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## YOUNG PEOPLE AND DIGITAL GRIEF ETIQUETTE

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In the aftermath after my younger sister passed away in May 2016, I did two things. As an older sister figure among her social circles, I was compelled by an ethics of care to meet up with her close friends to talk through their grief and to solidify our newly formed friendships via shared trauma. As a digital anthropologist who has been studying young people's self-curation practices, I turned to the critical lens of ethnography to make sense of how digital technology was impacting young people's experiences with grief.

While it is tempting to claim altruism and assert that I wanted to channel the most grievous event of my life so far into productive aims to help young people, the honest confession is that turning my grief into a scholarly research project became a comforting coping mechanism. The critical distance, sincere engagement, and intimate vocabulary of ethnography was second nature to me, and employed as a cushion to approach my pain in my own time, a lens to understand my messy entanglements with hoarding digital materialities that belonged to my sister, and a distraction and excuse to return to work and busy myself away from depression. But as I penned more and more heartfelt confessions of grief on my public blog to get through the difficult lulls in the dead of the night, these words began circulating highly and going viral among small or specific grief communities online. When the unsolicited letters of comfort and vignettes of personal grief past and present started to accumulate in several of my inboxes, I decided to embark on a formal research project among young people in Singapore, beyond merely my social circles, to study constructions of digital grief etiquette.

I embodied what it was like to be both a young person managing grief in digital spaces and an ethnographer invested in understanding everyday practices. I also yearned to transit from previous scholars and their passive observations of grief and grieving to an intimate anthropological inquiry. To do this, I conducted

personal interviews with young people who self-reported using digital media (i.e. the internet, social media, devices and artifacts, non-analogue spaces) to manage their grief. Participants were solicited through three avenues: the snowballing of personal contacts, a general call for participants among undergraduates in a local university, and an opt-in interview session for participants at a local independent arts and research center with whom I was conducting community outreach work on internet culture.

I wanted to know how young people experience grief, what words and images and thoughts and feelings they associated with their loss. I wanted to understand how young people journeyed on their recovery, how this differed from analogue coping mechanisms pre-social media or from older generations who may cope in less public ways. I wanted to learn how young people created transient spaces for each other to share their grief, how they constructed solidarity and conveyed empathy and maintained networks of care. Among some of these young people, I was also gifted the privilege to witness sections of their digital estates in order to understand how they crafted content, ranging from emotive Instagram captions of meaning photographs to extensive digital catalogues of every tactile item the deceased has ever touched. Here are their stories of grief in the age of networked technologies.

## Methodology

Through in-depth, in-person interviews across five months from a pilot study in Singapore conducted between September 2016 and January 2017, this chapter considers how young people under 30 years old who have grown up with the internet manage grief in digital spaces and develop repertoires of grief etiquette. While the pilot study included personal interviews with ten young adults in their early to mid-20s and five healthcare professionals who work in palliative care or counseling services, this chapter features interview data from six young adults in their mid-20s for whom their recent experiences with loss were their first encounter with personal grief through death (see also Frost, 2014). However, the analysis presented in this chapter is informed by findings in the larger pilot study, including consultative conversations with palliative care and counseling professionals who wanted to learn how academic research had the potential to shape the types of services they provided.

The interviews conducted were between 30 and 90 minutes long. Three of the young adults were interviewed individually and the other three requested to be interviewed in the setting of a focus group. All participants offered to be acknowledged by their first names. Syed is a 24-year-old Arab male who lost his father at age 11, and through grieving on Facebook and Instagram learnt about the ethnic-related surveillance and pressures of public grieving. Luqman is a 24-year-old Malay male who lost his romantic partner at age 18, and through maintaining his partner's highly prolific blog for some time and witnessing eulogies on the blog and Friendster grappled with the sudden publicness of his private

grief. Hannah is a 24-year-old Chinese female who lost her best friend at age 24, and through grieving on Facebook and Instagram struggled with the materiality of digital data and physical artifacts that she felt were precarious and vulnerable to loss. Cherry, Arlene, and Alyssa are 24-year-old Chinese females who requested to be interviewed in the setting of a focus group, having collectively lost a close friend at age 24. Through grieving on Facebook and Instagram, the trio questioned the credibility of information and authenticity of grief expressed on social media when they witnessed competitive eulogizing among their larger social circle. Collectively, the stories of these young people constructed an infrastructure of digital grief etiquette that encompassed cathartic self-care, protective group policing, functional information sharing, and the construction of rhythms of grief that were only feasible through deep engagements with digital technology.

This chapter begins with an overview of how experiences of death and grief have been augmented in the digital age, followed by four sections on how young people mediate personal grief through digital technology. “Grief across networks” evidences the importance of audiencing grief on social media, how physical and digital co-presencing crossover between platforms, and how some young people use technology to attempt sincere or symbolic contact with the dead. “Materialities of memory” reveals a recurring insecurity over the longevity of digital artifacts and memorials, how young people convert materialities of grief-related artifacts between the digital and the physical, and the construction of digital memories. “Competitive eulogizing” demonstrates that digital eulogies are functional, that crafting the perfect digital eulogy is an important process in young people’s grief, and that grief hypejacking occurs among certain young people who reframe grief for personal attention. “Digital rhythms of grief” analyzes how grief through social media is channeled toward self-care and recovery. The chapter finally closes with some reflections on digital grief etiquette and mutual aftercare among and for the living.

## Death in the Digital Age

Death has never been more public than in the age of the internet. Alongside waves of #RIPCelebrity tributes, death-in-custody activism, and global grieving tributes on highly viral hashtags (crystalabidin, 2016) proliferating on social media are viral posts of everyday people approaching grief and documenting their experience on the internet: recounting a person’s final days (Hawken, 2016), parting words and gratitude from the deathbed (STOMP, 2016), captures of assisted suicide and “right to die parties” (Hodge, 2016), and families commemorating the deceased through visual photography (Mosbergen, 2013) and digital headstones (monuments.com, 2017).

Experiences of death and loss have been augmented and prolonged in the archive culture of the digital age (see also Walter et al., 2012). Platform affordances and cultural norms on social media have kindled an archive culture generating a

wealth of digital footprints (Madden et al., 2007). In this climate, persons who have passed away may be memorialized by loved ones, through the resurgence of digital data and the subsequent re-curation of their post-death persona. Research on death in the digital age has been formally instituted through dedicated journals such as *Death Studies* (Taylor & Francis Online, 2017), and expertise research institutes (Durham University, 2017; University of Bath, 2017).

Grieving practices have been examined in various disciplines as internet memorial pages (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Kem et al., 2013) in which the deceased and/or their funeral is commemorated on a public page, digital altars (Gould et al., 2016) in which the living pay respects to the dead via technological mediations, afterlife digital estate management (Hopkins, 2013) in which the transfer and privacy of internet artifacts belonging to the deceased are negotiated, and RIP trolling practices in which trolls hijack Facebook memorial pages with abusive content (Phillips, 2013). This chapter presents one window through which grief in the digital age can be understood through the lens of media anthropology.

## Grief across Networks

### *Audiencing Grief on Social Media*

The young people in this study were highly cognizant of the continuums of privacy and publicness of their social media habits. They were especially conscientious of the audiencing of their grief across networks depending on the types of platforms used, the visibility of their posts on these platforms, the users who could access their content, and the spillover of having their personal grief broadcast via other people's social media.

Syed decided early on to control and modify the tone of his digital eulogies across Facebook and Instagram, contingent upon the audience of each space. On his Facebook account where he has accumulated more "Friends" than on Instagram, Syed has committed to maintaining a tone of positivity and thus commemorates happier events. He regularly writes "commemorative posts" through "simple status [updates]" on his late father's birthday, and conducts a personal count of how old his father would have been if he were still around. Syed says that, on some level, his approach reflects his father's personality: "He was a . . . great man in the simplest of ways [so I usually post] just a short three liner."

While Syed's desire to convert his grief into a "more positive kind of experience" on Facebook is an act of self-care, later in the conversation he hints at a surveillance pressure enacted upon him because his family members are "Friends" of his on Facebook. Syed belongs to a community of Arabs in Singapore, who have historically been a small diaspora in the country. As such, he feels that there is greater pressure to "uphold their rituals," especially pertaining to gendered

displays of strength and vulnerability. He explains that the resilience of his two older sisters, perceived by him to be articulated through the absence of grief on their Facebook profiles, pressured him to obscure his grief even though he maintains that he is “quite in touch with [his] emotions.” He felt it would have been “uncomfortable” for Arab men to express loss instead of stoically anchoring the household. However, as a compromise, he crafts his “commemorative posts” on Facebook through a cryptic vocabulary that requires youth literacies of code switching and emotive deciphering, much like the “social steganography” described by media scholars danah boyd and Alice Marwick (2011). Syed explains that backchannel filtering and encoding is a strategy: “I curate the posts to certain extent, to make it seem as though . . . I’m a lot less sad than I really am. So there’s this sort of unspoken understanding.”

Above and beyond audiencing, Syed also modifies his digital eulogies dependent on his designated use of specific social media. On Instagram, he has had three consecutive accounts. Each account was deleted whenever Syed felt that his audience was growing larger than what he was comfortable with, and his second and third accounts were set to private and followed by only a handful of people. This decision was a response to a self-reflexivity on the impression he was imprinting upon other users:

grief goes on beyond that photo that you post. And sometimes a week later you still . . . you will have a trigger . . . and you want to [post similar grief content] but I don’t do it, because . . . I am aware and I’m conscious of the kind of image of how Instagram is able to portray me as a person.

Syed appreciated the privacy that a closed account accorded him. He says he “was a lot more vulnerable” when his “circle” was smaller. As such, he fully utilized the visual nature of Instagram and used pictures to put together “bits and pieces of [his] identity” (see also Finlay & Krueger, 2011), thus allowing him to talk about his late father “from a rather different angle” than that of his more celebratory Facebook birthday commemorations.

Although the ability to control the intended audience of one’s digital eulogies was a crucial affordance in facilitating expressions of grief, this privilege is removed when death is associated with a relatively public figure. Luqman reveals that his romantic partner was a prolific blogger in Singapore in the mid-2000s whose death was sudden and had occurred when she was traveling abroad. Thus, the young death became a subject of controversy and gossip on the internet. On Friendster, where his profile was connected to that of his partner through shared content and mutual links, Luqman began to receive “a lot of messages and friend requests” demanding the backstory the day after the death. Back then, Friendster also featured a profile view counter that registered the number of views on one’s page, and Luqman recounts that his counter was “really high.”

In a highly emotive recount, Luqman explains that the sudden sense of loss that descended upon him was compounded and sullied by the unwanted attention thrust upon him:

It's like very weird, like I felt like my privacy was . . . intruded . . . I was already mourning over someone . . . I'm trying to go through life as normally as I should . . . regarding all these strangers trying to talk, I mean, okay, I'm sure they mean no harm. They are just trying to know what happened or something. But they don't really have the business to know. Yeah, and like I didn't feel like I had space, like there's no space for me.

In this incident, networked friendships through the platform of Friendster images and hyperlinks allowed friends of the deceased and strange others to not only trace but also solicit contact and information from Luqman. Had his romantic relationship to the deceased not been visible through networked content, Luqman felt he would have had more space, time, and privacy to grieve properly.

### ***Physical and Digital Crossovers***

In Luqman's story above, he revealed that the speculations and tension around being unwillingly audienced and possibly surveillanced severely impacted his quality of life, when he perceived the harassment to bleed into physical space (Gregg, 2011). As such, he did not want to leave the house for "a few weeks" out of fear that "anyone can somehow recognize" him and approach him to start a conversation at school. This crossover between digital eulogies and in-person consolation often required rigorous negotiation and care. Syed explains that even though his eldest sister is his "friend" on Facebook and has probably seen his digital eulogies, they have "never ever talked about how sad" they were for years until recently, thus reiterating that disclosive intimacies did not always naturally translate from the digital to the physical.

However, should such mappings of intimacy occur across spaces, both Syed and Luqman reckon that there are hierarchies of social ties for which such interactions would be appropriate or taboo. On his now-defunct Instagram account, Syed says his heartfelt posts became a "conversation starter" for his close friends to learn even more about him, but insists that these had to be friends "sufficiently close" to him before such privy would be warranted. In a similar vein, Luqman felt "very weird" and disoriented when "a bunch of people" whom he did not know approached him in school to express their condolences. The digital incarnation of parasocial relations (Horton & Wohl, 1956) or "perceived interconnectedness" (Abidin, 2015) that these students felt was not at all reciprocated by Luqman, who felt that only friends who knew him "personally" had the authority or right to approach him comfortably.

### ***Attempting Contact with the Dead***

As young people grapple with their first experience of death and grief, truncating contact and especially digital communications with their loved one was a great challenge. Hannah says she continued to “write directly” to her deceased friend on private and semi-private digital platforms, personally addressing her as if she was “speaking to her,” because the loss was so sudden and they had unfinished conversations. In a similar vein, Arlene, who says she had not been keeping up with her deceased friend as much as she would have liked to, continued to send text messages to a phone number that may or may not have been tended to.

### **Materialities of Memory**

#### ***Fear of Loss of the Digital***

For a group of digitally literate and savvy users, young people feared the loss of digital footprints, artifacts, and meaningful connections with the deceased. Luqman experienced this second wave of loss when he lost information in a computer crash. He reveals that while he took care to convert his late partner’s public blog into a private domain, retain the information in his hard drive, and subsequently delete it, he had not anticipated that his computer would break down and lose everything. In regret, he tells me: “So the only memories I have are in my head, and it’s quite faint now.” Through this incident, he has come to a new appreciation of people who use social media to post content as a proxy for saving one version of their data in a cloud.

Hannah’s fear of digital loss derived from an ambiguity over the state of her deceased friend’s social media accounts. In the immediate hours and days after news of the death, Hannah had turned to Facebook’s “see friendship” function to recount their friendship. But she suddenly realized the precarity and transience of social media and felt a second impending sense of loss. Hannah reveals that she contacted a family member of her deceased friend to ask if the account “was going to be closed,” which would then constitute “a loss of [her] archive.” As a pre-emptive measure, Hannah says she print-screened and saved all the content shared between her and her deceased friend on Facebook, “just in case one day something happens.”

#### ***Conversion between Materialities***

While Luqman and Hannah grappled with cloud-based and hard drive-based digital storage, Hannah and Syed consciously converted the physical into the digital and vice versa as a backup strategy. In response to her fears of loss catalogued above, Hannah explains that she has done “very irrational things” such as printing a large number of photographs of her deceased friend. In retrospect, she realizes that this spontaneous act occurred in a bid to placate her anxieties, because she usually archives all her data digitally and diligently, “all the way up to 2013” when

she owned a smartphone. Yet, the fears of digital loss outweigh any practicalities, and Hannah has come to see that even though material objects do “degenerate,” “hard copies are more long lasting [while the] digital tends to get lost.”

On the other hand, Syed’s fears that “the physical photo itself will deteriorate in condition” encouraged him to take digital photos of his analogue photos, which he stores in multiple places such as on his smartphone and computer. Like Hannah, Syed experiences ambivalence about the materiality of his memories, but says his move toward physical artifacts is not out of “more trust” in their reliability but merely a “multi-tier approach” to prevent loss of the tangible and the abstract.

### ***Constructing Digital Memories***

Having grown up with and on digital media, several vignettes from young people evidence technology-related obsessions, both conscious and subconscious. One informant tells me that he grieved over the fact that WhatsApp messages he continues to send to his deceased friend’s phone will never be “double ticked” (to indicate having been read), to the point that he has had dreams in which he would witness his sent text messages to the deceased magically accumulate a “second tick.” Another informant tells me that she dreamt of her deceased friend “liking” her social media posts from beyond the grave as an indication of communication from the afterlife.

In the conscious world, young people moved through grief in their digital networks in stages. Hannah says she shares multiple WhatsApp chat groups with her deceased friend, where each group still refuses to remove the defunct number from the chat. “No one wants to [be the person who] removes the number,” she says, instead relinquishing this autonomy to the app or telephone network that they envision will truncate contact on their behalf eventually.

The continued presence of a deceased person’s contact number or handle in the group chat was also functional. Hannah tells me that whenever she and her friends tap into the groupchat, seeing her deceased friend’s “membership” would solicit imaginings of responses to them in the chat. They would continue their conversations as usual, but slip in subtle quips that predicted their deceased friend’s response, or send group photos to the chatgroup after an outing as if they were still keeping their absent friend abreast of their routines. As such, digital memories of the dead were not just archived and selectively invoked, but continually constructed anew and in the present albeit through the lens of speculative nostalgia.

## **Competitive Eulogizing**

### ***Digital Eulogies as Functional***

Beyond the cloud of hyper-emotionality or self-care, some young people perceived digital eulogies as functional amplifiers of information. Since digital eulogies were posted on social media where they often shared mutual friends with the

deceased, it was a convenient way to relay the bad news en masse while carving out personal space to grieve. Hannah says this is a good “news dissemination” method because she “wouldn’t want to update people individually” and be inundated with multiple queries. Posting on social media afforded her the option to selectively respond to follow-up comments or condolences, and the publicness of her post among a network of friends and intentional ignoring of follow-up comments thereafter absolved her from the pressure of responding to dyad correspondence.

However, despite some convenience, the medium of social media also solicited questions around credibility of information. Arlene recounts that when she first read Facebook posts about her now-deceased friend being very ill, the tone and content was so cryptic that she could not discern the veracity of the information. As such, she corroborated what she saw with other friends through private text messages, and contextual backstories allowed her to now interpret the subtexts of the posts.

Cherry reiterated that such backchannel corroboration was crucial. She says that the sibling of her deceased friend personally informed her of the news, and that since it was known in social circles that Cherry is especially close to the deceased, other friends who were witnessing “vaguebooking” or intentionally ambiguous Facebook posts contacted her to verify the news. Because of the speculative aspect of digital eulogies, Cherry decided that her close friends had to hear about the news directly from her, and chose to send them texts via WhatsApp. She explains that it “felt better than watching other random people post on social media” and finding out second, third, or fourth hand.

On balance, young people felt that digital eulogies were personally rewarding and useful. Alyssa emphasized that while it is tempting to dismiss social media habits and content as vanity or frivolity, the act of self-presentation in digital spaces is “inextricably” linked to “validation.” Between tears and giggles, she recalls an old joke that “if a picture doesn’t make it on[to] social media [then an event] didn’t really happen,” but swiftly contains herself to assert that social media has become so integral for self-expression that young people will feel compelled to post on their feeds about “something so big” as a first encounter with death in their lives. Cherry interjects to express that posting about milestone events both celebratory and grievous is “very normal thing to do” for people in their age cohort.

### ***Crafting the Perfect Digital Eulogy***

As the focus group informants were debating over the functionality and cynicism of grief on social media, threads emerged around the aesthetics of the perfect digital eulogy. This largely comprised a visual image and a textual caption. A basic criterion was that the photograph had to be simultaneously personal and relatable (Abidin, 2015; Abidin, 2017; Kanai, 2017), representing the poster’s unique and dyad relationship to the dead, as well as the effervescent affects and sense of recognition that a social media audience ought to be able to discern.

For the most part, digital eulogy photographs had to comprise only the deceased and the poster, preferably looking their best, or encapsulating a particularly flattering or happy moment in their time together. Many informants reported posting images of them on holiday, at school events, or at birthdays and parties. Some informants exercise another layer of filtering which they felt expressed the hierarchy of their friendship and intimacy with the deceased over other users, and chose the oldest images they had to convey that they had known the deceased for much longer and thus felt the grief more strongly.

The textual caption accompanying the photograph was equally important. Many informants expressed that it was only good decorum to post celebratory accounts of the deceased, even if they had experienced conflict in the past. Often, these were expressions of grief that flowed naturally with little editing, marking how the poster felt in that space and time. For instance, Arlene, who says she is usually not as expressive in her social media posts, tells me that she spent a long time laboring over an image and caption, and then unexpectedly posted a “very very long ass [*sic*] poetic essay” in her moment of vulnerability.

However, on a networked platform where a mass of mutual friends means that such digital eulogies start surfacing in large numbers and in rapid succession, young people began to grapple with the authority and affect of their posts. Upon listening to Cherry and Arlene’s recounts of how they crafted their digital eulogies, and on reflection of some of the digital eulogies that the three women felt were insincere, Alyssa solemnly reflects somewhat apprehensively that the days of new grief were “just very strange . . . we were talking about how weird it felt that a lot of people were posting these things online.” Cherry agreed and expressed that the prolificness of the networked grief felt as if the intimacy they genuinely shared with their deceased friend had been watered down.

In a similar vein, on wrapping up her spiel on the long criteria for a perfect digital eulogy, Hannah slips into a somber moment and reflexively offers that such actions may not indicate that posters have “anything to prove.” She argues that while it is tempting to see such curation of digital eulogies as calculated or insincere, young people would feel compelled to put in effort to present the deceased in the best light, posting something that is “accurate and depicts the friendship as it is.”

### ***Grief Hypejacking***

Despite Hannah’s intimately honest and generous assessment, the three women in the focus group encountered a few instances of “grief hypejacking,” which I frame as the bandwagoning on high-visibility hashtags or public tributes where users wrestle to misappropriate highly public channels of collective grief for self-publicity. This frame posits that grief hypejacking occurs when “public grieving”—in which users sincerely partake in a global expression, narrative, and dialogue of a grief event through the use of high-visibility trending hashtags or by

partaking in highly visible networks of grief—transits into “publicity grieving”—in which users opportunistically harness the attention currency of high-visibility trending hashtags or public tributes to promote their (self-)brand or wares. While I have discussed and catalogued instances of hashtag grief hypejacking elsewhere (crystalabidin, 2016), in this section I discuss grief hypejacking as perceived by young people when self-serving or undeserving others publish digital eulogies.

As mentioned earlier, Alyssa, Arlene, and Cherry felt that many digital eulogies of their late friend were insincere and intentionally crafted for self-attention through self-pity or over-affiliation. I reproduce below a moment during the focus group when the three women were especially agitated and pushed through their sobbing and tears to recount their observations:

ARLENE: I think we were kind of mad at one point because we felt like—it’s very strange, because we didn’t see just *very close friends*, we saw like people . . . who we felt *barely knew her* . . . I mean . . . even though you were *not very close* to [the person who] passed away, you kind of feel like it affects you, but it also feels like *a bit offensive* to . . . you didn’t even know her . . . why are you *capitalizing on* someone’s death? . . . [one post said] we [the poster and the deceased] bumped [into each other] at the toilet once . . . I was legit like . . . stop it.

CHERRY: . . . also [it’s] because they post [about] the death in [response to] trends . . . *tag, tag, tag*.

ALYSSA: I was *very offended* . . . for me it kind of like *sullied* the whole thing . . . I feel it’s ok [to post digital eulogies] but the manner in which they do it . . . I would say [they’re only feeling] *bumped out* probably . . . [because they’re posting things like] “oh my god this girl, even though I didn’t know her . . .”; yeah, because think about the people who are *actually* like, mourning for her, they’re *not interested* to hear [these].

CHERRY: I’m thinking [that this is what] irks me about the Facebook [eulogy] posts because, after that I unfollowed a lot of people.

In this exchange, the three women used several descriptors to segment hierarchies of affinity and authorial claims to grief based on a few criteria. The first rule relates to the status of a digital eulogy poster’s relationship to the deceased. Posters who belonged to more central and intimate social circles and maintained more recent and active relationships with the deceased had more right to grief. “Very close friends” were “actually mourning,” while those who “barely knew her,” and were “not very close” were perceived as merely feeling “bumped out” rather than actual grief. The second rule relates to the modality of the digital eulogy and how it surfaces the affordances of social media. Posters who were observed utilizing visibility-amplifying social media tools, such as tagging other users, hashtags, reposting posts, or posting multiple posts in succession, were perceived to be “capitalizing on” a digital eulogy to gather attention toward themselves (see also Marwick & Ellison, 2012).

The third rule relates to the message of the digital eulogy and how sincere it was perceived to be. Posters who focused the digital eulogy on themselves and their own feelings, rather than celebrating the qualities of and commemorating the deceased, were deemed to be insincere, “offensive,” and “sullied” the experience of networked grief. The final rule relates to hierarchies of friendship groups among those experiencing networked grief. Posters were expected to understand that some of them had more authority to grieve over others, contingent upon arbitrary measures of affiliation of affect that privileged the longest friend, closest friend, most frequently co-present friend, most digitally networked friend, romantic interests present and past, to name a few, and that others were expected to give them precedence, space, and time for their grief to surface over others.

If these young people come across as fiercely territorial over the terrain of digital grieving, or exceedingly protective over the right to circulate digital eulogies in the appropriate mode, medium, and message, it is rightfully because they are of a cohort for whom relationships with digital technology are functionally complex, intensely intimate, and highly integrated into everyday life. Above and beyond relationships with digital media, such strong reactions are also because this is after all a young person’s first encounter with death, grief, and personal loss, where congregating in digital spaces has become a first resort and instinctive reaction to make meaning, find answers, and sooth the self.

## Digital Rhythms of Grief

As a segue into closing our conversation and providing opportunities for mutual aftercare for each other, I asked my informants if they felt distance from their digital technologies would aid in their recovery. It is at this juncture that I was privileged to witness the magic of these resilient young people pulling themselves out of depressive blackholes to ready themselves to function to normative society again. Solemn faces cheered up, voices adopted an upward inflexion, and narratives became more aspirational than nostalgic.

Alyssa tells me that even though the grief she and her friends feel is still very real, they are “quite lighthearted” in their approach to life and would intentionally meet up to keep each other afloat by committing to their social routines as if their deceased friend were still around, and digitally cataloguing these moments of normalcy on social media to encourage each other and the peers around them. Luqman tells me that his eventual decision to delete his late partner’s blog—despite some regret over having lost the backup in his hard drive—was because he was focused on progressing with life rather than “holding on to the past.” Syed tells me that his Instagram projects were specifically to “document [his] growth” out of grief, and that deleting the last account was a symbolic act that he has accumulated strength to “move on” without the deadweight of hurtful memories in digital artifacts.

Contrary to a normative belief that social media disrupts “natural” processes of grief, in part due to newer affordances such as Facebook’s “Year in Review” function that has cultivated “inadvertent algorithmic cruelty” by resurfacing old photos of the deceased on the feeds of the living (Meyer, 2014), young people are exercising agency, wit, resistance, and self-care in utilizing the rhythms of digital technology, digital media, and digital life to understand their grief.

I remember that on the morning of my sister’s cremation, I returned to a WhatsApp groupchat comprising her closest friends from all walks of life asking for strength. Her friends flooded my phone with group photographs, ridiculous memes, affective emoji, and text. Some reminisced, some humored, some loved, some prayed. They asked if I can maintain her Facebook account and Twitter feed. They asked if I can preserve her phone line and email accounts. They asked if I can mediate their distress by holding these digital spaces for their grief to unravel as they make sense of loss at such a young age. I promised that I would do so, and in so doing, my sister would live in everyone’s pockets, through their digital devices and traces, and be in “every place at once” (Abidin, 2016).

## Grief Etiquette

In closing each of these personal interviews and the focus group, I intentionally focused on questions on care chains and aftercare, in relation to the loss of their loved one as well as the process of recounting the grief to me during our conversations. As a researcher who had recently experienced grief myself, these emotionally intense conversations were not easy to conduct in person time and time again, just as it must have been arduous for my informants to be intimately transparent with a researcher whom they willingly trusted with their public displays of vulnerability. While this work necessitates laborious mutual care and self-care, it is undeniably valuable.

This became clearer to me as I began consulting and conversing with health-care professionals in palliative care. One hospice nurse expressed that as a patient approaches their end of life, most family members single-heartedly focus all their effort and affect on that one person, so much so that when the patient passes away, loved ones are suddenly hit with the grief all at once and are unable to transit into care for each other, or “care for the living.” In other words, despite social workers and counselors preaching the value of “care chains” (Hochschild, 2000), many people who are deep in grief about the impending loss of a loved one simply do not have the mental capacity and physical resources to plan for aftercare and self-care.

One palliative doctor I spoke to reported seeing an increasing number of young patients in their late teens or early to mid-twenties. Sorrowfully recounting a memorable incident in which her young patient instructed her to post a specifically worded status update on his Facebook after death, she came to realize that young people deeply valued their digital estates as platforms to communicate

gratitude and farewells even on their deathbed. In a handful of other instances, young patients requested that their palliative doctors and counselors add them on Facebook or read their blog in order to access sentiment they felt incapable of articulating in person, in physical spaces, via traditional media.

Despite the very crucial work that such palliative staff engage in, much of this work is negotiated ad hoc on-the-go as they “play by ear.” Most staff do “what feels right” based on their individual relationships with their patients, or on their personal concepts of etiquette and ethics. It is at this juncture that the insights from the young people involved in my project on grief in digital spaces will certainly help to inform and shape healthcare industry practices on how the young feel grief, do grief, progress from grief, and grapple with mortality in the age of the internet.

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