuming a human is analogous to a camera, grief is like a filter to my mind – because it's a state of being not an emotion (the same way love is). So for example, if love is the red filter, and grief is the green filter, then a person who knows both love and grief would see the world in some shade of brown. Some days that brown would be muddy and murky, and other days it would be beautiful and rich like chocolate.

When people came forth to talk with me, we talked about a variety of causes of grief. Some talked to me about the loss of their family members, some talked about the loss of a close friend, some talked about the loss of their older selves and innocence, and some talked about traumatic experiences. This is one of the most important considerations when we study social media and why I chose to not label grief for my project. Grief takes many forms; it has many triggers and causes. Social media as a space is the convergence of millions of ideas, topics, opinions, and beliefs. One of my participants even talked about how the same social media she used to process her grief from her grandmother passing away would be extremely triggering due to her experiences with sexual assault. In social media spaces, it's incredibly hard if not completely impossible to separate and distinguish between these different types of grief and different influences, and they absolutely effect and impact each other. To my mind, defining grief and therefore limiting the number of people who would come forth and talk with me didn't feel like an accurate representation of the kind of experience social media provides.

Also incredibly interesting for me to note, was how I picked my interview questions and how my own experience with processing your loss influenced and coloured how I conducted my interviews and structured them. When I first framed my interview questions, I had a very specific goal in mind, and I came from a very specific history and background – my mother had passed away when I was a sophomore in college, and I used social media to cope and express my emotions and feelings, and I wanted to see if that could be generalised as an experience and helping mechanism for others who were dealing with grief as well.

Each interview, however, impacted and shaped the next, because each interview was one more story – one more perspective – that helped me better understand how grief worked and what it entailed. I must say, Ma, grief really is such an individual experience. What started as a very stilted conversation from my end based on set of questions that reflected my personal social media usage, my own reflection of how my identity has been shaped and influenced by my social media and my experience with grief grew into so much more. As I explained to all my participants, I used the interview as a broad structure to guide the interview and wanted to frame the project more as a conversation. Because of this, the product of that interaction was created by the both me and the interviewee together rather than me learning about them. Each interview became a dialogue about grief, and a mutual sharing of experiences – something that would have been impossible without personal experience.

I do think that the way in which I interpreted the data was also absolutely influenced by the fact that I have experienced an important loss - because, how could it not? I think it came through at multiple points. The first was when I was conducting the interviews. In some ways my data analysis began during the interviewing because of how I was an active participant of the conversation as well. The conversation was often guided by what themes I picked up on from prior interviews, from commonalities between my experience and theirs,

and at times, even from my attempt to clarify what they were saying. For example, one time, when a participant was talking about how often she thought about social media and tried curating it because it was one image she could control, in my probing, we came upon the idea that perhaps one reason why social media became as popular as it did was because of the ability to feel in-control that it affords people. In the specific case of this participant, she definitely felt as if her ability to control her image on social media played into her ability to feel in control in her life in general. In fact, to quote her about why she uses social media - “that’s what it comes down to I guess – it’s all about control”.

Interestingly, talking with the counsellors was definitely very therapeutic for me as well. I talked with four different counsellors for this project and while I didn’t go to them for help with processing the situation, I think I definitely found myself doing that. From the first interview I had to the last one, (funnily enough the last interview I did was one with a therapist), I definitely had a heightened understanding of my losing you too. Each time I brought up my experiences in interviews and had people respond and pick up on what they related to, I would then understand a little bit more or get another new perspective on the loss I experienced. Additionally, later while actively analysing the data, I do think I was absolutely influenced by what I knew to be true for my experience processing grief on social media, as well as what information was new to me. Therefore, while writing all of this down, not only did I come to understand the information from two different perspectives- one of a researcher, and one of somebody who understand traumatic loss, I also came to the table with a nuanced understanding of my loss because of this process, which has been invaluable to me.

At this point, I want to track back to what one of the participants said about control though. In thinking about the control factor, I think that too explains so much of why I, and some of us, probably took to social media in the specific ways we did. We could control how

we talked about it – we defined the stories of our grief, rather than having those stories define us. I know for me, looking back, I think that was a huge part of it. When I first posted on social media, when you were in the hospital (before things really went badly), I remember doing it primarily because I got to say I missed you – I felt an emotion and I prioritised my feelings and needing to publicly believe in you over anything else. It was possibly the first time I'd felt that kind of ability to *do* something. The helplessness that characterised so much of my mind and life at that point felt slightly (temporarily) remedied.

Here in lies the problem though. While that is definitely representative of how powerful social media can be with helping, some participants felt like they took to social media too much and after that, a few months down the line, they realised they needed to do some more actual work. I wonder if because social media is so accessible and can provide the dopamine effect, that Doctor four mentioned, that comes from posting on social media and gaining validation from those posts, perhaps what starts off as one part of our processing of grief turns into a crutch. Is it possible that perhaps in a desire to keep feeling some relief from the sadness and the pain, as well as working against that sense of helplessness, we take to the medium that we have previously gained some kind of validation from?

This possibility leads me to consider that each choice we make on social media is therefore worth so much more – and reinforces the idea that we need to take social media as a space and virtual social spaces more seriously. It researchers like danah boyd have said – it's another space where people can hang out, which means that the decisions we make on it make differences and impact future actions we're going to take as well. An example of that (although on a more negative note) was what one of the participants said about arguments about politics on social media. While what he said was a criticism of how social media does not allow for nuanced, productive conversations, his point confirms what I was just talking about – social media as a space is *real*. The choices we make on the medium are *real*.

It's so funny, because I began this project with you in my head. I wanted to honour you. I wanted to make something beautiful from something hard. I wanted to make it so that my story of loss wasn't solely characterised by what I didn't have anymore, but was characterised by what I did with that situation. Ultimately, while I do think you'd be proud, this has become so much more. This isn't just about my story anymore, and never was going to be. This project is now as much for each person who shared their story with me, and is about their stories as well. This is for their bravery, and their resilience in what they went through. I've learned so much about myself, about people, and obviously, about social media and grief as well. I'd also be remiss to not mention how the way in which I conducted my study changed from beginning to end. I began thinking about a study where I separated my own experience of grief from the research and ended with an ethnographical study of the relationship between social media and grief (the complete opposite).

The biggest takeaway I have from my research combines all of what I've learned. I've realised how much social media is just one symptom in a larger problem of mindlessness. Social media amplifies the human experience – it makes joy easier and more accessible, as well as sadness, envy and pain. It makes communities more connected, and the world smaller, while possibly also pushing people away. Social media almost defines what it means to be human and insofar as that is true, blaming all of our problems with social media on the medium itself doesn't seem to make sense to me. I think it is our responsibility as users to be mindful of our usage and how it helps or hurts us. Perhaps then, one day we will find social media to be more positive in more ways. Perhaps then, this platform that helps us learn so much about our identities can help us gain even deeper insights into ourselves and our behaviours.

I'll leave you here with all of these thoughts. I'd say I'm sorry about my longest letter yet, but really you and I both know I'm not. I just wanted to update you about everything I'd found out and all the thoughts I'd had because I thought you'd be just a little interested.

With all my love,

Priyanka

## **CHAPTER 6: Conclusion**

### **Limitations**

#### Sample size:

This project was limited by the small sample size of seventeen participants. I had initially hoped to have more, but was limited both by time to interview and collect data, as well as individuals who were willing to talk about something as emotionally charged and difficult as grief. Since I spoke with thirteen students, the study really only speaks to their individual experiences rather than being able to generalise the findings. Additionally, I only spoke with four counsellors. While this provided some insight and framework to talking about grief, it was also a small sample as well, and is not representative of a generalizable conclusion.

#### Convenience sample:

The sample pool wasn't very diverse, and ideally, the sample would have been more random than it was. All of the students were selected from Tufts University, and while there was one student who mentioned being low-income, and there were three students of colour, most of the participants can be assumed to come from a certain socio-economic background, and were from the same racial background. In the case of the counsellors, three of the four counsellors were reached through psychology today, again determining the range of counsellors reached as well. Additionally, they all practiced in the Boston area, all in fairly affluent neighbourhoods, which meant most of the students they interacted with that framed their practical knowledge were presumably from a similar background as well. Lastly, it could have been beneficial to have a lesser number of participants whom I knew prior to the study. While this meant those participants were all quite comfortable during the interview, our conversation was inevitably framed by the fact that we were friends or knew each other in another context, and by our relationship outside of the interview context.



Focus of the American context of death and society:

One aspect of grieving that I had wanted to explore more that I was not able to due to the small size of the study was more consideration of the cultural aspect of grief. The study was conducted in the context of American society, with the social media experience being limited to that of an American one. As an international student myself, I can attest to the fact that social media spaces while similar across cultures and countries, are still affected by their host culture, and that diversity of thought is absent from this study, since all of my participants were American. One student mentioned some cultural grieving practices from Guyana, but it was not deeply explored during the interview.

Definition of grief:

Grief wasn't defined at all for this study for multiple reasons. What this meant was there were a few participants whose experiences of grief did not stem from a loss but rather from a traumatic experience such as a school shooting. Further, one participant mentioned of the types of grief she had been exposed to on social media, a lot of it came from the politics of police brutality, the election, and sexual assault – the #MeToo campaign. The aspect of constant exposure to those forms of grief wasn't explored as much as it could have been even though I attempted to account for it with my interview questions.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This study while detail-oriented in it's approach is still quite basic – there is still much to be explored and understood about the ways in which grief is presented on social media, what types of grief are presented, and how various influences interact and play off each other for a social media user. With the number of social media users increasing exponentially as well as the accessibility of news and propensity to use social media for activism increasing exponentially, the need to understand this is becoming more relevant. More research needs to

be done on how social media differs across countries and cultures and how people would present their grief on social media depending on the culture they exist and function within.

There is also still much to be understood about why one might take to social media to process something as personal as grief, given that social media is most often criticised for being extremely fake and superficial. Something a future researcher might want to consider is the changing culture of social media and what that implies about the function it therefore holds in our societies. Additionally, further studies could also frame their research on the basis of prior social media usage prior to presenting grief, to further understand what about the situation of a loss motivated someone to possibly change their behaviour.

Future research that draws specifically on this study's findings could elaborate on any of the five themes mentioned for what participants appreciated and did not appreciate about the presence of social media in their grieving process – (catharsis, community, raising awareness, social capital & attention, and obligatory social media posts) – and conduct a more nuanced study of any of the themes. For example, a study that were to focus on the catharsis aspect of the processing might also consider what Counsellor one mentioned about the journaling aspect of social media and study further the idea of public journaling, in the context of grief and hardship.

Additionally, further studies could explore more about whether there is a specific stage of grief that social media processing helps an individual with, building more specifically off the Kubler-Ross' theories about, and ones following that. More understanding of which specific part of grieving that social media helped with could be highly beneficial to understanding how best to utilise social media in a situation where an individual is already feeling vulnerable and exposed – both protecting the person from the more negative aspects as well as potentially amplifying the positive aspects.

Social media is still a relatively new phenomenon in our world and while there has been some research conducted about the ways in which we are increasingly presenting more of our lives on the platforms, often times that work is framed with a negative bias assuming that social media only harms. Given the apparent reality that social media is here to stay, our society would be well served by more research conducted that finds the positives of social media and how best to utilise the platform, and have it add to our lives rather than detract from it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis owes its existence to a few people -

Prof. D – *Thank you for everything. Thank you for encouraging me to write this thesis; and thank you for always seeing the potential in me and pushing me to realise that. Thank you for helping me become the student I am today – I would not have made my senior year as memorable without your encouragement.*

Fernando – *Your endless enthusiasm for my project when we met, and belief in me and what I can accomplish were instrumental to my believing I could make this happen. Thank you.*

My participants – *Your endless generosity in sharing your stories with me touched me deeply, and I hope I've honoured your stories in a way that feels right to you as well. Thank you.*

Madi – *I could write endless pages about why I'm grateful for you, so this time, I'll keep it short – thank you for all the love, kindness, compassion and honesty. Your friendship has seen me through everything college threw my way.*

The B130s – *For always listening, always supporting, and always being there when I needed a hug – thank you.*

And last but not at all the least, to Shreyas and Appa - *You have supported me and been there for me in so many ways and we've built, and worked on, our relationship so much. I derive so much strength from you both. I don't say it enough, but I'm so grateful to you both, and love you unconditionally.*

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*For my mother-*

*Thank you for being my mom. There could have been none better. In your loving memory -*  
*always.*

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

#### Students

##### Part 1: Social Media & You

1. Do you use social media regularly? (Regularly defined as exposing yourself to social media at least once a day, on a daily basis).
2. Which platform(s) of social media do you use the most?
3. What purposes/functions does social media serve for you?
4. To what extent do you think your social media use has any impact on your day to day emotions?
5. Can you think of a time that social media content has had a negative impact on your day to day emotions? Can you tell me a little about it?
6. If at all, how long lasting were those negative feelings? (Did the feelings you experience stay with you for a while after you stopped engaging with social media?)

##### Part 2: Identity & Social Media

1. Do you believe your social media presence forms another aspect of your identity? If so, can you tell me more about it?
2. Do you think that your social media impacts how you feel about current events? E.g. With the election, did the way it was presented on social media impact how you felt about it? Do you have any other examples of when this happened?
3. Do you think that the way you present yourself on social media matches the way you present yourself offline? Can you think of times in your life when your social media presence didn't match the way you think you present yourself offline?
4. What are your feelings, if any, about the impact your social media presence has on your life?

##### Part 3: Social Media & Emotional Impact

1. Have you ever shared/ Do you share events/content of heightened personal importance on social media?
2. Does sharing about those events impact how you engage with any emotions related to the event?
3. (If not mentioned already) Have you ever shared personally important content stemming from a place of grief/loss?
4. What impact did sharing that information have on you? How did it make you feel? Did it help you understand better your emotions, provide validation etc? Did it hinder how you dealt with your emotions in anyway?
5. Do you know anybody else who has shared personal content relating to grief on social media?
6. Why do you think they initially want to share said content on social media?
7. Do you think it had the impact they desired?
8. Have they shared that type of content on social media again? (If applicable) why or why not?

Mental Health Professionals

Part 1 - Grief & Your experience with counselling

1. In your experience how do high-school/college students approach the ideas of grief or loss?
2. Are there any specific techniques or approaches you have found that students who have faced some kind of loss all benefit from?
3. How do you help students who are grieving i.e. what is your specific style for counselling grief?
4. Are there any patterns or common aspects in the ways in which students present themselves socially when they are grieving?

Part 2 - Students & Social Media

1. What has been your experience observing the impact social media has had on students?
2. How do their interactions with social media inform the ways in which they carry themselves in 'real life'?
3. Do you believe that social media forms another aspect of their identities?
4. What kind of effect does engaging with social media regularly (defined as once a day, daily) have on students?
5. How important do you feel a student's social media presence is to them?

Part 3 - How do they impact each other?

1. Do you think social media has changed the ways in which students process their emotions, and relate to themselves?
2. Do you believe that sharing content on social media about subjects relating to grief and loss can help, or do you think they hinder? In what ways?
3. Why do you think a student might share about a personal loss/grief online?
4. Do you think talking about one's grief or loss online detracts from their processing that grief? Or do you believe it's another aspect of processing grief?

## **Appendix B: Consent Forms**

### Students

#### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

**STUDY TITLE:** Online vs Offline: The Impact of Social Media on the Processing and Understanding of One's Grief

**INVESTIGATORS:** Priyanka Kumar

#### **BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE:**

You are being asked to take part in a research project, for an undergraduate senior thesis. Social media as a platform is a place of constant communication without regulation and curation of content, which lends itself to a lot of artistic expression, but simultaneously means that each viewer's experience of that content is dependent on their own ability to navigate that space. How then does being exposed to all of these stimuli while dealing with one's own emotions effect one's ability to actually process those emotions? The lack of curation of social media content becomes even more worrisome when we consider the impacts of engaging with content from a show such as this one when not being in the right headspace for it. We need to better understand the relationship young adults have with their social media, so we can be better equipped to portray healthy images of processing of grief rather than sensationalising it to profit off it. So, I would appreciate it if I could interview you in order to better understand the relationship young adults have with their social media as well as the ways in which social media impacts their emotions.

#### **PROCEDURES:**

I have prepared around fifteen questions, to conduct an interview. The format of the interview will be a discussion, in a closed room. I expect that the interview will take approximately 1 hour. The questions are centred around your usage of social media, whether any content on social media has impacted your emotions, and lastly, whether you have shared anything relating to your grief on social media. I may quote your remarks in presentations resulting from this work. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity. With your permission, I will also audiotape the interview for the purposes of accurately transcribing the conversation.

The audio, if you consent, will also be used for the creation of a podcast. Your decision to participate in the podcast is independent of your decision to be recorded, and neither has bearing or effect on the other. The podcast aims to serve as an example of more responsible media about grief. It aims to discuss grief in a productive way rather than creating a profitable, sensationalist piece. I intend to share the podcast on sound cloud and plan to submit it to the iTunes podcast directory as well. The podcast will not mention your name, birthdate and so on. The audiotapes as well as the transcriptions will be stored securely on a password protected hard drive to ensure your privacy. If you choose to not participate in the podcast, then your audiotape will be deleted post transcribing the interview. My faculty advisor and I will be the only people who have access to these files prior to publishing the podcast.

### BENEFITS AND RISKS:

My aim is to try to provide a framework through which to further understand your social media usage and engage with it in a critical and thoughtful manner. Additionally, as some analysts have discussed, talking about grief in a non-threatening situation may also be helpful to the healing process. I also hope, with this study, to have some benefits in a larger context. I hope to contribute further to the discourse about how social media and mental health are related - working not only to potentially dispel the idea that any impact social media has on one's mental health is solely negative, but also possibly finding actively positive relationships between how one processes grief online and offline. My study hopes to be a step in the direction of bettering the relationship people have with their social media as well as adding to the body of knowledge about the interconnectedness of social media and mental health today.

This said, the nature of the study is inherently emotional, and discussing loss can be emotionally difficult as a participant. To mitigate the effects of this, the study is designed in such a way that the focus remains on your social media usage, rather than the event you might be referencing, and a list of resources will be provided to you of facilities on campus that provide emotional support should you feel the need for it.

### RIGHTS OF PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer. If at any time and for any reason, you would prefer not to participate in this study, please feel free not to. If at any time you would like to stop participating, let the researcher know. We can take a break, stop and continue at a later date, or stop altogether. Further the study may also be stopped by the researcher at any point should they deem it necessary for your emotional well-being.

You may withdraw from this study at any time, and you will not be penalised in any way for deciding to stop participation. Your decision to participate in the podcast and the study are independent of each other, and neither one affects the other. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the researcher will ask you if the information already collected from you can be used.

### FINANCIAL COMPENSATION

No monetary compensation will be provided for participation in this study, and participating in this study will involve no cost to you.

If you would like anymore information concerning the study, you can reach the investigator at [pkumar01@tufts.edu](mailto:pkumar01@tufts.edu). If you wish to contact the faculty advisor of the investigator with any questions or concerns, you can email Dr Julie Dobrow at [julie.dobrow@tufts.edu](mailto:julie.dobrow@tufts.edu). You can also reach the IRB office with any questions or concerns at [sber@tufts.edu](mailto:sber@tufts.edu).

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My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study.



## Grief & Social Media

Participant Signature

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Date of Participation

---

Name Printed.

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I agree to be audio-taped

YES

NO

Initial

I agree for my audio to be used for a podcast

YES

NO

Initial

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

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Mental Health Professionals

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

STUDY TITLE: Online vs Offline: The Impact of Social Media on the Processing and Understanding of One's Grief

INVESTIGATORS: Priyanka Kumar

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE:

You are being asked to take part in a research project, for an undergraduate senior thesis. Social media as a platform is a place of constant communication without regulation and curation of content, which lends itself to a lot of artistic expression, but simultaneously means that each viewer's experience of that content is dependent on their own ability to navigate that space. How then does being exposed to all of these stimuli while dealing with one's own emotions effect one's ability to actually process those emotions? The lack of curation of social media content becomes even more worrisome when we consider the impacts of engaging with content from a show such as this one when not being in the right headspace for it. We need to better understand the relationship young adults have with their social media, so we can be better equipped to portray healthy images of processing of grief rather than sensationalising it to profit off it. So, I would appreciate it if I could interview you in order to better understand the relationship young adults have with their social media as well as the ways in which social media impacts their emotions.

PROCEDURES:

I have prepared around fifteen questions, to conduct an interview. The format of the interview will be a discussion, in a closed room. I expect that the interview will take approximately 1 hour. The questions are centred around your experiences working with people who have experienced grief, your opinion of how social media has impacted that process, and the relationship you have observed between an individuals emotions and their social media usage. With your permission, I will audiotape the interview for the purposes of accurately transcribing the conversation.

The audio, if you consent, will also be used for the creation of a podcast. Your decision to participate in the podcast is independent of your decision to be recorded, and neither has bearing or effect on the other. The podcast aims to serve as an example of more responsible media about grief. It aims to discuss grief in a productive way rather than creating a profitable, sensationalist piece. I intend to share the podcast on sound cloud and plan to submit it to the iTunes podcast directory as well. The podcast will not mention your name, birthdate and so on. The audiotapes as well as the transcriptions will be stored securely on a password protected hard drive to ensure your privacy. If you choose to not participate in the podcast, then your audiotape will be deleted post transcribing the interview. My faculty advisor and I will be the only people who have access to these files prior to publishing the podcast.

BENEFITS AND RISKS:

## Grief & Social Media

As a participant there are no specific benefits you will gain from this study, however, this study might have some big picture benefits. It could contribute further to the discourse about how social media and mental health are related, working not only to potentially dispel the idea that any impact social media has on one's mental health is solely negative, but also possibly finding actively positive relationships between how one processes grief online and offline. My study hopes to be a step in the direction of bettering the relationship people have with their social media as well as adding to the body of knowledge about the interconnectedness of social media and mental health today.

The study is designed in such a way that the participants are exposed to minimal risk, where the focus remains on the social media usage and trends of young people in general.

### RIGHTS OF PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer. If at any time and for any reason, you would prefer not to participate in this study, please feel free not to. If at any time you would like to stop participating, let the researcher know. We can take a break, stop and continue at a later date, or stop altogether. You may withdraw from this study at any time, and you will not be penalised in any way for deciding to stop participation. Your decision to participate in the podcast and the study are independent of each other, and neither one affects the other. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the researcher will ask you if the information already collected from you can be used.

### FINANCIAL COMPENSATION

No monetary compensation will be provided for participation in this study, and participating in this study will involve no cost to you.

If you would like anymore information concerning the study, you can reach the investigator at [pkumar01@tufts.edu](mailto:pkumar01@tufts.edu). If you wish to contact the faculty advisor of the investigator with any questions or concerns, you can email Dr Julie Dobrow at [julie.dobrow@tufts.edu](mailto:julie.dobrow@tufts.edu). You can also reach the IRB office with any questions or concerns at [sber@tufts.edu](mailto:sber@tufts.edu).

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My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study.

Participant Signature

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Date of Participation

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Name Printed.

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## Grief & Social Media

I agree to be audio-taped	YES	NO	Initial
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I agree for my audio to be used for a podcast	YES	NO	Initial
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Signature of Person Obtaining Consent			Date
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