

Status Update: Life after... [typing]
A Dramaturgical Analysis of Filipinos' Grief Performance on Facebook
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Abstract

The constricting climate of death and loss in the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed mourning into online adaptations. Through Dramaturgy, the researchers explore public grief as an online self-performance. The researchers gathered twelve bereaved who lost a family member from March 22, 2022 onwards to participate in submitting Facebook content relating to the participant's grief experience and an interview to inquire about the participants' personal motivations in posting. The researchers found a key tension between the self and society as individuals who experience grief are pressured by broader social rules of bereavement. Consequentially, grief expressions were informed by satisfying their own personally determined intentions, or from the pressure of following the rules of their perceived social groups (whether or not what was shared aligned with their own personal intentions). The researchers recommend a multi-disciplinary model, more specific demographic sampling, and using other public and private communication theories in analyzing online grieving.

Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic has caused the death of around 5.73 million people worldwide in two years (COVID-19 Data Explorer, 2020). In experiencing the death of a loved one, Filipino's typically practice rituals based on an individual's personal family traditions, religions, indigenous beliefs, and superstitions. Given the physical restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been limited opportunities to say goodbye or facilitate traditional death and funeral practices (Corpuz, 2021). Social support is important to how individuals experience loss and grief, and is a significant determinant to positive outcomes after bereavement (Breen, 2020).

Through technology, the transformation of death from just a biological loss of life into a social phenomenon is enhanced, as people collectively store and interact with memories of the deceased as posted on the internet to create a digital archive (Egnoto et al., 2014). Temporally, spatially, and socially, social media has been reappropriated into a setting for death-related experiences (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013) and has radically transformed grief and mourning.

Facebook, in particular, has 83.9 million active monthly users (DataReportal, 2022) and is still a "growing and unstoppable digital graveyard that stores online remains in the form of archives, biographies, testimonies, obituaries, eulogies, and traces of social bonds" (Ambrosino, 2016). Social media becomes a medium of social production—in this case, the production of public grief as an online performance. There is a pliability that allows for an interweaving of death into an everyday social media experience, rather than just in the temporally-bound settings of funerals and memorials, and a spatial expansion in which physical barriers to participation are dissolved.

Theoretical, Conceptual, and Operational Framework

The researchers employ Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory as a framework for this study. Goffman (1956) likens daily life to a theatrical play where people are actors performing a role on a stage in front of an audience. Existing literature has shown the use of dramaturgy as a

framework for understanding grieving and bereavement both online and offline. A dramaturgical approach allows for a systematic understanding of how meaning is constructed interactively. These interactions can be mapped out through the exchanges of different peers contained in a social environment, or how the self interacts with the environment. The proliferation of digital technologies has impacted dramaturgy, with regard to how the self can manage various and deliberate presentations of the self through their differing digital profiles—affecting how individuals consequently interact with each other in digital avenues (Markham, 2016).

Given these, the main concepts of dramaturgy used for the analysis of this research are as follows: A) The front stage or the manner in which an actor performs their role; B) the backstage, which are the behaviors of the actor when they are unobserved by an audience; and C) self-presentation or the maintenance of an actor's image of themselves through the performance of certain roles over time, which is where an actor's social reality is crafted. Meanwhile, the supplementary concepts from the theory that were used to inform the analysis from the main concepts are as follows: the actor (person who is “performing”), role (events, scenarios, and conditions that an actor is situated in), setting (scene where an actor is performing), and audience (various people an actor is surrounded by). Conceptually and operationally, the actors are the Filipino participants who have lost a loved one from March 15, 2020 onwards; the role they are “performing” is their bereavement from losing a loved one; the “audience” they are performing for is their Facebook friends who are able to see their posts; their front stage is their grief-related Facebook posts; their backstage is their individual grief, personal motivations, and considerations behind the posts; and the self-presentation is the negotiations, tensions, and mediations of the bereaved participants between their “front stage” Facebook posts and “backstage” motivations—otherwise known as their online grief performance.

Methods

The researchers used a descriptive qualitative approach to understand the bereaved individuals' grief performance and the motivations behind it. Through a snowball sampling method, twelve Filipinos of legal age who experienced the loss of a family member within their immediate and extended family from March 15, 2020 onwards were recruited. This was done by releasing a Google Form on the personal social media profiles of the researchers, which included the general information of the study, and a series of prompts sourcing the interested participants' personal information to deem their eligibility according to the standards stated prior. If the interested participants are deemed eligible, they are given an opportunity to ask further questions to clarify their concerns by contacting the researchers by email. Consent forms were then distributed to each participant, which they were required to sign and submit prior to proceeding to the data collection proper. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, accommodations were given if a participant needed additional time or assistance in any portion of their participation in the study, or if they wanted to withdraw their participation entirely.

Data collection and analysis were then conducted in two consecutive phases. Firstly, data was collected through Facebook content that were explicitly or implicitly posted in light of the bereaved's experience of grief within 30 days since the date of passing of their family member, and was analyzed through content analysis. Secondly, data was collected by interviewing the bereaved about their considerations and motivations in posting their grief on Facebook. All of which were then analyzed through Goffman's dramaturgical theory with the data from the Facebook content interpreted as the front stage, and the data from the interview interpreted as the

backstage. The front and backstage were then inductively analyzed together to form the participants' self-presentation of grief.

Results and Discussion

The researchers were able to collect 39 Facebook posts in total. Moreover, the semi-structured interviews—indicated as the backstage in the study—were all conducted online through Zoom and lasted between 15 to 45 minutes.

Front Stage

The front stage findings—which are the collected Facebook posts—show public messages that the bereaved wrote in second person, as if they were addressing the deceased directly. Specifically, the bereaved expressed admiration for their loved ones in their posts and typically attached photos with and of the deceased alongside their message. They also frequently mentioned their religious or spiritual beliefs, with a reference to an afterlife or a resting place. Most participants also changed their Facebook profile picture to black with no caption, which was implicitly understood by their Facebook friends that they had recently lost a loved one.

Backstage

In the backstage findings, the bereaved publicized the death of their deceased loved one on Facebook for the purposes of (1) letting the audience know it was a time of grieving for them and their family; and (2) seeking support, empathy, or *karamay* given the restrictions of the pandemic. The participants also shared that their posts were a celebration of their loved one's life. The open nature of Facebook, the setting, allows them to continue the presence of the deceased and their created social world through their posts, photos, and communication with their loved one. In this sense, the deceased “live” in the virtual domain, transcending both time and space, where they virtually exist perpetually in cyberspace. The bereaved also shared a variety of photographs with accompanying captions. Most of the media chosen were to express the importance of memories and emotions felt during the grieving process, and how they wanted the deceased to be perceived by the public that views their posts. Finally, as the bereaved's grief is “personal and direct,” writing the message in second person was fitting as they were not also able to communicate with their loved one before they passed.

Self-Presentation

The findings under self-presentation highlighted the significance of Facebook as a medium by showing how the platform's affordances affected the bereaved individual and the manner by which they expressed their grief. The medium and its function gave the participants an outlet to express their grief as it occurred, which further elucidates the continuous relationship-building of the bereaved with their deceased loved one. It also affirmed the non-linear nature of grieving as many of the participants still felt the need to communicate their grief even after a month since their passing.

On the other hand, the participants also attempted to bring in-person bereavement practices online, and in the process, followed and created their own rules, norms, and etiquette for how bereavement is practiced online—particularly on Facebook. These rules are as follows:

1. The announcement of significant life changes such as marriage, having children, and death in this case, are frequently practiced by Facebook users.
2. There is a level of appropriateness regarding the content shared on Facebook as

- the bereaved placed considerations on what they wanted to share to the public.
3. Symbolisms and imagery for death in crafting Facebook posts are important to visually signify that a loved one has passed (i.e. changing profile picture to black, editing the photo of the deceased to black and white).
 4. The bereaved implicitly managed and considered their Facebook friends in crafting their posts as most of them felt compelled to justify their behavior to their audience.

There is also an inherent social aspect that comes with grief and bereavement. On Facebook, this social dimension was attempted by the audience in the comments section of the bereaved, but it was not as sufficient compared to when bereavement is practiced in person. Additionally, online grief performance becomes concurrently public and private by displaying backstage behavior into the front stage setting of Facebook. The Dramaturgical Theory as applied to grief performance incorporated a greater fluidity between the front and backstage, and a more flexible understanding of the audience; thus, this positions Facebook as a valuable medium for the facilitation of public grief. While the findings suggest that the participants' grief performance is greatly informed by the ascribed role of bereavement and the fluidity of both their front and backstages, they also implicitly assume the role of the deceased by memorializing their lives on Facebook. Finally, the Facebook posts were reflective of the unique relationship between the deceased and the bereaved, and were created for both commemorative and communicative functions. The bereaved's continuing connection with the deceased has also allowed one to bend the permanency of death, and therefore enhance one's acceptance to it.

Implications

This study outlines a nuanced picture of a world that attempts to stay together while having to be *apart*. The sensation of being *apart* is exacerbated by the prolonged time that individuals need to stay physically distant to minimize the health risks brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The sensation of being *apart* becomes even worse when the distance is made permanent by the inevitable death of a loved one. While Facebook provides an opportunity to communicate amid spatial and temporal limitations, Facebook also amplifies the tension between the individual and the community.

Satisfying personal instincts to experience grief is made more complicated on a hyper-social platform that asserts broad social expectations on grieving. The data shows that there can be certain conflicting interests in processing death in a more private and intimate manner, which is adversely affected by the pressures on Facebook to actively publicize and socialize the experience of grief—as it makes the bereaved vulnerable to a vast public. While prior studies assert the importance of a social dimension in achieving a positive outcome in the grieving process, this study presents how the scale and quality of socialization are important considerations in understanding how a person navigates loss.

In the experience of communicating grief, this study has displayed a depth to the experience of bereavement that cannot explicitly be captured as it is portrayed on social media. Communication practitioners are therefore given a heightened responsibility to create more empathetic social environments, especially in the increasing expansion of human relations through digital necessity and evolution.

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