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Social Grief: A Grounded Theory of Utilizing Status Updates on Facebook as a Contemporary Ritual

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Social Grief: A Grounded Theory of

Utilizing Status Updates on Facebook as a Contemporary Ritual

by

Celeste Catania-Opris

A Dissertation Presented to the

College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences of Nova Southeastern University

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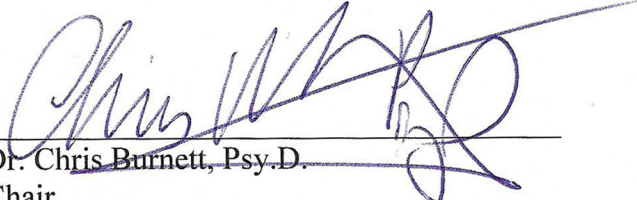
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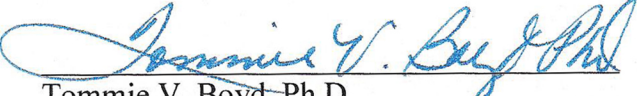
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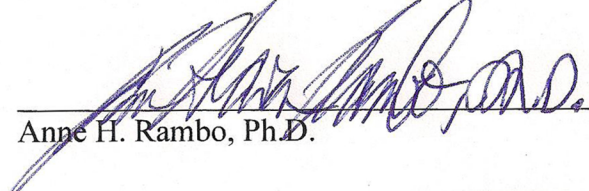
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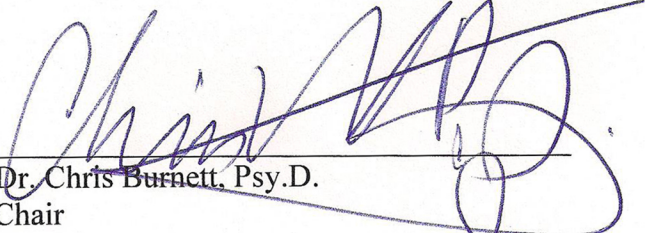
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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Anna and Domenico Catania, who have supported me throughout the years and continue to motivate me to be the best person I can be in my life. This dissertation is also dedicated to my husband, Adam Opris, because without you there is no us. There is no one else with whom I would share my life.

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Table of Contents

Abstract

The popular Social Networking Site, Facebook, offers its users the ability to

communicate with others from all over the globe. Individuals can create a virtual identity

for themselves enabling members to call, message, and locate others in a matter of

seconds. The number of Facebook users appears to increase; yet, the number of members

who die daily is not normally accounted. Facebook now permits the memorialization of

the deceased's profile. This allows members to continue commenting, sharing photos and

videos, and visiting the deceased's Facebook page. This trend led to the central question

of this study, "What benefits, if any, are individuals receiving by utilizing Facebook

status updates in order to cope with loss?" A gap in the literature exists pertaining to the

creation of status updates for adults (25-64 years old) who have lost an immediate family

member within the past year, as other studies have focused on adolescents' and college

students' grieving processes on Facebook. As the principal investigator, I looked for what

may or may not be *different* for individuals using Facebook status updates to cope after

the loss of a loved one. I did so by interviewing seven participants, transcribing digital

voice recordings, and using a grounded theory methodology to code and search for

themes and patterns within the data. Participants were recruited using fliers, word of

mouth, and emails sent to members of Nova Southeastern University. Findings from this

study led to the discovery of the theory *Social Grief* after participants shared they

received support, validation, and closure by using Facebook status updates to cope with

the loss of an immediate family member.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

"I can't believe it's been 4 years. I miss you every day.

I will always love and think about you"

─Facebook Member

The Internet is a creature of its own. The virtual world is a dimension that our minds can faintly grasp. Yet, contemporary conversations tend to include references to breaking news, recent events, and upcoming activities introduced by online sources. While interacting, people typically will include, "Did you hear . . ." or "Did you see . . ." commonly referring to something they saw online. The Internet is essentially inescapable, but appears something people do not want to escape. Every day the Internet extends us the opportunity to inform and to educate ourselves on occurrences that are happening globally, offering the world at our fingertips. The Internet even allows us to view live interactions, instantaneously from anywhere in the world, creating a feeling of being at the event ourselves. Many of these activities and exchanges are also displayed on popular Social Networking Sites (SNS), such as Facebook.

According to Facebook (2015), the site has nearly 1.59 billion monthly active users making it one of the most widely used Social Networking Sites in the world. Founded in 2004 by Harvard University student Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook was initially available to college students in the greater Boston area, and several years later, accessible worldwide (Chang & Heo, 2014). Facebook's mission is "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (Facebook, 2015, para. 1). The site offers its users the ability to communicate with others from all over the globe. In essence,

Facebook has become "an indispensable part of many users' everyday lives, breaking the boundary between their virtual and real worlds" (Chang & Heo, p. 79).

Facebook offers a multitude of functions for communicating as it "enables cheap, casual communication with people who would otherwise have lost contact, particularly those without the time or inclination to engage in more formal, traditional forms of communication" (Young, 2011, p. 31). Presently, anyone with a valid email address can have a Facebook account. With technological advances, Facebook users can now call, message, locate others, and so forth in a matter of seconds. Individuals are able to create a virtual identity for themselves on the site. According to McEwen and Scheaffer (2013), such content includes "sending and accepting friend requests ('friending'), liking pages, adding photos, tagging one's self and others in photos, writing photo captions, adding information in the 'About' section, posting statuses, making wall posts, generating comments, and uploading videos" (p. 65). The number of Facebook users appears to increase on a daily basis perhaps due to these unique features. Still, the number of Facebook profiles linked to the deceased is not normally taken into account.

Research by Kasket (2012) illustrated that "as Facebook's popularity grows and endures, many profiles are becoming grave markers of the dead, scattered among the profiles of the living" (p. 62). Until recently, Facebook would delete a deceased individual's account, once notified of the person's death. Based on excessive feedback from users of the SNS, Facebook now memorializes the deceased's profile, allowing Facebook users to continue commenting, sharing photos and videos, and visiting the deceased's Facebook page. This resulted from Facebook members openly sharing that they were unable grieve properly after losing a loved one (Facebook, 2015). Facebook

administrators were being told that family and friends *needed* to visit the deceased individuals' pages so that they could continue writing the deceased messages on their Facebook pages and openly share memories about the deceased (Young, 2011). As a result, Facebook users can still have a relationship with the deceased by "creating memorial pages or by continuing to post on his or her active wall; directly messaging the dead; posting, tagging, adding captions to photos of the deceased; and tagging him or her in comments" (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013, p. 71).

In general, people grieve differently. Some individuals immerse themselves in their daily activities, ignoring or repressing any negative emotions associated with loss. Many people carry a picture or visit the deceased's grave; at times, talking to the photographs or graves as if the deceased were in their presence. Countless others isolate themselves away from family, friends, employment, and overlook self-care. For individuals who are reluctant to surround themselves around other people, Facebook allows grief to become more communal—something very different than traditional support groups (Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2012). From the comfort of their own homes, the bereaved can experience communal grief by participating on Social Networking Sites, like Facebook. The bereaved use Facebook to share and express what matters to them and to stay connected with friends and family (Facebook, 2015). These public expressions are particularly evident when experiencing the loss of a loved one. In a way, these experiences are similar to "talking to a photograph" of the deceased, except the photo remains on a digital realm.

Personal Realization

I first noticed this trend when my best friend lost her father to lung cancer in 2012. My friend wrote a status update on Facebook the day after her father's death and appeared to notify her Facebook friends about the loss of her father. Status updates are "self-disclosed text descriptions written by the profile owner about current locations, emotions, or activities" (Egan, Koff, & Moreno, 2013, p. 46). My friend poured her emotions into this open forum, allowing her family and friends to witness her sorrow. Coincidently, "Facebook is used as a forum not only for communicating and connecting with people, but also as a place where one is being listened to" (Ilyas & Khushi, 2012, p. 505). Perhaps my friend felt listened to on Facebook. Compared to the common methods of grieving on Facebook I previously saw, which included sharing photos and writing on the deceased's Facebook page, I noticed my best friend would write status updates about her father. As discussed by Young (2011), "Photos and status updates are also important tools for strengthening bonds with offline entities" (p. 30).

In the status updates, my friend would write a message to her father as if he were able to read her words. At first I was taken aback by this action, because I wondered how someone could profess their emotions in front of numerous "friends" and acquaintances. I could not fathom how one could be so vulnerable in a virtual world where physical contact does not exist and similarly physical connection could not take place. Then, I realized my best friend somehow may be benefiting from her posts. Perhaps, in her own way, she was just *grieving.* At times, my best friend would post two status updates in one day. In the status updates, she told her father that she still needed him, described what she did that day, discussed how the kitchen sink needed to be fixed, and so forth. Although

her father was no longer physically present, he still managed to *exist* in her life. I began

to wonder why did she write these posts on a public site? Why was it necessary to post

status updates daily or multiple times a day? Was she benefiting from writing these

messages on her personal profile page? Was she also trying to reach someone else in

particular? Did she feel better after writing a status update about her father? How did it

feel to have others participate in her grieving process? By conducting qualitative

research, I intended to interview mourners who had utilized Facebook status updates in

hope of discovering if they benefited from these public expressions.

Gap in the Literature

A gap in the literature exists pertaining to the creation of status updates on

Facebook, specifically for adults grieving the loss of an immediate family member and

how these status updates may be used as a present-day death ritual. This gap increased

my curiosity in this topic and led to the central question of the study, "What benefits, if

any, are adult clients receiving by utilizing Facebook status updates in order to cope

with the loss of an immediate family member?" The focus of this study searched for what

may be *different* about using status updates on Facebook, compared to other traditional

rituals of grieving. Existing research asserts that "Facebook is the habitual site for

interaction with friends, and by extension the logical space for responding to a user's

passing, contrasted with the sense of alienation from the traditional, physical sites of

mourning, such as a cemetery" (Lingel, 2013, p. 193). Respectively, the site's "massive

adoption and immediacy increase the chances of reaching a wide audience of people who

knew the deceased, as opposed to a newspaper obituary" (Marwick & Ellison, 2012, p.

395). Generalization is limited in this study as I mainly focused on individuals from 25-

64 years old who lost an immediate family member within the past year. I was specifically interested in this population as other studies focused on adolescents and college students' grieving processes on Facebook. Likewise, this study was limited by specifically focusing on status updates compared to Facebook memorial pages in which extensive research exists. Either way, these limitations may have added a unique understanding to the varied ways adults participate in the grieving process and offer insight to the coping mechanisms contributed by modern modalities.

Purpose of the Study

I firmly believe the findings of this study were advantageous to clinicians by demonstrating various rituals clients use to cope when grieving and adding significant information about the grieving process. Marriage and family therapists, mental health counselors, social workers, psychologists, and counselors may benefit by being introduced to a distinctive way clients grieve and what may be helpful. Although traditional support groups still exist, which allow the bereaved to meet weekly with others experiencing similar heartache, a transition is happening towards virtual support groups. These virtual memorials include memorial webpages, funeral home virtual guestbooks, and memorial groups on social networking sites, such as Facebook (DeGroot, 2012). These settings allow mourners to interact with others who are grieving from any place at any time. As long as members have access to the Internet, they can continue participating in communal grief with others from all over the world. Recent research suggests that individuals "want to have contact with others to share their reactions. They want immediate access to others" (Pfohl, 2012, p. 36). Over the last several years, more research has been conducted on the benefits of Facebook memorial

pages for the bereaved (DeGroot). Therefore, it was useful to examine the potential

benefits, if any, status updates can offer towards understanding grief.

Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the background pertaining to the study and

offered a personal reflection of my intentions involving this research. Furthermore, I have

considered the multitude of available functions on Facebook, while presenting the gap in

the literature discussing how status updates may be used as a contemporary death ritual.

In chapter two, I will present an extensive literature review, particularly theories

regarding grief in general. In chapter three, I will describe the methodology that was

applied to this study, mainly a qualitative framework with a focus on grounded theory. In

chapter four, I will analyze the data gathered from seven participants who utilized

Facebook status updates to cope with the loss of an immediate family member. In chapter

five, I will discuss the implications for future research.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Before the 20th century the most common death in the U.S. was of a child, leaving behind a house in mourning (Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2012). Grief was a shared experience for those still living in the home. Presently, the most common death has become that of the elderly, typically leaving behind a widow and adult children (Walter et al.). This could be isolating for the surviving family members, as most are no longer co-resident. In these cases, the bereaved allow the dead to live on in everyday conversations (Klass & Walter, 2001). These conversations have somewhat shifted over the last decade. In today's world, conversations can take place in person, on the phone, or most recently—online.

Mourners have the opportunity to grieve online offering a shared experience of grief. These experiences commonly take place on Social Networking Sites, although Virtual Support Groups still exist for these purposes as well. Social Networking Sites (SNS), such as Facebook, "afford a unique lens through which to examine a human interaction and self-presentation online" (Carr, Schrock, & Dauterman, 2012, p. 176). Facebook is a system that provides many means for communicating with others (Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010). The site has become a public forum for communication in our digital age and it is used to send messages, share photos, and communicate instantaneously with others from all over the globe (Levitt, 2012). Facebook "permits users to create a cover photo, profile page (and set picture), an about area, to publish contact details, to share content, to run apps, to designate favorites list, and to administrate privacy settings for friends, acquaintances, and public" (Aladwani, 2014, p. 271). Individuals use Facebook "to stay connected with friends and family, to discover

what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them" (Facebook, 2015, para. 1). Furthermore, it appears that individuals are using Facebook to express themselves after experiencing the loss of a loved one.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher examined the process in which adults utilize Facebook to grieve, as it is useful for clinicians to educate themselves on the methods clients may use to cope with loss. Facebook is a remarkable platform to study as it is a "structure made up of individuals with a commonality, be it friendship, an interest, relationship, knowledge, experience or belief system" (Young, 2011, p. 22). A recent commonality includes grief and according to McEwen and Scheaffer (2013):

> Facebook offers its members, via features and policies, a locale for the
>
> bereaved user to access an online community for support, to act out front stage
>
> performances of mourning regardless of physical geography, and to negotiate the
>
> private backstage performance of grief through a continual online bond with the
>
> deceased. (p. 72)

Death is "irreducibly physical, but it is also social. Dying presents an entirely new situation for each individual who faces it" (Walter et al., 2012, p. 276). The way people deal with death varies from person to person; every individual handles grief differently.

The Grieving Process

Many people feel lost and confused once a loved one passes away. Others become angry, either with God, the deceased, or even themselves. Countless questions come to mind when one experiences such a tragedy, such as why the death happened. Some individuals blame themselves, wishing they would have done something differently then maybe their loved ones would still be alive. Numerous individuals suffer an intense

feeling of loneliness. In essence, "Grief is the reaction to loss, loneliness the reaction to deprivation" (Parkes, 2001, p. 9). The bereaved feel deprived of their loved ones who have passed, some hoping that the entire experience was simply a nightmare.

Every person reacts differently and there is not a typical response to loss, as "there is no typical loss" (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 7). Grief is a personal process, which is one of the reasons why it is so challenging to understand. In other words, "Our grief is as individual as our lives" (Kübler-Ross et al., p. 7). Perhaps this may be why we find it difficult to relate to or comfort the bereaved, because we cannot know exactly how someone feels. Parkes (2001) insists, "Grief is a process and not a state" (p. 7). The grieving process can be a life-long experience. Mourners will make progress towards healing, but this process can be rather taxing on the bereaved. Several theorists believe that several stages of grief exist. Even though the models may appear dissimilar, each leads to accepting the loss and reorganizing one's life.

Stages of Grief

Bowlby's Model of Grief

When discussing the stages of grief, many refer to John Bowlby's model. The stages of Bowlby's model are called: *Numbness, Yearning, Disorganization and Despair*, and *Reorganization* (Bowlby, 1980). The first stage, *Numbness*, is when one first hears the news of their loved one's passing. Some feel stunned, and unwilling to believe their loved one is truly gone. This stage "usually lasts from a few hours to a week and may be interrupted by outbursts of extremely intense distress and/or anger" (Bowlby, p. 85). People experience many emotions at a time, sometimes not knowing how to process these feelings. The second stage, *Yearning*, is "searching for the lost figure lasting some

months and sometimes for years" (Bowlby, p. 85). Bowlby (1980) described these as

"pangs of intense pining" which lead to distress and intense sobbing (p. 86). In this stage,

the bereaved can also feel restlessness, guilt, panic, insomnia, and preoccupation

(Bowlby). The third phase, *Disorganization and Despair*, is characterized by conscious

searching, questioning why the loss occurred, and beginning to accept the permanence of

the loss (Bowlby). Individuals typically feel depressed and sleep for longer periods of

time. Lastly, *Reorganization,* is described as the "slow but steadily representational

models of the self and of the world beginning to align to the new situation" (Bowlby, p.

120). In the final stage, individuals' depression begins to subside, resulting in feeling

hopeful and more energetic.

Parkes' Model of Grief

Colin Murray Parkes is a researcher who expanded Bowlby's phases of grief.

Similar to Bowlby's model, Parkes added: *Shock and Numbness, Yearning and*

Searching, Disorganization and Despair, and Reorganization (Parkes, 2001). Parkes

included *Shock* to the first phase as he believed shock and distress are initially

experienced, along with a feeling of numbness (Parkes). Here, the bereaved may have

outbursts or feel ill once hearing about the loss of their loved one. Again, these are the

initial feelings for the bereaved, which can last a few minutes to several days. To the

second phase, Parkes added *Searching*, as he described the bereaved tend to search and

yearn for the deceased. Parkes (2001) explains, "Pining is the subjective and emotional

component of the urge to search for a lost object" (p. 44). At times, people will walk

around their homes, looking for the deceased, as if he or she were still there. During these

times, anger and "pangs" are commonly experienced which are "episodes of severe

anxiety and psychological pain" (Parkes, p. 43). These feelings occur spontaneously and eventually become less frequent, but tend to reemerge when something like a photograph brings the deceased to mind. Parkes kept the third phase, *Disorganization and Despair* and the fourth phase, *Reorganization,* the same as Bowlby discussed. Parkes realized that the characteristics of the final two phases were analogous to Bowlby's discoveries. In the *Disorganization and Despair* phase, the bereaved appear to be apathetic, withdrawn, and rather depressed (Parkes). Likewise, in the *Reorganization* phase, people begin to accept the changes in their lives and start planning for their futures (Parkes).

Kübler-Ross Model

One of the most widely known models of grief was introduced by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. The five stages of grief in the Kübler-Ross model are: *Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance* (Kübler-Ross et al., 2005). Although it is not considered one of the stages of grief, "anticipatory grief" is the "fear of the unknown, the pain we will someday experience" (Kübler-Ross et al., p. 1). Some of us randomly think about losing our loved ones and we fear that they will no longer be present in this world. Understandably not every person thinks this way, and most people disregard these melancholic thoughts. However, when the death of a loved one does occur, individuals will then experience the first stage of grief—*Denial.*

In the initial stage, one "denies the pain while trying to accept the reality of the loss" (Kübler-Ross et al., 2005, p. 10). This process is one that resonates with many individuals who have lost a loved one. At this point, the bereaved cannot accept that their loved one is no longer present, and in turn, are in denial. The second stage, *Anger*, is the most immediate emotion, but other feelings will also emerge (Kübler-Ross et al.). Along

with anger, the bereaved experience sadness, panic, hurt, and loneliness (Kübler-Ross et al.). The bereaved can be angry at the situation itself and at other times blame themselves for the death. It is useful to remember, "Underneath anger is pain" but it may take time for the bereaved to process these emotions (Kübler-Ross et al., p. 15). The third stage, *Bargaining*, is when the bereaved negotiate with the pain and plead to do anything to not feel the pain of the loss (Kübler-Ross et al.). Some individuals bargain to God; others call out to the universe; and some make these negotiations within their own minds.

The fourth stage, *Depression*, is difficult for some to manage. During this stage, the bereaved experience intense levels of sadness. Some view these emotions as something "unnatural: a state to be fixed; something to snap out of" (Kübler-Ross et al., 2005, p. 21). People typically feel uncomfortable when encountering someone who just lost a loved one and try to "fix" these natural emotions. Many people do not know how to respond to mourners. Kübler-Ross et al. (2005) argue "In grief, depression is a way for nature to keep us protected by shutting down the nervous system so we can adapt to something we feel we cannot handle" (p.21). Contrary to popular belief, the human body and mind ordinarily protect us from harm. The emotions experienced during the *Depression* stage are normal, and not something to be fixed. These emotions will pass, but "may return from time to time, but that is how grief works" (Kübler-Ross et al., p. 22).

The final stage of grief, *Acceptance*, is realizing that the loved one is truly gone and being able to move on in our lives. Essentially, this stage is about "accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone and recognizing that this new reality is the permanent reality" (Kübler-Ross et al., 2005, p. 25). Some people believe that *acceptance*

means we will forget the deceased. Kübler-Ross et al. (2005) insist that the bereaved will never forget their loves ones, but will learn to form a new relationship—"we learn to live with the loved one we lost" (p. 25). At this point, the loss is accepted and the healing process continues.

The Impact of Grief

After years of repressing our attitudes and expressions about grief in our culture, we have begun to speak openly about death (Roos, 2012). Still, when a person dies, we feel a sense of discomfort for the bereaved. According to Parkes (2001), "We have less fear of the newly bereaved, but we still find it difficult to accept their need to mourn, and when forced to meet them we find ourselves at a loss" (p. 9). In a way, we find ourselves at a loss for words. The healing process takes time and coping with the loss can require "longer-term adjustment" (Roos, p. 2). Perhaps the most importance lesson is to remind ourselves, "We will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; we will learn to live with it. We will heal, and we will rebuild ourselves around the loss we have suffered" (Kübler-Ross et al., 2005, p. 230). Luckily, the stages of grieving "provide us with a construct to guide and manage our emotions and with a timetable that dictates how much longer we will have to endure the grieving" (Scheid, 2011, p. 2).

Grieving is encouraged as a way to properly handle a loss (Scheid, 2011). Grief has become more public over the last decade, especially on the Internet (Walter et al., 2012). This avenue "may also facilitate access to how other people react to grief through blogs, websites and social networking comments and responses" (Frost, 2014, p. 258). As the bereaved experience loneliness and anger, many turn to various avenues to cope. Losing a loved one is considered one of the most painful experiences in a person's life,

and for those who have never lost a loved one it can be difficult to relate to the bereaved. During these times, the bereaved can turn to mental health clinicians, support groups, or even virtual support groups.

Coping Mechanisms

Support Groups

Over recent decades, it has become more popular to turn to others for help after experiencing the loss of a family member. It is no longer uncommon to seek console in others. Some find peace by turning to support groups as a way to deal with the pain associated with death. Research indicates, "Recent decades have witnessed the rise of self-help groups in which bereaved people create a community not with those who knew the deceased but with strangers who have suffered the same category of loss" (Klass & Walter, 2001, pp. 442-443). It is can be assumed that a significant portion of the bereaved who attend support groups may prefer physical human interaction, considering these groups still exist and thrive to this day. Perhaps there are individuals who want to relate to others who share a similar story as "people feel psychological distress and many turn to others for support" (Pfohl, 2012, p. 36). Furthermore, it is probable that it may seem impossible for mourners to envision moving on, but witnessing the success of others in their support groups may give them hope.

Research shows that in a time of tragedy, "people search for ways to reach out for catharsis, information, and solace" (Levitt, 2012, p.78). Many support groups exist for this purpose. Individuals may turn to a support system when experiencing a tragedy in their lives. Several support groups currently prosper and have done so for decades. One specific group exists to provide friendship, understanding, and hope to those going

through the natural grieving process (The Compassionate Friends, 2015). This group has

been expanding throughout the U.S. for the last 40 years and mainly focuses on aiding

individuals after the loss of a child. Another leading support group provides nationwide

support to survivors of suicide loss who have lost a family member, loved one, or friend

to suicide (The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention [AFSP], 2015). Likewise,

another support group has chapters throughout the U.S. and provides support for people

who are newly bereaved, including parents, siblings, and grandparents (Bereaved Parents

of the USA [BP/USA], 2015). This national organization offers brochures, articles,

poems, newsletters, and hosts annual events for the bereaved. Lastly, the final support

group that will be mentioned meets weekly to help face the challenges when grieving the

death of a family member. In this support group, individuals "discover there are others

who have the same kind of feelings they do and who understand the hurt they feel and the

loss they have experienced" (Griefshare, 2015). Interestingly, "most 'GriefShare' leaders

have experienced significant losses in their lives and are examples of the healing and

restoration that can occur as an outgrowth of deep grief" (Griefshare, 2015).

These four groups are simply a handful of support groups that currently exist as a

medium for those dealing with the loss of a family member. Oddly enough, recent

contenders consist of support groups that require participation within our virtual world.

As technology progresses, so do our ways of interacting with others. This stands true as

virtual support groups are becoming more popular in recent years. The following section

discusses the impact of virtual support groups and how they have expanded the manners

in which we grieve, while offering insight as to how virtual grief originated.

Virtual Support Groups

Lingel (2013) introduced the idea that "the very permanence and irrevocability of death contribute to the desire for a virtual space in which the deceased 'lives on'" (p. 193). Funerals and cemeteries are physical sites that allow visitation for the bereaved. Yet, online platforms allow individuals to respond to death in an open venue less constrained by social and cultural obligations (Lingel). In these spaces, mourners can freely and openly communicate with each other in a communal space, from the comfort of their own homes (Kasket, 2012). These interactions take place on web memorials. These virtual support groups are created and formed by specific topics. For example, some memorials are for parents who have lost a child; others for widows who have lost a spouse.

According to Roberts (2012):

> Some memorials include a few photographs and the name of the deceased, while many are elaborate with music, slideshows, and multiple pages of text. Like most memorials in web cemeteries, memorials can be viewed by anyone and they tend to have separate guestbooks which can be signed and read by visitors. (p. 56)

Common themes shared by most web memorials are to have guestbook or comment sections, spaces that can be used for creating a shared biography of the dead, and spots for offering condolences (Roberts). Normally, the bereaved have to solely provide an email to join a web memorial, allowing them access to these valuable features (Roberts).

There are a number of popular virtual support groups which continue to thrive to this day. One group exists as "a virtual toolkit for men coping with the loss of a loved one; a place where men can meet others going through the same transition" (The National

Widowers' Organization, 2015). These "loved ones" include a spouse or lover, a parent, a

child, or a lifelong friend. One of the site's mottos states, "You aren't alone and you

don't need to go through this alone. There's another guy in your community in the same

place as you and in this case – trust us – two or more heads and hearts are better than

one" (The National Widowers' Organization, 2015). Another virtual support group for

bereaved parents functions when members send email messages to the group and

everyone in the group receives a copy, allowing people "to respond with love and care to

the thoughts and feelings of an individual, day and night, year-round" (Grieving Parents,

2015). This group also offers a trained clinical psychologist and traumatologist to

monitor and supervise group participation. Alternatively, "The Compassionate Friends"

offers virtual chapters and live chats for parents, grandparents, and siblings (over the age

of 18) grieving the death of a child. This group provides support and friendship and

"encourages conversation among friends; friends who understand the emotions you're

experiencing" (The Compassionate Friends, 2015). Lastly, "DailyStrength" allows

mourners to choose a group (i.e., son/daughter loss, mother/father loss, cancer loss) and

to reply or post their own writings so that others can reply and offer support (see

Appendix A for Virtual Memorial). Although it is rare, there are times people write

negative comments and remarks on these sites, requiring sites to monitor and manage

these posts (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). Still, the benefits of web memorials appear to

outweigh the cons.

Impact of Social Networking Sites

The Internet has the powerful ability to change "the way we die and mourn,

certainly interactionally, and possibly experientially" (Walter et al., 2012, p. 295). In

particular, "social networking sites can bring dying and grieving out of both the private *and* public realms and provide an audience for once private communications with the dead" (Walter et al., p. 275). In fact, these social networks allow grief to "re-emerge as a *communal* activity" and bring the dead back into everyday life (Walter et al., p. 290). In a way, the "line between what is real and what is virtual is beginning to fade" (Young, 2011, p. 29). This leads to "a pervasive sense that social networking sites are omnipresent" (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013, pp. 64-65). Furthermore, social networking sites "change the constraints that geographical separation and social division formerly placed upon talking about and, indeed, to the dead" (Kasket, 2012, p. 67).

In essence, control is shifted over how the person will be remembered in "a free-for-all discussion forum" (Marwick & Ellison, 2012, p. 379). Here, individuals can openly express their emotions regarding the deceased and sometimes directly to the deceased as well (Carr et al., 2012). It is believed that an increase in these types of interactions has occurred due to a rise in mobile media, offering easier access to online tools and how we engage with social media (McEwen & Scheaffer). Most commonly, students and adolescents tend to use social media more often than other age groups, reporting that the Internet helps them feel closer to others when mourning (Pfohl, 2012). Studies still lag in regards to the benefits adults encounter when using Social Networking Sites. It is important to note that Social Networking Sites display aspects of symbolic behaviors when aiding individuals during the grieving process. Essentially, these behaviors can be viewed as present-day death rituals as they induce a desired effect. For the purposes of this study, the desired effect may be coping with the loss of a loved one which will be discussed further in the succeeding section.

Common Death Rituals

Traditional Rituals

In the Japanese tradition, it is imperative to acknowledge that the father's spirit guides and participates in the successes of the family after his death (Klass & Walter, 2001). In Hindu tradition, every morning "a fresh garland of flowers is placed around the photograph of the father of the present patriarch of the family" Klass & Walter, p. 431). A Tibetan monk "begins every meditation session with a series of exercises that call forth the presence of his deceased teacher" (Klass & Walter, p. 431). These examples demonstrate common rituals from various cultures.

According to Norton and Gino (2014):

> Rituals occur in fixed, repeated sequences and communal or religious settings . . . however, people often create everyday rituals that are performed in the absence of such factors but which still meet the definition of a symbolic behavior performed to induce some desired effect. (p. 266)

In Western traditions, continuing interactions with people after they passed away is more common than severing the bonds with the dead (Klass & Walter). Westerners "traditionally gather in public venues to mourn—at wakes, memorials, or funerals" (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013, p. 65). Conventionally, "funerals and other related rituals provide spaces to cope publicly with death, where an individual can process personal feelings generated by someone's passing through displays of grief that cohere with collectively constructed rituals" (Lingel, 2013, pp. 190-191). Even though newspaper obituaries spread information about the deceased and public wakes and funerals allow community members to mourn collectively, "social media are very effective for sharing

information with others, and may be superior to newspaper obituaries for this purpose because they are more likely to be read by and provide access to multiple, varied networks" (Marwick & Ellison, 2012, p. 379). This new trend signifies that present-day rituals are transitioning towards a more virtual dimension.

Present-Day Rituals

Lingel (2013) would describe online grief as a present-day ritual and "an emerging sociocultural phenomenon" which should be placed "in a larger context of mourning rituals" (p. 190). From one perspective, "No longer do we simply remember the deceased in death or in life; instead we also visually communicate the presence of the situated self in relation to the funeral to a wider social network" (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2014, p. 264). In comparison to traditional post-death rituals, "web memorials can be created by anyone at any time, providing a place for the disenfranchised to display their grief and for honoring the dead long after traditional post-death rituals have ended" (Roberts, 2012, p. 55). Understandably, feelings of grief are expressed in "old media, such as grave inscriptions and local newspaper *In Memoriam* columns, but typically tend to be in silence if there are others around; whereas, online conversations with the dead are there for all to witness" (Walter et al., 2012, p. 288). Klass and Walter (2001) argue, "For a variety of reasons, online conversation has replaced ritual as the normative way in which the bond with the dead is maintained" (p. 435). These ways appear to "reposition the dead back within the flow of everyday life" (Gibbs et al., pp. 256-257). Many of these interactions also take place on the Social Networking Site, Facebook. In particular, it may be advantageous to examine if there are

any benefits when utilizing Facebook features as ways to cope with loss, as social media outlets are being considered present-day rituals.

Impact of Facebook and Grief

There are different forms of verbal and non-verbal communication which can take place in various settings. Modern forms of communication are simultaneously taking place within the physical and digital world, predominantly within the social networking site entitled Facebook. Facebook is "currently considered as the largest and fastest growing networked community on the Internet" (Aladwani, 2014, p. 271). Facebook members can "upload photos, describe interests, work, education history, relationships, personal stories, schedules and more" (Nosko et al., 2010, p. 406) (see Appendix B for Facebook Profile Page).

Facebook is also a platform for individuals to seek support and to grieve after losing a loved one (Levitt, 2012). Facebook "can produce what pre-modernity did: a bereaved community. A person's diverse mourners may not be co-resident, but on Facebook many of them may be co-present" (Walter et al., 2012, p. 289). According to Facebook (2015) "Facebook's hope is that by allowing people to mourn together, the grieving process will be alleviated just a little bit" (About section, para. 1). Still, technical and cultural protocols have made it difficult to determine what should be done to the deceased's virtual identities after death (Lingel, 2013). In fact, studies have shown that other Facebook users have felt "traumatized" after seeing the deceased's profile removed without notice (Kasket, 2012, p. 66). This process changed following the Virginia Tech shootings after a "number of emotional requests to keep active indefinitely the profiles the Virginia Tech shooting victims; 'memorializing' was redefined by Facebook to

denote a state where deceased users' accounts remains in an active state" (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013, p. 66). In order to memorialize the deceased's Facebook page, a family member or friend must provide a link to or copy of an obituary or other documentation about the death (Facebook, 2015). In these cases, the deceased's page becomes a "kind of social artifact, but continued interactions on the user's page keep it from being a static one" (Lingel, p. 193). These interactions allow friends, family, and acquaintances to participate in online grief (Lingel). Anyone can write Facebook management offering suggestions and concerns and "many of the features of the site have evolved primarily as a result of Facebook members' actions" (Young, 2011, p. 21).

Features of Facebook

There are multiple Facebook tools that have been utilized as grieving methods, even though the creation of these features may have had other purposes. For instance, posting wall comments on friends' profiles, status updates, events, and photographs are typically tools to socialize on Facebook, but are now being used to offer support after loss (Young, 2011). Facebook users can similarly participate by "'liking' a comment, photo, video, or status, and by contributing evidence in the form of text, photos, videos, or links" (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013, p. 65). In a time of tragedy, such as an accident, Facebook affords an open space to "receive updates about the victim's condition, stay in touch with the family, and send supportive messages to thousands of people at once" (Levitt, 2012, p.78). This allows families, friends, and acquaintances to receive updates regarding the victim, typically via status updates, which will be further discussed in more detail. In unfortunate situations, such as death, these updates make knowledge of the deceased more public and make it more likely that large public displays, such as a large funeral

with many visitors, will occur (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). Oddly enough, "Funeral celebrants increasingly use Facebook to understand the deceased's character and networks" by looking at the deceased's Facebook profile (Walter et al., 2012, p. 281).

Facebook also offers *Look Back* videos that consist of photos of the deceased, and can be shared for all of the deceased's Facebook friends to see and comment (Facebook, 2015). Another feature called "wall posts" can be defined as public spaces where users can post messages, including on the deceased's Facebook page (DeGroot, 2012, p. 196). Interestingly, "the belief that Facebook is the best way of getting hold of the dead is also expressed in wall posts that seem to assume that while the dead are not omniscient, they must surely be reading their wall posts" (Kasket, 2012, p. 66). It is difficult for some individuals to break the bond they share with the deceased, and some people use Facebook wall postings to maintain relationships with the deceased (DeGroot).

It is believed that although Facebook messages may only flow one way, replies are "forthcoming via natural phenomena, dreams, and intercessions, and that deceased loved ones are guiding and helping the living" (Kasket, 2012, p. 65). DeGroot (2012) argues that one of the benefits of Facebook is being able to express your emotions from anywhere at any time. This allows the bereaved to share memories and to participate in the grieving process in their own way (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). Finally, "sites like Facebook offer useful, perhaps even critical, possibilities for coping, individually and collectively, with social death" (Lingel, 2013, p. 193). The following section will discuss one of the most popular features on Facebook which is commonly used as a setting for the bereaved to continue relationships with the deceased—memorial groups.

Memorial Groups on Facebook

Facebook offers a "memorializing" feature, which requires a Facebook friend or an immediate relative to "report the passing of a user" to administrators (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013, p. 65). Once Facebook administrators receive the notification and a copy of the death certificate, the deceased member's account will be memorialized (Facebook, 2015). A memorialized profile may be defined as "preserved in its current state so that no content or friends could be added or deleted; it would be a digital archive of the deceased's creation of content and interaction with others on the platform" (McEwen & Scheaffer, pp. 65-66). Although Facebook is a medium for connecting with friends and family, "it's also a place to remember and honor those we've lost. When a person passes away, their account can become a memorial of their life, friendships and experiences" (Facebook, 2015, para. 1).

Memorial groups were one of the initial methods Facebook members used to grieve on the Social Networking Site. For the purpose of this study, "Facebook memorial groups offer an opportunity to view how group members enact the grieving process" (DeGroot, 2012, p. 196). According to Roberts (2012), "Because most web memorials are public, they allow authors to signal others that they are bereaved and they provide a venue for the uninitiated to unobtrusively learn about bereavement" (p. 55). Essentially, Facebook memorial groups exist so that people can set up groups where friends and family can share memories and photos of a deceased friend (Levitt, 2012). Memorial groups can be described as "collective voices composing the unofficial obituary, and their postings are littered with images, slang, inside jokes, poetry, and more personal and unfettered emotion" (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013, p. 69). Most participants may have

different writing styles, but "tend to be similar in content; they tell the dead how much they are missed, give them updates on recent activities and reminisce" (Roberts, 2012, pp. 58-59). DeGroot (2012) clarified that the messages were directed at "someone who no longer has a physical presence. Although others can read the publicly posted messages, the primary intended recipients of the messages appear to be the deceased" (p. 198).

Research by DeGroot (2012) found:

> In addition to writing on the walls as a form of Sensemaking, people wrote messages as a way to Maintain Bonds with the deceased. Continuing bonds is, in some aspects, 'sensemaking' as well; however, this communicative function is more relational in nature and focuses on individuals making sense of their identity as it exists without the deceased. (p. 204)

Likewise, "Sensemaking was evident on the Facebook memorial group walls as posters experienced shock, envisioned the deceased checking his or her Facebook from heaven, posted original and non-original prose, referred to spirituality, and questioned the death" (DeGroot, p. 202). Spirituality is a relevant concept when related to *Sensemaking,* and "references to a higher being were present in many of the posts. It appeared that people relied on their spirituality in order to make sense of the loss" (DeGroot, p. 203).

DeGroot (2012) also determined that grieving individuals wrote to the deceased as if the deceased could read the messages, which is a unique type of communication. Some Facebook members wrote "see you soon" or "I'll see you when it's my turn" on the memorialized pages implying that the living believe they can meet with the deceased again (DeGroot, p. 207). Many people "posted updates or announcements on the wall as

if to involve the deceased in their daily lives, kept note of important dates such as birthdays and holidays, and posted their appreciation for the memories they shared with the deceased" (DeGroot, p. 206). Interestingly, the bereaved share requests for the deceased and may ask for "favors" on the deceased's memorialized page as well. For instance, group members asked the deceased if he or she would take care of another deceased individual or pet, and even asked the deceased to help them get through difficult times or handling special events without the deceased. These acts indicate the continued reciprocal nature of the relationship, signifying a continued bond (DeGroot) (see Appendix C for Facebook Memorial Page).

Benefits of Facebook Memorial Pages

According to Kasket (2012), "Research participants explicitly spoke of visiting Facebook as being more satisfying and carrying more of a feeling of connectedness than did visiting the grave or a physical memorial" (p. 68). Similarly, "For all who have access, web memorials provide a place to visit the dead at any time, from almost anywhere" (Roberts, 2012, p. 58). These unique experiences "afford many benefits for the bereaved" (Roberts, p. 55). In most cases, these memorials are possible due to the ease with which non-experts can upload pictures, music, and comments (Walter et al., 2012). This is useful as "for some visitors, these pictures can represent the deceased better than words" (Walter et al., p. 293). Roberts (2012) added that there is a sense of community online and "clearly, the mourner is not alone and the deceased is well remembered if there are hundreds of comments on their memorial wall" (p. 59). Overall, "Creating a web memorial may bring various psychological benefits, providing a place

for: accepting the death, emotional release, constructing the dead and incorporating the loss into the author's self-narrative" (Roberts, p. 55).

Drawbacks of Facebook Memorial Pages

Unfortunately, there are negative circumstances which can take place on Facebook memorial pages. Facebook memorial pages can be considered "vulnerable," since "nearly anyone can join Facebook, and anybody can post or access content on 'open,' or public, pages, such as open memorial groups" (DeGroot, 2012, p. 198). This can lead to potential conflicts, especially if the deceased had any enemies. Online "technical regulation happens differently" as "co-existing audiences that may have conflicting understandings of the deceased, which would require impression management" (Marwick & Ellison, 2012, p. 397). The creator of the memorial page is mainly responsible for impression management and has "the ability to block access to the memorial completely, to allow only certain people to see or comment on it, and to limit access to certain parts of the memorial on a case by case basis; decisions that can be changed at any time" (Roberts, 2012, p. 56). If this proves ineffective, then members of the memorial group may have to report other members causing conflict. At that point, Facebook management would ban the disruptive member from entering the memorialized page.

Transition towards Status Updates

Kasket (2012) gathered "The persisting digital self and the mourner's bond with it is experienced and somehow 'real', and there is a terrible fear of that bond being broken" (p. 66). Some individuals truly have a difficult time "letting go" of someone they lost. To some, continuing their bond may be an important element while grieving and "if the

relationship is to continue after death, we might expect to find not only a sense of physical presence but also an ongoing conversation with, and about, them" (Klass & Walter, 2001, pp. 436-437). In a way, Facebook memorial pages are beginning to replace traditional obituaries and appear to work effectively as individuals continue to grieve more openly. Considering research has proven these trends to be true, I can only ponder as to why individuals are transitioning from invitation-only Facebook memorial groups to writing public status updates which invite all Facebook friends to see? Do Facebook members need to share their Facebook posts more publically? Do members think they will receive more support by posting status updates? Is this support different than the type of support they were receiving on Facebook memorial groups? These questions led me to my research question, "What benefits, if any, are adult clients receiving by utilizing Facebook status updates in order to cope with the loss of an immediate family member?" The following section will discuss how status updates may be used as a contemporary death ritual, adding to the premise of this study.

Status Updates on Facebook

The focus of this study concentrated on a widely used feature of Facebook known as *status updates*. Status updates are short texts that can include pictures, links, videos, and typically appear on Facebook news feeds, allowing friends to "like" or "comment" below the status update (Winter et al., 2014, p. 195). A *News Feed* is an "updating list of stories from friends, Pages, and other connections, like Groups and events where people can 'like' or comment on what they see" (Facebook, 2015, para. 1). These writings are "omnipresent forms of communication that the user may selectively update (or not) at his or her convenience" (Carr et al., p. 182). At the touch of our fingers, we are capable of

writing a message that can be seen across the globe instantaneously (Coviello, Sohn,

Kramer, Marlow, Franceschetti, Christakis, & Fowler, 2014).

Most often status messages are written for a specific recipient; yet, the messages

are posted in a public forum for all Facebook friends to read (Carr et al., 2012). Facebook

status messages offer the mental health field the ability "to study a unique and emergent

type of communication: publicly personal messages within a defined network" (Carr et

al., p. 180). Status messages can be viewed as being interactive as "friends may comment

on, reply, or otherwise publicly react to an individual's status messages" (Carr et al., p.

182). This shows how "socialization patterns emerge through the sharing of feelings,

information, and ideas" (Ilyas & Khushi, 2012, p. 506). Facebook members commonly

write status updates discussing their "thoughts, experiences, or emotions with their

friends varying from trivial information on the weather or their breakfast to intimate

disclosures on love affairs, break-ups or personal crises" (Winter et al., 2014, p. 194). For

the purpose of this research study personal crises such as losing an immediate family

member will be looked at more closely.

A fascinating aspect of Facebook is its ". . . ability to inform an entire set of

online 'friends' of someone's passing with a single post or status update" (Lingel, 2013,

p. 191).

According to Lingel (2013):

> Online, the hierarchy of intimacy honored by traditional information protocols is
>
> flattened into a unilaterally chosen action by anyone with the information to
>
> spread awareness of someone's passing, irrespective of the offline level of
>
> intimacy in a social network. (p. 191)

Traditional means of communicating about loss are being altered towards a more interactive and public dimension. Individuals appear to be more willing to share personal information, such as their feelings and the special occasions in their lives. Essentially, "Through status updates people not only expressed their emotions but also shared details about their daily life activities as to what they were doing or what was going on in their lives at that moment" (Ilyas & Khushi, 2012, p. 506) (see Appendix D for Facebook Status Updates).

Existing Research

Several studies regarding Facebook status updates and grief have been conducted over the last several years. A study by Levitt (2012) asserted, "The media coverage of tragic events has encouraged people to be more open with their grief. This has led to people sharing their grief with one another and expressing their grief in very public ways" (p. 80). Another study found that "through status updates people can express a variety of emotions and they know that they are heard among their members" (Ilyas & Khushi, 2012, p. 503).

According to DeGroot (2012):

> The Promises and Requests category is comprised of messages assuring the deceased that his or her family would be taken care of, requests for help, pleas for the deceased to visit the living in their dreams, and appeals to the deceased to watch over the living. Because the deceased are no longer a part of the physical world, the living often reassured their deceased friends that they will care for the important people and projects in the deceased's life as necessary. (pp. 206-207)

DeGroot's study revealed that the living feel as if they are still able to communicate to the deceased through status updates and even make "promises and requests" to the dead. This, in turn, includes rationalizing why their friend had to leave the physical world in the first place (DeGroot). The study also uncovered "As part of the grieving process, people also try to make sense of the death through lamenting and questioning" (DeGroot, p. 204). Lastly, "The online messages clearly provided evidence of the living attempting to maintain a relationship with their deceased loved ones through communication" (DeGroot, p. 208).

Conversations with the deceased are pertinent to the grieving process and "many people talk with the dead and find the conversations meaningful" (Klass & Walter, 2001, p. 435). Several researchers insist that negative emotions may be more acceptable on Facebook than in real life (Lin, Tov, & Qiu, 2014). Perhaps this insinuates that individuals have the freedom to share personal information about themselves that may not be frequent conversation starters in person. In particular, this can be compared to status updates discussing the pain associated with losing a loved one. Research by McEwen and Scheaffer (2013) supports that "the immediacy of being able to publish grieving and memorializing comments, messages, wall posts, photos, and so on provides users with a quick outlet for emotion and a means of timely support via replies" (p. 71). One reason may be because "writing online feels private, almost like a confessional, yet there is in fact a wider audience" (Walter et al., 2012, p. 293). Another perspective is that "it also seems there is a social presence felt among the members which helps in the self-expression process" (Ilyas & Khushi, 2012, p. 503).

A number of other studies in particular added useful information to the topic of utilizing status updates for grieving purposes. A study by Chang and Heo (2014) claims that "college students who use Facebook for social motives (e.g., sending messages, tagging photos, and updating statuses) may be willing to provide more personal information, even 'highly sensitive' information" (p. 84). The same researchers insist that the time spent on Facebook also influences more disclosure of personal information (Chang & Heo). Another study concerning college student participants mentioned that "mental health status updates could be calls for help" and often lead to a referral to a mental health professional when involving a close friend (Egan, Koff, & Moreno, 2013, p. 50).

Several researchers determined differences between males and females in regards to status updates. One study found that "Females showed significantly higher levels of emotional support in their public replies than males for Facebook status updates and were more likely to 'Like' a Facebook status update than males" (Joiner et al., 2014, p. 167). The same researchers discovered that "one of the most consistent findings is that females are more likely to use affiliative language (used for connecting to others), whereas males are more likely to use self-assertive language (used for dominance, and achieving practical goals)" (Joiner et al., pp. 165-166). Other researchers comparing the participation of male vs. female use of status updates argued "gender difference would not affect Facebook users' self-disclosure of 'highly sensitive' information" (Chang & Heo, 2014, p. 85). These findings can be related to another study involving college students which reasoned that "participants felt that males and females were equally likely

to post status updates about their mental health, and that these status updates were viewed with equal seriousness when posted by either gender" (Egan et al., 2013, p. 49).

Although multiple studies have discovered the benefits of posting Facebook status updates, drawbacks also exist. According to Marwick and Ellison (2012), "This visibility engenders context collapse and larger audiences that may include unwelcome participants such as trolls" (p. 398). In other words, "other users might comment negatively as specific disclosures may appear inappropriate to some readers" (Winter et al., 2014, p. 195). Unfortunately, this may deter a member from receiving the support he or she was searching for when writing the status update.

Contrasting Views

On average, Facebook members updated their status message about "once every 5.5 days" (Carr et al., 2012, p. 186). Moreover, humor was integrated into almost 20% of these status messages (Carr et al.). Other studies contend that status updates are "extremely capable of fulfilling narcissists' striving for positive feedback (through 'likes' or positive comments), and can be expected that narcissists also write more of these messages and engage in considerable self-disclosure in order to arouse attention" (Winter et al., 2014, p. 196). On the contrary, research by Young (2011) states, "When adult users post photos and make status updates it is not necessarily about promoting themselves, rather they are used as conversation starters" (p. 30). These distinctions illustrate that depending on the way a study is conducted, various perspectives and results may emerge.

The Next Best Set of Questions

As Ilyas and Khushi (2012) stated in their study, "The writer has shared his or her experience and wants to know if someone else also has gone through the same experience" (p. 504). People turn to others in time of need, especially when experiencing grief. It is still unknown if these status updates are posted strategically or erratically (Carr et al., 2012). However, what is known statistically is "people know that they do not need to go to a newspaper or television channel to make their voice heard; they can express themselves through Facebook status updates" (Ilyas & Khushi, p. 504).

In a way, this new trend of posting status updates on Facebook to grieve is allowing people to express themselves while simultaneously redefining their identities (Ilyas & Khushi, 2012). Nevertheless, these types of posts are becoming more frequent and more revealing of one's emotions. More importantly, status updates appear to help the grieving process for adolescents and college students, as the previously discussed studies discovered. A gap in the literature exists pertaining to the creation of status updates on Facebook specifically for adults grieving the loss of an immediate family member and how these status updates may be used as a present-day death ritual. Emerging questions have begun to unfold and will be explored in the following chapters. For instance, what reactions or responses is a mother looking for as she posts a status update on Facebook about her deceased son, asking him if he still thinks of her? How does a father find it comforting to post a status update about the father-daughter dance he will never have after his daughter's death? How does it help for a woman to write a status update to her deceased father, asking him if he approves of her new boyfriend? All

appear to be written and asked with the intention of having the deceased read the status update.

 In agreement with Levitt (2012), "This research is important because social media has drastically changed how people relate to each other" (p. 78). It is important to learn whether or not posting a status update does help an adult to cope with the death of a loved one, as other studies mainly have focused on the benefits of memorial groups created by adolescents and college students. A grounded theory methodology was incorporated in this process as it is a "qualitative design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants" (Creswell, 2013, p. 83), as identified in the following chapter.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Facebook status updates offer a unique opportunity to study grief, as the site is widely used all over the world. Individuals who have a Facebook account tend to openly express their thoughts and interests on this Social Networking Site. These actions also can include emotional expressions in regards to the loss of a loved one. My research question was, "What benefits, if any, are adult clients receiving by utilizing Facebook status updates in order to cope with the loss of an immediate family member?" As a researcher, I deemed qualitative methods were appropriate for my specific interests. Qualitative research is conducted in order to *explore* a particular topic or problem, while offering a detailed understanding as well (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). In essence, I was particularly interested in the process of posting status updates on Facebook for grieving purposes.

Qualitative research is used to help explain the linkages in causal theories, which provide a "general picture of trends, associations, and relationships, but they do not tell us about the processes that people experience, why they responded as they did, and the context in which they responded" (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). I looked for what may or may not be *different* for individuals using Facebook status updates to cope after the loss of a loved one. I examined the factors which may influence posting a status update on Facebook for grieving purposes. The power of qualitative research "lies in its ability to make visible frequently unseen and overlooked aspects of daily life" (Papadimitriou, Magasi, & Frank, 2012). I considered the topic of grieving on Facebook to be "overlooked" as status updates are created on a daily basis by a majority of Facebook members, and yet, hardly explored in detail.

This study contributes to our field as clinicians by reporting on the various

methods individuals use to cope after losing a loved one. There is a gap pertaining to the

Social Networking Site and its uses for grief. Although research exists for the benefits of

memorial groups on Facebook and also for adolescents' use of status updates to express

grief, research lacks for adults' use of status updates as a coping mechanism for grief.

Therefore, I intended on interviewing and hearing the personal responses of participants

who had lost a loved one and who used Facebook status updates to express these

emotions. Strengths of qualitative methods include "the ability to generate hypotheses;

identify the perspectives, meanings, and experiences of stakeholders; describe

sociocultural processes and context; and explain relationships between views, behaviors,

and context" (Hinton, 2010, p. 564). I used a grounded theory methodology, while coding

and searching for themes and patterns within the data. Qualitative inquiry can be in the

form of various approaches, such as narrative research, phenomenology, grounded

theory, ethnography, and case studies (Creswell, 2013). Grounded theory provides a

theory that is "grounded" in the data (Creswell). This method assisted me with

discovering the meanings and associations of individuals in regards to using Facebook to

grieve.

Qualitative research is conducted when in search of "*empowering individuals* to

share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist

between a researcher and the participants in a study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). Since

discussing loss can be emotional, it was important for me to respect and take a non-expert

stance towards the participants. Several of the main points of qualitative research are to

include "the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex

description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change" (Creswell, p. 44). This is typically accomplished in a natural setting, while adhering to the ethical standards required of researchers. This included being aware of my own worldview, including my personal beliefs and assumptions. I adhered to the idea of multiple realities and I interviewed participants as a way to gain a fuller understanding of their thoughts and feelings towards the utilization of status updates. Qualitative methods "can also be extremely useful in early work on understudied populations or topics" (Hinton, 2010, p. 564). I hoped to contribute valuable research findings to the mental health field. I represented the data by including the participants' perspectives, as well as my own, while utilizing a grounded theory framework.

Grounded Theory Methodology

The methodology of a study has an enormous impact on its process and direction. The preferred methods chosen by researchers essentially shape the way their research will be conducted. Since I was interested in examining the trend of utilizing Facebook status updates as a coping mechanism for grief and the meanings of participants' interview responses, grounded theory supported this study. In essence, grounded theory is a "qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the views of participants" (Creswell, 2013, p. 83). Glaser and Strauss (1967) were the two researchers who pioneered the concept "grounded theory" as they believed developing theories are *grounded* in qualitative data. The term originated as the two researchers examined "behavioral interactions between dying patients and their caregivers in a Californian Hospital" (O'Callaghan, 2012, p. 237). The researchers believed that the existing theories

utilized for research were "inappropriate and ill-suited for the participants under study" (Creswell, p. 84). Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory methods so that a theory could be generated and supported from data. In other words, rather than researching with an agenda, the researchers "used a process of discovery to explore important themes and issues as they emerged during the grounded theory research process" (O'Callaghan, p. 242). The idea was for a theory to emerge, while searching for patterns and themes within the data.

I considered grounded theory an appropriate methodology for this study, although other methods of inquiry were questioned. First, Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) focuses on the perspectives and interpretations of conversations between participants and researchers; exploring the interactions that occur during a session (Larsen, Flesaker, & Stege, 2008). IPR, although related to emotions, is more geared towards the thoughts and feelings experienced throughout an interview, rather than the participants' responses regarding the phenomenon itself (Larsen et al.). In other words, I was more interested in finding patterns and categories within the participants' responses, rather than inquiring about their thoughts and feelings during our interview. Second, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) "involves the art and practice of asking unconditionally positive questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2015, p. 336). Likewise, AI centers on a system's "strengths, possibilities, and successes" (Stavros, Godwin, & Cooperrider, 2015, p. 96). Appreciative inquiry is also an "assets-based approach that aims to focus on the best of 'what is' and to envision desired situations" (Naaldenberg et al., 2015, p. 4). This method allows participants to "contribute their knowledge and experiences in discussing solutions" and

"enabling collective learning processes by sharing positive experiences and ideas"

(Naaldenberg et al., p. 4). In essence, my intention was to not ask "positive" questions or

to discuss solutions, but to be present and understand the participants' processes of

grieving on Facebook. All individuals have their own perspectives and interpretations of

the world. Researchers should be sensitive to the thoughts and ideas of the participants as

a way to build trust, show respect, and display appreciation for participating in a study.

Grounded theory has become more popular and appealing to researchers over the years

due to the variety of approaches available for conducting research. Perhaps the emerging

theory of this study offered insight as to other ways individuals cope with loss.

Role of the Researcher

There are multiple roles qualitative researchers must fulfill when conducting a

study. Researchers are responsible for collecting and sorting extensive data, reducing this

data to themes and categories, and gaining an insider perspective (Creswell, 2013). It is

also useful for a qualitative researcher to learn about participants' lives and to make

analytic sense of their responses and actions (Charmaz, 2014). Investigators are expected

to reflect the multiple perspectives of participants. This means that researchers must

focus on learning the meaning of the participants' responses, rather than the "meaning

that researchers bring to the research" (Creswell, p. 47). Another duty of qualitative

researchers is to remember that research is constantly changing, so being able to adapt to

this process is essential. This adaptability can allow a theory "grounded" in the data to

naturally emerge.

Investigators must also identify the complex interactions of factors in a study in

order to understand the context and larger picture (Creswell, 2013). These factors can

assist researchers with understanding the larger picture and aid with identifying patterns and themes. Researchers must not place their own agendas into a study, but instead, manage their personal biases and assumptions. Addressing these biases is an individual process for each researcher, at times requiring the assistance of colleagues. It is essential for researchers to consider the ethical standards involved in a study. Ethically, researchers must never present information that can somehow harm participants and also refrain from reporting private information regarding participants, such as their names (Creswell).

Honesty is also key when conducting and reporting data. This translates to having participants sign an informed consent form, discussing the form, and notifying the participants that they can leave the study at any time (Goodie, Kanzler, Hunter, Glotfelter, & Bodart, 2013).

According to Creswell (2013) additional ethical considerations include:

Assessing issues that we may be fearful of disclosing, establishing supportive and respectful relationships without stereotyping and using labels that participants do not embrace, acknowledging whose voices will be represented in our final study, and writing ourselves into the study by reflecting on who we are and the people we study. (p. 56)

In other words, it may be beneficial for researchers to be "reflexive" while conducting a study; inserting themselves into the research by including personal references to their "work experiences, cultural experiences, and history" (Creswell, p. 47). These personal references help build rapport with participants, and can also offer a sense of comfort and relatability. Furthermore, it is pertinent to de-emphasize a power relationship by collaborating with participants (Creswell). One way to do so is to allow the participants

to read the interview questions. As the researcher, I familiarized myself with the interview questions so that I could constantly maintain eye contact with the participants during the interview. This offered a more natural interaction and avoided distracting the participants as well. I took a non-expert stance in order to create a space where participants could speak freely and openly, without judgement.

According to Creswell (2013), giving back to participants for their involvement and devoted time is known as *reciprocity* and should be offered by researchers. This includes thanking the participants for their involvement, maintaining proper power balances, and being sensitive to their responses and concerns. This study in particular involved participants who were experiencing loss and grief, resulting in the exposure of their emotions. These individuals endured a personal pain and may have been susceptible to being taken advantage of by willing researchers. Such ethical standards are put into place to assist with avoiding these occurrences; it is the role of researchers to withhold these principles.

Self of the Researcher

We are all comprised of traits, values, and beliefs that make each of us unique. Depending on the situation or setting, there are typically certain behaviors and protocols we must abide by as researchers. It is essential for researchers to find a balance between their personal traits and volitions and what is ethically expected. Qualitative research includes the researcher's "culture, gender, history, and experiences, from their choice of a question to address, to how to collect data, to how they make an interpretation of the situation, and to what they expect to obtain from conducting the research" (Creswell, 2013, p. 55). As the principal researcher, I reminded myself that my personal history and

background may have affected how I conducted the study and analyzed the data. I have thoughts and ideas about the world and its inhabitants; however, I practiced being neutral with the participants and allowed them to speak openly without guiding them towards a certain outcome.

I incorporated methods discussed in Creswell (2013), such as clarifying researcher bias, by thoroughly questioning my assumptions regarding grief. In turn, this may have reduced the risk of influencing the research. I was aware that my worldview and background essentially shaped these questions and the analysis of the data, so I took these factors into consideration. My main focuses were to protect the well-being and welfare of the participants. Therefore, I asked participants interview questions that allowed them to offer their own viewpoints and feelings towards grief, avoiding the inclusion of my own opinions.

My main biases for this study were that I assumed most Facebook members tend to openly disclose their personal information on the site and did so for personal benefits. In this study, I presumed that adults wrote status updates on Facebook about loss because they wanted instantaneous support and wanted others to be a part of their grieving process. I had not participated in this process myself, but I initially noticed this trend on my friend's Facebook page regarding her father. However, I remembered these were my personal experiences and viewpoints, and they did not stand true for every person. This required skill and training, which I received as a graduate of NSU's Marriage and Family Therapy program. My focus was to learn from the participants in regards to if and how they experienced grief by posting status updates on Facebook.

Data Collection Procedures

The data of this study was collected by conducting interviews with adult

participants who had lost an immediate family member within the past year and used

Facebook status updates to discuss the loss of their loved one. The participants ranged

from the ages of 25-64 years old, as other studies mainly have focused on the memorial

groups created and used by adolescents and college students to grieve on Facebook

(DeGroot, 2012). I included seven participants who fit the criteria of this study.

Study Approval and Sampling

Qualitative research should be conducted ethically. This involves getting

university approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for permission to conduct

this study. As the researcher, I was responsible for submitting a proposal of this study to

NSU's IRB. In the proposal, I explained this study's procedures in complete detail. Once

I received approval, I then continued executing this study. One of the initial steps of a

study is to gather participants. I used purposeful sampling strategies to find a

homogeneous sample by "selecting individuals and sites that can purposefully inform an

understanding of this study's central phenomenon" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 90).

A common issue in grounded theory approach is finding a "homogeneous

sample" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 107). Homogeneous samples apply to individuals who have

"commonly experienced an action or process" (Creswell, 2013, p. 154). In this case, the

homogenous sample related to individuals who had lost an immediate, blood-related

family member, such as a mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, grandmother, or

grandfather, within the last year and used status updates to display their grief. The

purpose of using a homogeneous sample is so that it can "focus, reduce, simplify, and

facilitate group interviewing" (Creswell, p. 158). The sampling strategy I incorporated

into this study was "convenience cases" which "represent sites or individuals from which

the researcher can access and easily collect data" (Creswell, p. 157). I recruited

participants by utilizing fliers, word of mouth, and sending emails to my colleagues at

Nova Southeastern University (see Appendix E for Research Flyer). I stated the premise

and purpose of my study, and included my contact information.

Informed Consent Form

It is pertinent for participants to know the purpose of the study they will be

involved in, but also the rights they obtain as volunteers. Prior to the onset of this study, I

requested for the participants to sign an informed consent form explaining their rights as

members (see Appendix F for Consent Form). The form included "the central purpose

and procedures of the study; confidentiality of the participants; the expected benefits to

accrue to the participants in the study; and the signature of the participant as well as the

researcher" (Creswell, 2013, p. 153).

Participants meeting at NSU signed an informed consent form in person, which

was discussed prior to the commencement of the interview. Members participating via

the computer program, Skype, were asked to provide their mailing address once initial

contact was made so that the informed consent form could be mailed. A stamped return

envelope was provided as well, requiring participants to return the signed informed

consent form. These participants were asked to make a copy of the form for their own

records. Once the informed consent form was returned, I contacted the participants via

Skype to discuss the form in detail and asked the participants if they had any questions or

concerns prior to beginning the interview. I went over the purpose of this study in detail

either in person or via Skype and discussed how the results would be used for educational

purposes.

It was essential for participants to be aware that confidentiality was a main

priority of this study. The members were notified that their names were on the informed

consent form, but pseudonyms were used thereafter for confidentiality purposes. In the

form, I asked the participants for permission to audio-record and take notes of their

interviews as I would be transcribing these interviews for data analysis. Likewise, I

reviewed the amount of time needed to complete the interview, estimating 45 minutes.

During this time, I discussed the emotional consequences of being a participant in this

study, as it was a sensitive subject related to loss and grief.

I intended to notify the participants that I would avoid placing them in any

potential risk or harm throughout this process. I consistently checked in with each

individual, reiterating that each member could withdraw from the study at any time. I

asked for permission to follow up if I considered more data was needed to properly

develop the categories. In the end, I made sure the participants had copies of the abstract

and informed consent form for their records, and clarified that their information would be

destroyed within 36 months from the conclusion of the study (Creswell, 2013).

Interview Procedures

The primary sources of this study were interviews and audio-recordings. It is

suggested to choose one or two of the four basic sources of qualitative research—

interviews, observations, documents, and audio-recordings (Creswell, 2013). Interviews

and digital voice recordings were utilized in order to attain an in-depth and personal

understanding of the participants' responses. Compared with surveys, interviews

regularly require "specific skills and more training because the interviewer must make more complex decisions about how and when to probe topics or explore emergent themes" (Hinton, 2010, p. 564). When interviewing individuals, it was imperative to notice any discomfort, especially when discussing emotional topics such as death.

My intention was to interview the participants of this study via Skype or at a private office at Nova Southeastern University. For the individuals interested in meeting in person or simply for convenience purposes, I scheduled a specific day and time to conduct the interviews. I utilized Skype for those who were unable to meet in person. I considered the latter approach appropriate as my participants had the skill set and capability to use Facebook and its tools. Following the practices of qualitative research, I wanted to offer flexibility and adaptability to the participants' needs when possible and appropriate.

Interview Questions

Qualitative researchers mainly create their own research instruments using open-ended questions (Creswell, 2013). Open-ended questions allowed me, as the researcher, to adapt to the data collection process and to gather the data freely, without a particular purpose. I attempted to listen intently to the participants and withhold from asking unnecessary questions. One of the main purposes of asking the participants open-ended questions was to understand how individuals experienced the grieving process using Facebook status updates. I asked the members about their participation in this process, the steps taken to write a status update, and how they felt afterwards.

Interview Guide

I referred to an interview guide when meeting with the participants which included questions pertaining to the criteria of this study and open-ended questions. The interview questions related to the research question of this study and offered rich responses that contributed to research involving grief. The nature of the questions evolved in the process of collecting the data, which again required adaptability and flexibility as a researcher. Several of interview guide questions included: 1. Are you 25-64 years old? (If yes, continue to the next question) 2. Have you ever used the Social Networking Site called Facebook? (If yes, continue to the next question) 3. Have you ever written a status update on Facebook? (If yes, continue to the next question) 4. Have you ever written a status update about an immediate, blood-related family member (mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, or grandparent) that has passed away within the past year? (If yes, continue to the next question) 5. Could you briefly describe the process that led you to writing the status update initially? (see Appendix G for the Full List of the Interview Guide)

While conducting interviews, I journaled my own thoughts and questions. I was aware that these questions may not have presented themselves in this specific order when actually conducting the interviews. I intended on following the lead of the participants and carrying out the interviews at an appropriate pace. I strove to be conscious of my demeanor, be empathetic, remain curious, and regulate my biases throughout the interview process, as discussing loss may lead to a variety of reactions.

Interview Considerations

While conducting this study, I needed to take into account several considerations. First, it may have been somewhat difficult for me to find participants who followed through with this study, as it required the members to discuss the loss of an immediate family member. The discussion of loss may have been too overwhelming and emotional for some individuals, causing some participants to withdraw from this study. Second, equipment issues may also have been a factor, such as if the digital voice recorder stopped working. Although I took notes during the interviews, the lack of audio-recordings may have hindered the possibilities of discovering the potential patterns and themes within in the data; an occurrence that may have affected the emerging theory. In addition, the process of note-taking may have been a distraction for some participants, requiring me to refrain from memoing; another factor to consider. Third, data should be stored by having backup copies; keeping a master list of information collected; and using high-quality audio-recording (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, I stored the consent forms, audio-recordings, and notes in a locked cabinet in my office and will do so for 36 months from the conclusion of this study (Creswell). Issues can present themselves at all stages of data collection. I needed to continue being aware of these factors so that I could withhold the standards expected of me as a researcher, predominantly when analyzing the data of this study.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative research requires flexibility and adaptability. Throughout the data collection process, researchers are consistently modifying and comparing data. In fact, this process is "time and labor intensive, particularly when the research moves beyond

descriptive work to theory building and conceptual refinement" (Hinton, 2010, p. 564).

Researchers then begin the data analysis portion of a study, attempting to build and refine

a theory. Qualitative researchers are expected to explain the processes or actions of a

theory as well as the steps and phases involved (Creswell, 2013). This is accomplished in

the data analysis portion of a study as investigators obtain an understanding of the

concept. A theory can be considered an explanation or understanding that researchers

develop, and for the purposes of this study, theoretical categories were drawn together to

discover the emerging theory (O'Callaghan, 2012).

Interview Transcription

The steps of qualitative data analysis follow a systemic paradigm. This includes

utilizing "procedures such as generating categories of data, relating the categories in a

theoretical model, and specifying the context and conditions under which the theory

operated" (Creswell, 2013, p. 123). Expanding on the conditions of this process is

considered standard for qualitative researchers. My responsibility as a qualitative

researcher was to fulfill these roles as well. I began by preparing and organizing the data

of this study. I collected data by using digital voice recordings during the interview. I

transcribed the interviews and typed any additional notes taken during our encounters, a

technique known as *memoing* (Creswell). These memos are "short phrases, ideas, or key

concepts" (Creswell, p. 183). Note-taking also was used as a preventative tool just in case

the audio-recorder stopped working. Researchers need to anticipate and prepare for these

types of situations, so the study can proceed and negative influences can be reduced. The

next steps after *memoing* are to label and interpret the data (Charmaz, 2014). I read

through the interview transcriptions multiple times, commencing the coding process.

Coding Data

According to Creswell (2013) the characteristics of grounded theory are "grounding a theory in the views of participants; using primarily interviews; studying a process, action, or interaction involving individuals; analyzing data through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding; and generating a theory" (p. 105). Essentially researchers generate a theory by coding and analyzing the data of the study. *Open coding* is the process in which the researcher searches for major categories or themes in the data; leading to *axial coding*, which is a process of focusing on one open coding category and creating subcategories (Creswell). The final process, known as *selective coding*, is characterized by developing hypotheses that result in a "story that describes the interrelationship of categories in the model" (Creswell, p. 87). This "story" connects the categories, and leads to the discovery of a theory. This process may include "in vivo" codes, which are direct quotes from the data; depending on the preference of the researcher (O'Callaghan, 2012, p. 243).

According to Creswell this process includes:

> Presenting a coding paradigm or logic paradigm (i.e., a visual model) in which the researcher identifies a central phenomenon (i.e., a central category about the phenomenon), explores causal conditions (i.e., categories of conditions that influence the phenomenon), specific strategies (i.e., the actions or interactions that result from the central phenomenon) identifies the context and intervening conditions (i.e., the narrow and broad conditions that influence the strategies), and delineates the consequences (i.e., the outcomes of the strategies) for this phenomenon. (p. 89)

This logic paradigm assisted me with exploring the interrelationships of categories and the causal conditions involved. Furthermore, I was then able to distinguish any intervening conditions so they could be addressed. These practices also helped me to describe the outcomes of the strategies for this process. The prospective goal was for a theory to naturally develop that was empirically supported.

Constant Comparative Method

I worked inductively by organizing the data into abstract units of information; fluctuating back and forth until comprehensive set of themes were established (Creswell, 2013). I used comparisons from the data and abstractions, concurrently tying these abstractions to the data (O'Callaghan, 2012). I used the *constant comparative method* when attempting to reach saturation for the categories, although categories can never fully be saturated (Creswell). In other words, I kept searching for new categories and compared these to emerging categories, until I considered there were no others and saturation had been reached. At this point, theory development proceeded (O'Callaghan).

<center>**Verification Procedures**</center>

One of the main focuses for me as a researcher was to deliver quality assurance. I paid special attention to each process of this study and monitored my actions within it as well. I utilized several methods to handle potential, negative factors that may affected the validity of this study. I incorporated the methods discussed in Creswell (2013), such as clarifying researcher biases. Current research proposes that clinicians "selectively choose to preserve, omit, alter, and add in their formulation—whether deliberately or inadvertently—contributing to the version of the individual's life and circumstances that emerge" (Korman, Bavelas, & De Jong, 2013, p. 34). I questioned my personal biases

and assumptions in order to reduce the risk of negatively influencing the research. One way to do so was through quality control. I displayed quality control by extending the study to professors, Dr. Chris Burnett, Dr. Tommie Boyd, and Dr. Anne Rambo of my dissertation committee. These professionals reviewed, offered feedback, and asked to submit preferred changes for this study. This process is also known as *debriefing* and was completed multiple times (Creswell).

An important technique of this study was to establish credibility. According to Creswell (2013) this involves "taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the study" (p. 252). This included member checking along the way and portraying the participants' realities in the emergent theory (Creswell). This was done by sending the participants electronic copies of the transcriptions and emerging models so that they could check for congruencies and accurate representations.

Summary

In grounded theory, data collection, coding, conceptualizing, and theorizing are simultaneous (Fleming, Glass, Fujisaki, & Toner, 2010). Grounded theory can be viewed as a systemic approach. This particularly resonates to my beliefs and practices as a marriage and family therapist, since it applies to the context of a situation and how a system is interrelated. My goal for this study was to offer an in-depth understanding of the grieving process using Facebook. In line with my background and training, I reported honestly and contributed scientific credibility. I was mindful that I had an ethical responsibility to protect the welfare of the participants, and I reminded the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Lastly, I genuinely strove to create a

space where participants felt free to openly share their thoughts and concerns with me at

any time. My hope was for participants to feel heard and understood, but most

importantly, appreciated for contributing to the findings of this study.

CHAPTER IV: DATA ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I present the findings gathered from seven participants who utilized Facebook status updates to cope with the loss of an immediate family member. The participants were recruited by utilizing fliers, word of mouth, and emails sent to my colleagues at Nova Southeastern University (see Appendix E for Research Flyer). Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix F for Consent Form), allowing the interview process to commence. Eligible participants were interviewed for approximately 45 minutes either in person or via Skype, contingent upon participants' availability and personal preference. The interviews took place in a private office at Nova Southeastern University. An interview guide was implemented (see Appendix G for Interview Guide) which included open-ended questions focusing on the potential benefits individuals may receive by utilizing Facebook status updates to cope with loss.

Participant Profiles

The participants were two men and five women, ranging from 25-50 years old (see Table I for Participant Profiles, p. 57). All participants had lost an immediate, blood-related family member within the past year. One male participant lost his grandfather to cancer, while the other male participant lost his father to a pedestrian car accident. One female participant shared that her mother was murdered in a domestic dispute, as another shared her brother passed away from a drug overdose. One participant stated that her father passed away due to internal bleeding after a car accident. Another female participant shared her father passed away as a result of cancer, similar to another participant who also lost her mother to cancer. All participants discussed utilizing

Facebook status updates to cope with the loss, either instantaneously after being informed of the family member's death or sporadically throughout the past year. Three participants created a single Facebook status update related to the loss, whereas the others wrote countless posts. According to the participants, the frequency of these posts depended on comfort levels, personal interests, and/or the desire to release their emotions.

Table I: Participant Profiles

Name	Monica	Doug	Molly	Bob	Kelly	Paula	Tara
Interview Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Age	27	39	27	25	36	50	30
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	Female
Type of Loss	Father: Cancer	Father: Pedestrian Car Accident	Mother: Murdered in Domestic Dispute	Grandfather: Cancer	Father: Internal Bleeding after Car Accident	Mother: Cancer	Brother: Drug Over-dose

Results of the Analysis

As the principal researcher, I listened to the audio-recordings of the interviews several times. I then transcribed these interviews for data analysis. During the transcription process, I typed all key ideas or concepts as well; a technique known as *memoing* (Creswell, 2013). Interview numbers, line numbers, and page numbers were assigned (i.e., 1, 5, 10). This process led to open coding in which I searched for major categories and themes within the data (Creswell). The subsequent categories were created by grouping related concepts and ideas unique to each category.

Open coding resulted in the following categories:

1. Category One:

    a. Sharing of Stories

    b. Sense of Personal Responsibility

2. Category Two:

     a. Acknowledgment

     b. Positive Reinforcement

3. Category Three:

     a. Reaching the Masses

     b. Discussion of Present Emotions

4. Category Four:

     a. Accomplishments

     b. Holidays

5. Category Five:

     a. Support

     b. Connection

     c. Closure

Data was re-examined multiple times in order to properly represent the major themes existing within the participants' interview responses. This allowed me to transition onto axial coding in which I focused on each open coding category and created subcategories by finding the relationships amongst the codes (Creswell). Axial coding resulted in the emergence of five categories:

     1. Memorialization

     2. Validation

     3. Megaphone

     4. Milestones

     5. Methods of Coping

I then utilized selective coding to develop hypotheses which resulted in a *story* that

described the interrelationships of these categories (Creswell). This "story" connected the

categories and led to the central theme: "Social Grief using Facebook Status Updates as a

Contemporary Ritual." The results of this analysis supported the discovered relationships

amongst the categories and demonstrated the benefits individuals receive by utilizing

Facebook status updates when coping with loss. This process led to the discovery of the

theory *Social Grief* after participants shared they received support, validation, and closure

by using Facebook status updates for grieving purposes.

<div align="center">

Social Grief

</div>

Memorialization

The first category that emerged within the theory of *Social Grief* was

Memorialization. This category was characterized by the *sharing of stories* regarding the

deceased. Participants described this process as a personal eulogy to their loved ones and

a way to share and honor their memory.

One participant named Tara stated:

It was nice to get all the comments back from even like friends of his that I never

met, stories about him, or . . . things that maybe that his . . . things that I would

have never known if I didn't put it out there. (7, 54, 3)

Another participant named Monica shared:

I think posting those or, you know, posting pictures about his car or him in the car

or him at the racetrack just kind of positive things we'd do together I think is what

I lean toward more on Facebook and just the memories, the pictures, the positive

times, doing things for him more so than dwelling on the negative things.

(1, 248, 11)

Participants described the importance of sharing stories related to the deceased as a way to keep their memories alive. Some individuals looked forward to the contribution of personal stories from their friends and families, while other participants wanted to take the role of sharing specific stories that perfectly represented their loved ones. Participants also stated being comforted and pleasantly surprised by what others had to say about the deceased. One participant, Doug, explained, "I remember browsing through it and there was something comforting about being able to you know . . . to be able to like come across these few little gems was what I was hoping for it was . . . you know . . . really, really cool" (2, 109, 4). These individuals described a feeling of appreciation but most importantly, support, especially as others commented and reflected on the type of individual the deceased represented. A participant named Tara shared, "I feel like . . . they were like maybe helping by posting or . . . sharing of stories" (7, 71, 4). Participants reported feeling better and at ease knowing that others cared about their immediate family members' passing. Participants enjoyed seeing what others had to say about the deceased, but also becoming aware of the lasting impact the death had on their friends and families.

A *sense of personal responsibility* also characterized the category of *Memorialization*. Participants mentioned a sense of responsibility towards reminding others of their loved ones that passed away. The participant, Molly, explained, "It was a great way to remind myself and those who know and love us that they're not with us but we always remember . . . and every now and again I too like to be reminded" (3, 172, 8).

These individuals described a feeling of responsibility towards keeping the deceased's

memory alive. One way of doing so was by sharing photos and songs representing the

deceased.

According to Doug:

> I put uh . . . a photo of him and it was probably, probably one of the harder things
>
> to do to kind of like meticulously go through pictures that would memorialize him
>
> best. I felt like a tremendous burden or responsibility of choosing a picture that
>
> was um . . . showed his vitality and showed, you know, captured him in whatever
>
> his essence is and uh, so yeah I was very careful in choosing a picture. (2, 27, 2)

Participants felt an immense sense of pressure to properly memorialize the deceased by

including pictures and songs that demonstrated the essence of their loved ones. Another

participant, Monica, shared that she sometimes spent hours picking a song that embodied

her father and their special relationship.

Monica:

> I've included a lot of song lyrics. There's a lot of country songs, "I Drive Your
>
> Truck", um . . . my dad gave me a '72 Chevelle when he passed away. He was in
>
> the hospital and he verbally said, "This car belongs to you" and that song to me is
>
> just . . . it's my dad. And, even songs like Luke Bryan, you know "Drink A Beer."
>
> My dad didn't drink, but I can just picture myself sitting with my dad in our front
>
> patio having a beer. (1, 90, 4)

Participants explained that this was their way of continuing the legacy of their loved

ones. Doug clarified, "It's . . . an intangible way to see his legacy maybe . . . more than

what you kind of realize that it could be" (2, 130, 5). In other words, the participants

considered that whatever is written on their Facebook status updates was infinite and will always be on the Internet allowing the memory of the deceased to live on forever.

Monica:

> It's not like writing a journal where, you know, one day it's gonna take too much room you're gonna throw it away or God forbid, you know, you have a fire and you lose all those papers; it's on the Internet. It's never gonna go away. It's always gonna be there. (1, 370, 17)

Monica continued:

> Maybe it's I feel like I'm connected with him by keeping him alive. I'm keeping his memory alive. I'm keeping the man he was alive. I'm allowing people to see the man he was, to see the fun times we had, the fun memories we had . . . And then it turned into kind of like, this is my dad, this is who he was. He was such a family man. You know, he couldn't do enough for his family, couldn't do more with his family. The family vacations we had and just kind of keeping him alive in that sense. (1, 135, 6)

Participants felt a personal responsibility to write Facebook status updates as a form of loyalty towards the deceased. Participants believed that they owed the deceased in some way and required themselves to continue reminding others of their loved ones. This included allowing themselves and others to remember special occasions.

Kelly:

> I do, you know, like to keep his memory alive and have people, you know, remember his birthday and acknowledge it, you know, um . . . yeah that was part

of it as well to kind of celebrate that even though he's not here we're still thinking

of him and we still sort of celebrate his birthday. (5, 108, 5)

Kelly continued, "It was also to let people know about him about how he was . . . things

like that" (5, 44, 2). Participants shared that one of the benefits of posting these types of

Facebook status updates was its individualized experience for sharing memories. Tara

supported, "It's an outlet where you're not actually having to confront anybody . . . but

kind of letting people know how you're doing or that you're thinking of him, or just to

remind other people just of his memory" (7, 43, 2). In essence, participants strove to

continue sharing memories of the deceased as often as they considered necessary and

appropriate; keeping the memories of their loved ones alive.

Validation

The second category that emerged within the theory of *Social Grief* was

Validation. This category was characterized by receiving *acknowledgment* for the loss

and *positive reinforcement* from friends and family. Participants described receiving

acknowledgement for their pained experiences related to the loss, and also positive

reinforcement such as well wishes and words of encouragement on their Facebook status

updates. In regards to *acknowledgment*, participants described being personally

acknowledged for their emotions, but also stated that others acknowledged their loved

ones' memories. Doug shared, "I really wanted to put kind of a marker down saying this

isn't your fluff, this is a very important, you know, for me . . . a very important

situation . . . very important post that I'm putting out there" (2, 82, 3). Participants

described wanting others to know about the loss of their family members and to feel

heard by those within the SNS.

Kelly:

> I felt that this was my way of getting my feelings out and kind of be heard so . . . I
> think it, you know, it was a positive experience for me and I did get some
> feedback from friends and family and I guess it acknowledges, you know, the
> feelings I was having in the moment. (5, 94, 5)

Doug:

> It's the moment where you get to kind of start the conversation and step to the
> side and see kind of what happens. If people want to step up and share a memory
> that's great. If people want to comment on the picture I posted that's great. If
> people want to um . . . take it a step out of the digitized world and join us at the at
> the funeral home even better, you know, but it felt like an opportunity to give out
> to the people not so engaged; their chance to say something. (2, 289, 10)

Tara expressed this as, "Just like hearing people's responses and replies and like making
you feel more like people cared . . . or felt the same way" (7, 134, 7). Participants felt that
Facebook members were acknowledging their emotions by offering responses and
comments on their status updates, essentially relating to their personal experiences. This
too was an opportunity for people to offer their sympathies to the bereaved. Participants
reported feeling "better" after being acknowledged for their emotions. For example,
Kelly offered, "I just felt better that I got my feelings out and then when I got some
family members that responded and they remembered him . . . it made me feel better and
everything" (5, 39, 2). Participants reported that they appreciated the recognition and felt
as if others truly cared about their well-being.

Molly:

> We could be totally private in our worlds . . . but I open myself up to it by putting
>
> it out there so sure, I mean it, it was heartwarming to know that they cared enough
>
> to take two seconds . . . or four seconds in their day to just write "thinking of
>
> you." I mean that I think that was part of it too to just give me like a little, you
>
> know, thanks for recognizing that she lived a great life . . . that they were super
>
> cool and I was kind of blessed to be, you know, a part of it. (3, 212, 10)

Participants shared that they appreciated the total recognition, but more so from those
who also had lost an immediate family member.

Monica:

> Because I think losing a parent, or a brother, or a sister, or someone that's a close
>
> relative is a hard thing to go through and, you know, like I said you have the
>
> friends that are great, they understand, they're very supportive but they don't
>
> know until unfortunately they've been through it. It's not anything you want
>
> anyone to go through and so I think having that support and knowing that that
>
> support is out there within your stream of friends. (1, 310, 14)

Participants admitted that they were able to relate more to those who also experienced the
loss of someone they loved and cherished so deeply. Either way, participants showed
appreciation for people's comments by "liking" or replying to their responses. Monica
mentioned, "I would take the time to 'like' the status update, thank them, something to let
them know I heard what they were saying. I appreciate them taking the time to reach out
to me . . . for the pain . . . I am suffering" (1, 332, 15). Participants felt that it was
important to let others know that they appreciated the support and it did not go unnoticed.

Some participants replied instantaneously while others waited months to respond or

"like" these comments, depending on their personal preference and comfort levels.

Participants also noted feeling validated by receiving *positive reinforcement* from

their acquaintances, friends, and family members on Facebook. Participants affirmed that

others would write supportive comments, in turn validating their feelings and emotions.

Paula:

I have a lot of good reactions and um . . . positive reinforcement like you've

become so much like your mom, your daughter and you look so much alike,

um . . . 'cause I have family all over the country and they always look at it like I

am growing up to be just like her um . . . and my mom would be so proud.

(6, 160, 8)

Participants genuinely believed that others desired to make a point of letting them know

how well they were adjusting to the loss. Molly confirmed, "It's totally again this support

and . . . and the good thoughts and wishes and . . . all were warm hugs that were sent

through Facebook" (3, 195, 9). Participants felt listened to and recognized by other

Facebook members for their personal growth after the loss. The participants perceived

these occurrences as being supportive and beneficial to their grieving processes.

Megaphone

The third category that emerged within the theory of *Social Grief* was entitled

Megaphone. This category was characterized by the utilization of status updates to *reach*

the masses on Facebook and to *discuss present emotions*. Participants described the

process of *reaching the masses* as using Facebook status updates to discuss funeral

arrangements, share photos of the deceased for all to see, and a way to reach out for support.

Doug:

> These posts are an announcement tool to let people that maybe I don't have direct contact with, kind of letting the universe know, you know, my dad just passed away um . . . and it wasn't kind of to solicit, you know, uh "Oh, I'm so sorry" or you know remorseful comments, but more to kind of get in touch with people that might be out of my network. But because of the six degrees of separation that exists on Facebook, it was probably the best tool to be able to get in touch with people that I couldn't know how to get in touch with. So, that one post was letting people know, you know, that my dad passed away and the funeral arrangements. (2, 18, 1)

Molly added:

> That was a great way to outreach my various friends that were not in the immediate vicinity to let them know that my mom had passed. So for me it was an outreach, a social outreach, to let them know sadly that she did pass on . . . and that heaven had a new angel. That was kind of my way. And I had used a photo of she and I from fairly recently you know within a couple of months, to let everybody know that she had gone. (3, 13, 1)

Bob revealed:

> I guess the exposure you get would be the most, uh, would be the most appealing thing . . . that was probably the quickest and easiest way to, you know, share my

feelings with my friends and more importantly my family about, you know, how I

felt about him taking ill and passing. (4, 50, 3)

Participants used status updates to discuss the passing of their immediate family members

but also to inform others of plans and funeral arrangements. Participants added that it was

helpful to discuss the loss using status updates in order to avoid making individual phone

calls and having direct interactions not necessarily desired.

Tara:

Not directly calling people and having to talk about it seems like an easier way to

put something out there I guess . . . I think it's an easy way to share with like a lot

of people instead of just, you know, calling everybody you know and saying how

you are feeling that day. (7, 49, 3)

Paula:

I was able to reach out and reach a large variety of people at a time and now it's

easier, a lot easier for me to talk about it and I didn't have to go through the

grieving situation so long. (6, 109, 5)

Participants stated that using these public expressions helped with the grieving process.

Molly found this process supportive by "outreach and just knowing that they were able to

know um . . . recognize and maybe honor too the memory" (3, 209, 10). Participants also

found it beneficial to see whom else could relate to their situation.

Monica:

I think it was more to let everyone know that "Hey, I'm here, I'm dealing, but I'm

still in a lot of pain." And then you see who gets it, who understands it, and that is

a form of therapy to have, you know, a friend come forward and say, "Hey, look

we may not have spoken in a year or two but we're friends on Facebook. I saw

what you are going through, let's get together . . . let's do something in memory

of our parents. Let's do something that's gonna make each other feel better. Let's

just sit there any cry." (1, 290, 13)

This category also was characterized by *discussing present emotions* to notify

others of their feelings, frustrations, and opinions. Participants revealed that publically

sharing their emotions on status updates offered them the ability to feel as if they were

not the only ones that ever experienced loss. Participants declared feeling unfamiliar and

uncomfortable emotions sometimes while grieving and not always having access or

desire to physically meet with someone to discuss these feelings. For instance, Kelly

explained, "I felt in the moment that I needed to get my feelings out and didn't really

want to speak to like one person in particular" (5, 84, 4). Participants also wanted to

instantaneously "share in the moment." This included informing others that their loved

ones will never be forgotten and/or sharing their frustrations.

Kelly:

> I just felt to express myself and, you know, the only way that came to me was,
>
> you know, to kind of get it out and put it on Facebook and I don't know, maybe so
>
> my family and friends would know that I am thinking of him and how I feel about
>
> him and kind of share in the moment. (5, 21, 1)

Monica:

> You know . . . people always put on there how they feel, they're angry about this,
>
> happy about that. This is kind of my, I'm sad. I'm sad that I had to lose my dad at
>
> such a young age. I'm sad that there are so many milestones in my life that he's

never going to be a part of. I'm sad that I see, you know, people posting wedding

photos with their dad or just different things with their dad that I'll never get to

have in my life. (1, 117, 6)

In essence, participants shared that they would use status updates to reach out to others; a

process they described as rather therapeutic and helpful.

Milestones

The fourth category that emerged within the theory of *Social Grief* was entitled

Milestones. This category was characterized by *accomplishments* and *holidays.*

Participants described sharing new *accomplishments* with the deceased and including

their loved ones during *holidays*. Participants used Facebook status updates to discuss

accomplishments such as getting a new job, going back to school, new experiences

involving family members, and other memorable events.

Monica:

I want to continue sharing those memories and I want to continue living those

memories and, you know, the first time I raced my dad's Chevelle down the

quarter mile track was the biggest day ever. And it wasn't so long ago and now I

can look back next year on Facebook and see that day and live that day all over

again that I did this for my dad. (1, 350, 16)

Participants explained feeling a sense of obligation and an urgency to include the

deceased in their lives.

Paula:

Yeah, like if something was to happen or that happened in our lives or with my

daughter I write it to my mom, you know, "Hey mom, this is what happened." I'd

> take a picture or I'll send it to her, you know, something like that . . . Like you
> know, milestones in my daughter's life. Like if she took a family class photo or
> something, I would show it to her. (6, 119, 6)

This process reverberated back to wanting the deceased to know that they were not forgotten. Participants also used status updates to keep the deceased updated on special events, particularly occasions that the participants wished the deceased could be a part of or attend. Participants described using status updates as their way of sharing these memories and making the deceased a continued part of their lives.

Participants similarly created Facebook status updates around the *holidays*, including Christmas, Hanukkah, anniversaries, and so forth. For instance, Paula mentioned, "If it was a holiday, like Christmas came around, we posted a lot of the holiday photos . . . so it was like, she's a part of it" (6, 131, 6). Participants used these times to reflect on the memories they shared with the deceased and to acknowledge their loss. In addition, participants used these times to write how much the deceased were missed, how they wished they were still alive, and how they hoped the deceased were reunited with other loved ones who passed away.

Molly:

> I think it was remembering her and her first birthday in heaven, and I don't post
> all the time, I totally posted obviously right after the fact and . . . while it isn't
> constant (sniffles) um . . . what do you call it? Posting? At all . . . there was
> certainly one immediately after and there was probably . . . it was their
> anniversary in December, you know, those milestones is the word I'm looking for

so at milestones, which would have been like on Valentine's Day, they're reunited

their first Valentine's Day together. (3, 127, 6)

Celebrating first holidays without their loved ones was a trying time for the

participants. Participants described these "firsts" as being difficult times, typically

leading to the creation of Facebook status updates. Participants admitted that creating

these status updates allowed them to release their emotions by "speaking" to the deceased

which helped with their grieving processes. This was accomplished by using words,

pictures, or songs related to the deceased. Photos commonly included images of past

holidays in which the deceased were included and/or special songs affiliated with the

memories of their loved ones.

Methods of Coping

The fifth category that emerged within the theory of *Social Grief* was *Methods of*

Coping. This category was characterized by receiving *support* while grieving, making a

connection with the deceased, and feeling *closure* after the loss. Participants described

the process of *support* as a feeling of comfort by receiving positive responses from other

Facebook members.

Monica:

> You could write a comment about, you know, losing someone and the process
>
> you were going through and you'd get people that would relate to you, that would
>
> understand the process you were going through, that would kind of give you
>
> words of encouragement. (1, 35, 2)

Participants shared feeling as if others were able to relate to their loss by writing these

words of encouragement. Participants also felt supported knowing that their loved ones

made a positive impact on other people's lives. Doug shared, "There's more of a reach than you imagined or . . . you understood. Um . . . and that's really a kind of a comforting thing 'cause you get to realize wow, you know. It's important for you to know who your father reached" (2, 138, 5). Participants added that it was helpful to receive the support they needed by not having to directly meet with anyone, but instead relay their thoughts and emotions through Facebook status updates. Kelly explained, "I guess it is kind of like a coping mechanism um . . . when you have all these feelings inside and either there's nobody there for you to talk to about it at the moment or you don't feel comfortable" (5, 90, 5). Participants described this comfort as an easily accessible outlet that did not require driving anywhere or setting up a time to meet someone in order to discuss these thoughts and emotions.

Participants also revealed that other Facebook members would offer helpful suggestions to ease the pain of their loss; a process considered to support their needs. Paula:

Other people who had lost their family members or mother at a young age they would also write back, you know, something like what they did to help them or, you know, something that would comfort me and ease the pain that I am not the only one. (6, 66, 3)

Participants also explained a feeling of loneliness at times, turning to Facebook status updates for support.

Monica:

This past year I've been more of the supporter, than I've gotten support. I've been my mom's shoulder to cry on. I've been my brother's person to yell at. I've been

the one that's gotten the rough end of the stick. And while I had my own things

going on and trying to figure out my life and the direction I want to go in my life,

I didn't really have that support to kind of help me when I lost my dad. It was

always "My mom lost her husband," "My mom lost her best friend." It was never

"I lost my dad" so I think having Facebook kind of gave me the outlet to have my

friends like, not give me pity, but know that she lost her dad . . . I lost someone

close to me. They could see the days that I was struggling and the days that I was

having pain. (1, 43, 2)

Monica elaborated:

I think the hardest part of losing someone is right after the funeral, after the first

few weeks when everyone goes home. You have family in town, they come in for

the funeral and then they leave. And that's when you need your friends and family

the most. And I think with Facebook that's when you know who's there.

(1, 266, 12)

Participants described having a desire to feel heard, which also offered them support. Bob

clarified, "It was, you know, it was nice to know that people were thinking of me and that

I had someone to talk to, you know, if I needed to" (4, 78, 4). Tara continued, "I think

that . . . just to know that there's other people out there feeling the same way or like

missing him too makes you feel a little bit better" (7, 79, 4). Participants found it rather

supportive to know that others were missing and thinking of the deceased as well and

appreciated the time these Facebook members offered words of support and

encouragement.

Making a *connection* with the deceased also characterized the category of *Methods of Coping*. Participants shared that Facebook status updates offered each individual a way to talk to or about their loved ones who passed away. This connection allowed participants to include the deceased in their daily lives. Tara shared, "It seems like really silly and crazy 'cause obviously he is not like scrolling through Facebook right now reading anything, but I feel like sometimes just to like get it out there if you know what I mean" (7, 152, 7). Monica concurred, "I think for me using Facebook was a way of almost connecting with my father. Even though he didn't have social media, wasn't big into Facebook or any of that, it was a way of expressing my feelings openly" (1, 20, 1). Participants stated that they truly felt as if they were able to speak to the deceased at times, and other times considered this process impossible. Still, participants felt a connection to the deceased and even wrote them well wishes.

Kelly:

> I was missing my dad and obviously I can't talk to him or see him or go and, you know, tell him "I miss you and happy birthday" so it was kind of just like a mode to use and get my feelings out. (5, 49, 3)

Participants described feeling guilty at times if they did not write to the deceased. These individuals experienced a need to remind the deceased that they were not forgotten.

Feeling *closure* after the loss also characterized the category of *Methods of Coping*. Participants described experiencing closure by utilizing Facebook status updates as a personal therapy to release their emotions. Participants shared that they used these posts as a platform to reflect on their feelings and thoughts regarding the death.

Paula:

> It's more of like um . . . it was a personal therapy . . . letting out my emotions and being able to talk to her in a way . . . more of a personal therapy to release it . . . I think I've come out of it a lot better just because I released a lot of my emotions and my feelings in the statuses. (6, 48, 3)

Bob:

> Closure I guess mainly was, you know, a eulogy type thing. I guess my own personal eulogy . . . it kind of gave me a time to really reflect on, you know, how I felt about him and how I felt about the connection that I had with him while he was still alive 'cause we were pretty close. (4, 46, 3)

Participants agreed that writing status updates to or about the deceased was part of their grieving processes.

Molly:

> Part of that is the process for me as well working through it, the grieving process, and if it just . . . if it helps me it's probably a selfish thing 'cause my mom is gonna hear me whether I put it on Facebook or I Instagram a photo or not but again, it's part of the grieving process I think and selfishly for me, you know, to kind of work through it as well. (3, 89, 4)

Participants explained that these posts helped them to "heal" and move on noting they would never forget the memory of their loved ones.

Monica:

> It was kind of . . . it's a healing process and it's keeping their memory alive and for me I think that's important for me to know that, you know, I can look back on

Facebook and see collages I made, fun times I had, and think about the memories.

(1, 339, 15)

Participants described that they were able to experience closure by feeling that they could still connect and talk to their loved ones through Facebook status updates. Participants stated that they felt better after writing status updates because they were able to make sense of the loss, but most importantly, make peace in their lives.

Participants did report several considerations when posting Facebook status updates. Monica mentioned how she wondered at times if her status updates bothered her Facebook friends since she posted so often about her father. Kelly considered that her posts may cause others to be sad and that was not her intention in any way. Tara stated that she refrained from posting status updates about her brother as frequently as she preferred because she did not want her family to know that she was sad so often. Doug considered the process of "liking" a status update about the deceased rather inappropriate, even though he still expected friends and family members to do so.

All participants stated that they would post another status update about the deceased in the future if needed or desired. Participants considered the utilization of Facebook status updates rather healing when grieving the loss of a loved one. Participants received positive and supportive messages from other Facebook members, considered this outlet easily accessible and convenient, and related to others who endured similar experiences.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate the various rituals clients use to cope when grieving and to add significant information about the grieving process. In particular, this study focused on the research question, "What benefits, if any, are adult clients receiving by utilizing Facebook status updates in order to cope with the loss of an immediate family member?" As the researcher, I considered qualitative methods appropriate for my specific interests to examine this trend and therefore used a grounded theory methodology to code and search for themes and patterns within the data. Seven participants were interviewed in this study as a way to gain a greater understanding of the impact of Facebook status updates as a contemporary death ritual. These steps led to the discovery of the theory *Social Grief* after results indicated that participants received support, validation, and closure by using Facebook status updates to grieve.

Findings and Interpretations

Category One: Memorialization

The first category that emerged within the theory of *Social Grief* was *Memorialization*. This category was characterized by the *sharing of stories* and a *sense of personal responsibility* regarding the deceased. Results indicated that participants used Facebook status updates to share stories of the deceased as a way to honor the memories of their loved ones. This concept may be compared to Young (2011) who found that status updates were being used as conversation starters. However, in this study, conversations were initiated to specifically relate to the deceased. Results supported that participants shared these stories to talk about their loved ones as a way to keep their memories alive so they never will be forgotten. This offered a sense of comfort,

appreciation, but most importantly, support, for the bereaved as others continuously responded to their status updates. Participants found it beneficial to witness the lasting impact the deceased had on their friends and families.

A *sense of personal responsibility* also characterized the category of *Memorialization*. Results of this study revealed that participants felt a sense of responsibility to properly memorialize the deceased by including words, pictures, and songs in their status updates to accurately depict the deceased. This reverberated back to the feeling of responsibility towards keeping the deceased's memory alive. Similar to Gibbs et al. (2013), the results of this study confirmed that keeping the deceased's memory alive meant "repositioning the dead back within the flow of everyday life" (pp. 256-257). This was accomplished via status updates, allowing participants to continue honoring the legacy of their loved ones. Participants supported the notion that anything put on the Internet will always be there, allowing the memory of the deceased to live on forever. This was described as a form of loyalty toward the deceased as participants felt responsible to remind others of memories and important occasions, such as birthdays and anniversaries.

Category Two: Validation

The second category that emerged within the theory of *Social Grief* was *Validation*. This category was characterized by receiving *acknowledgment* and *positive reinforcement* from other Facebook members via status updates. Research indicated that participants felt *acknowledged* for their loss and felt heard by those within the SNS. In agreement with Ilyas and Khushi (2012), Facebook is a forum to communicate and connect with people, but also as a place where people feel heard. Results of this study

suggested the bereaved were able to openly express their emotions through Facebook

status updates and receive words of encouragement as well. It was found that participants

felt validated when other Facebook members offered supportive responses and comments

on their status updates. These experiences benefited participants by offering them the

desired recognition for their loss. However, it was revealed that although participants

appreciated the recognition and acknowledgment for their loss, they tended to prefer and

relate more to those who also experienced the loss of a loved one. Nonetheless,

participants acknowledged those who wrote them supportive comments either

instantaneously or months later, depending on personal preference and comfort levels.

This research found that participants also experienced validation by receiving

positive reinforcement from other Facebook members. In essence, participants received

supportive comments in reference to their loss thereby validating their feelings and

emotions. As Ilyas and Khushi (2012) observed, status updates allowed individuals to

feel "heard" (p. 503). By the same token, this study revealed participants felt listened to

and recognized when using status updates on Facebook to discuss the deceased,

especially as others complimented their progress and growth since the death.

Category Three: Megaphone

The third category that emerged within the theory of *Social Grief* was entitled

Megaphone. This category was characterized by the desire to *reach the masses* on

Facebook and *discuss present emotions* using status updates. Research found participants

used status updates to *reach the masses* on Facebook as a method to discuss funeral

arrangements, share photos of the deceased, and reach out for support. Comparably, a

study by Levitt (2012) found that status updates could be used to "receive updates about a

victim's condition, stay in touch with the family, and send supportive messages to thousands of people at once" (p. 78). Levitt's study concentrated on updating other Facebook members about a tragedy involving those still alive, whereas this study focused on status updates involving those who already passed away. Both studies found it beneficial to use status updates in order to reach a wide audience and to avoid having direct interactions not necessarily preferred at the time. Marwick and Ellison (2012) supported this notion by adding Facebook's "massive adoption and immediacy increase the chances of reaching a wide audience of people who knew the deceased, as opposed to a newspaper obituary" (p. 395). In this study, it was discovered that status updates allowed the bereaved to be exposed to many individuals at once, offering opportunities to relate to others who also lost a loved one, receive guidance, and obtain support as well.

This research study suggested that Facebook status updates were used to *discuss present emotions.* In other words, participants were able to publically notify others of their emotions, frustrations, and thoughts as ways to share their feelings and connect with other Facebook members. Roos (2012) described a shift in our culture stating we recently started to feel comfortable openly talking about death. The findings showed that the bereaved felt they were not alone knowing others experienced loss in their lives as well; therefore, freely discussing their emotions by using status updates appeared to benefit the bereaved. In essence, participants found this process convenient, therapeutic, and helpful as they were instantaneously able to reach out to others and to connect in ways that allowed them to openly express themselves. This remained consistent with Pfohl (2012) which acknowledged that the bereaved "want to have contact with others to share their reactions. They want immediate access to others" (p. 36). Correspondingly, the findings

of McEwen and Scheaffer (2013) supported that Facebook "provides users with a quick outlet for emotion and a means of timely support via replies" (p. 71). Participants in this study discussed their present emotions using status updates as a way to instantly obtain needed support but also as a method to receive words of encouragement.

Category Four: Milestones

The fourth category that emerged within the theory of *Social Grief* was entitled *Milestones*. This category illustrated how the bereaved used Facebook status updates to share *accomplishments* and *holidays* with the deceased. Results indicated that the bereaved felt responsible to continue including the deceased in their lives, particularly during new experiences and memorable events, such as holidays. These status updates commonly included words, pictures, or songs. The research of this study may be compared to Ilyas and Khushi (2012) which found that people commonly used status updates to share minute details about their lives, except the results of this study pinpointed how individuals used status updates to share details specifically with the deceased. DeGroot (2012) focused on Facebook memorial groups and discovered that individuals wrote on the deceased's Facebook wall as a way to post updates and reflect on "important dates such as birthdays and holidays" (p. 206). Similarly, this research supported the idea that the bereaved wanted the deceased to know that they had not been forgotten during these milestones, and did so by using status updates instead of Facebook memorial pages. It was discovered that participants created these status updates sporadically, ranging from one to several posts throughout the past year. This outlet allowed the bereaved to release their emotions and helped their grieving processes. In

essence, status updates benefited the bereaved by being a way to easily share memories and allowing the deceased to be a continued part of their lives.

Category Five: Methods of Coping

The fifth category that emerged within the theory of *Social Grief* was *Methods of Coping*. This category was characterized by *support, connection*, and *closure*. Results found that participants felted *supported* and comforted by receiving positive responses and helpful suggestions from other Facebook members. McEwen and Scheaffer (2013) specifically examined Facebook memorial groups and observed that these groups were a "locale for the bereaved user to access an online community for support" (p. 72). In comparison, the research of this study suggested that the bereaved received support via status updates by feeling heard and being told that other Facebook members also missed and thought of their loved ones as well.

It was discovered that Facebook status updates offered participants the ability to *connect* with the deceased. As the principal researcher, I found that participants used status updates to talk directly to the deceased or at times about their loved ones. Kasket (2012) argued, "The best way of getting hold of the dead is also expressed in wall posts that seem to assume that while the dead are not omniscient, they must surely be reading their wall posts" (p. 66). Kasket's study focused on the deceased's Facebook memorial page, which allowed others to continue writing messages to those who had passed. However, the results of this study found that the bereaved also connected with the deceased by using status updates to include the deceased in their daily lives and to release their emotions in a personal way. DeGroot (2012) presented that the messages written on the deceased's Facebook memorial pages were directed to and intended for the deceased

so that the deceased could read them. Likewise, the results of this study indicated that the same recipient, the deceased, may be reading their status updates.

DeGroot (2012) also found that the bereaved asked the deceased for favors at times, such as looking after another deceased family member in heaven. However, none of the participants of this study stated that they asked the deceased for any favors or requests. Still, "The online messages clearly provided evidence of the living attempting to maintain a relationship with their deceased loved ones through communication" (DeGroot, p. 208). The results of this study did indicate that participants tried to maintain a relationship with the deceased and experienced guilt if they did not commonly write a post to or about the deceased. Participants typically experienced a need to remind the deceased that they were not forgotten as a way to connect and preserve their bond.

Research provided evidence that participants did in fact experience *closure* by utilizing Facebook status updates as a personal therapy to release their emotions. Other research showed that in times of tragedy, "people search for ways to reach out for catharsis, information, and solace" (Levitt, 2012, p. 78). Previous research indicated people also "try to make sense of the death through lamenting and questioning" (DeGroot, 2012, p. 204). These results suggested participants used these posts as a platform to reflect on their emotions, connect and talk to the deceased whenever desired, and help them to heal and move on in their lives. These processes offered the bereaved closure. It is important to highlight that participants reassured themselves that they would never forget their loved ones, even after experiencing closure. Status updates allowed participants to make sense of the loss, but most importantly, gave participants an outlet to reconnect with the deceased if ever desired.

Implications for Practice

Professionals who work with the bereaved may benefit from the findings of this study. This research offers a glimpse of the ways in which individuals grieve, expanding contemporary methods of bereavement. Mental health clinicians may employ this knowledge to discuss the various rituals clients can use when dealing with the loss of a loved one. These conversations may offer clinicians a better understanding of grief as grief is a personal process for each client. Considering alternative coping mechanisms, including Facebook status updates, could offer practitioners the ability to use follow up questions with clients. Clinicians may ask questions about the type of release and comfort clients receive if discovered that clients indeed utilized status updates to cope with loss. Professionals could then expand this conversation by asking if clients also used other Facebook tools as coping mechanisms. These types of discussions can assist clinicians to better understand their clients' personal grieving processes and how to be helpful within these situations as well.

Being mindful of the diverse outlets clients use to release their emotions when dealing with loss may be considered valuable for marriage and family therapists. In comparison to the theories put forward by Bowlby (1980), Parkes (2001), and Kübler-Ross (2005), which discuss the specific stages of grief, *Social Grief* is rather a *process* experienced by the bereaved. *Social Grief* offers an easily accessible outlet when in need of instantaneous support. The process of *Social Grief* may not be experienced by each individual who has lost a loved one. Based on the findings of this study, individuals who created Facebook status updates to cope with the loss of an immediate family member found the process of *Social Grief* beneficial by receiving support, validation, and closure.

Clinicians could continue asking clients follow up questions related to *Social Grief*, inquiring if clients have utilized other SNS to cope with loss. These questions may include if and why other sites were useful and also discover what worked and helped alleviate the pain associated with loss.

Limitations of the Study

As the principal researcher, I interviewed seven participants who utilized Facebook status updates to cope with the loss of an immediate, blood-related family member such as a mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, grandmother, or grandfather, within the last year. Generalization was limited as I mainly focused on individuals from 25-64 years old. In addition, this study lacked male representation as there were five female participants and two males. Furthermore, none of the seven participants who were interviewed fit the criteria of using status updates to discuss the loss of a child. All of the individuals interviewed either lost a parent, grandparent, or sibling. Perhaps the responses of those who had lost a child and used Facebook status updates to cope could have provided a richer understanding of this grieving method.

My personal biases were another limitation of this study. My professional training includes the practices and techniques of Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) which focuses on solutions and exceptions to the problem (Berg & Reuss, 1998). Over the years, I have learned to center my questions around what is working in someone's life and emphasizing a person's positive attributes. In turn, my background may have influenced the direction of this study's interviews, including the way I may have responded to the participants. I was aware of these biases before conducting the research; however, my prior training may have unintentionally, negatively affected the results of

this study. Perhaps I could have attained a greater sense of how the utilization of status updates could be retroactive, rather than amplifying its benefits.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this research study contributed to the gap in the literature by illustrating the benefits of utilizing Facebook status updates as a contemporary ritual. Still, these results are a small contribution to the mental health field considering the scope of potential findings in future research. This study particularly focused on the utilization of Facebook status updates when coping with the loss of an immediate family member. Participants were interviewed one time for approximately 45 minutes. Future studies could expand this study by conducting a follow-up interview, questioning the same participants included in their studies. Participants could then be asked if their Facebook status updates changed in any way after initially being interviewed. Researchers could discover if participants changed the type of words used in their status updates, altered the frequency of their posts, or if any status updates were removed after becoming aware that they were being used to cope with the loss of their loved ones.

Future research may also address the utilization of Facebook profile pictures as a way cope with loss. Facebook profile pictures are chosen photos used to represent one's social profile (Chang & Heo, 2014). A current trend I have noticed is individuals changing their profile pictures to a photo of the deceased individual or to a photo of themselves and the deceased family member. Individuals then appear to receive supportive comments and responses in reference to their new profile pictures. It may be useful to discover ways in which the bereaved utilize Facebook profile pictures as a way to cope with the loss of a loved one.

This study specifically focused on the utilization of Facebook status updates to cope with the loss of an immediate, blood-related family member. Additional studies may examine the process of when one loses a child or a spouse. A spouse is typically considered a lifelong partner, but when that bond is broken, it may be extremely challenging for widows to cope with the loss. Some individuals consider their pets as family members, in turn resulting in difficulty coping with their deaths as well. Individuals possibly may use Facebook status updates to cope with the loss of their children, spouses, or pets, offering a sense of support and closure. In addition, future studies could examine the utilization of Facebook status updates as a coping mechanism for the elderly and minors as well. Both the elderly and children can create a Facebook account and perhaps they may utilize status updates for grieving purposes as well. It may be interesting to compare and contrast the types of posts created by the elderly and children to the themes and patterns discovered in this study. Examining these processes may add valuable information to the vast array of methods individuals use to grieve.

It may be advantageous to expand this research to include various cultures. This study specifically focused on the utilization of Facebook status updates within the United States. However, Facebook is a Social Networking Site used worldwide. It may be interesting to determine the various ways in which individuals in other countries create and utilize these types of posts for grieving purposes. How do other cultures memorialize their loved ones using Facebook? Do other cultures include more pictures in their status updates of the deceased? Do other countries also add song lyrics to their posts? These potential questions may continue addressing the gap in the literature and offer more opportunities for future research.

Researcher Reflections

While conducting this study, I noticed several factors that may be taken into consideration for future studies. During the interview process, note-taking appeared to be a distraction for the participants. As I began to take notes, all participants paused when sharing their responses, but continued speaking once I resumed making eye contact. I refrained from taking further notes throughout the remainder of the interviews. I realized that the two male participants had the shortest interviews and were less responsive regarding the loss compared to the five female participants. The reasons for these occurrences were unknown. Possibly the men felt uncomfortable openly discussing their emotions regarding their loss or perhaps talking about their emotions to a female researcher may have affected the interviews as well.

I initially had eleven participants interested in participating in this study. Four participants withdrew prior to the interview process. Two of these participants experienced the loss of a child. The other two experienced the loss of their loved ones less than a month before our initial contact. Perhaps discussing the loss of a child or a loss that was fairly recent may have been truly difficult for these four participants, resulting in their withdrawal. Furthermore, it was revealed that the more time that passed after the loss, the less frequent participants posted Facebook status updates regarding their loved ones. Future studies may address these factors and determine the causes and explanations regarding these diverse behaviors.

Conclusion

Facebook has become a part of life for billions of people across the globe. For some, Facebook may be considered a daily routine in which communication takes place

with loved ones, both living and deceased. Current findings from this study found that individuals were able to receive support, validation, connection, and closure by utilizing Facebook status updates to cope with the loss of an immediate family member. This process provided a way for the bereaved to feel some form of comfort and to alleviate the pain experienced when grieving. Professionals may incorporate these findings into their work with the bereaved by being aware of the various methods individuals use to cope with loss. While conducting this research, I acquired that individuals indeed grieve differently. As a marriage and family therapist, I look forward to continuing to educate myself on the effective techniques related to grief and contributing future research within the field of bereavement.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Virtual Memorial Page

Appendix B

Facebook Profile Page

Appendix C

Facebook Memorial Page

Appendix D1

Facebook Status Updates

Appendix D2

Facebook Status Updates

Appendix D3

Facebook Status Updates

Appendix E

Research Flyer

RESEARCH STUDY

Social Grief: A Grounded Theory of Utilizing

Status Updates on Facebook as a Contemporary Ritual

- Have you **lost an immediate family member** within the past year?
- Have you used **Facebook status updates** to cope?
- Are you **25-64** years old?

- **Research Question:** Are there any benefits for individuals utilizing Facebook status updates in order to cope with loss?

- Eligible participants will be interviewed for approximately **45 minutes** either in person or via Skype, contingent upon participants' availability and personal preference. The interview will take place in a private office at Nova Southeastern University.

Please contact **Celeste Catania-Opris, M.S.** at **(954) 655-0718**
or **cc1618@nova.edu** with any questions or
if you would like to be a participant in our study!

Appendix F

Consent Form

Consent Form for Participation in the Research Study Entitled

Social Grief: A Grounded Theory of Utilizing Status Updates on

Facebook as a Contemporary Ritual

Funding Source: None.

IRB protocol #: 2016-49

Principal investigator   Co-investigator
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                                                 (954) 262-3010

For questions/concerns about your research rights, contact:
Human Research Oversight Board (Institutional Review Board or IRB)
Nova Southeastern University
(954) 262-5369/Toll Free: 866-499-0790
IRB@nsu.nova.edu

Site Information
Nova Southeastern University
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314
(800) 541-6682

What is the study about?
The focus of this study is to discover if there are any benefits for individuals utilizing
social media, particularly Facebook status updates, to cope with loss. This study searches
for what may be *different* about using status updates on Facebook, compared to other
traditional rituals of grieving.

Initials: _____   Date: _____   Page 1 of 4

Why are you asking me?
We are inviting you to participate in this study as you are 25-64 years old and have utilized Facebook status updates to cope after losing an immediate family member within the past year. A total of seven participants will be involved in this study.

What will I be doing if I agree to be in the study?
You will participate in one interview for approximately 45 minutes either in person or via Skype, contingent upon your availability and personal preference. A digital voice recorder will be used to record the interview. During the interview, you will be asked multiple questions regarding your use of Facebook status updates. The interviews will be transcribed using pseudonyms to protect your identifying information. A copy of the transcription will be sent to you via email in order to review accuracy. There may be emotional consequences as a participant in this study, as it is a sensitive subject related to loss and grief. The principal investigator, Mrs. Celeste Catania-Opris, will consistently check in with you reiterating that you can leave the study if needed. A follow up may be requested if more information is necessary. A copy of the abstract and informed consent form will be made for your records. You may ask any study-related questions in the future by contacting Mrs. Celeste Catania-Opris at (954) 655-0718. You may also contact the IRB at the numbers indicated above with questions.

Is there any audio or video recording?
A digital voice recording will be used and may be heard by the principal investigator, personnel from the IRB, and Dr. Chris Burnett. The recording will be transcribed by Mrs. Catania-Opris, who will use headphones while listening to the interview as a way to protect your privacy. The recording will be in a locked cabinet kept securely in Mrs. Catania-Opris' private office for 36 months from the conclusion of this study and will be destroyed by shredding the memory card. Since your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although Mrs. Catania-Opris will try to limit access to the recording by working in a private office.

What are the dangers to me?
Risks for this study are considered minimal; however, the procedures or activities in this study may have unknown or unforeseeable risks. There may be emotional consequences being a participant in this study as loss and grief will be addressed. Mrs. Catania-Opris will attempt to alleviate this discomfort by discussing your distress. You may withdraw from the study at any time. If you have any questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact Mrs. Celeste Catania-Opris at (954) 655-0718. You may also contact the IRB at the numbers indicated above with questions as to your research rights.

Initials: _____   Date: _____   **Page 2 of 4**

Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?
There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study.
Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?
There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information private?
All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Research records may be reviewed by the IRB, regulatory agencies, and the co-investigator. Pseudonyms will be used in the transcription and written data to protect your identifying information. Your name will appear on the consent form which will be stored in a locked cabinet kept securely in Mrs. Catania-Opris' private office for 36 months from the conclusion of this study along with the notes, transcription, and digital voice recording. The digital voice recording will be transcribed by Mrs. Catania-Opris, who will use headphones while listening to the interview as a way to protect your privacy. The digital voice recording, notes, and transcription will be destroyed and shredded 36 months from the conclusion of this study to ensure security and confidentiality.

What if I do not want to participate or I want to leave the study?
You have the right to leave this study at any time or refuse to participate. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to participate, you will not experience any penalty or loss of services you have a right to receive. If you choose to withdraw, any information collected about you **before** the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the conclusion of the study but you may request that it not be used.

Other Considerations:
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you by the investigators.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:
By signing below, you indicate that
- this study has been explained to you
- you have read this document or it has been read to you
- your questions about this research study have been answered
- you have been told that you may ask the researchers any study related questions in the future or contact them in the event of a research-related injury
- you have been told that you may ask Institutional Review Board (IRB) personnel questions about your study rights
- you are entitled to a copy of this form after you have read and signed it
- you voluntarily agree to participate in the study entitled *Social Grief: A Grounded Theory of Utilizing Status Updates on Facebook as a Contemporary Ritual.*

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant's Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____
Date: _____

Appendix G
Interview Guide

1. Are you 25-64 years old? (If yes, continue to the next question)

2. Have you ever used the Social Networking Site called Facebook? (If yes, continue to the next question)

3. Have you ever written a status update on Facebook? (If yes, continue to the next question)

4. Have you ever written a status update about an immediate, blood-related family member (mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, or grandparent) that has passed away within the past year? (If yes, continue to the next question)

5. Could you briefly describe the process that led you to writing the status update initially?

Potential Follow-Up Questions:

1. To which family member did you write the status update?

2. What did you write (generally) in your post?

3. Did you include any photos, songs, or links attached to your status update?

4. What was the purpose of your post?

5. What were the benefits (if any) of writing the status update?

6. What were the drawbacks (if any) after writing the status update?

7. How did other Facebook members react to your status update?

8. Did you respond to those who liked or commented on the status update? If so, what did you say or do?

9. Would you ever write another status update to or about an immediate, blood-related family member (mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, or grandparent) that has passed away? If so, why?

Biographical Sketch

Celeste Catania-Opris was born in 1987 and raised in Margate, Florida. Her parents moved to Brooklyn, New York in the early 1970's from Sicily, Italy. Her parents faced financial hardships for many years, but the belief in the "American Dream" offered them the courage to open an Italian restaurant in South Florida in 1983. Her mother later purchased a hair salon in 2010. Celeste and her two older brothers grew up around many relatives who exemplified the true definitions of love and family.

Celeste earned an Associate's degree in 2008 from Florida State University. Celeste then completed her Bachelor's degree at Florida Atlantic University as she wanted to live closer to her family. Celeste received her Bachelor's degree in psychology and minored in sociology. Continuing her education in South Florida, Celeste decided to attend orientation at Nova Southeastern University. There she was introduced to the Marriage and Family therapy program. Celeste received her Master's Degree in Marriage and Family therapy in 2012 and decided to continue her education by entering the doctoral program at Nova Southeastern University. Today, Celeste is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and works at a private practice in Coral Springs, Florida. She and her husband enjoy going to the beach and traveling around the world.