SEVEN PARTICIPANTS’ FACEBOOK EXPERIENCES OF LOSS & MOURNING

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Abstract

Social media, and for many, specifically, Facebook, has emerged as an integral part of daily routine and is often the primary medium for sharing news with one’s community. With the emergence of this technologically integrated social lifestyle, research is needed to elucidate the ways in which individuals and communities are impacted. While numerous questions of sociological and psychological impact emerge, the purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of mourning and bereavement on Facebook. Four research questions were posed to assist in understanding this emergent phenomenon: (a) how has social media, specifically Facebook, impacted the mourning process within the first 13 to 14 months of the loss; (b) what was the lived experience of utilizing Facebook to mourn; (c) was there a perceived pressure or expectation to mourn publically on Facebook; and (d) what were, if any, unexpected outcomes or experiences from mourning through Facebook. The method used for this study was a qualitative phenomenological multiple case study with a constructivist philosophical worldview employing interviews, surveys, and live-document analysis. One male and six female participants, ranging in age from 27 to 38, qualified for the study. Four significant themes emerged from the data: (a) Facebook as a community grief support; (b) Facebook as external, active mourning; (c) Facebook as a means of self-presentation in grief; and (d) negative outcomes of Facebook use with grief. Three conclusions were derived from the findings. First, Facebook had a positive impact on mourning because it reduced isolation, increased connection to support, and allowed grievers to receive instant feedback validating their experience. Second, Facebook allowed participants to disseminate information about the loss, ranging from specifics about the death to details about the
memorial service. Third, Facebook provided participants an avenue to be more vulnerable about the mourning experience without dealing with social cues present in face-to-face interactions.

*Keywords: grief, Facebook mourning, social networking sites, meaning-making*
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Dedication

In loving memory of my brother, Garrett Douglas Taylor, who through the experience of losing him, motivated me to pursue helping others find peace in their unique grief. For my beautiful son, Miles Douglas, with the hope that he knows he is worth finishing anything he starts. And in honor of all those I loved and lost along the way…
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Chapter One

I wake up in the morning, turn off my cellphone alarm, and log in to Facebook to check what has filled my newsfeed in the six hours since I last checked. I start to get ready for my day and periodically check Facebook again to see if there are any new friend photos or silly cat videos. I make it to work and notice that someone has “liked” my recent profile picture change honoring my brother who would have turned 30 a few days ago. I continue to check Facebook throughout my busy day to see how my “friends” fill their busy days. This routine is repeated daily. Wake up, check Facebook, get ready for work, check Facebook, go to work, check Facebook, etc. According to Statisticbrain.com (2017), this is a pattern followed by over 80% of American adults today.

Social networking sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, etc., emerged in the late 1990s (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006). While many sites for social networking exist, Facebook is currently the most frequently used and subscribed to social networking site worldwide (Bennett, 2014). Other sites such as MySpace, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram have high user statistics, but Facebook remains the leading social media site (Bennett, 2014; Hartung, 2011). Facebook, established in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, was created to fill a need for social accessibility within a university campus (Ellison et al., 2006). Facebook allows users to create an online profile reflecting who they are, accrue friends, comment on friends’ pages, and post pictures, thus creating an online social network and community of friends (Ellison et al., 2006).

Many Facebook users report on the daily aspects of life through their Facebook posts and status updates. Others have chosen to use it as a medium to share significant
life events, such as relationship status changes (e.g., marriage, divorce, engagement, “it’s complicated”), holidays, anniversaries, births, and deaths (Ellison et al., 2006). Facebook has become a platform for people to share funny videos and inspirational quotes, advocate for social causes, unify over current events, voice political leanings, and even sell merchandise. While many people use it for entertainment and learning about people they went to high school with, others use it for significant social support, particularly during times of loss. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary online, death is the ending of a particular person’s life, the permanent cessation of all of one’s vital functions (Death, 2014). In 2015, there were over 2.7 million deaths in the United States (Xu, Murphy, Kochanek, & Arias, 2016). Death often results in the process of grief which is experienced by the loved ones and family members.

With over 1.28 billion worldwide users on a daily basis, it would make sense that individuals experiencing grief would connect to their Facebook page to post about their loss, look at their loved one’s profile, or create a memorial page for their loved one (Facebook, 2017a; Facebook, 2017b; Noyes, 2014; Smith, 2014; Statista, 2017). The emergent trend of utilizing Facebook as an outlet for grief has started to become a topic for study. Through sharing one’s loss on Facebook, one engages in the process of mourning. Researchers are exploring usage frequency among age groups, linguistic variables expressed on Facebook, and users utilizing Facebook to access or be connected to other grievers and even the deceased (Abraham, 2007; Bell, Bailey, & Kennedy, 2015; Bouc, Han, & Pennington, 2016; Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013; Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Brubaker & Vertesi, 2010; Buck, 2013; Carroll & Landry, 2010; DeGroot, 2008; DeGroot, 2012; Fearon, 2011; Frost, 2014; Getty et al., 2011; Hieft, 2012; Kaleem, 2012;
Grief is an individual, subjective experience that is currently being shared in public, online forums such as Facebook. Many studies have done preliminary explorations of the impact Facebook’s predecessor, MySpace, had on grief (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Brubaker, Kivran-Swaine, Taber, & Hayes, 2011; Odom, Harper, Sellen, Kirk, & Banks, 2010; Roberts, 2006). While the research on grief via MySpace is a start, there is a gap in research targeting whether Facebook, specially, impacts the active mourning process over time for grievers. Facebook provides a unique opportunity and location for anyone who knew the deceased to connect with other grievers as well as allow the griever to connect with the deceased (Degroot, 2008). The intention of this study is two-fold: 1) to explore the lived experience of individual grievers who engage in active mourning through online social media, specifically Facebook, and 2) to understand the users’ impressions toward Facebook as a medium for mourning. This will be accomplished by conducting a phenomenological, multiple case study aimed at exploring the lived experience of seven to ten participants. The selected participants will have experienced a significant loss (e.g., parent, child, spouse, sibling) between two and five years prior to the study, and will be currently and actively using Facebook, though they may or may not be using it for mourning purposes.

Definition of Key Terms

Prior to reading the following literature review, the definitions of key terms and concepts will be provided.
Bereavement. “Bereavement is an event that relates to the loss of a loved one through death. Bereavement refers to the face, the event, without implying an emotional state” (Mallon, 2008, p. 152).

Facebook. “Facebook is a free social networking site that allows registered users to create profiles, upload photos and video, send messages and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues” (Rouse, 2014, p. 1).

Grief. “Grief encompasses a broad range of feelings and behaviors that are common after a loss…such as somatic or bodily distress of some type, preoccupation with the image of the deceased, guilt relating to the deceased or circumstances of death, hostile reactions, and the inability to function as one had before the loss” (Worden, 1982, pp. 19-20). “Grief is the personal experience of loss” (Worden, 1982, p. 31). “Grief refers to the process of experiencing the psychological, social and physical reactions to your perceptions of loss” (Rando, 1988, p. 11).

Mourning. “Mourning is the process which occurs after a loss that may occur in stages” (Worden, 1982, p. 31). “It is the expression of deep sorrow for someone, typically involving some convention to honor the person, such as wearing black clothing, it is an outward expression of an internal experience” (Death, 2014). “It is the formal practices of an individual or group after a death” (Mallon, 2008, p. 155).

Social networking sites (SNS). “[W]eb-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 2).
Literature Review

In this section, the research literature on grief and bereavement, online social media, including information on privacy and user types, and the intersection of the two topics is reviewed. This information is important to providing context, history, and definitions for the study. Empirical studies were utilized to demonstrate a lack of research into the impact of Facebook when being used with individuals experiencing grief and the process of mourning.

Bereavement. Corr, Nabe, and Corr (1997) stated, “Death, dying and bereavement are all ultimately lived out in individual ways. But death, dying and bereavement also teach individuals about the human community and universal needs that apply to all” (p. 17). People continue to find ways to connect with and continue loving the deceased even after they have passed on (DeGroot, 2008). These can be in both formal and/or informal ways. The aim of this section is to understand the impact of death, the terms bereavement, grief and mourning, and the current theories around these concepts and healing from loss.

According to Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe, and Schut (2001), bereavement is “the objective situation of having lost someone significant that is associated with intense distress” (p. 6). The researchers proceeded to distinguish the different terminology used within the realm of bereavement. Grief is defined as the emotional reaction to the loss of a loved one through death that is experienced through psychosocial, emotional, psychological and physical manifestations (Rosenblatt, 1996; Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001). James and Friedman (2009) described grief as the “normal and natural reaction to the loss” (p. 3). The action of grief is mourning, whereby an individual utilizes
social expression or acts of “expressive grief” (p. 6) that are influenced and determined by the culture and society of the individual (Stroebe et al., 2001). Rosenblatt (2001) described the process of the newly bereaved being shaped by the culture to which they belong and how individuals can be influenced into believing they should think, feel, or mourn in the socially modeled way. Graves (2009) explained these three terms as being separate but interconnected in that a bereaved person may grieve (experience the emotion) but not mourn (social experience or response), and vice versa; a bereaved person may mourn (show up to the funeral) but not grieve (experience feelings). While every loss is unique, it is important to understand how people make meaning from the loss for themselves. This is what leads to action, intentionality, integration, and healing for the individual.

Bowlby (1980) discussed the role of attachment formed in relationships and stated that it perpetuates a need for security and safety. When a loss occurs, an individual may experience an intense reaction and an almost universal attempt is made to regain what was lost. Bowlby’s (1980) view of grief conceptualized it as a severe form of separation anxiety thus motivating in the grieving person a desire to be close in proximity to the departed (Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen, & Stroebe, 1996). There is a history of clinicians seeking a way to conceptualize the process of grief in a way for people to understand. These efforts largely started with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. In her first work, On Death and Dying, Kubler-Ross (1969) discussed her proposed five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Individuals make the mistake of thinking that these five stages happen in the order discussed, and that it is possible to move in a straight line through the phases and then be done grieving (Kollar, 1989; Lofland, 1982;
Oates, 2003; Parkes, 1988). However, she readdressed the misapplication of her works in a subsequent book, *On Grief and Grieving*, when she stated:

> They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is no typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives. The five stages – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – are part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost. (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 7)

This clarification created a shift in the perception of the straight-line process type of bereavement toward a dual-process model of working through bereavement as the different stages come, and possibly experiencing various stages multiple times. Worden (1982) developed four tasks of mourning to explain the role of the mourner and the intentional action steps that need to be taken for healing to occur. In his work, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, Worden (1982) explained the four tasks of mourning: “1) accept the reality of the loss, 2) experience the pain of grief, 3) adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing, and 4) withdraw emotional energy and reinvest in another relationship” (pp. 28-32). Other clinicians also created varied interpretations of Kubler-Ross’s original stages. Parkes (1988) created another interpretation of the four phases of mourning: numbness, yearning, disorganization and depression, and reorganized behavior. Dr. Therese Rando (1984) created the framework of three phases of mourning – avoidance, confrontation and accommodation. Rando (1993) expanded on these three concepts to be her current grief model, the “six Rs” process of mourning:
recognize the loss, react to the separation, recollect and re-experience; relinquish old attachments, readjust, and reinvest.

Meaning-making is a concept that was created by Robert Neimeyer (2001). It encapsulated how an individual seeks meaning in life from the practical to relational to spiritual surrounding the death of a loved one, how individuals adjust to the loss, and who they choose to become after the loss. One way to do meaning-making work is to create and execute rituals around the loss. Rituals are “patterns of activities, both social and personal, that enter into every aspect of our lives” (Kollar, 1989, p. 272). Many rituals are symbolically traditional in the realm of bereavement from memorial services to obituaries to the spreading of the deceased’s ashes (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). The authors further studied bereavement rituals and that many consider them to be one-time events and fail to realize that grief is a process that takes time (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). Reid and Reid (2001) studied the phenomena of roadside memorials in Texas and Oklahoma. The authors found that frequent visits were made to the sites but not from a motivation of public awareness. The frequent visits occurred as those who were grieving wanted to feel close to the loved one who had passed. These rituals help the bereaved personally make meaning around the loss and express emotions in a health way. The purpose of meaning-making is to find a ritual that assists the grievers in moving toward the tasks of mourning and healing. Meaning can be framed rituals as well as cognitions, cultural practices, interpersonal conversations, and language (Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002).

Worden (1982) called mourning the healing process that occurs after the loss, and the time taken for an individual to reacquire balance. The balance is achieved through
concept of dual processing (Neimeyer, 2001). The Dual-Processing Model aids in bereavement by encouraging the griever to oscillate between loss-oriented work and restoration-oriented work (Stroebe & Schut, 2001; Worden, 1982). Loss-oriented work is focused on the deceased, where the individual allows himself or herself to feel, to process, to participate in healing rituals or to work on the tasks of mourning. Restoration-oriented work is when the individual takes a break from the tasks of mourning and focuses on integrating things that are life-giving or joy-filled. The oscillation between these two activities is shown to make a difference in the bereavement healing process (Stroebe & Schut, 2001).

When discussing bereavement and death, Walter (1999) stated that “bereavement through death is inevitably social as well as psychological” (p. 20). He meant that not only does the grieving individual have to work through the bereavement process for themselves, but is also something that must be processed as it relates to their social surroundings. After a death, the absence of that person can create changes in social structures, interactions, and relationships. There is a need for integration of new roles within the grieving person’s social sphere. While grief is subjective and individual, it impacts the social aspects of the individuals that are experiencing it.

Klass and Walter (2001) studied the human need to continue interactions with individuals who are deceased. For the majority of the 21st century, Westerners were told to sever ties with the deceased and move on. However, the research of Klass and Walter (2001) validated the practice of maintaining connections with loved ones who have died rather than severing the bonds and attachments. With this cognitive shift in realizing the need for humans to continue bonds with their deceased loved ones, what role does
Facebook play? Additionally, news of an individual dying used to be delivered via telegram, telephone, or in-person. With the emergence of online social networking sites, how does that change? What is the potential impact it may have? How does one mourn in this new era?

**Online social networking.** Social networks consist of people with whom a relationship is shared, whether they are friends, family, co-workers, church members, or others (Golder, Wilkinson, & Huberman, 2006). With the emergence of the Internet, social networks that once were only face-to-face have transitioned into the online realm. Social networking sites (SNSs) began after the first wave of Internet community websites emerged in 1997 (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison et al., 2006; Thelwall & Wilkinson, 2010). These are sites that created platforms for “individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others” (Ellison et al., 2006, p. 3; Thelwall & Wilkinson, 2010). They had a variety of contexts for both personal and professional social circles. Thelwall and Wilkinson (2010) discussed the emergence of “social grooming” where the development of friendships over SNSs through gossip or other activities assisted in the building of trusting relationships that could be helpful in challenging seasons in the future (p. 394). SNSs made long-distance communication and relationship maintenance possible, and provided opportunities for social learning principles through social information gathering (Thelwall & Wilkinson, 2010). SNSs created a disembodiment effect where individuals posted online more freely without fear of judgment due to reduced face-to-face interaction (Kang, 2007). This was able to occur as SNSs are a system built on direct communication without traditional non-verbal cues that dominate offline communication.
(Patterson, 1982). Hancock, Landrigan and Silver (2007) studied the impact of text-based communication on emotion expression and the ability to interpret verbal cues. The authors found that individuals were able to adapt their emotional expression to the text-based communication environment, meaning the participants were able to pick up on verbal cues despite the lack of face-to-face cues such as verbal tone.

Before Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, or Twitter, there were basic online social networks that allowed people to congregate online for a variety of reasons. For the purpose of this literature review, the focus will be on web (Internet) memorials and support groups, specifically bereavement support groups. Chapple & Ziebland (2011) studied the impact of Internet support groups on griever in the United Kingdom (UK) who had lost a loved one to suicide. The researchers reported that individuals who used the Internet support groups felt it was helpful as it reduced feelings of isolation and allowed them to find validation in their experiences by hearing of others who had similar loss experiences. A study conducted by van der Houwen, Stroebe, Schut, Stroebe, and van den Bout (2010) recruited 253 participants to complete questionnaires. Participants were then randomly assigned to the control group or the mutual bereavement support group. The aim of the study was to explore potential negative aspects from being involved in online support groups. The findings from the study showed that the participants from both groups had no real mental health changes over time (van der Houwen, Stroebe, Schut, Stroeve, & van den Bout, 2010). Roberts (2004) explored the creation of web-based memorials and their role in perpetuating relationship bonds and connectivity with the deceased. Most pages were addressed directly to the deceased with many visitors returning regularly. These sites helped create active bereavement
communities that provided support. Vanderwerker and Prigerson (2003) investigated whether bereaved individuals were utilizing of online bereavement support groups. The researchers sampled 293 bereaved individuals and found that approximately half of the individuals utilized the Internet, cellphones, and email as methods of obtaining support in their bereavement.

The first SNS was SixDegrees.com. The website allowed users to create profiles and a friend list (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In 2002, Friendster was launched as a semi-dating site with the plan to help friends-of-friends meetup romantically. The site quickly gained support, but the system was unable to keep up with the usage demands due to the site’s popularity at the time (boyd & Ellison, 2007). After 2003, there was a continual influx of new social networking services. MySpace was launched in 2003 with the purpose to compete in the SNS world. It was a draw for musical bands and continued to strive to adapt to user demands, which made it a very competitive site (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Facebook launched in 2004 as a site for supporting college networks only. In 2006, Facebook began to expand their permissions for participation to be more in line with the same attitude as MySpace, of giving the users what they wanted. Since that time, SNSs have continued to progress and evolve; and as the connections facilitated by SNSs have grown, SNS platforms have become embedded in culture today (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

There are multiple current platforms for SNS including Snapchat, Twitter, Vine, Google Plus, Pinterest, MySpace, and Facebook, with new applications being developed daily. Prior to 2009, the main SNS platform was MySpace and it was used to start research on this emergent communication modality (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Brubaker,
et al., 2011; Carrol & Landry, 2010; Eler, 2012; Graves, 2009; Odom et al., 2010, Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Roberts, 2006; St. John, 2006). These studies explored the use of MySpace for communication, social support, and bereavement. The researchers reported similar findings to the studies that have been conducted using the Facebook platform. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, Facebook will be the focus of the literature review as that is the current leading social networking site (Bennett, 2014; Hartung, 2011).

At its inception, Facebook was unique in that it supported geographically bound communities of university students, but now has expanded to include anyone and everyone (Ellison et al., 2006; Facebook, 2014). Winerman (2013) found that people continue to use Facebook because it meets both the need to belong and the need for self-presentation. Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield (2008) studied patterns of Facebook use over time with college students and noted that usage was consistent with no drastic changes in usage. According to Smith (2014), users are becoming more vocal about things that are disliked about Facebook. For example, 36% of users dislike people who share too much information about themselves. Women primarily use Facebook to see photos and videos while men like sharing with many people at once (Smith, 2014). Joinson (2008) investigated how Facebook users receive gratification from usage and how that usage continued to grow over time.

Facebook is a SNS platform that serves many functions in online life ranging from social and emotional support to information resources to facilitating connections to other people. Based on recent data, Facebook averaged 1.28 billion daily active users in March of 2017 (Facebook, 2017). It is a place people spend time most days whether for
personal, organizational, or work-related functions. According to Lampe et al. (2008), it can serve as a surveillance tool for tracking individuals or social searching to learn about people. As the SNS culture continues to grow and expand, new challenges and abilities to connect will emerge.

**Facebook and grief.** “Humans do not simply live in proximity of one another. They link themselves to one another. They tie. They bond. They bind” (Lofland, 1982, p. 220). Lofland (1982) explored loss and the human connection, specifically how the social world is impacted when there is a loss. With the emergence of Facebook, individuals are closer to death stories than ever before. In Kastenbaum and Aisenberg’s (1972) *The Psychology of Death*, they discussed that we can still experience somebody’s presence even after they have passed. Before the Internet and Facebook, these researchers recognized that with greater global and societal integration, comes a lessened barrier to death. With the emergence of social media, there is greater awareness of death and the ability to access support for grief.

Gilbert and Massimi (2012) reported on the increase in Internet use for bereavement related activities, such as seeking social support, processing grief, working through tasks of mourning, and maintaining continuing relationship with the deceased through memorial websites and social media sites such as Facebook. Massami and Baecker (2010) studied the use of technology when processing grief. The authors found the most important part for the bereaved was to “reconcile the persisting digital representation of the deceased with the reality of their death” (Massami & Baecker, 2010, p. 1828). With the increased use of Facebook, a higher accessibility and ability to be instantly connected to grieving peers or the deceased is created (Bouc et al., 2016;

Hieft (2012) had similar findings in that social networking sites enabled grieving individuals to maintain a connection with the deceased or simply connect with others who were grieving over the same loss. Researchers Vicary and Fraley (2010) found that, in response to college campus shootings, all 284-study participants reported being part of the online Facebook groups. While the participants stated the involvement made them feel better subjectively and objectively, there was no indication of either helpfulness or harm to participants by using Facebook. Brubaker and Vertesi (2010) reported that friends who continued to post on the deceased’s profile would do so for years following the death, showing a commitment to continuity of a relationship. It was reported that participation in social networking sites during a time of grief and mourning may facilitate the meaning-making process that Neimeyer (2001) discussed as being essential to the mourning and healing process (Hieft, 2012). Balk (1996) reported that many individuals make an intentional effort to remain connected to the deceased as it is comforting. Facebook is able to facilitate this ability to connect to the deceased even after they have passed. But is this beneficial to the bereavement process?

Pennebaker (1997) studied the process of writing as an outlet for emotional expression. When an individual remembered upsetting experiences, consistent and significant health improvements in both subjective and objective markers were found with the participants who utilized writing as a tool for emotion expression. How does writing on a Facebook wall impact one’s health? Is this a similar expression in that the
individual writes to or about their loved one and then feels a benefit from expressing the
thoughts or feelings?

Additionally, Romanoff (2001) studied the impact of narrative used in therapy. The researcher found that sharing memories and telling stories was a powerful vehicle for healing because it allowed the individual to reshape their story and own their truth.

Alternatively, Brubaker, Kirvran-Swaine and Hayes (2011) reported that individuals who were experiencing emotional distress in relation to bereavement, and who utilized online post-mortem pages to vent frustration, exhibited continued signs of distress. Based on Kang’s (2007) research, reduction of social cue awareness may enable more authentic grief processing on Facebook due to reduced inhibition and social pressures or cues of which to be sensitive.

Rosenblatt (2001) discussed the role of ritual in bereavement. When connecting the concepts of bereavement rituals with modern culture, has a sociocultural response to death become to post a status or comment on Facebook? Stone (2010) made the point that traditional mourning is governed by conventions, but where does that leave this uncharted form of grieving via Facebook? Kaleem (2012) and Abraham (2007) reported that some individuals find being able to post about their deceased love one to be comforting while others struggle with the constant reminders and feel it is an invasion of privacy. There are no standard social norms for dealing with death on Facebook; therefore, there is no moderation or filter for what may or may not be posted regarding someone who has passed, as well as no regulation from Facebook when they send friend request or birthday reminders for people who are deceased (Kaleem, 2012). The only exception is that now Facebook offers a memorialization feature where a deceased
individual’s page can be memorialized (Facebook, 2017b). DeGroot (2008) discussed how some individuals found Facebook memorial pages to be inappropriate. She reported that some individuals believe it to be an avenue for “drama-and-angst-pumped comments” where the deceased’s life is opened up for criticism (DeGroot, 2008, p. 7). St. John (2006) reported that one participant thought it was too public a place for such personal reflections, but was appreciative of the responses received around the loss. Alternatively, some individuals reported finding Facebook to be helpful in their grief process (Kolowich, 2006). Some individuals noted that it provided a space to mourn and was helpful in knowing others felt the same way.

DeGroot (2008) analyzed 10 deceased individual’s Facebook walls and found that the most common thing individuals did was strive to maintain continuity with the deceased by providing them with life updates and including them in their world. She stated:

By creating memorial groups, people now have a new way to cope with the death of a loved one. Individuals now have the opportunity to express their grief in an acceptable way in a society that does not openly talk about death. (p. 24)

DeGroot (2012) used grounded theory to study the impact of Facebook memorial groups. She found that individuals benefitted from the constant availability of being able to post. DeGroot (2012) discovered two main supportive findings regarding use of Facebook memorial groups. Users of the groups reported that they helped with “sensemaking” around the death and allowing for “continuing bonds” with the deceased (DeGroot, 2012, pp. 202-204). Researchers have conducted recent studies focused on the impact of using Facebook memorial groups in the bereavement process (Bell et al., 2015; Fearon, 2011;
Kennedy, 2015; Lippert, 2013; Myles & Millerand, 2016). They solely explored how being part of a Facebook memorial group impacted the mourning process. Overall the studies found mixed results of positive benefits and negative challenges on the users. Benefits ranged from continuing bonds with the deceased, and feeling a sense of community, which allowed for emotional processing and receiving support (Bell et al., 2015; Fearon, 2011; Lippert, 2013). Additionally, there was a benefit of being able to “check-in” with the deceased and feel like the relationship continued on even after the death (Bouc et al., 2016). Challenges ranged from experiencing insensitive and/or insincere comments, to seeing spam advertisements on the memorial pages, to the feelings of loss and pain when a memorial page was deactivated (Fearon, 2011).

Pennington (2013) explored the phenomena of continuing Facebook “friendships” with the deceased after they have passed and how individuals are wont to “unfriend” them. She found that people tend to grieve online in similar ways to how they grieve offline (i.e., if they have private offline expressions of grief, they are likely to have private online expressions of grief, and vice versa). Pennington (2013) stated, “The unwillingness to defriend the dead is a reminder that inherent in the grieving process is a continued presence of the deceased. This presence may increase or decrease over time but is always there if needed” (pp. 632). This speaks to the current shift in grief patterns where people are becoming less likely to move on in the traditional sense, and are becoming more aware of how complicated each unique grief experience is and how affirming Facebook can be to those engaged in mourning activities (Fearon, 2011). It is an avenue to feel connection to others versus isolation and suppression of emotions around the loss. Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillies (2012) expanded on this idea by
introducing the idea of grief no longer being a secluded activity due to the presence of Facebook. Being able to post a “digital RIP” on one’s Facebook wall shows that person is in mourning (Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillies, 2012, p. 285). This more public display of grief demonstrates how current technologies are impacting a shift from grief being an isolating activity done in seclusion and separation from the community to making mourning activities socially acceptable through public mediums such as Facebook.

The passing of Robin Williams in 2014 led thousands of individuals to post Facebook statuses of support, awareness, sadness, anger, confusion, and other emotions around mental health, death, and suicide (Almasy, 2014; Izadi, 2014; Mahler, 2014). In 2016, the deaths of David Bowie, Prince, Alan Rickman and other celebrities brought another outpouring of Facebook statuses as people mourned the losses; the online mourning was able to bring support and a sense of community over the shared loss (Heine, 2016; Wilmot, 2016). Is this the culture of loss that is being established at this time? Kern, Forman, and Gil-Egui (2012) examined 550 memorial pages on Facebook to explore the use of Facebook as an alternative place to mourn that is both public and allows the dead to continue to exist. They found that “Facebook memorial pages aid in the bereavement of the deceased, and allows a continuing space to engage with the deceased in a mediated, virtual and spiritual space” (Kern et al., 2012, p. 10). There appears to be a growing acceptance of permanent online memorialization. Sanderson & Cheong (2010) reported on the impact Tweeting had after the death of Michael Jackson in 2009.
It has been established that individuals utilize Facebook for connectivity and relationships with others, but what impact does this type of connectivity have on bereavement, grief, and mourning? Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish (2013) asked if Facebook is too casual a medium for such a weighty topic despite it providing a platform for support and discussion. Wilmot (2016) asked if social media has made it too easy to offer condolences after a loss; but does that take sensitivity into account? If the onslaughts of “silver lining” condolences are so far removed from the pain of death, does it help people or create more harm? With these interactions occurring online, do they become more automatic with less thought considered as to how it will impact the griever since how it is received does not have to be witnessed in person? Wilmot (2016) stated, “Social media may have opened space for public mourning, but etiquette for ensuring that outpouring supports the bereaved has yet to develop” (p. 2). Ware (2016) conducted a mixed-method study with 203 participants to better understand the individual grief experience, what connections were made between grievers online, and what it was that motivated individuals to utilize Facebook as a grief outlet. Data revealed themes of support, social connectedness, information handling, and memory sharing. Additionally, data showed that over 64% of participants made a Facebook public post after experiencing a loss. This study started the conversation about motivations for using Facebook while grieving and generated themes with how it impacts the individual mourning experience.

Rossetto, Lannutti, and Strauman (2015) conducted a study exploring potential benefits and problematic effects of grieving on Facebook. They surveyed 265 people who had experienced the death of someone they knew. The data resulted in three themes:
news dissemination, preservation, and community. These different themes contained both positive and negative aspects of grieving on Facebook. Facebook made news dissemination regarding the death easier in that mass amounts of people could be informed at once without the grieving person reliving the loss with face-to-face conversations. However, the response from the mass audience could be overwhelming to the bereaved. The online Facebook wall served as a way to preserve memories and photos of the deceased, which brought comfort to the bereaved person as they felt they could still connect with their loved one. But the preservation had a negative outcome as the bereaved continued to receive automated Facebook notifications of the deceased’s birthdays, etc. The community that a person builds via Facebook can consist of family, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances, and this community can be an invaluable asset as a person grieves. If they post regarding their grief, their community posts their love and support. However, the responses can also be overwhelming in amount or in content and can have the opposite impact of what was intended. This study also referenced the dual-processing model of grief (Stroebe & Schute, 2001) and how correlating the model with Facebook created the opportunity for people to grieve and cope on their own terms. This meant they were able to experience connection to other bereaved individuals while being engaged with a restorative-focused activity of generally being on Facebook. Rossetto et al. (2015) introduced the idea of the coping paradox on Facebook, where both restorative-focused and loss-focused coping can simultaneously occur. Lingel (2013) expanded on the idea that Facebook can be a useful, even a critical place to both individually and collectively process death without traditional limits of face-to-face interactions.
With the paradox of potential benefits and problematic effects regarding mourning and loss as it relates to Facebook, there are numerous questions that must be addressed in order to understand this online tool as it relates to grief. Is Facebook enabling for grief-work? Is Facebook a source for oscillation between loss-oriented work (sharing about the deceased) and restoration-oriented work (seeing other stories on the newsfeed not related to grief and loss)? These are questions to consider as researchers and mental health professionals work to better understand the role of Facebook in relation to grief.

**Rationale**

As individuals continue to experience loss and Facebook continues to be the most used online social networking site, research on the potential and perpetual impact of the relationship between the two may assist professionals and mourners in understanding how Facebook impacts the individual mourning experience. This study was designed to provide an initial understanding of grief and mourning, the role of Facebook in mourning, and how the lived experience of mourners is impacted by Facebook usage. Viktor Frankl (1984) said:

> To live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering – if there is a purpose in life at all, there must be a purpose in suffering and dying – but no one can tell another what that purpose is. (p.11)

With a greater awareness regarding the impact of online social networks on grief, counseling professionals may have a better understanding of how to or how not to encourage use for their clients, as well as how to assist their clients in the search for meaning and healing.
This study will contribute to literature on grief and online social media as the focus is placed specifically on the interactions conducted on Facebook while contributing to understanding the lived experience of individual mourners. As described in the review of literature, studies have shown why people choose to use Facebook as an outlet (Abraham, 2007; Brubaker et al., 2013; Buck, 2013; Carroll & Landry, 2010; DeGroot, 2008; DeGroot, 2012; Getty et al., 2011; Gilbert & Massimi, 2012; Kaleem, 2012; Odom et al., 2010; Stone, 2010; Vicary & Fraley, 2010); however, there is a lack of research on whether the experience of using Facebook as an outlet for mourning is helpful or not from a qualitative framework. The research presents a split in mourners about whether or not using Facebook for a mourning outlet is appropriate or inappropriate (Abraham, 2007; Kaleem, 2012). There have been a number of studies conducted that explore the impact of starting RIP pages for the deceased or posting on the deceased individual’s wall (Bell et al., 2015; Bouc et al., 2016; DeGroot, 2012; Fearon, 2011; Frost, 2014; Lippert, 2013; Myles & Millerand, 2016; Pennington, 2013). There continues to be a lack of qualitative research on how the use of personal walls and status updates impacts the mourning process. An aim for this study was to provide information on the subjective experience of using Facebook when mourning as Brubaker et al. (2013) stated that “qualitative research addressing experiences on SNSs remains limited” (p. 154).

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that the selected population was the appropriate population for study of this topic. A second assumption was that this was a topic that was necessary for study. A third assumption was that the researcher assumed that the proposed methodology would be an effective measure for the topic.
Research Questions

Based on the reviewed literature, the following research question with supporting questions was proposed. The main research question was as follows: How has social media, specifically Facebook, impacted the mourning process within the first thirteen to fourteen months of the loss? Additional supporting questions were chosen to further understand the main question being asked and assist in bringing further understanding to this topic. They were:

1. What was the lived experience of utilizing Facebook to mourn?
2. Was there a perceived pressure or expectation to mourn publically on Facebook?
3. What are or were, if any, unexpected outcomes or experiences from mourning through Facebook?

Summary

In this first chapter, rationale was provided to support this study, which was aimed at understanding the lived experience of mourners on Facebook. Chapter One also provided literature on historic and current research into social interactions, bereavement, and online social media in order to create a basis for elaboration and context for this study. Lastly, study research questions were provided that drove the research findings. In Chapter Two, a thorough description of the methodology that was used for this study is detailed.
Chapter Two

Methodology

Chapter Two contains the specifics of the methodology that was used for this study. First, the worldview that informed the research design and methodology was discussed and rationale provided for why it was the best fit for the study. Second, the purpose overview and research questions used to guide the study were provided. Next, information about the population and sample group used for this study was provided. The data collection methods, materials to be used, a discussion of the researchers credibility as a qualitative researcher, and the steps being taken to increase the reliability and validity of this qualitative study were described. Lastly, this chapter included information about the data analysis and procedures as well as information about the protection of the human subjects involved in the study.

Philosophical Worldview

The philosophical worldview for this study was a social constructivist perspective. Creswell (2009) stated that this worldview held the assumption that people seek understanding of the world in which they live based on the subjective meaning of their unique experiences. Social constructivist worldview was appropriate for this study as a phenomenological perspective sought understanding of the lived experience of the participants (Patton, 2002). Heppner, Kivlighan and Wampold (1999) stated that constructivism favors the ideas that “truth” and “reality” are not as important as the social world created in the minds of individuals (p. 238). As the study investigated participants’ interactions with their physical, social, and technological environments, social constructivism was an appropriate philosophical worldview. The goal of this study was to
make sense of the case study participants’ experiences with Facebook, grief and mourning, and to generate a pattern of meaning (Creswell, 2009).

**Purpose Overview**

The purpose of the study was to better understand how the societal transition to a technologically integrated social lifestyle impacted the mourning process over the first 13 to 14 months post-loss, specifically exploring the role of Facebook. With the emergence of social networking sites (SNSs), particularly Facebook, there was a new medium with which to express ideas, opinions, emotions, and general interpersonal communications (Thelwell & Wilkenson, 2010). The aim of this study was two-fold: 1) to contribute to the existing literature on Facebook and grief practices, and 2) to better understand if the societal transition to a technologically integrated social lifestyle impacts the mourning process.

**Research Questions**

According to Creswell (2009), the purpose of qualitative research is to explore a complicated set of variables contributing to a “central phenomenon” and “present the varied perspectives or meanings that participants hold” (p. 129). Based on the reviewed literature, the following research question with supporting questions was proposed. The main research question was as follows: How has social media, specifically Facebook, impacted the mourning process within the first thirteen to fourteen months of the loss? Additional supporting question were useful in further understanding the main question being asked and assisted in bringing further understanding to this topic. These were:

1. What was the lived experience of utilizing Facebook to mourn?
2. Was there a perceived pressure or expectation to mourn publically on Facebook?

3. What are or were, if any, unexpected outcomes or experiences from mourning through Facebook?

Population and Sample

The participants in this study were individuals, over the age of 18, who experienced the death of a significant family member (e.g., parent, sibling, child, spouse) in the past two to five years and who utilized online social media, specifically Facebook. Purposeful sampling was used to acquire participants for this study (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) described purposeful sampling as “information-rich cases from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of inquiry” (p. 230). A combination of homogenous sampling, snowball sampling, and emergent sampling was used in order to find seven to ten individuals that meet relevant criteria to be appropriate for participation (Patton, 2002). This range of participants was appropriate as this was a qualitative study and the information was dense. The aim of this study was to be completed within a year window and this number of participants made that achievable. Lastly, this study was meant to be a starting point for future researchers to explore the impact of Facebook on grief and mourning practices. The decision to use combination sampling allowed for stronger triangulation, credibility, and validity of information (Patton, 2002).

Participants were solicited through networking via Facebook. The researcher posted a “seeking participants” notice on Facebook through a professional account created containing the parameters and requirements of the study. The researcher shared
this posting through her personal account as well to increase the population reached for potential candidates for participation. This post asked Facebook members to share this notice to their Facebook walls to expand the potential pool of inquiries for participation. The notice requested that interested participants call the provided phone number for further information about participation rather than respond directly on the Facebook post to allow for greater confidentiality. If the potential participants preferred to respond via email, a disclaimer was posted that not all electronic transmissions are completely secure and they emailed at their own risk. All emailed responses from researcher included the following disclaimer:

This email and any files transmitted with it are confidential and intended solely for the use of the individual or entity to whom they are addressed. If you have received this email in error please notify the system manager. This message contains confidential information and is intended only for the individual named. If you are not the named addressee you should not disseminate, distribute or copy this e-mail. Please notify the sender immediately by e-mail if you have received this e-mail by mistake and delete this e-mail from your system. If you are not the intended recipient you are notified that disclosing, copying, distributing or taking any action in reliance on the contents of this information is strictly prohibited.

(Appendix A)

No potential participants responded directly to the Facebook post. Compensation for participation included a $20 gift certificate to Starbucks or business of choice, referral information for individual counseling or group counseling, and recommended reading materials for grief support if services were requested post-exit interview.
The data was information-rich due to the qualitative nature of the study and was not appropriate to generalize the results to other populations who have had a similar experience with Facebook and mourning, based on information from the literature review. The data collected from this study can be used to add breadth to research currently being conducted on the phenomena of Facebook. It can also add value to informing its impact on the process of mourning, specifically individuals who have chosen to participate in this online community and who created personal, grief-related posts on their Facebook walls.

**Research Design and Methodology**

The qualitative method was selected as the research design for this study. According to Merriam (2009), a qualitative research study aims to understand how participants understand and make sense of their lives and lived experiences, and then the researcher will interpret those meanings. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) stated that qualitative research is “an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 5). As the aim of this study was to better understand if the societal transition to a technologically integrated community impacted the mourning process, qualitative methods were chosen.

The strategy of inquiry was two-fold, utilizing both a phenomenological and a case study approach. Phenomenology, as a strategy of inquiry, creates an emphasis on a specific experience in a participant’s everyday life and social actions, and how an individual has integrated that into consciousness (Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2009) stated that phenomenological research is used when the researcher “identifies the essence of
human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). A case study is an “in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). It is a strategy of inquiry that is bound by time and activity where researchers collect a variety of information through multiple data collection procedures (Creswell, 2009). These strategies of inquiry were combined to create a phenomenological, multiple case study that was conducted to thoroughly understand the lived experience of the participants. Specifically, it looked at the societal transition to a more technologically integrated lifestyle and community and how that may or may not have impacted the mourning process over the first 13-14 months post loss.

Data Collection Process and Procedures

The researcher posted a “seeking participants” notice on Facebook (see Appendix A) through a professional account the researcher created containing the parameters and requirements of the study. This post asked individuals to share this notice to Facebook walls to expand the potential pool of inquiries for participation. The notice requested that interested participants call the provided phone number for further information about participation rather than respond directly on the Facebook post in order to allow for confidentiality. If the potential participants preferred to respond via email, they received an email invitation to participate in the study (see Appendix B), which included a disclaimer that not all electronic transmissions are completely secure and they emailed at their own risk. Inquiries and electronic communication via email was saved onto an encrypted flash drive and then deleted from the email account. The encrypted flash drive was stored in a locked file cabinet. All responses saved to the encrypted flash drive will be destroyed when the study is finalized. Each participant was given an alias to protect
his or her identity and the identity of their loved one. There was a master list containing participant name and alias kept in a locked filing cabinet kept separate from the collected data.

To gather data that addressed the topics of investigation, I used three sources of evidence: semi-structured individual interviews, surveys, and live document analysis, or online fieldwork, from each participant’s Facebook feed. Each of these sources of evidence assisted me in further understanding the individual, lived experience of each participant during the 13-14 months of the study. These three sources of evidence are explained in further detail below.

**Semi-structured interviews.** All participants participated in a one-on-one audio-recorded interview. Merriam (2009) described semi-structured interviews as containing both several specific questions as well as open-ended questions regarding topics or themes that could be followed up with clarification questions. The aim of the interview was to gain background knowledge about the participant, the loss they experienced, types of coping techniques they used, and more information about their online social media use, specifically Facebook. The first interviews were conducted in a quiet and private location convenient for the participant and was audio recorded. At the time of the interview, the participant received the consent form, which provided the timeframe for participation, guidelines about the survey and interviews, as well as information about compensation for participation (see Appendix C). I conducted the semi-structured interview using the list of prepared questions as a guideline (see Appendix D). However, I used additional questions as needed and made note of what I stated to use in future interviews. The first interviews lasted approximately 45-75 minutes. The audio
recordings were stored on an encrypted flash drive. I have kept the audio recordings separate from the master list of coded names of participants. All audio recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription service with the identifying information removed. The transcriptions were stored in a locked file cabinet on the encrypted flash drive separate from the master list.

The second interviews occurred after the data analysis had taken place. The second interview lasted between 20-30 minutes. The purpose of this interview was to discuss Facebook wall findings, provide additional information about the study findings and resources should the participant need additional counseling support, and provide compensation. This second interview did not have an interview guide. These interviews were not audio recorded or transcribed. If the interviewee was unable to complete the second interview or ceased participation in the study, the gift card for participation was mailed to them.

Surveys. Each participant completed a participant questionnaire (see Appendix E) to better understand the participant’s Facebook usage, frequency and type of posting pre- and post-loss. The questionnaire was 14 questions and collected demographic data to provide additional information for the data analysis process. The survey was administered to the participants at the first interview. The survey responses were saved electronically on a password-protected encrypted flash drive or, if they were printed on paper, identifying name and personal information was removed and the documents were filed in a locked filing cabinet.

Live document analysis. This source of evidence enabled the researcher to more fully observe the lived experience of the participants through online fieldwork. I created a
“fake” Facebook profile linked to the researcher’s Northwest University email account (heather.taylor@northwestu.edu) that included no personal identifiable information. I ensured my settings were set to “only me” to limit who can see my “friends” and had the highest privacy settings in place. I then “friended” each of the seven participants through Facebook. As per Facebook’s own privacy policy, information posted to Facebook is public and as I am not an app developer or seeking to advertise, I was not infringing on privacy or perceived privacy of its users.

After “friendship” had been established via Facebook, the researcher scrolled back to two months before the death of their loved one occurred. This assisted in providing insight and validity into what the participants reported on the survey as pre-loss behavior. It provided baseline context of the type of posts they did. Next, the data was collected from the 13-14 months after the loss, specifically focusing on frequency of posting about the loss and other posting behavior. All data was reviewed for insight into Facebook usage during the 13-14 month period immediately following the loss. This information was collected because it showed linguistically the way the participants communicated with their loved one, shared their own mourning experience and received community support. The information was triangulated with the data collected from the surveys and interviews and then coded for themes with the utilization of a second coder to increase the validity of findings (Patton, 2002).

**Data Analysis Process and Procedures**

When the interviews, surveys, and live document analysis was completed, the data was analyzed with the intent to find emerging themes that reflected the lived experience of the participant’s experience with mourning and Facebook.
Semi-structured interviews. Before the data was analyzed, each digitally recorded interview was submitted to a professional third party transcription service, TranscriptionLive, who followed the highest levels of confidentiality and protection of information. Once the interviews were transcribed, they were uploaded into the qualitative data software, NVivo, and then coded by the researcher for emergent and specific themes pertaining to mourning and Facebook (Creswell, 2009).

Surveys. Data from the surveys needed multiple types of analysis, as there were multiple types of questions. The open-ended questions were coded for emergent themes. The Likert scale questions and single word responses were inputted into NVivo to be compared with the coded themes from the other data (Creswell, 2009). All data from the surveys were compiled into the NVivo software for qualitative data analysis.

Live document analysis. The data from the participant Facebook walls were captured via screenshots and compiled into NVivo software for emergent coding.

Analysis of data. All interviews and documents were transcribed, coded, analyzed by the researcher to explore emergent and specific themes (Patton, 2002). The researcher used a second coder who had been trained in case study and phenomenological research to assist in reviewing the interview transcripts to increase the validity and reliability of the study (Patton, 2002). The second coder reviewed the interview data and emergent themes to support or refute the findings. Additionally, I continuously compared the themes and the codes to the data to ensure they remained consistent throughout the data analysis process (Creswell, 2009). All of the data was entered into a qualitative data analysis software program called NVivo where it was coded and analyzed. After the coding process was completed, the data was triangulated for themes within each
participant's sources of evidence in order to protect the individual experiences as well as create the potential for applicable findings (Patton, 2002). Additionally, the emergent themes were broken out into an Excel spreadsheet, and then with pen and paper I pared down to the primary and significant themes. After the triangulation process was completed, the resulting findings were used to potentially answer the initial research questions and provided insight into the impact Facebook may or may not have on the mourning process.

Creditability, Validity, and Reliability

Researcher credibility, and the validity and reliability of this research study were given considerate attention. Patton (2002) expressed the importance of establishing the credibility of the researcher. This was achieved by considering the researcher’s experience in the specific field, how the researcher gained access to the study site, the prior knowledge the researcher brought to the study, and any personal connections that the researcher had to the study, population or topic. The questions described by Patton (2002) assisted in establishing my credibility as the researcher. As this study was primarily focused on the intersection of grief and online social media, specifically Facebook, I was uniquely equipped to assist. As I am currently a seventh year doctoral student, I have received training in research methodology, including qualitative methods, thus I am equipped with tools to administer and facilitate a safe, professional research study. Additionally, I was trained to work with bereaved individuals through a 13-month practicum experience with the Providence Hospice Bereavement Department in Snohomish County in Washington State. I have no specific training in the intricate details of Facebook, but I have been a user since 2005 and have remained an active user.
Additionally, there are personal connections to this topic through my own experience with loss, as well as witnessing peer and familial use of Facebook as an outlet for mourning experiences. I am aware of the biases that I brought to the study and included them in the limitations of the study. The provided information aided in supporting my credibility as a researcher for this topic.

According to Johnson (1997), descriptive validity, interpretive validity, and theoretical validity are three types of validity to consider when conducting qualitative research. Descriptive validity is the “factual accuracy of the account” or more simply, “Was what was reported happening actually occur” (p. 284). This researcher utilized descriptive validity through the use of a second coder to look for emergent themes and trends of the transcribed interviews. Interpretive validity represents accuracy of portrayal of the participants’ thoughts, feelings, and meanings (Johnson, 1997). As this study was a phenomenological case study, working toward understanding participant meaning of a lived experience was the primary goal; therefore, asking for feedback in the second interview was important towards verifying interpretations of the participants’ experience. This will be discussed in Chapter Four. Theoretical validity is the degree to which a theoretical explanation that emerged from the study accurately fits the data and is “credible and defensible” (Johnson, 2002, pp. 286). As this study was not looking to create a theory, this type of validity is not applicable at this time.

The aim of this study was to further the breadth of research emerging around the relationship between mourning and Facebook (Abraham, 2007; Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013; Brubaker, Kivran-Swaine, Taber, & Hayes, 2011; Brubaker & Vertesi, 2010; Buck, 2013; Carroll & Landry, 2010; DeGroot, 2008; DeGroot, 2012; Getty et al.,
Creswell (2009) described validity as the researcher checking the accuracy of the findings by implementing specific procedures. To further improve upon the validity of the methodology, I included a second coder to search for themes and emergent trends among the interview data to prevent my biases from influencing the findings from the study (Creswell, 2009). Additionally, this was achieved through the use of three strategies of inquiry (interviews, surveys, and live document analysis) with the utilization of triangulation to establish trends based on overlapping themes from the multiple sources. Finally, Patton (2002) described qualitative research as being high in external validity, meaning the population or location it can be generalized to. This study was done in the world, in the participant’s own homes. The findings were not largely generalizable but will contribute to this growing area of study.

The reliability of this study refers to the ability to replicate the study in the future. Creswell (2009) discussed suggestions for increasing the reliability of a study. The researcher utilized intercoder agreement by using the services of a second coder for the data collected as well as checked the transcripts received by the professional transcriber to ensure a reduced level of mistakes. These are the ways in which the researcher worked to ensure this study was credible, reliable and valid.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The procedures of the Northwest University Institutional Review Board were followed. All participants were provided with a consent sheet (see Appendix C) that provided them with information about the study, time required, and criteria for participation. Participants were informed of the limits of confidentiality surrounding child
Participants were informed of potential risks, which in this study were minimal as it was observing general Facebook behaviors and participating in a one-on-one interview. Participants were at minimal risk when they choose to participate in the study. Some participants experienced discomfort when sharing their loss narrative. However, as the loss occurred at least two to five years prior to the interview, the discomfort was lessened.

All identities of the participants and their deceased loved ones were coded and kept confidential to reduce risk of identifying information becoming compromised. The master coded list with the participant information was stored separate from the data on an encrypted flash drive to ensure confidentiality. Confidentiality was also maintained through the strict privacy settings available on Facebook. All written transcripts and documents were maintained according to current HIPAA laws and were stored on a password protected and encrypted flash drive. Lastly, as I had experience in working with bereavement and completed courses on research methods, this researcher upheld Northwest University professional and ethical standards. If a participant who was not currently in counseling had an adverse emotional reaction to the content of what is discussed in the interview process, they would have been immediately referred to counseling and the researcher would have provided calming exercises to make sure the client was emotionally safe before leaving the interview. If a participant had an adverse reaction and was already seeking counseling support, then the researcher would have asked for a release of information to contact the participant’s counselor to discuss what occurred and provided options for additional support. As the loss occurred at least two
years prior, there was a decreased chance that an adverse reaction would occur. Upon completion of this study, participants were offered counseling referral information if requested.

**Summary**

This chapter outlined the methodology for the study. The philosophical worldview of this study was explained, as well as the purpose overview and research questions were further explained. This chapter included information about the population and sample that was studied in addition to the research design and methodology that was implored. The data collection and data analysis process and procedures were expanded upon. Lastly, this chapter addressed the topics of credibility, reliability and validity and how the participants were protected.
Chapter Three

Findings

Chapter Three provides a descriptive report of the findings from the research study. First, a brief description of the data analysis is provided. Second, data on the emergent themes that arose from within each individual participant’s coded data is described. Third, a thorough description of the emergent themes that developed between the findings of the participants are discussed. Lastly, the overlap of the data and the emergent theme process is presented in a table format.

After recruiting the necessary number of participants, seven individuals were interviewed for participation in the research study. These interviews were digitally recorded and sent to TranscriptionLive to be professionally and HIPPA-compliantly transcribed. Upon the delivery of the transcribed interviews, the data were uploaded into NVivo qualitative software for coding. Next, private Facebook invites were sent to participants from the researcher’s hidden Facebook account to allow the researcher access to the participant’s live Facebook walls. Screenshots of grief-related posts from each participant were compiled and uploaded into the NVivo qualitative software. Survey data was coded and inputted into the NVivo software.

All three sources of evidence were then coded for emergent themes. The interviews were given to a second coder for verification to increase the validity and reliability of the emergent themes. The emergent themes surfaced due to similar statements and reflections made between the participants. Chapter Three will report on the emergent data found from within each participant’s coded sources of evidence as well as between each participant’s coded sources of evidence.
Participant One - Mary

Mary is a 30-year-old, married, Caucasian female from a rural community. She qualified for participation in this study due to the loss of her father almost five years prior. He passed away unexpectedly due to health complications. Mary (personal communication, March 9, 2016) reported using Facebook on a daily basis with interactions multiple times per day. She reported that she has used Facebook in her expression of grief over the loss of her father through journaling and honoring his memory. The dominant themes represented with Mary were of Facebook being a place of community grief support and Facebook as an external, active mourning experience.

Mary continually stated that Facebook was her personal outlet and she felt no external pressures to actively engage with it. In her survey, she stated, “The more I have used Facebook to share and obtain information, the more I want those kind of exchanges” (Mary, personal communication, March 9, 2016). Her Facebook wall was filled with consistent postings both of her everyday life experiences as well as posts related to varied aspects of her grief. This took the form of pictures, reflective journaling, sharing memories, or even expressing frustration about the paperwork involved when someone dies. She shared about how grieving publically was mutually beneficial when others would share their own experiences (Mary, personal communication, March 9, 2016).

Mary stated:

I did enjoy though some people’s comments you know, if they would share a memory. I really liked that…. It’s healing for me to help people find their healing. So when people would share that it was kind of a mutual benefit. (Mary, personal communication, March 9, 2016)
Overall, Mary most utilized Facebook for her active mourning as evidenced by frequency of Facebook posts and self report.

![Source of Evidence](image)

Figure 1. Mary's emergent themes within data

**Participant Two - Jane**

Jane is a 38-year-old, partnered, Caucasian female from an urban community. She qualified for participation in this study due to the loss of her grandfather four years prior. Her grandfather was her primary paternal figure from age six and therefore she qualified for this study. He passed away due to lung cancer. Jane reported general Facebook use on a daily basis with multiple interactions per day (Jane, personal communication, March 10, 2016). She reported struggling to use Facebook as an avenue to express her grief due to feeling as though it was inadequate for capturing the emotions or self-presentation of grief, and also not wanting to invoke the perceived pity of others. The dominant theme represented with Jane was of Facebook as a community grief support.

Jane shared about the way Facebook allows one to feel heard. She stated:
I think as a writer I deal a lot with the concept of call and response, and I think Facebook is a really good way for that to happen in our lives in a gentle way. Sometimes, you just need to be heard and then I think it is an outlet that allows that – everything from what you had for breakfast to the intense over-sharing that sometimes happens in people’s relationships just in a great way publicly or, you know, things like not wanting to see that in the middle there. (Jane, personal communication, March 10, 2016)

When her Facebook wall was coded, it revealed minimal postings related to her grief. Her primary mourning post was sharing a link to her personal blog where she wrote a piece on her grief experience. She shared, “I have a piece that I’ve read at a couple of readings or conferences, things like that. It has been pretty helpful in sharing the experience” (Jane, personal communication, March 10, 2016). In her survey, when asked if her Facebook use changed after her loved one passed, she shared, “I wanted to talk about it on FB, but felt frozen. I didn’t want to feel like I was seeking pity, so I withdrew a bit” (Jane, personal communication, March 10, 2016). Her Facebook wall data confirmed her withdrawn behavior. Jane appeared to have limited Facebook use around her mourning experience.
Participant Three - Chloe

Chloe is a 28-year-old, single, Caucasian female from a suburban community. She qualified for participation in this study due to the loss of her father three years prior. He passed away suddenly due to a vehicle accident. Chloe reported using Facebook on a daily basis with multiple interactions per day (Chloe, personal communication, March 11, 2016). She reported Facebook being an avenue to communicate her grief, receive support from her community, share pictures of her deceased loved one, and journal about her grief. She shared that, at times, people were unintentionally insensitive with their attempts at support. Her dominant themes were Facebook being a community grief support and Facebook being an external, active mourning experience.

Chloe highly utilized Facebook for her mourning process as evidenced by frequent posts of pictures, memories, and reflections. She stated, “Yeah, I would say that I’ve used Facebook quite a bit for the mourning” (Chloe, personal communication, March
Her survey self-reported multiple interactions with Facebook throughout the day and that her use did not change after her dad passed away. She shared that during her mourning, she would judge what others posted. She stated, “I sometimes was kind of judgmental of other people’s post. Like why does this even matter? My whole idea of life and what matters changed” (Chloe, personal communication, March 11, 2016).

Chloe’s Facebook wall showed a large amount of data points around Facebook being an active, external mourning medium. She frequently and consistently posted photos of her father, reflections on her memories of him, and comments about her overall grief experience. She had high Facebook usage throughout the first 14 months post-loss. This was also evidenced by the self-reported data from her survey.

![Figure 3. Chloe’s emergent themes within data](image)

**Participant Four - Anne**

Anne is a 27-year-old, married, Caucasian/Native American female from a suburban area. She qualified for participation in this study due to the loss of her mother
two-and-a-half years prior. Her mother passed away from cancer. Anne reported using Facebook on a daily basis with multiple interactions per day. She reported Facebook being an avenue to “give back” from a social platform standpoint, as well as to process and journal about her grief experience (Anne, personal communication, March 12, 2016). Her dominant themes were Facebook as community grief support and Facebook as external, active mourning.

Anne self-reported on her survey data that she experienced “unexpected connections in networking, new friendships” (Anne, personal communication, March 12, 2016). Anne reported monthly posts about her grief experience and posting about the birthday and anniversary of her mother passing. Her Facebook data showed the highest amount of journaling and photo sharing posts compared to the other participants. Anne frequently used Facebook to honor the memory of her loved one as evidenced by the high amount of overall Facebook activity around her mourning. Additionally, she found grieving through Facebook as a way to give back to organizations such as Relay for Life. In her interview, when asked about motivation to post on Facebook, she reported:

I’m a sharer. I’m like I feel like if I can share what I’m going through and help somebody get through it, I don’t know, I’m always like – like innately feel like I – be sure it’s going to help change somebody else’s life so that’s why I put it out there. (Anne, personal communication, March 12, 2016)

Overall, Anne was active on Facebook around her grief and mourning experience.
Participant Five - Pam

Pam is a 27-year-old, married, Caucasian female from a rural area. She qualified for participation in this study due to the loss of her father four years prior. Her father passed away due to being shot. Pam reported using Facebook on a daily basis with multiple interactions per day. She reported Facebook initially being an overall negative experience around her grief. She also reported feeling as though the information got out of her control and that she and her family felt on display versus supported by the community (Pam, personal communication, March 19, 2016). Her dominant themes were Facebook as external, active mourning, and negative outcomes of Facebook use with grief.

Based on Facebook data, Pam had minimal postings on Facebook throughout her early mourning experience. She had the second fewest data points on Facebook. In her
interview, she reported an overall negative experience with Facebook during the initial period of grief. She stated:

Kind of the immediate effect felt negative and then the long term effect felt positive. So immediately just having to see that I’m being contacted by a reporter that I don’t know who wanting to ask me questions…that felt gross. And even just having people find out whom I hadn’t told or being tagged in other people’s stuff that I wasn’t – it wasn’t just me getting to share my feelings or share my story or wait to share. So the immediate effects felt kind of negative and then for the next 18 months it was more positive then. But the first week or two, probably not so positive. (Pam, personal communication, March 19, 2016)

In her survey data, she self-reported that “a lot of people knew before I told them because of other people’s posts that they tagged me in” (Pam, study questionnaire, March 19, 2016). She reported that she expressed her grief on Facebook once every few months, which corroborated with her minimal Facebook data points.
Participant Six - Daniel

Daniel is a 31-year-old, married, Caucasian male from a suburban area. He qualified for participation in this study due to the loss of his father three years prior. His father passed away due to a vehicle accident. Daniel reported using Facebook on a daily basis with multiple interactions per day. He reported minimal Facebook usage around his grief experience and that it can be difficult to express his grief experience through such a public forum due to the expectations and pressure of others (Daniel, personal communication, March 25, 2016). He did report feeling an increase in community support due to the minimal amount shared on Facebook; however, this did not inspire further sharing over time. His dominant theme was Facebook as community grief support.

Daniel’s survey self-report stated, “I don’t share my grief on FB” (Daniel, personal communication, March 25, 2016). He stated during his interview that he
struggled with the effort it took to post on Facebook about his grief, saying, “I’m sad to admit I think it’s just a pure laziness that I don’t get to post the pictures. Then I don’t know what to say” (Daniel, personal communication, March 25, 2016).

When questioned about feeling pressure to post his mourning experience on Facebook, he shared that he felt competition between himself and other family members. In his interview he stated:

Posting of the – coming up on the anniversaries or his birthday or my mom’s anniversary or my parents anniversary. My sister always beats me to it and I don’t know where she gets her photos because she attaches old, childhood photos.

(Daniel, personal communication, March 25, 2016)

Daniel self-reported on his survey that he did use Facebook to express his grief experience; however, his Facebook data showed minimal posts related to his grief during the first 14 months post-loss.

Figure 6. Daniel’s emergent themes within data
Participant Seven - Emma

Emma is a 31-year-old, married, Caucasian female from an urban area. She qualified for participation in this study due to the loss of her mother two years prior. Her mother passed away due to cancer. Emma reported using Facebook on a daily basis with multiple interactions per day. She reported that Facebook provided an avenue to lower her guard and be more vulnerable around her mourning experience, as well as provide space to journal and express her grief (Emma, personal communication, April 6, 2016). She reported that Facebook was not always able to facilitate the desired meaningful connections needed around grief support. Her dominant theme was Facebook as external, active mourning.

Through Emma’s survey data, she self-reported her change in Facebook behavior after her mother died. She stated, “I think I began posting things relevant to my experience of loss – more personal than I normally would” (Emma, personal communication, April 6, 2016). Her Facebook use showed consistent grief-based monthly posts the first year post-loss. She shared pictures and memories of her mom, and articles focusing on grief from a clinical standpoint. Her Facebook data show a high amount of journaling-based posts related to her mourning experience. When comparing self-reported survey data with Facebook data, there appears to be a misrepresentation of self. Her Facebook data showed more frequent posting than her self-report stated.
Emergent Themes Between Participants

The data from the participants was collected and compared between the seven participants to find common, emergent themes. These themes were how the participants were able to communicate meaning making of their mourning experience and how the researcher utilized the constructivist worldview to explore data from between the participants. The common themes that emerged are further explained. Data from the surveys, interviews coded by the researcher, interviews verified by the second coder, and the Facebook data were collected into a table to better explore and analyze the emergent themes. Upon completion, 19 main ideas emerged from the data. Of those 19 themes, seven primary themes emerged. Of the seven primary themes, four were directly related to the research questions and marked as noteworthy. The noteworthy themes were:

- Facebook as community grief support.
- Facebook as external active mourning.
• Facebook as a means of self-presentation in grief.
• Negative outcomes of Facebook use with grief.

The seven primary themes will be described with emphasis placed on describing the four noteworthy themes.

**Facebook as Community Grief Support**

The first significant theme relates to how the participants were able to find support through sharing their grief experience on Facebook. When coding the interviews, two common ideas emerged. The first idea was that Facebook was a way for others to communicate sympathy and support in a way the griever could receive it. The second idea was that people use Facebook as a support group around their grief experience. These two ideas were merged into the first significant theme: Facebook as community grief support. This theme emerged from the interview data and was supported by the online data retrieved from the Facebook walls of the participants. Participants shared how other individuals or Facebook friends were able to comment to their walls, offer written support, and be a pseudo support group to the individual griever. Finding different types of support through Facebook connections was a shared experience among all participants.

All of the participants experienced Facebook as a community grief support. Chloe received over 100 comments on her Facebook wall about her loss experience. People from different communities she belonged to in real life commented about her father passing. She shared:

So people were always contacting, making sure that everything was okay. Just letting us known that they were praying for us. People – there was just a lot of response…. I felt like it was really comforting to know that people that can’t be
near me because they live far away are, in a sense, with me through Facebook and their words of encouragement. In the beginning condolences but then throughout, going and taking the jump of going back to school and the support I got through Facebook while I was still very much mourning and not really wanting to do my school work. A lot of encouraging messages or comments on statuses. So I would say that there was a lot of encouragement and comfort and also hope that I wasn’t going to have to do this alone. (Chloe, personal communication, March 11, 2016)

Another way community appeared to be reinforced via Facebook grief sharing was through reestablishing and deepening of relationships. Mary, Jane, Chloe, and Anne reported in interviews about experiencing a deepening in relationships over sharing about their loss via Facebook, thus strengthening the sense of community they experienced via Facebook. They reported that others who had experienced a loss would reach out to them which created a sense of togetherness and community over that common grief experience. Mary shared:

My sharing of my loss...well three friends of mine...lost their dad within months of mine... So it felt good to have that in common – you know, to be able to see someone my age, which is awful going through the loss of a parent the same age... It was healing for me to be able to reach out to them and say if you need to talk to anyone I can relate. (Mary, personal communication, March 9, 2016)

Jane shared:

The wonderful part was when people did respond in really heartfelt ways and even people I wasn’t close to, shared their experiences about when they had lost
their parents. And so I’ve tried to do that after it happened to me. (Jane, personal communication, March 10, 2016)

Chloe shared:

People knowing that my dad passed and these are the people that would come out of the woodwork, so to speak, sharing their story. I feel like me kind of being vulnerable and sharing my loss and what I’m going through… and the unfortunate commonality… when someone goes through what I’ve experienced, going through tragedy and loss and then other people go through it, I feel like there’s this, even if you weren’t really close with the person, you can develop a deeper relationship because you share the loss. And I see that through Facebook. (Chloe, personal communication, March 11, 2016)

Anne shared about an experience where sharing about her loss built a connection with another person who had experienced similar grief:

There was this girl who contacted me on Facebook thinking that I was my sister and she had met my mom because her mom passed from cancer really like within a matter of months of being diagnosed. But they did bible study together and she met my sister and they had a conversation. Well it turns out this girl is going through a lot of crap, like grief, like dark grief, like not having anyone to talk to about it, this and that, and I was just kind of like “Hey I’m here for you, we’ve got to stick together here.” … So that’s what I’m finding a lot that’s happening so that’s why I’m more open to sharing because hey, if we can all help each other somehow to get through the process because it’s not easy and it will never go away. (Anne, personal communication, March 12, 2016)
Another way community was experienced was through witnessing what others would post on her father’s Facebook page. Pam shared:

I think one of the things, like not necessarily me sharing in that my, I would have post about it by me sharing in that I was able to have a little but more community around it was just seeing people post on my dad’s Facebook page. He had a page and just seeing people remember things because you kind of realize how few stories you have when someone dies. You’re like wow, there’s so much that I never heard. That time he did something ridiculous or that time he was really kind and so just seeing a lot of that, I think, from different people posting on his Facebook page and me being able to just kind of see or interact with that. (Pam, personal communication, March 19, 2016)

Pam also shared in her interview about how her Facebook community is helping her parent her children through the grief experience now that they are older. She shared:

This summer it will be four years since...Now that my kids are old enough to ask really hard questions. I don’t know how to handle these questions that they are asking me. And just kind of, now that my kinds are a little older, having all sorts of new things come up and how I feel like I’m using my Facebook community more for some of that. (Pam, personal communication, March 19, 2016)

Emma found that informing her community during her mom’s disease process helped her feel supported when her mom eventually passed. She was able to receive support from her community through the disease progression and after her mom passed. She shared:
When my mom was sick I posted on Caring Bridge and then put those updates on my Facebook, really because I wanted people to know that knew my mom…. And so it was good to be so connected to people that I cared about and they knew what was going on, which is interesting because I don’t really want lots of support and I don’t want lots of sympathy but I really did – I put a lot out there now that I think about it. Like I did want people to know. (Emma, personal communication, April 6, 2016)

The seven participants experienced Facebook community support in different ways relative to their grief experiences ranging from child rearing to condolences to learning more about their loved one through story sharing. Overall, the community aspect of mourning on Facebook received positive feedback and comments from the participants. The only variant was from Pam, who reported her initial experience of mourning of Facebook as negative while over time her perspective had shifted to a positive association with Facebook being community grief support, particularly around parenting advice around grief (Pam, personal communication, March 19, 2016).

**Facebook as External, Active Mourning**

The second significant theme relates to expressions of active mourning displayed by the participants on Facebook. This theme emerged primarily through two ideas within the personal interview data and was later supported by the live Facebook data. The first idea was that Facebook was a way of remembering the lost person and honoring their memories. The second idea was using Facebook as a way of journaling about and/or processing grief/sharing photos. These two concepts expanded to be the theme of Facebook as external, active mourning. Ways this was utilized on Facebook was through
the participants journaling and/or documenting their internal experience to assist in processing their grief, in addition to sharing photos that held meaning, tagging other family members (including their deceased loved one) in their reflections and memories and remembering their loved ones on birthdays, holidays and anniversaries. This represented externalized active mourning as they were generating meaning from their loss in a non-internalized way, through actions.

Mary shared in her interview that in the immediacy after the loss, she would post things related to her dad, whether memories or photos and over time has felt the desire to post lessen. Her Facebook data supported this interview statement due to frequency of grief-related posts. Additionally, her survey data reported regular posting and varied uses of Facebook around sharing memories, commenting, etc. She shared:

I’ve used it here and there to kind of give my dad a shout out for something you know, like teaching me something I’m dealing with in my life that maybe I didn’t know then but is applicable now…definitely wishes, heavenly birthday wishes…I tried to find ways to maybe justify new things that I was doing as part of my grieving process…And I was doing a lot of thinking about, I posted some kind of pictures with cookies in relation to my dad. Yeah, so I kind of feel like I’ve run the gamut on kind of sharing the pain and that, and then kind of the light at the end of the tunnel…. The last couple of years…. I guess I don’t need that support anymore from the Facebook world. (Mary, personal communication, March 9, 2016)

Jane, shared in her interview about a desire to post and process her grief through Facebook while paired with a struggle to protect close family members. She stated in the
interview that she posted infrequently on Facebook, and this was confirmed via live Facebook data. Her primary medium for grief support was through other avenues. She stated:

I used it in the run up. I remember posting that my grandfather had cancer and that he was going to have brain surgery and then I remember posting the day after he died. Part of my reticence to post more was because of my mom and my grandmother. I do not know if it is because of all of these issues with my grandmother that I did not want to share that with her on there or that I wanted to protect my mom from being reminded of the loss. (Jane, personal communication, March 10, 2016)

Additionally, as a writer, she shared about her struggle to name her grief experience in such a public forum. She stated:

I used Facebook indirectly to link to the writings that I made about it. That was part of it. Like I would bother people with well like, “If you want to read about this…. I also had a hard time, you know, as somebody who works with words for a living, I had a really hard time sort of quantifying what I wanted to say. This enormous grief and you do not know what, like how do I even, you know, put this into…. ” (Jane, personal communication, March 10, 2016)

Her Facebook data supported a lack of public processing and meaning making. She had one primary post related to her externalized mourning process.

Of the seven participants, Chloe, Anne, and Emma utilized Facebook frequently and consistently when processing birthdays, anniversaries and picture sharing. Chloe reported frequently utilizing Facebook to process her grief experience. This ranged from
posting about memories, her dad’s birthday, the anniversary of him passing, and creating a Facebook photo album related to her grief experience and desire to find hope and beauty in the world around her. This self-report from her interview was supported by approximately 25 posts related to her external mourning via Facebook. She shared:

   Every time I post a picture of my dad and I there’s always comments and everyone likes…. So there is just a lot. Facebook was kind of one of those things that turned into helping me…. I’ll post some pictures of me and him normally at the anniversary or his birthday or whatever, I always have a picture of me and him…. So there’s a lot so I actually dedicated an album on my Facebook and I had mentioned in the note part why I’m posting the pictures. My dad and passed and how in – to process grieving and so I don’t feel like I’m just depressed and in a dark hole that I try to find things that cheer me up throughout my day as I go about it. So that was really helpful. (Chloe, personal communication, March 11, 2016)

Both Chloe and Anne shared about participating in Throwback Thursday, which is where a Facebook user posts a historic picture of themselves. This process engaged both sharing photos while remembering past memories with the deceased, thus creating an opportunity for meaning making. Anne stated:

   I post things and tag her [mom] in it because I feel like she should have that on her board…just really thoughtful things like, “I’m really sad today”, like little blurbs of like Relay for Life. Yes, I post stuff about her, pictures. Every once in a while I’ll do a throwback, Throwback Thursday, some photos. (Anne, personal communication, March 12, 2016)
When asked about how it feels to mourn on Facebook, Anne stated in her interview, “Just release, just getting it out there, like, ‘Hey people, this sucks, losing a parent.’ Even if no one read it, it was like out there, it was like off my chest” (Anne, personal communication, March 12, 2016). Her statement contributed to the idea of externalizing one’s grief experience because it creates witnessed meaning making. Her interview, survey and Facebook data all supported this being a true theme for her.

Daniel shared in his interview about his choice to keep his grief experience private. This was supported by general his lack of grief-related activity on his Facebook wall. He shared:

Maybe the first year or first two I don’t think I did any posting on the anniversary of my dad’s passing… I guess I kind of – I don’t know if I – my reasoning, I’m not quite sure. But I guess my thinking of not – I don’t want that attention.

(Daniel, personal communication, March 25, 2016)

Daniel appeared to not utilize Facebook as part of his external, active mourning. He stated in his interview that he found doing projects with male mentors to be more emotionally beneficial to his grief (Daniel, personal communication, March 25, 2016).

Emma explained in her interview about her process in mourning through Facebook. Her perspective supported the positive effect of externalizing mourning through monthly and holiday/anniversary-focused postings. She shared:

When she died, every month, on that day, I would post a picture and just a comment or whatever and I did that for a year, which felt really important to me to do that. So I did that and then if I saw articles about grief that made sense to me I would post those. And then probably the following year I didn’t post as often but
on Mother’s Day or her birthday or we went to Leavenworth and I posted a picture of my mom and I when we went to Leavenworth, things like that. I don’t know. I guess in some ways it felt – feels, still feels important that people know that it doesn’t just go away. (Emma, personal communication, April 6, 2016)

The majority of participants presented with positive feedback and insight about how it felt to externally mourn on Facebook. Some participants reported feeling conflicted about sharing due to the personal nature of their emotions around their loss and chose to remain less active on Facebook specifically about their grief experience. Data around this theme was primarily gathered through the self-report in interviews and supported by the Facebook wall data. There appeared to be consistency between all three sources of evidence for this theme. Facebook data was the most represented in this theme due to consistent and frequent engagement with the medium as a means of meaning making and processing the unique grief experience of each participant.

**Facebook as a Means of Self-Presentation in Grief**

The third significant theme emerged from the coded data was Facebook as a means of self-presentation in grief. This theme emerged from two coded ideas. The first idea was Facebook as a means of communication, feeling pressure to say and what not to say, and the second idea was Facebook as an extension of one’s social group and struggling with how to present one’s self in grief. These two ideas were merged to encompass Facebook being a way to present oneself in grief. Within this overarching theme, behaviors such as using Facebook as a means of communication about one’s mourning experience, the experience of feeling the pressure of what to post or not post to one’s social system, in addition to the internal struggle of how one present’s themselves
in grief are all encompassed. This theme represents the lived experience of expectations, both real and perceived, from the Facebook social media platform. Most of the data pulled for this theme was from interviews and supported with survey data. The participants reported experiencing this theme in both positive and negative ways.

Mary shared about her internal struggle to “put people’s minds at ease, to let them know that I am okay” (Mary, personal communication, March 9, 2016). She shared about how it felt to post on Facebook about her experience and how she wanted to be seen by her online community. She stated:

I think it would take me a while to post things. I would really process it and think about my wording because I didn’t want to look pathetic. I wasn’t looking for sympathy. I was just... I don’t know. I don’t know what I was looking for. I didn’t want people to feel bad for me at all. I hate that. But it was more kind of like just checking in. (Mary, personal communication, March 9, 2016)

Other participants struggled with fears of judgment around choices of how to present one’s grief experience. Jane shared about struggling with how she was presenting herself in her grief. She stated:

I think I did not know how to put it out there without admitting that I was feeling as weak as I was. Then life just sort of sweeps you up and keeps you moving, so then there are other things to post about. Like your simple boxes, and go away feelings, keep it in the box. (Jane, personal communication, March 10, 2016)

Additionally she shared about the fear and vulnerability she experienced at the thought of posting about her grief. She stated:
When I wrote my first few pieces, I was afraid everybody would comment. I was afraid everybody would think I was seeking pity. I was afraid that no one would comment. That nobody cared. Then, there was an extreme neediness there too. I really needed to have acknowledgement that I was going through it. (Jane, personal communication, March 10, 2016)

She also stated:

I do not know if it is because I am being selfish of my memories or again I do not want people to think I am not okay, I do not want to burden people. That was never my MO... I wanted to invite people to take or leave my grief which they have the power to do. Again, like I do not know why I would think that anybody would blame me for sharing it, because I don’t resent other people who share. (Jane, personal communication, March 10, 2016)

Chloe and Emma both discussed how feeling what they shared would potentially impact other family members and their grief processes. Chloe shared about how important considering other family members was in how she presented her grief experience. She stated:

I didn’t want to ever come across on Facebook as all about me and my grief. So I was very cautious of how I worked it because I knew that my brothers and sisters-in-law were on Facebook. So I didn’t want to just be like it’s all about me and I miss my dad. So I was very cautious. Intentional of “we” miss him and he was the best dad ever. (Chloe, personal communication, March 11, 2016)

From a negative perspective, one participant had the option of how to present one’s grief experience tainted. Pam shared about how she didn’t have a choice of whether
or not to share about her grief on Facebook. Due to the public nature of her father's passing, she was not given space to decide how she wanted to present her grief through Facebook. She stated:

I think the part that I was really surprised about with Facebook was that people knew before I told them because other people – would post and tag. So it almost got totally out of my hands as far as I didn’t have as much control and choice over how I disclosed to people or just even just telling the story. It was on the news. So for anyone local, people found out that way and then for people not local they saw on Facebook that – my aunt tagged me in something like, “So sorry for your loss”. (Pam, personal communication, March 19, 2016)

Emma had a positive experience with self-presentation. Emma shared about being able to be more vulnerable in how she presented her grief experience through Facebook compared with how she did in real life. In her interview she stated:

People post things that they wouldn’t necessarily say in real life and then you don’t necessarily talk about it. I don’t know. There’s like – you get a little bit braver behind the screen…. I’m normally not that vulnerable so putting out something that personal was a lot easier on Facebook than it would have been any other way. I wouldn’t be like, “Hey, it’s the anniversary of my mom’s death. Would you like to see a picture?” In real life I don’t think I would do that.

(Emma, personal communication, April 6, 2016)

Through positive and negative experiences this theme emerged. Overall, participants were more apt to feel positive about their ability to self-present. The data for this theme
was collected primarily from surveys and interviews. There were no data points to triangulate this with the Facebook data.

**Negative Outcomes of Facebook Use with Grief**

The fourth significant theme is a combination of many ideas expressed from the participants around the negative effects of mourning through Facebook. These experiences range from receiving hasty or unintentionally insensitive comments, receiving unwanted contact, feeling like the information about how their loved one passed became out of their control, experiencing minimization of their personal grief experience, and an inability to find meaningful connections. These ideas were compiled from interview and survey data. There was a split between some participants who experienced negative outcomes and the other participants did not.

Some participants experienced well-meant expressions that were poorly delivered or conveyed, and thus created an emotional injury. Chloe shared about receiving comments that were meant to be kind and ultimately unhelpful. She shared:

I was very surprised on some of my – the way that people responded. One is your dad is – I mean obviously, I know my dad is with Jesus and I find comfort in that but the first couple of days I don’t need someone telling me that your dad is with Jesus now or his time must have been up or his purpose must have been fulfilled because I don’t really see that is why the car hit my dad…. They didn’t really say that it was God’s plan. I think I probably would have deleted my Facebook if that was the case but yeah, a lot of just – I know what you’re going through. Something like that would piss me off because it’s like you don’t really know what I’m going through. Can you read my mind? I’m really, really, really sad and
I don’t even know how to explain it and I’m the one that’s actually feeling those feelings. So how can you say that I know what you’re going through. Yeah, so those things – I was very shocked in knowing who would say those things.

(Chloe, personal communication, March 11, 2016)

One negative interpretation of using Facebook while mourning is the challenge of being personally too accessible and too connected. Anne and Pam shared about the challenge of feeling like Facebook was “too public.” Pam stated:

I was contacted by reporters on Facebook and I didn’t want to respond to that... It wasn’t like I had a choice to keep it off of Facebook. So at the very minimum I had to – everybody knew and then everybody was kind of – whether private message or posts on my wall like, “I’m sorry for your loss.” So there was kind of an automatically – normally I think people don’t interact with you around grief unless you kind of tell them this happened, someone died, and then they know they’re free to interact with you. But because other people told, it’s like everybody was free to interact with me around it even though I hadn’t opened the door necessarily.... It wasn’t me getting to share my feelings or share my story or to wait to share. So the immediate affects felt kind of negative. (Pam, personal communication, March 19, 2016)

Another negative experience expressed was of the limit of language available through Facebook. Daniel stated in his interview that he felt that the limitations of communication and availability of emotional response on Facebook made mourning on Facebook feel negative to him. He shared:
The only negative was, at the time, there wasn’t—like there is now—where you could put a frowny face or whatever. I don’t know if you would use the wow face. But you know it’s just it was like you like it or you don’t. Or you make just a comment. So I guess that’s the only negative part was people liked it but I think, obviously, that they didn’t mean it in that way…. It’s like, how do you like this? But it’s kind of like all you can do. (Daniel, personal communication, March 25, 2016)

When different people are grieving the same loss, there can feel as though there is a hierarchy around the type of loss experienced. Emma shared about relationships on Facebook potentially minimizing an individual griever’s experience, like grief competition. This “grief competition” can impact the ability to make meaning from the loss and find new ways to honor how the loss impacted oneself. She shared:

My mom’s sister would post some things on her own page that would totally make me so frustrated. I don’t know if it was feeling like your loss can’t compare to mine or—I don’t know. There were just things that she would post sometimes…. I remember I posted one thing. I can’t remember what it was but essentially, I miss my mom. And she had posted something like, “We all do.” And I know that she meant it from a good place but it felt like, “Oh no you didn’t”…. So I think in terms of my family that’s where, if there was anything negative, sometimes what they would say. Or it couldn’t be about me. (Emma, personal communication, April 6, 2016)

Overall, participants reported varied negative experiences about sharing their grief experience on Facebook. It ranged from Facebook feeling like too public of a medium, to
limited ways to support or respond to what the griever shared, to an inability to control your story. Primarily the data that influenced this theme emerged from questions asked in the interview and through survey data. There were no points of data to triangulate from the Facebook data.

Figure 8. Emergent themes data between participants

The above chart, Figure 8, depicts the distribution of coded data points and theme dispersal among the different sources of evidence. The purpose of this figure is to capture which sources of evidence the emergent themes developed from and how they were triangulated to validate each theme.

The first two themes (Facebook as community grief support and Facebook as external, active mourning) strongly emerged from the Facebook data. Those themes referred to the lived experience of the participants using Facebook during bereavement, and work to answer the first two research questions. The third theme about self-presentation in grief was most prominent in survey and interview data. This third theme
relates to the second and third research questions but does not answer them directly. The implications of how it felt to present oneself in their grief can address the pressures to grieve publically through Facebook and the varied pressures experienced by the participants. Lastly, the theme of negative outcomes almost exclusively emerged from interview data. Participants were able to express through dialogue with the interviewer, different ways they had negative experiences through sharing their loss on Facebook.

**Additional Themes**

Three additional themes emerged through the coding process that were noted as primary themes but not marked as significant, meaning they did not answer the research questions. These emergent themes are included as data to consider for future research directions. These themes were:

- Facebook as a way to maintain relationships.
- Non-Facebook grief support.
- Facebook as a message platform.

Facebook as a way to maintain a relationship was related to the expressed ability to contact and update family and friends, as well as maintain community through this online, social media forum. It was an avenue for friendships to have consistent contact and provide space for building community. Another theme that emerged from some of the participants was how Facebook can be used as a platform for giving back, providing insight into the unique experience of grief, and a way to share ideas, beliefs, and opinions. One participant used this as a way to promote raising funds for Relay for Life in honor of her mother who had passed (Anne, personal communication, March 12, 2016). Others reported using it to share about how grief can impact people differently.
Additionally, Facebook can be a platform to share Pinterest ideas, promoting books and authors, as well as self-promotion.

Another theme that emerged was the different ways the participants received support that was not related to Facebook. Examples of this include receiving emails and phone calls, people attending memorials, and receiving individual in-person counseling. While most of the participants experienced support outside of Facebook, this theme does not relate back to answering the research questions being explored by this researcher. These themes were not considered significant to this study as they did not directly relate to one of the research questions. They would be themes to further explore in a future study around the use of Facebook in maintaining relationships and connections with community as well as a platform for communicating messages.

Summary

The findings for this study are comprised of three sources of evidence: self-report surveys, face-to-face interviews, and live document analysis of personal Facebook walls. All participants utilized Facebook to express their grief with varied frequency of use. After both the researcher and the second coder coded the data, seven primary themes emerged from the data. Of the seven emergent themes, four were found to be noteworthy, meaning that they contributed to answering the research questions. Figures throughout this chapter depict how each participant experienced the different themes both within their own data points as well as between each other’s data points. All of the participants utilized Facebook in some way throughout their mourning and most had a mixture of positive and negative experiences. Chapter Four will provide conclusions, interpretations and recommendations from these findings.
Chapter Four

Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of Facebook users who experienced a significant loss. Specifically, I looked to contribute to the existing literature on Facebook and grief practices, and to better understand if the societal transition to a technologically integrated social lifestyle impacts the mourning process. Using a phenomenological, multiple case study methodology, I gathered data from seven participants who met the qualifications for participation. The specific qualifications for participation, as well as the parameters of the study, are described in Chapter Two. Data were transcribed, coded, analyzed, triangulated between and within sources of evidence and participants, and presented for each participant and emergent theme in Chapter Three. The purpose of this chapter is to present interpretations of the study, followed by integration of the findings, to explore the strengths of the study, and end with future directions and concluding thoughts.

Interpretation

Seven participants, six female and one male, participated in the current study. All participants experienced a significant loss in the past two to five years and reported utilizing Facebook in the mourning process. Four significant themes emerged through the findings: (a) Facebook as community grief support; (b) Facebook as external, active mourning; (c) Facebook as a means of self-presentation in grief; and (d) negative outcomes of mourning on Facebook. The results of the current study contribute additional evidence that Facebook is both helpful and unhelpful to the mourning process.
RQ1: How has social media, specifically Facebook, impacted the mourning process within the first thirteen to fourteen months of the loss?

The two primary ways Facebook impacts the mourning process is through providing connection to community and by providing space to execute the tasks of mourning. The current study confirms the findings of other studies by demonstrating the importance of feeling connected to community (Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015; Ware, 2016). This is strongly represented in the findings through all sources of evidence. Participants of the current study expressed that being able to receive support as well as give support to others who were grieving was of noted importance. The participants explained that it both allowed them to feel connected to community and gave them the opportunity to pass along support and camaraderie to someone else who was grieving. Facebook provides a platform for this supportive exchange. Additionally, the community component instills hope in the grievers as they are able to witness other people experiencing grief and not feel isolated in their current state.

Facebook creates opportunities to participate in the tasks of mourning and meaning making (Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer & Sands, 2011; Stroebe & Schut, 2001; Worden, 1982). As mentioned in Chapter One, Worden (1982) explained the four tasks of mourning: “1) accept the reality of the loss, 2) experience the pain of grief, 3) adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing, and 4) withdraw emotional energy and reinvest in another relationship” (pp. 28-32). The social networking platform of Facebook enables the bereaved individual to work through the four tasks of mourning. For example, Facebook provides a medium to work on accepting the reality of the loss by experiencing the pain of grief. This is accomplished in that the participants could share feelings,
memories, and make comments about their pain-filled emotional state. Through Facebook, participants shared that their pain was witnessed and supported, making it more bearable to experience. Regarding, the task of adjusting to an environment in which the deceased is missing, Facebook provides a unique opportunity to continue being in relationship with the deceased. Participants reported posting on their deceased loved one’s wall, tagging them in comments or pictures, and continuing to integrate them into their present day, online lives in new ways. Participants shared that this need to tag or post on their loved one’s wall decreased over time. The ability to have a gradual adjustment appeared to prepare participants for the fourth task of mourning, which is redistributing energy into other relationships. Facebook assists in this being a smoother transition due to the consistent and constant activity that occurs through that online community. Also, most participants shared that they felt less of a need to post about their grief over time due to less immediate need for support. Being able to complete these tasks made it for easier acceptance and transformation post-loss.

Meaning making, as described by Neimeyer (2001), is creating and executing rituals around the loss to better understand what it means for the griever as well as helping to influence who they want to become post-loss. Participants appeared to do this through monthly posts on the day their loved one died, honoring birthdays and anniversaries, as well as random posts where the participant was reminded of their deceased loved one through an external stimuli such as hearing a song on the radio or finding an old picture. For example, Emma shared that she would make a post with a memory and a picture of her and her mom the same day each month for the first year after the loss as that helped her receive support and show that the loss was still impacting
her. Chloe shared about creating a special photo album on Facebook titled "beauty" composed of pictures that give her hope. She shared the following on her Facebook page:

Last year after my Dad passed away, I tried to make a daily effort to see God in the midst of tragedy through his beautiful creation and new life given. I continue to live day to day seeing God's beauty which gives me hope that he is present with us.

(Chloe, personal communication, March 11, 2016)

Mary shared that she would post on Facebook anytime a song came on the radio that was special to her and her dad, and would comment about what she felt he was trying to teach her. Based on the tasks of mourning and meaning making (Neimeyer, 2001; Worden, 1982) the participants appeared to mourn externally through Facebook, which contributed to their healing process as the participants did not solely internalize their grief experience. They used Facebook as an outlet to mourn.

**RQ2: What was the lived experience of utilizing Facebook to mourn?**

Participants expressed a variety of ways they used Facebook. Some participants primarily shared that the loss occurred and that they did not interact with Facebook around their grief experience afterwards. Some participants used Facebook to spread information about the memorial service. Other participants expressed frequent journaling, posting of pictures, and receiving support from their communities through comments and likes of what they posted. Some participants would post on the birthday of the deceased, anniversary of their loved one’s death, or on specific holidays (e.g., Father’s Day, Mother’s Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas). Pam (Personal communication, March 19, 2016) shared about using Facebook to help her parent her kids around the grief they were experiencing. She was able to reach out and receive support through Facebook from
family separated by distance. Emma (Personal Communication, April 6, 2016) used Facebook to share articles relating to grief as she reported that felt important to her that others understand what it means to grieve. Anne (Personal communication, March 12, 2016) shared about using Facebook to fundraise for Relay For Life and share her grief story over the loss of her mom. She also reported that she felt posting motivational comments and memes about loss helped her connect with others about her grief so they knew how she was doing. As the Facebook platform allows for different ways of interacting on it (e.g., article sharing, picture posting) it would follow that someone mourning could interact with it and use it in a variety of ways, such as those mentioned above.

**RQ3: Was there a perceived pressure or expectation to mourn publically on Facebook?**

Based on data from interviews with the participants, the majority reported no pressure to mourn publically on Facebook. Some reported feeling the pressure to post details about the memorial or make a statement about the passing of their loved one. However, from an active, mourning perspective, the participants reported no perceived pressure or expectation to publically mourn. Using Facebook as an outlet for their grief experience was a personal choice for most participants, which is reflected in how little or how much they used it.

**RQ4: What are or were, if any, unexpected outcomes or experiences from mourning through Facebook?**

Community continued to be a theme throughout the study. Three participants reported the experience of having another person who had a similar loss reach out and
share their personal story of loss with them. They reported that this deepening in understanding and friendship left an impact and made them feel even more connected to their community. They also report feeling a desire to continue externalizing their grief through Facebook with the hope of being able to help others and let them know they were not alone. There were negative experiences reported that were not anticipated. Chloe (Personal communication, March 11, 2016) shared about how people posted things with good intentions to her wall and yet were insensitive with language and timing. Pam (Personal communication, March 19, 2016) had the most difficult and unexpected experience of the participants in that local news channels pursued her through her Facebook profile to provide more information about her father’s death. She reported feeling a strong invasion of privacy, and anger that she had not expected.

The next step for the current study is to understand and discuss what the findings mean. From an application perspective, the current study supports the belief that each person grieves in his or her own way. Some participants found Facebook to be a healthy outlet to use frequently while others chose to have a more reserved Facebook presence with their grief. All the participants reported that they felt connected to their community when they shared, regardless of frequency of Facebook posts. Most individuals reported feeling safe to share about their loss in this public forum. Due to the unique nature of Facebook, the ability to be vulnerable and receive compassion from the online community, especially when that may not be accessible in real life, can be helpful in advancing the tasks of mourning and grief processing work. The next section will discuss ways the findings relate to current literature as well as compare and contrast with other current literature.
Integration

The findings from this current study fit within the current literature around Facebook and grief in that it explores the public posts griever make on their own walls. Most other studies look at memorial pages, grief groups, or visiting/commenting on the page of the deceased individual. There is a gap around qualitative research studying what users post on their personal Facebook walls. The current study begins the conversation about what that specific action looks like for mourners and how they make meaning through their personal grief experience from a qualitative approach.

The first significant theme was Facebook as community grief support. A way to begin establishing community through Facebook is by making a public post as this allows Facebook friends to respond and provide feedback, either through reaction or comment. All of the participants of the current study created a public post about their loss on Facebook. According to Ware’s (2016) Facebook study, 66% of the 203 participants created a public post after experiencing a loss and of those that posted, and 50% reported experiencing a positive effect. Rossetto, Lannutti, and Strauman (2015) surveyed 265 people who experienced the death of someone they knew and found that community support was a positive outcome of sharing about their loss on Facebook. Participants reported it to be helpful to have people witness, respond to, and experience how their grief and feelings were expressed through Facebook (Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015). Participants of the current study, as well as previously mentioned studies, found that a sense of community and connection through Facebook was both positive and valuable. As society continues to shift toward a stronger online presence, the sense of
community continues to shift with it and people are able to feel support, connection, and community through online social networking platforms.

The second significant theme, Facebook as external, active mourning, emerged in the current study as well as other studies around this topic (Balk, 1996; Bell, Bailey, & Kennedy, 2015; DeGroot, 2012; Getty et al., 2011; Klass & Walter, 2001; Neimeyer & Sands, 2011; Strobe, Gergen, Gergen, & Strobe, 1996). By participants having a space to honor and mourn their loved one through journaling, posting pictures, sharing memories, and memorializing them, it created opportunity for meaning making and continuing bonds (Neimeyer, 2001; Worden, 1982). Pennebaker (1997) and Romanoff (2001) explored how writing and sharing stories through narrative can improve health and healing. If this theory is applied to external mourning on Facebook, it could be conjectured that this act of public posting can assist in creating opportunities for healing through a social media platform. The external mourning process pairs with Worden’s (1982) tasks of mourning, particularly the third task, where an individual works to adjust to a world where the deceased is missing. Facebook helps this adjustment be a less abrupt process as the mourner has a platform to work on this task. Klass and Walter (2001) discussed the need for humans to continue to interact with individuals who are deceased. Facebook allows for a continuation of a relationship with the deceased as well as interact in a reflective way. DeGroot (2012) and Balk (1996) addressed the need for continuing bonds to exist between the bereaved and deceased and how this can help with mourning. Facebook facilitates a long-term connection to the deceased where users get to continue their relationship even though the deceased is no longer physically present. Neimeyer (2001) shared that being able to keep continuing bonds intact presents the opportunity to
restore attachment security that is normally challenged by a death. Over time, people continuing to make meaning through avenues such as Facebook have further opportunity to process their grief and mourn.

The third significant theme, Facebook as a means of self-presentation in grief, related to how the mourner expressed their grief online and disseminated feelings and information to their “friends.” Rosenblatt (1996) introduced the idea that grieving is based on how others in society grieve at that time. With the emergence of Facebook as a current medium for grieving, users see how peers grieve through this application, which then influences how they use it. Additionally, this theme was important as it introduces the idea that Facebook allows for increased vulnerability in a way that interactions in real-life do not. Emma expressed how important it was for her to be able to share about her grief through Facebook, and yet it was not something she could do in real life. She shared, “I wouldn’t be like, ‘Hey, it’s the anniversary of my mom’s death. Would you like to see a picture?’ In real life I don’t think I would do that” (Emma, personal communication, April 6, 2016). Facebook created an avenue for Emma to be brave and vulnerable about her emotions around her loss without her feeling unsafe in expressing them. A challenging aspect of this theme, based on responses from participants, was that mourners have to consider how they present their grief experience as it could impact others who are grieving the same loss. This was a variable for half of the participants.

The final theme was negative outcomes from grieving on Facebook. Participants of the current study struggled with Facebook feeling too public at times, dealing with insensitivity in comments from others, and being pursued for information in an insensitive and harmful way. Participants additionally reported feeling hurt and
frustration due to a lack of appropriate response being available i.e. liking a public post about a loved one dying. Since the time the interviews for this study were conducted, Facebook has changed this feature and allows for an emotional response, such as sad emoji, angry emoji, love emoji, etc. Comparatively, Ware (2016) and Rossetto et al. (2015) reported negative outcomes as a corresponding theme. Of Ware’s (2016) 203 participants, only 2% experienced a negative outcome of using Facebook while grieving. Rossetto et al.’s (2015) study participants experienced negative outcomes through misinformation or incomplete information about the deceased person, feeling the person and how they died was depersonalized, and feeling confusion between “the deceased person’s death and the deceased person’s continued presence [on Facebook]” (pp. 983). With the changing nature of Facebook, some of these negative outcomes are already being addressed and changed to make Facebook a safe, positive place to express feelings of grief and loss while allowing for connections to continue to be built.

The next section will discuss and explore weaknesses of the study and how it could be improved in future research.

**Limitations.** This study had a number of limitations. The first was the scope. This was a multiple case study in the qualitative method of inquiry. There was a limit around the quantity of information to be collected. Second, while the number of participants was small and limited the quantity of information, the study focused on only those over the age of 18 who had experienced a significant loss (e.g., parent, sibling, spouse, child) between two and five years prior. There were other types of loss that were not explored in this specific study, and the time distance from the loss was tightly scoped. As all participants in the study experienced parental loss, other significant types of loss were not
explored in this study. Next, this study screened for participants that actually use Facebook. Individuals that did not use Facebook were not asked to participate in the study. Additionally, other types of social media were not explored in this study. Lastly, as I had personal experience in utilizing Facebook as an outlet for my grief experience, I realized I had a potential bias as the researcher. Implementing Patton’s (2002) recommendations for reducing researcher bias, I was vigilant to avoid imposing my opinions onto the lived experiences of the participants and strove to maintain professional integrity and impartiality.

**Future Research and Recommendations**

This section will suggest how the findings of the current study can be used in future research endeavors and include recommendations for practical applications. Facebook continues to evolve and adapt to the needs of the online social community; therefore, research should continue to pursue how these new features impact grief and mourning. Additionally, to explore and expand upon the research of this study, a quantitative study could pursue data around the public posting of loss from the personal pages of Facebook users rather than only from memorial groups/pages or the pages of the deceased. Brubaker, Kivran-Swaine, Taber, and Hayes (2011) and Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish (2013) quantitatively studied linguistic use around grief on Facebook, specifically exploring key phrases used. The current study could create further opportunities to explore grief-specific language from a linguistic perspective, by analyzing individual Facebook walls and posts to track how individuals progress through grief through online social networks.
As all participants in this study experienced parental loss, future research could explore the relationship between other significant types of loss and how that manifests through Facebook use. Whether child loss has a longer and stronger presence on Facebook over time or how spousal loss is represented. Other types of loss would be important to study longitudinally and in the short term. Additionally, how the loved one passed away could impact the frequency and content of Facebook use. If the loved one died from cancer versus suicide, that could impact how much is shared on Facebook and further impact self-presentation or how someone receives community. Another area to explore is how different personality aspects influence the degree to which one shares in their online community. People with different usage patterns may display varying amount of their grief experience. Lastly, age is a factor to consider within future studies. Different generations use Facebook to connect and communicate varying types of information. As the participants in this study were between 26 and 38, other age groups would be an area to better understand.

Another opportunity for future study is exploring how different family members utilize Facebook to express their grief and mourn. The participants mentioned that they considered how what they posted would impact their families, and the different complicated emotions experienced when someone within the family posted about the loss. A future study exploring how different family members use Facebook as a medium for grief and how the memories, photos, and comments expressed impact one another could be helpful toward improving familial conversations about grief and increased empathy for different ways people mourn. As a counselor, being able to encourage grieving clients and families to include their online communities in their active mourning
could be a beneficial tool. It allows them to feel connected to peers, reduces isolating feelings and behaviors, integrates tasks of mourning, allows for continued support over extended periods of time, and provides an outlet to externalize feelings. As this relates to family, being able to see how other family members use Facebook could allow a different avenue to relate and communicate about the loss. The current study had two siblings participate, both utilized Facebook differently to express their grief, and both were aware of how the other person expressed their unique grief experience. Better awareness and education about how family members grieve differently could allow for healthier familial interactions and provide understanding with how to support different family needs during an already difficult time.

By continuing to expand research on the negative outcomes experienced by grieving on Facebook, those findings could help provide opportunities for Facebook to change or adapt to the ever-evolving needs of its users. Some participants in the current study shared that their need to share about their grief diminished over time. As using Facebook to mourn is a newer tool, conducting longitudinal studies on the impact of mourning through Facebook would be beneficial toward further understanding how social media and online communities impact the grief process long-term.

As there was only one male in the study, it is difficult to apply his findings to a bigger population. However, his minimal Facebook posts to express his grief experience correlate with other studies around how males use Facebook (Bell et al., 2015; Rossetto et al., 2015; Ware, 2016). Ware (2016) expressed how males tend to be more reserved and avoid public expressions of emotions whereas females feel more freedom to express feelings in search of support. This is reflected in part with the current study, as four of the
six females were highly active in using Facebook to share posts, expressed feelings, and publically mourned through the online social media platform. Further gender studies around Facebook use and grief could benefit practitioners and peers in better understanding how to support grieving loved ones.

A final clinical implication of the study is the topic of online social media being a point of cultural competence for counselors and others in the helping profession. As communities continue to grow and expand online, a need to increase awareness of how this technology shift may be impacting their patients is needed. An initial assessment of online social media use may be useful to integrate within the therapy process to understand how the patient may or may not be using that tool could be beneficial to the therapy process. Being able to encourage connection if the patient already has a strong online presence may be a way for them to receive support. Additionally, understanding outcomes of sharing about grief and loss on Facebook to provide insight into how your patient may be using this resource. As new apps and tools continue to develop, further assessment of the impact of online social media will be needed. I recommend further qualitative and quantitative studies to continue understanding the varied experiences of users mourning through Facebook and other social media platforms, such as Instagram, Vine, Twitter, and SnapChat.

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, there are three main points concluded from the current group studied:

1. Overall, Facebook had a positive impact on the mourning experience of the seven participants of this study. While some experienced negative
outcomes, the positive data points were more strongly represented than negative data points. Additionally, the participants expressed Facebook being a positive experience through interviews. Mourning on Facebook was positive in the way that Facebook established community for the participants, which allowed them to feel less isolated in their grief and able to connect to other grieverѕ. Further, the participants were able to receive direct feedback validating their grief experience through Facebook comments and likes.

2. Participants of the current study utilized Facebook as a medium to grieve. A primary way that was used was as a way to disseminate information. With the emergence of a more online societal structure, participants reported sharing about the loss first through Facebook rather than traditional phone calls or texts. Facebook was the location where participants posted details of memorial services and where they were able to receive initial condolences. This is a newer trend occurring in society today. Some participants reported struggling with the perceived insensitivity of the phenomenon while others found it helpful as a way to get the information out to those who wanted it without having to feel the emotions of the loss generated through face-to-face interactions. Facebook provided a buffer that protected the grieverѕ from having to engage in traditional social cues and norms that may have caused more emotional duress. Through Facebook, the participants could share the information and instantly receive support, encouragement, and validation back from
their communities. It will be important to continue monitoring this trend as new technologies emerge, and to further explore how they impact the lived experience of grief.

3. An unexpected realization regarding mourning on Facebook was that it provides an avenue for the user to lower their guard and be more vulnerable about their mourning experience. The ability to express sadness, mourn, share photos of the deceased loved one on the anniversary of their passing, receive continual support after the loss, and simply be vulnerable, allows for more authentic mourning. Kang (2007) supports this idea through research, suggesting that when there is a reduction of social cues, people feel more enabled to be authentic with how they are feeling. Thus Facebook, with its current platform, allows for people to be vulnerable in ways they cannot in face-to-face interactions because it removes the experience of people dealing with judgment, negative facial expressions, etc. Facebook allows for giving oneself permission to be vulnerable which may lead to a more authentic grieving experience that can be readily supported by one’s online community.

In conclusion, from a social constructivist perspective, people seek understanding of the world in which they live based on the subjective meaning of their unique experiences. Therefore, through Facebook online communities, a user’s perception of how helpful Facebook use with grief will be different based on the user’s own unique perspective of what is true for them. From a phenomenological perspective, the current study explored the lived experience of seven participants around their use of Facebook
while mourning the loss of a loved one. The lived experience of mourning on Facebook was different for each participant and the current study represented those varied perspectives.
References


Appendix A

Facebook Notice
SEEKING PARTICIPANTS

I am a doctoral student researching the relationship between Facebook and grief, specifically the active part of grief called mourning.

I am looking for participants who:

1. Are over 18 years of age
2. Have experienced the significant loss of a parent, child, sibling or spouse
3. The loss occurred between two and five years ago
4. Reside in the Pacific Northwest and are available to be interviewed in person
   *Participants and their deceased loved one will remain anonymous in the research.

What is involved in Participation?

• Willing to fill out a 14 question survey
• Two face-to-face interviews that will be audio-recorded lasting between 30-75 minutes.
• Will allow the researcher access to your Facebook wall to review historic postings during specific time frame

Compensation:

• $20 gift card (i.e. Starbucks)
• Optional referral information for specific grief counseling support

If you are interested in participating, or would like more information, please contact:

Researcher: Heather L. Taylor, MA

Phone: 253-220-7797

Email: heather.taylor@northwestu.edu

*Please note that not all electronic communication is 100% confidential. Information contained in email messages may be privileged and confidential. There is some risk that any protected health information that may be contained in such email may be disclosed to, or intercepted by, unauthorized third parties. Please be aware that email communication can be intercepted in transmission or misdirected. Your use of email to
communicate protected health information indicates that you acknowledge and accept the possible risks associated with such communication.
Appendix B

Invitation Email
Mourning in the Era of Facebook  
Invitation Email  
PSYC 8972 Doctoral Dissertation  
Heather L. Taylor, MA  
Northwest University, Kirkland Washington

Dear Participant (Name),

Hello. My name is Heather Taylor and I am a Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.) student at Northwest University. I am currently investigating the relationship between mourning and Facebook and would like to know if you are willing to help.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the role of emergent technology, specifically Facebook, during the first thirteen to fourteen months after a significant loss, specifically a spouse, child, parent or sibling. I aim to do this by exploring the relationship between mourning and significant losses when much of community and relationships is based online, specifically through Facebook.

Your willingness to participate will involve two in-person interviews, responding to a brief questionnaire, and providing permission to review your Facebook wall. Confidentiality measures will be put in place to ensure your information is protected. The interviews will last between 45 minutes and 75 minutes. If you choose to participate, you will receive a $20 gift card from Starbucks as compensation for your participation.

I can answer any additional questions you may have and provide you with more information about my study. Please let me know if you are available to participate. Please reach out at heather.taylor@northwestu.edu to schedule a time to meet and I can send you the initial paperwork.

I appreciate your time and consideration to participate.
Respectfully,

Heather Taylor, MA  
Psy.D. Student, Northwest University  
(253) 220-7797  
heather.taylor@northwestu.edu
Appendix C

Consent Form
Mourning in the Era of Facebook
Consent Form
PSYC 8972 Doctoral Dissertation, Northwest University, Kirkland Washington
Heather L. Taylor, MA

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Heather Taylor at Northwest University. The study is being conducted as part of the Psy.D. program requirements and a class requirement for PSYC 8972 Doctoral Dissertation. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the impact of Facebook on the mourning process.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will participate in two in-person interviews, respond to a brief questionnaire, and provide permission to review your Facebook wall. The interviews will last about an hour. Your participation and identifying information is kept confidential.

There are minimal risks associated with participation. Some individuals may be uncomfortable answering personal questions. In particular, there is an increased risk of discomfort in answering questions about the loss of significant loved ones and the grief/mourning experience. Should any discomfort arise, you will be provided with referral information to a counselor if you wish.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate in this study at any time and for any reason. There will not be any negative consequences for you if you refuse to participate. You may refuse to answer any questions asked. All responses are confidential therefore your name and the name of your loved one will not be made known or included in any of the written results. You may keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

The results from this study will be presented to a committee for the final defense of my dissertation and at a poster presentation session of a psychological convention as part of the dissertation project requirements. The finished dissertation will be published in the ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis database online. All data from this study will be destroyed on or before August 15th, 2016.

If you have any questions about this study, contact Heather Taylor, 253-220-7797. If further questions, please contact, Dr. Becky Sherman at 425.889.7814. You may also contact the Chair of the Northwest University IRB, Professor Suzanne Barsness, at suzanne.barsness@northwestu.edu or 425-889-5763.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Heather L. Taylor, MA
Psy.D. Student, Northwest University
I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print Name of Participant_________________________________________

Signature of Participant___________________________________________

Date__________________________________________________________
Appendix D

Interview Question Guide
First Interview Questions (For Researcher Only)

PREFACE TO INTERVIEW:

“Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about your loved one. I will be asking you a number of questions today about your story, specifically about your grief experience and about Facebook. I realize that sharing some of this may be challenging for you and if you need to take a break at any time, please just ask. Additionally, you are free to decline to answer any question. I will do my best to keep any identifying information confidential. Do you have any questions before we get started?”

Tell me about yourself. What do you do for work? What’s your family like?

Tell me about when you started using Facebook? What do you use it for the most?

What type of friends do you have on Facebook? How do you know them?

How would you describe your community in real life? Do you have close friends, acquaintances, long–term friends, etc.?

Please tell me about your loved one who passed?

How did your loved one die?

What did your support look like after your loved one passed?

Do you have close family or friends?

Did you seek any counseling?

Did Facebook have a role in you sharing about your loss? How did you use it?

Tell me about how that felt to use Facebook while mourning?

Was there anything unexpected that came from sharing your loss through FB?

Other questions as needed.
Appendix E

Participant Questionnaire
Mourning in the Era of Facebook
Participant Questionnaire
PSYC 8972 Doctoral Dissertation
Heather L. Taylor, MA
Northwest University, Kirkland Washington

Name: ____________________________ Age: ________ Gender: _____
Ethnicity: __________________________ Relationship status: ________
Name of deceased loved one: __________________________ Age: ________
Relationship: __________________________ Date of passing: ______________
How did your loved one pass? __________________________

Instructions: Please read each question carefully and answer by circling your response.
*Please fill out the below information to the best of your ability. If you are unable to respond to a question, you are allowed to leave it blank.

1. Do you have an active Facebook account/personal profile? YES NO
2. How long have you had a Facebook account?
   Less than 6 months 6-12 months 13-18 months
   19-24 months 24+ months
3. How often do you currently visit Facebook (circle one)?
   3+ times daily 1-3 times a day Once every few days
   Once a week Once every few weeks Less than once a month
4. What types of things do you primarily post/share/like on Facebook? (Please score choices based on frequency with 1=most often, 2=frequently, 3=sometimes, 4=rarely, 5=never)
   _____ Personal status updates _____ Personal pictures _____ Videos
   _____ FB Friend pictures _____ Articles _____ Group pages
   _____ FB Friend status updates _____ Events _____ Birthday reminders
   _____ Personal Messages (IM) _____ Comment on friends wall
5. Why did you initially join Facebook?

6. Have you experienced the death of someone close to you (parent, sibling, spouse, child) within the last 1-3 years?  
   NO  YES

7. Have you used Facebook to express your grief experience?  
   NO  YES

8. Does your deceased loved one have a Facebook page?  
   NO  YES

9. Have you posted on your loved one’s wall since they passed?  
   NO  YES

10. Have you made status’ posts about your grief?  
    NO  YES

11. On average, how often have you used Facebook to express your grief since your loved one passed (please circle)?
    2+ times/day Once a day Once a week Once a month  
    Once every few months Only on their birthday Only on holidays  
    Only on the anniversary of their passing I don’t share my grief on FB

12. Did your Facebook usage change after your loved one passed?  
    NO  YES
    Explain?

13. Have you felt pressured or that it was expected to share your grief on Facebook?  
    YES  NO  N/A

14. (If applicable) In your own words, has there been any unexpected things happen resulting from sharing your grief on Facebook?