

Only a Click Away: An Investigation of Facebook Memorialization

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“Only a Click Away: An Investigation of Facebook Memorialization”

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Abstract

Online memorializing is increasing in popularity, specifically on Facebook. This type of memorialization has typically taken the form of groups or pages dedicated to the memory of loved ones, which, in turn, creates a community of support for people who are grieving. A sample of 250 people, with a mean age of 31.02 years (ranging from 19 to 77), volunteered to complete a questionnaire assessing use and perceptions of Facebook memorial groups and pages. Participants reported joining Facebook memorial groups, with the majority saying they visit these less than once a month, usually when alone. During these visits, participants typically looked at pictures of the deceased, with sadness being the most commonly experienced emotion. Many participants reported that Facebook memorial groups and pages allow people to remember the life of the deceased and to help in the grieving process. It was found that liking a Facebook memorial page was seen as being supportive rather than disrespectful. The majority of participants reported that Facebook memorial groups should be private rather than public. Participants who reported learning about the death of a family member on Facebook were significantly more likely to report that a deceased's Facebook account should remain on Facebook but only be accessed by Facebook friends than participants who reported never learning about the death of a family member on Facebook. The implications of the results and directions for future research are discussed.

Only a Click Away: An Investigation of Facebook Memorialization

The longstanding tradition of memorializing loved ones has recently taken a more technological form. Online memorialization has now become part of our society's death and dying rituals (DeGroot, 2014). Newspaper obituaries have moved online, as well as funeral home guestbooks, and the creation of virtual cemeteries (Hume & Bressers, 2010). One online memorial website, Legacy.com, has hosted memorials and obituaries for more than 60% of people who died in the United States (Hume & Bressers, 2010). Further, in a Facebook memorial study by Carroll and Landry (2010), students were asked what they would do if they learned through campus email that an acquaintance had died in a car accident. The majority of these students reported that they would access the Facebook memorial group or contact mutual friends; only a small portion reported they would first look for and read the printed obituary. With the growing popularity of online memorialization, more specifically Facebook memorial groups and pages, it is important to examine the prevalence, purpose, and perceptions of Facebook groups and pages to memorialize loved ones.

Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace are being increasingly used to memorialize deceased loved ones. For example, Facebook users can create memorial groups and pages in memory of their deceased friends and family members, offering a community where people can grieve with others and witness the grief of others (Carroll & Landry, 2010). These groups and pages serve as a place for people to post messages to and about the deceased, as well as pictures, videos, information regarding funeral arrangements, and related fundraisers (DeGroot, 2014).

Gender differences have been found regarding the creation of online memorials as well as who is memorialized. Research has shown that the majority of online memorialization has been created for men rather than women and has been created more often by females than by males (Roberts & Vidal, 2000; Vries & Rutherford, 2004). This gender difference was also found by Musambira, Hastings, and Hoover (2007) who found that sons were memorialized online at a higher rate than daughters, by both mothers and fathers on The Compassionate Friends website for bereaved parents.

Web memorials can be created at any time, including immediately after a death, as has been seen in the creation of web memorials after a large-scale public tragedy or natural disaster (Foot, Warnick, & Schneider, 2006). Immediately after the event, web memorials may serve as an organizing space for making arrangements, notification of offline memorials, and recruitment of assistance (Foot et al., 2006). As time passes, web memorials may become records of a deceased's life. In the case of public tragedy or natural disasters, web memorials offer a place for people to express their condolences to friends and family of the deceased, which may be especially important in the absence of a body or gravesite, thereby providing the bereaved a location for such expression (Foot et al., 2006).

Visiting web memorials is often done immediately after the death because it may be more convenient to visit a web memorial than a physical monument since it can be quickly and easily accessed from any location (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Roberts, 2004; Roberts & Vidal, 2000). In a study that examined the use of Facebook for memorialization, it was reported that 45% of participants stated they would visit Facebook memorials immediately after learning of an individual's death (Carroll &

Landry, 2010). The immediacy of Facebook can sometimes result in people learning about a death through their Facebook newsfeed instead of being informed directly by a friend or family member, and this may be seen as an inappropriate way to learn about the death of someone close (Burbaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013). Usually, informing others of a death begins with the family first, but through Facebook, friends of the individual are often told before some family members (Burbaker et al., 2013). This circumstance occurs because of context collapse, which is the result of Facebook grouping all friends and family in the same category (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). This collapse does not distinguish between family members, friends, or acquaintances on Facebook, which can cause problems when notifying loved ones of the deceased (Marwick & Ellison, 2012).

The visiting of online memorial pages can be both a private time to grieve and a time to share memories of the deceased with others. It has been noted that people often visit online memorials in the presence of others so they can share memories of the deceased both virtually and in person (Roberts, 2004). Roberts and Vidal (2000) examined three different online memorial websites (Garden of Remembrance, World Wide Cemetery, and Dearly Departed) and found that 84% of respondents said that they had visited an online memorial with at least one other person present, usually a friend.

Another behaviour that occurs in online memorialization is changing a profile picture on Facebook to a picture of the deceased or a memorial image representing the deceased (e.g., a particular colour ribbon or flower). This is becoming a noticeable act when an individual dies, however in a study by Carroll and Landry (2010), it was found that only 14% of participants reported this behaviour.

Online memorials allow grieving people to share their thoughts and feelings through messages to the deceased and others. These online memorial postings tend to have very similar themes that include events and updates, storytelling, religious references, poetry, emotional expressions, discussion of cause of death, and themes of eventual reunion (DeGroot, 2012; Roberts & Vidal, 2000; Vries & Rutherford, 2004; Williams & Merten, 2009). Another noticeable theme on Facebook memorial group posts is to describe the relationship with the deceased, in an effort to give other group members context for the post (Lingel, 2013). This occurs when a person who was a Facebook friend of the deceased posts on his or her memorial group or page, although they may not have been close with the deceased (Lingel, 2013). This person will say how they knew the deceased or that they did not know the deceased, to give other group members a reason for why they are posting on the Facebook memorial group or page (Lingel, 2013).

The prevalence of online voyeurs on Facebook memorials of people they do not know or distant acquaintances of the deceased who post messages has not been adequately researched (DeGroot, 2014). Those who engage in these behaviours are referred to as “emotional rubberneckerers” (DeGroot, 2014, p. 79) or “grief tourists” (Marwick & Ellison, 2012, p. 390). Emotional rubberneckerers post on the walls of Facebook memorial pages to explain that they themselves have lost a friend, that they did not know the deceased, or that they distantly knew the deceased but felt deeply saddened by the loss (DeGroot, 2014; Roberts, 2004). Similar to emotional rubberneckerers, Marwick and Ellison (2012) explained that grief tourists are people who did not know the deceased, but take part in expressions of public mourning such as posting on Facebook

memorial groups or pages. Both of these groups of people often feel the need to offer their condolences or to share that they had a similar experience of losing a loved one by a similar type of death or a similar type of relationship (DeGroot, 2014; Roberts, 2004). This behaviour is not uncommon; it has been found that 98% of online memorial creators reported visiting memorial pages of people they did not know (Roberts, 2004). This behaviour often generates support from new online friends who had similar experiences and it can be helpful to those grieving (Roberts, 2004). Overall, the limited findings suggest that emotional rubbernecking can be a healthy and productive activity for people responding to death (DeGroot, 2014).

In the most extreme cases of grief tourism, these strangers may post disturbing pictures or make comments to provoke anger, disgust, or confusion in memorial group followers (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). The term used to refer to individuals who engage in this behaviour is “trolls” (Marwick & Ellison, 2012, p. 390). Trolls commonly comment on Facebook pages for the purpose of creating conflict among others (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). People have tried to control trolling by reporting disturbing photos, blocking profiles, carefully monitoring the page, posting verbal attacks, and deleting the page and creating a more private profile to memorialize their loved one (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). Trolling behaviour has the potential to cause frustration in the bereaved and disrupt the memorialization of their loved ones. Along with trolls, there exists “lurkers” who visit and read messages on online memorials without leaving any evidence that they have read the posts (DeGroot, 2014, p. 83). It is suspected that some lurkers visit online memorials to read about others misfortunes or perhaps these people are known to the deceased but prefer not to post (DeGroot, 2014). Presently, it is unknown

how prevalent trolling and lurking are and the effect these have on those visiting online memorials.

Web memorials may provide an opportunity for the bereaved to re-establish an inner representation of the deceased in an ongoing, internal relationship through online messages to the deceased (Burbaker et al., 2013). This appears to be a common practice on many web memorials providing evidence of the bereft working to maintain a relationship with their deceased loved ones through this form of communication (DeGroot, 2012). This behaviour, documented in a study of adolescents' online social networking after the death of a peer, showed that the language used indicated that participants were using their Facebook posts to talk directly to the deceased (Williams & Merten, 2009). By posting messages to the deceased, people may feel a continued presence of the deceased because of their interaction with their online profile in a similar way as when the person was alive. Also, social networking sites like Facebook give individuals the opportunity to visually reflect on their relationship with the deceased through their online presence, also providing the potential to facilitate a sense of ongoing connection (Williams & Merten, 2009).

One aspect of online memorials that has varied perspectives is regarding the public or private nature of the site. Facebook has recently added a feature for users to create groups and these groups can be public or private (through invitation only). This feature has made Facebook memorialization more private and only open to new members through an invitation (Burbaker et al., 2013). Marwick and Ellison (2012) noted that users of Facebook memorial pages experienced the benefits and risks of the public nature of pages. Though these benefits and risks were noted, there was no empirical evidence

about Facebook users' perceptions of whether or not Facebook memorial groups should be public or private.

Facebook gives its users the option to 'like' Facebook pages, posts, and comments by clicking on a 'like' button. In Marwick and Ellison's (2012) study, the 'liking' of Facebook memorial pages was widely interpreted by their participants. Some thought that the more 'likes' for a page, the more support or sympathy for the deceased. Other people believed it was disrespectful to compare the number of 'likes' to how much people liked the deceased. Since there is limited investigation and mixed perceptions on what liking a Facebook memorial page means, further investigation is necessary to understand the interpretation of this action.

In 2009, Facebook introduced a memorialization status for profiles that disabled the ability to log on to the account but left the wall accessible to Facebook friends only (Burbaker et al., 2013). This memorialization status prevents new friends from being added to the profile and does not allow reconnect messages to be sent regarding the deceased (reconnect is a feature of Facebook since 2009 which sends a message, such as "share the latest news," with a particular Facebook friend with whom you may have lost contact). People in Burbaker et al.'s (2013) study reported being alarmed by these reconnect messages from deceased friends. When the deceased's profile is officially memorialized, the message to reconnect with them will not appear. Participants reported mixed ideas about what should happen to a person's Facebook profile after he or she dies. Participants' perspectives varied when asked what they would want to have done with their own profiles after they die. The responses varied from wanting a family member to

control their profile to no one controlling it, and the majority of participants reported they would not even want it memorialized.

Due to the recency of Facebook memorial groups and pages and the limited research, it is evident that there are important gaps in the literature that need to be explored regarding perceptions and use of this online forum. Given the growing popularity of the creation and visitation of Facebook memorial groups and pages, it is important to understand the role these play in the grieving process. While the limited evidence suggests that many people are memorializing their loved ones online, there is less information pertaining to the prevalence of the usage, the reported purposes it serves the bereaved, and perceptions regarding Facebook memorial groups and pages. The present study addressed the following questions: What is the prevalence of use of Facebook memorial groups and pages?; What is the role of Facebook memorial groups and pages for the bereaved?; and What are the perceptions of Facebook memorial groups and pages?

Method

Participants

A sample of 250 people volunteered to participate in the study. To the open-ended question of gender, 192 identified as women, 40 as men, 1 as “nonbinary,” 1 as “androgynous,” and 16 did not specify. The mean age of the participants was 31.02 years, ranging from 19 to 77 years. Of the total participants, 26.9% identified as currently grieving the death of someone important to them.

Materials

An informed consent paragraph outlining the purpose of the study; the minimum age to participate (19 years); and details on anonymity, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and obtaining study results were provided upon clicking the link to the questionnaire (see the Appendix). The questionnaire constructed for this study consisted of 27 questions and statements assessing participants’ use and perceptions of Facebook memorial groups and pages. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions and statements on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Questions about age, gender, and current bereavement status were included at the end of the questionnaire (see the Appendix).

Procedure

The questionnaire was posted on SurveyMonkey. The link to the questionnaire was sent to students, faculty, and staff at Grenfell Campus, Memorial University of Newfoundland, through a campus-wide e-newsletter. The survey link was also posted on Facebook profiles and Twitter. Since it was possible to receive multiple copies of the link, participants were asked to complete the questionnaire only once.

Results

Descriptive statistics, chi-square tests for independence, goodness of fit chi-square analyses, and independent measures *t*-tests were used to analyze data collected from the questionnaire. In the descriptive statistics, response ratings do not always equal 100%. Participants were asked to check all options that applied on selected questions, thus many participants chose more than one option. As a result, the summed scores of all of the options in those questions were greater than 100%.

The vast majority, 243 (97.2%) the 250 participants, indicated that they used Facebook, while 5 (2.0%) indicated not using it, and 2 (0.8%) did not respond. The average number of friends for users was 496.66 ($SD = 382.31$) ranging from 6 to 2600. Table 1 displays how often participants logged in to Facebook, indicating that most people (90.1%) logged in to Facebook more than once a day. The average number of hours spent on Facebook each day was 2.34 ($SD = 1.94$) ranging from 0 to 12 hours.

A high percentage of participants (71.9%) reported joining a Facebook memorial group, while 28.1% of participants had never joined one. Participants were asked how often they visited Facebook memorial groups or pages. Table 2 shows that most participants (64.6%) visited less than once a month. Participants were asked if they had ever changed their Facebook profile picture in a variety of ways related to the remembrance of a person who died (see Table 3). While 50.4% of the sample reported never changing their Facebook profile in a way to memorialize a person who died, the remainder of the participants had engaged in a variety of changes as noted in Table 3. Also, responses of “other” included changing their profile picture to a picture of a deceased pet, a picture of a grandchild, and a picture of a memorial tattoo. Only 2.9% of

participants reported creating a Facebook memorial group or page themselves; 5 identified as women, 1 as a man, and 1 as unidentified. These Facebook memorial groups and pages were created equally for women and men.

Table 1

Frequency of Login Among Facebook Users

Frequency	% yes responses
More than once a day	90.1
Once a day only	4.9
More than once a week	3.7
Once a week only	0.8
More than once a month	0.0
Once a month only	0.0
Have a profile, but never login or use it	0.4

The majority of participants (88.4%) reported visiting Facebook memorial groups or pages alone, rather than with others (11.6%). Table 4 presents participants' activity on Facebook memorial groups. The most frequently reported action while viewing Facebook memorial groups was looking at pictures of the deceased (69.6%). The option "other" was endorsed by 5.6% of the participants and included, to post messages to the deceased's family, "all of the above," "read other peoples post (*sic*), comments, photos shared," "visited one out of curiosity," and "depend on how close I was to the person." One participant wrote, "I hate on everyone and everything related to the memorial group

in an irrational angry way where I think I am better then (*sic*) them all, but I know I am not and I need to get over myself and let others mourn in their way.” Approximately one quarter (25.6%) of participants reported seeing trolling behaviour on a Facebook memorial page, while no participants reported trolling a Facebook page themselves. The majority of participants (97.1%) reported visiting a Facebook memorial group or page without posting on the wall.

Table 2

Frequency of Visiting Facebook Memorial Groups or Pages

Frequency	% yes responses
More than once a day	1.3
Once a day only	1.3
More than once a week	6.3
Once a week only	3.4
More than once a month	5.1
Once a month only	5.5
Less than once a month	64.6
Never visited a Facebook memorial group or page	12.7

Table 3

Profile Picture in Memory of Person Who Died

Changes	% yes responses
Never changed Facebook profile picture in this way	50.4
A picture with a person who died	35.2
A picture of a person who died	22.4
A group picture including a person who died	19.2
A picture of an object that represents a person who died	10.8
Other	1.2

Approximately one quarter of the participants (24.8%) reported learning about the death of a family member on Facebook. A much higher percentage of participants (64.3%) reported learning about the death of a friend through Facebook. Table 5 presents participants' opinions regarding what should happen to a deceased's Facebook profile and indicates that most participants' believed that the account should be deleted (40.9%) or that the account should remain on Facebook and only be visited by Facebook friends of the deceased (31.0%).

A 2x5 chi-square test for independence was used to determine if there was a significant association between a person learning about the death of a family member on Facebook and their opinion on what should happen to a Facebook profile after a person has died (see Table 6). This test was significant, $\chi^2(4, N = 241) = 14.58, p = .006, V =$

.061. As a follow up analysis, a goodness of fit chi-square analyzed the responses of the participants who responded “yes” to learning about the death of a family member on Facebook and their opinion on what should happen to a deceased’s Facebook profile. All expected values were inputted as equal percentages. There was a significant association found between participants who responded “yes” to learning about the death of a family member on Facebook and what should happen to a person’s Facebook profile after he or she dies, $\chi^2(3, N = 60) = 33.60, p = .001, V = .355$. Specifically, 48.3% of participants who learned about the death of a family member on Facebook believed when a person dies, the Facebook account should remain on Facebook but only be accessed by Facebook friends, and 38.4% of participants said that the account should be deleted. In a second chi-square goodness of fit analysis, there was a significant association found between people who had not learned about the death of a family member on Facebook and what should happen to a person’s profile after he or she dies, $\chi^2(4, N = 181) = 85.72, p = .001, V = .206$. Specifically, out of the people who did not learn about the death of a family member on Facebook, 24.9% said that the account should remain on Facebook but only accessible to Facebook friends of the deceased and 42.0% said that in this case the Facebook profile should be deleted. Therefore, it was found that people who had reported learning about the death of a family member on Facebook were more likely to report that a deceased’s Facebook account should remain on Facebook but only be accessed by Facebook friends (48.3%) than participants who reported never learning about the death of a family member on Facebook (24.9%). There was no significant relationship found between people who reported learning about the death of a friend on

Facebook and their opinion on what should happen to a deceased's Facebook profile,
 $\chi^2(4, N = 240) = 5.63, p = .229, V = .023$.

Table 4

Reported Activity While Visiting Facebook Memorial Groups

Activity	% yes responses
Look at pictures of the deceased	69.6
'Like' pictures of the deceased	21.2
Look at the profiles of other group members	21.2
Comment on pictures of the deceased	14.4
Post messages to the deceased	14.0
Post pictures	8.4
Post song lyrics	4.0
Post religious saying/quotes	3.2
Post poetry	2.8
Other	5.6

Table 7 displays participants' responses regarding how they felt after visiting a Facebook memorial group or page. Results indicated that 49.6% reported feeling sad and 31.2% reported feeling neutral. Responses of "other" included, "happy to see the person's life being remembered," "sometimes indifferent, and sometimes annoyed,"

“sometimes people post private thoughts and feelings. I sometimes wonder if some of the posts shouldn't be public,” and “I find them morbid so uncomfortable.”

Table 5

Action for Deceased's Facebook Profile

Action	% yes responses
Account should be deleted	40.9
Account should remain on Facebook and only visited by friends	31.0
Family member should manage the account	10.3
Friend should manage the account	0.4
Undecided	17.4

Participants' responses regarding the purpose of Facebook memorial groups and pages can be seen in Table 8. Results indicated that most of the participants (71.6%) reported that the purpose of Facebook memorial groups and pages was to remember the life of the deceased person. Other popular responses were sending condolences to the family of the deceased (61.2%) and to feel connected to others who are grieving (55.6%). Responses of other included, “I am not sure”, “if I ever had an opportunity to join one”, “because a family member invited me to join and I felt it would hurt their feeling not to”, “I hate using Facebook for all those reasons, and I do not do it myself, but I know others who do”, “some people look for attention”, “many people view the pages to be nosey and look at comments other people may be leaving”, and “these answers are only reasons I

assume ppl (*sic*) use them. I responded this way since I don't like them myself. My personal (*sic*) preference is to grieve in private.”

Table 6

Action on Deceased’s Facebook Profile and Learning of Death of a Family Member on Facebook.

Count of learned of death of family member on Facebook			
Action	Yes	No	Total
Family member should manage account	3	22	25
Friend should manage account	0	1	1
Account should be deleted	23	76	99
Only able to be visited by Facebook Friends	29	45	74
Undecided	5	37	42
Total	60	181	241

Participants reported viewing other forms of online memorialization (seen in Table 9). Results indicated that most of the participants (72.4%) have viewed funeral homes’ online obituaries or guestbook. The option “other” was endorsed by 4.8% of the participants and included, “none”, “Facebook”, “my uncles (*sic*) memorial was streamed to us from Alberta so we could be part of it”, and “personal website/blog of family and friends of the deceased.”

Table 7

Emotions after Visiting a Facebook Memorial Group or Page

Emotion	% yes responses
Sad	49.6
Neutral	31.2
Connected to the deceased	20.4
Connected to others	18.4
Content	9.6
Frustrated	8.4
Happy	5.6
Angry	4.8
Relieved	2.8
Other	1.6

Table 10 shows participants' responses regarding the interpretation of 'liking' a Facebook memorial page. Most of the participants (65.3%) reported that 'liking' a Facebook memorial page meant supporting the family and friends of the deceased. Table 11 depicts participants' responses about when is it most appropriate to create a Facebook memorial group or page. Responses were varied, but the most popular response was that it is appropriate to create a Facebook memorial group or page at any time (32.6%). Also,

78.5% of participants reported that Facebook memorial groups should be private and 21.5% reported that they should be public.

Table 8

Purpose of Facebook Memorial Groups and Pages

Purpose	% yes responses
To remember the life of the deceased	71.6
To send condolences to the family of the deceased	61.2
To feel connected to others who are grieving	55.6
To get support from group members	44.8
To help in the grieving process	40.0
To feel connected to the deceased	27.2
To leave messages for the deceased	25.2
To say my final goodbyes to the deceased	21.2
To post relevant information to help others	20.0
To post funeral information	18.8
To share my relationship with the deceased with others	16.8
To get sympathy	11.2
To stay focused on grief/sadness	4.4
To observe the misfortune of others	3.2
Other	3.2

Table 9

Other Forms of Online Memorialization Viewed

Memorialization	% yes responses
Funeral homes' online obituaries or guestbook	72.4
Twitter memorial accounts	3.2
Virtual cemeteries	2.4
MySpace memorial websites	0.8
Other	4.8

Table 10

Interpretation of 'Like' on a Facebook Memorial Page

Interpretation	% yes responses
Supporting the family and friends of the deceased	65.3
Showing respect for the deceased	22.2
Showing the importance of the deceased	7.1
Being disrespectful towards the deceased and his/her family and friends	5.3

Table 11

Most Appropriate Time to Create a Facebook Memorial Group or Page

Time	% yes responses
At any time	32.6
Within the first week of death	22.0
Within a month after death	19.8
Within six months after death	4.8
Immediately after the death	3.1
A year or longer after death	1.3
Facebook memorial groups and pages should not be created	16.3

Likert scales were used to assess participants' level of agreement on various statements related to Facebook memorial groups and pages. The scales ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Participants indicated that they somewhat agreed that Facebook memorial groups can be helpful to people who are grieving ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.81$). They tended to feel neutral about the appropriateness of writing direct posts to the deceased on a Facebook group or page ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.10$). Participants clearly felt it was unacceptable to post on a Facebook memorial group or page to ask about the cause of death ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 0.78$). Furthermore, participants indicated that they felt somewhat neutral about the statement that a person should only post on a Facebook memorial page if he or she had a close relationship with the deceased ($M =$

3.27, $SD = 1.01$). Each of the four statements was analyzed for gender and bereavement status by separate independent measures t -tests, applying a Bonferroni correction ($p = .005$). There were no significant differences found.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence, roles, and perceptions of Facebook memorial groups and pages. Almost all of the participants reported that they used Facebook and logged in more than once a day for a total average of 2 hours. A high percentage of participants reported joining a Facebook memorial group or page and most of these participants said that they visited these memorials less than once a month. There were two main themes for using Facebook memorial groups and pages; to remember the deceased and to obtain and give support in the grieving experience.

Remembrance of the deceased was the most reported purpose for Facebook memorial groups and pages (71.6%). Facebook gives individuals the opportunity to visually reflect on their relationship with the deceased through their online presence (Williams & Merten, 2009). This type of activity was endorsed by the majority of the participants in the current study, indicating that they looked at pictures of the deceased while visiting Facebook memorial groups and pages as well as 'liked' and commented on pictures of the deceased. One quarter of the participants in this study focused on the theme of ongoing connection with the deceased as a purpose of Facebook memorial groups and pages. This was similar to previous research that suggested web memorials allowed the bereaved to re-establish an inner relationship with the deceased (Burbaker et al., 2013; DeGroot, 2014). Facebook memorial groups and pages can facilitate this sense of ongoing connection with the deceased as they view pictures, leave messages, and in the case of a memorialized Facebook profile, look at old messages and posts written by the deceased. From these results, there is evidence that Facebook memorial groups and pages have a role to play in the difficult relationship transition from a physical to an

internal representation of the deceased. As well, 21.2% of participants reported that the purpose of Facebook memorial groups and pages were to say final goodbyes to the deceased. This finding may indicate that Facebook memorial groups and pages gives the opportunity for the bereaved to express thoughts and emotions that were left unfinished as a result of the death. Furthermore, previous research by Carroll and Landry (2010) found that 14% of grieving people changed their own Facebook profile picture to a picture of the deceased or a memorial image representing the deceased. In this study, almost half of the participants reported this type of Facebook behaviour, which may indicate its increasing popularity.

It was found that a quarter of participants reported learning about the death of a family member on Facebook and over half the participants reported learning about the death of a friend on Facebook. These findings show that it is not uncommon to learn about the death of a friend or family member on Facebook. Furthermore, in the current study, there was a significant relationship between learning about the death of a family member on Facebook and opinion on a deceased's Facebook profile. People who had learned about the death of a family member on Facebook were more likely to believe that the deceased's Facebook account should remain on Facebook but only be accessed by Facebook friends than participants who did not learn about the death of a family member on Facebook. Perhaps the reason for this could be because those who were informed about the death of a family member on Facebook may be much more connected to online activity in this domain and may feel more inclined to visit the deceased Facebook profile than someone who did not have this experience. This form of information being exchanged online is very different than how it was traditionally shared. Traditionally,

learning about the death of a family member was done through a face-to-face encounter or direct conversation. These results are an indication that communication of a death is taking a more technological form.

The majority of participants reported visiting Facebook memorial groups and pages alone, rather than with others. This finding is in contrast to Roberts (2004), who found that people often visited online memorials while in the presence of others so they could share memories both virtually and in person. While the current finding is in contrast to the previous literature, perhaps this is due to the type of website used by participants. On Facebook, everyone has their own profile so it is more convenient to visit Facebook memorial groups and pages privately, whereas in Roberts' study the online memorials were cyber cemeteries and online guestbooks. Ljepava, Orr, Locke, and Ross (2013) found that people who use Facebook reported having more intimate friendships than non-users, which contributed to a feeling of closeness to friends both online and offline. In the current study, Facebook memorial visitors may have felt they had close friends online within the Facebook groups, so they did not feel the need to visit the memorial groups and pages with others.

The second common theme regarding the role of Facebook memorial groups and pages was receiving and giving support in the grief experience. Participants reported that Facebook memorial groups were used to look at the profiles of other group members. This online behaviour is not uncommon for people who are grieving. Roberts (2004) found that half of the participants reported contacting 20 or more people who wrote messages on the online memorial guestbook, and almost all of the participants reported visiting online memorials besides their own. By looking at the profiles of other group

members, it may provide people who are grieving with an opportunity to generate new online support by finding others who are going through a similar experience.

Furthermore, in the current study, when asked about the purpose of Facebook memorial groups and pages, participants reported to obtain support from others, such as to feel connected to others who are grieving (61.2%), to get support from group members (44.8%), and to help in the grieving process (40.0%). These findings were consistent with Carroll and Landry (2010) that Facebook memorial groups and pages offer a community where people can grieve with others and see the grief of others to identify their own grief. It appears that the needs for support and understanding for the bereft are at least potentially being met through online activity.

Almost all the participants indicated that a 'like' on a Facebook memorial page was a positive action to show respect for the deceased, to show the importance of the deceased, or to support the family and friends of the deceased; 'like' was not interpreted as disrespectful. Since research on 'liking' Facebook memorial pages is limited, it is possible that the negative perceptions that were indicated by participants in Marwick and Ellison's (2012) study regarding this activity may have changed over time. Perhaps, since 2012, Facebook memorial groups and pages are a more common occurrence and people may be becoming more accustomed to the 'liking' of Facebook memorial pages.

Some participants reported that the purpose of Facebook memorial groups and pages are for posting information for the public, such as relevant information to help others (20.0%), and to post funeral information (18.8%). Information for others can be important on particular types of online memorials such as in the case of a suicide. Also, the posting of funeral information is fast and easily shared on a Facebook memorial

group or page because people who are members of the group or ‘like’ the page may be interested in going to the funeral of the deceased individual. Sending condolences is another way people use Facebook memorial groups and pages, which can be beneficial for people who live far away and cannot do this in person or if they did not feel they knew the deceased well enough to speak to the family directly. This is another way that Facebook memorials are changing the way people have traditionally expressed condolences and shared information after the death of an individual. Traditional condolences were given in a face-to-face interaction or a sympathy card, which may be seen as more personal. Although these traditional methods still occur, Facebook memorials may potentially replace or minimize face-to-face condolences in the future.

Previous research noted that the majority of online memorials were created for men rather than women, and had been created more often by women than by men (Roberts & Vidal, 2000; Vries & Rutherford, 2004). The current study found that Facebook memorials were equally created for men and women; however, consistent with the previous results, more women reported creating Facebook memorials than men. In a more recent study, Klaassens and Bijlsma (2014) found similar results to the current study that the majority of web memorials were created by bereaved women, and the percentage of males memorialized was only slightly higher than females. Further, Klaassens and Bijlsma found that the younger the age of the deceased and the suddenness of the death (e.g., traffic accident, suicide, and murder), the more likely a person was to have a web memorial created for him or her. Also, the closer the relationship of the creator to the deceased the more likely a web memorial would be created. Klaassens and Bijlsma also found that the majority of web memorials were created within the first year

after the death. The participants in the current study, did not indicate a specific timeframe as to when a memorial pages should be created, rather they indicated that it would be appropriate any time.

A quarter of the participants reported seeing trolling behaviour on a Facebook memorial page, however no participants reported engaging in trolling themselves. In a study examining social networking memorial pages, Marwick and Ellison (2012) reported that trolling occurred on Facebook memorial pages and it was usually dealt with by blocking the profiles, deleting the comments, and reporting the trolls. While trolling behaviour has been previously acknowledged, the current study is the first to document its prevalence on Facebook memorial pages. While no participants reported engaging in trolling behaviours themselves, there may likely be a significant social desirability response bias present. The majority of the participants did report visiting Facebook memorial groups and pages without posting on the wall. In DeGroot's (2014) study, this behaviour was referred to as lurking; visiting and reading messages on online memorials without leaving any evidence that the memorial was visited. Perhaps this is a more common occurrence on Facebook memorial groups and pages than on web memorials, as was examined by DeGroot. Facebook memorial groups and pages are usually more publicized on the profiles of Facebook friends and quickly accessible by others, if there are no privacy settings. By looking on their newsfeed people can see the activity of their Facebook friends on Facebook memorial groups or pages and may be inclined to go to the group or page out of a sense of curiosity and ease of access. Due to the fact that the majority of participants reported lurking (97.1%), no significant results could be found between lurking behaviour and opinion regarding posting on a Facebook memorial wall

only if an individual was close to the deceased. However, this still may be an important factor for understanding the decision of a person to post or not. This finding is consistent with Roberts (2004) where 98% of participants reported visiting memorial pages of people they did not know. In the current study, there was a rating of neutral on the statement about people should only post on a Facebook memorial group or page if they had a close relationship with the deceased. Perhaps this means that people did not agree or disagree with emotional rubbernecking since it was reported in this study that people do not need to have a close relationship with the deceased to post on a Facebook memorial group or page.

There were limitations to consider in this study. Overall, gender differences could not be assessed accurately due to the small number of men who participated in the study. Further research should be conducted to assess gender differences regarding the use and perceptions of Facebook memorial groups and pages, as even with the greatly unequal number of men and women a gender difference was discovered. Also, there was the possibility of a selection bias, as those who responded to the questionnaire may have been more likely to use or to have knowledge about Facebook memorial groups and pages.

Future research in this area could explore the use of Facebook memorials as a form of mutual-help for people who are grieving. This may involve creating, visiting, and maintaining a Facebook memorial group or page dedicated to the deceased. From the current study, it appears that participants used Facebook memorials to remember the deceased, but also to connect with other people and to gain support. Understanding of

how this type of support compares to people without online support would be a useful investigation.

In conclusion, the results of this study show that the use of Facebook memorial groups and pages is a common activity that is evidently changing the way people communicate about death and express of grief. Overall, the two main uses of Facebook memorial groups and pages were to remember the deceased and facilitate an ongoing connection, and to gain support during the grieving process. Further exploration is needed regarding the potential of Facebook memorial groups and pages to change communication about death such as the learning about the death of a loved one on Facebook or avoiding a face-to-face expression of condolence to the family and friends of a deceased person. This study offered a greater understanding of how Facebook memorial groups and pages are used and perceived; a necessary component in an ongoing exploration of how online memorialization is impacting the grief experience.

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Appendix

Informed Consent

This is a study on perceptions of Facebook memorial groups and pages. It is being conducted by Holly Kelly as part of requirements of a psychology honours thesis, under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Buckle, Psychology Program, Grenfell Campus. By participating in this study, your consent is assumed, and it is also assumed that you are 19 years old or older. It will take approximately 5 minutes to complete the questionnaire. There are no obvious risks or benefits associated with this study. No IP addresses will be collected and your responses are anonymous and confidential. The information obtained in this study will be analyzed on a group basis, therefore individual responses will not be available or identified. The results of this study will be presented, used to write an honours thesis, and may be published in the future. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to stop participating at any time prior to finishing the questionnaire. If you have any questions or concerns about the study or if you are interested in receiving results of this research, please contact Holly Kelly at hkelly@grenfell.mun.ca or Dr. Jennifer Buckle at 639-6524 or jlbuckle@grenfell.mun.ca. If you would like to hear a presentation of the results of this study, you are invited to attend the Psychology Student Research Conference at Grenfell Campus Memorial University of Newfoundland at the end of the winter 2014 term. If this study raises any concerns of a personal nature, please contact the toll free, 24 hour adult Mental Health Crisis Line: (709) 777-3200 or 1-888-737-4668.

By clicking “Next” you are consenting to participate in the study.

Perceptions of Facebook Memorial Groups and Pages

Please answer the questions that are based on the following definitions:

Facebook Page: a public profile created for individuals, businesses, and causes. Pages can be 'liked' and they are publically visible to all Facebook and internet users.

Facebook Groups: a community of people online who share and discuss a topic of common interest. Groups can be public or private (invite only).

1. Do you use Facebook? (If no, please go to question number 19)
 Yes No

2. Estimate the number of Facebook friends you currently have: _____

3. How often do you log into Facebook? (check only one)
 More than once a day
 Once a day only
 More than once a week
 Once a week only
 More than once a month
 Once a month only
 I have a profile, but I never login or use it

4. Estimate the number of hours a day you spend on Facebook: _____

5. Have you ever learned about the death of a family member through Facebook?
 Yes No

6. Have you ever learned about the death of a friend through Facebook?
 Yes No

7. What should happen to a person's Facebook profile after they die? (check only one)

- Family member should manage the account
- Friend should manage the account
- Account should be deleted
- Account should remain on Facebook and only visited by Facebook friends of the deceased
- Undecided

8. Have you ever joined a Facebook memorial group?

- Yes
- No

9. Have you ever changed your Facebook profile picture to (check all that apply):

- A picture of yourself with a person who died
- A picture of a person who died
- A group picture including a person who died
- A picture of an object that represents a person who died
- Other (please specify) _____
- I have never changed my Facebook profile picture in this way.

10. Have you ever created a Facebook memorial group or page?(If no, please go to question number 12)

- Yes
- No

11. If yes, what was the gender of the person being memorialized? _____

12. I visit Facebook memorial groups or pages (check only one):

- When alone
- With other

13. How often do you visit Facebook memorial groups or pages? (check only one)

- More than once a day
- Once a day only
- More than once a week
- Once a week only
- More than once a month
- Once a month only
- Less than once a month
- I have never visited a Facebook memorial group or page (if selected, please go to question 19)

14. While visiting Facebook memorial groups do you do any of the following? (check all that apply)

- Look at pictures of the deceased
- 'Like' pictures of the deceased
- Comment on pictures of the deceased
- Post pictures
- Post messages to the deceased
- Post song lyrics
- Post poetry
- Post religious sayings/quotes
- Look at the profiles of other group members
- Other (please specify) _____

15. Have you seen trolling behaviour (posting comments/photos on Facebook walls to irritate others) on a Facebook memorial page?

- Yes
- No

16. Have you trolled a Facebook memorial page?

- Yes
- No

17. Have you ever visited a Facebook memorial group or page without posting on the wall?

- Yes
- No

18. How do you feel after visiting a Facebook memorial group or page? (check all that apply)

- Angry
- Frustrated
- Relieved
- Sad
- Neutral
- Happy
- Content
- Connected to others
- Connected to the deceased
- Other (please specify) _____

19. The purpose of Facebook memorial groups and pages is (check all that apply):

- To get support from group members
- To feel connected to others who are grieving
- To post funeral information
- To post relevant information to help others
- To send condolences to the family of the deceased
- To share my relationship with the deceased with others
- To remember the life of the deceased person
- To leave messages for the deceased
- To feel connected to the deceased
- To say my final goodbyes to the deceased
- To get sympathy
- To help in the grieving process
- To stay focused on grief/sadness
- To observe the misfortune of others
- Other (please specify) _____

20. What other forms of online memorialisation have you viewed? (check all that apply)

- MySpace memorial websites (MyDeathSpace.com)
- Twitter memorial accounts
- Virtual cemeteries
- Funeral homes' online obituaries or guestbook
- Other (please specify) _____

21. If you 'like' a Facebook memorial page it means you are (check only one):

- Showing respect for the deceased
- Showing the importance of the deceased
- Supporting the family and friends of the deceased
- Being disrespectful towards the deceased and his or her family and friends

22. It is most appropriate to create a Facebook memorial group and page (check only one):

- Immediately after the death
- Within the first week of the death
- Within a month after death
- Within six months after death
- A year or longer after the death
- At any time
- Facebook memorial groups and pages should not be created

23. Facebook memorial groups should be (check only one):

- Public
- Private

Please circle the number to represent your opinion on the following statements.

24. Facebook memorial groups can be helpful to people who are grieving.

- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |

25. It is appropriate for an individual to write a post directly to the deceased on a Facebook memorial group or page. (For example, “Sally got a 100% on her math test. I know you would be very proud.”)

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

26. It is acceptable to post on a Facebook memorial group or page to ask others about the cause of death.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

27. A person should only post on Facebook memorial page if he or she had a close relationship with the deceased.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Demographics

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Are you currently grieving the death of someone important to you?

Yes No

Thank-you for your participation.