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THE UNSHARABLE: NON-SHARING AS GRIEF WORK AND RUPTURES OF DIGITAL MOURNING

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Introduction: Grief Beyond the Visible

Social media has transformed how grief is experienced and shared, turning platforms into unexpected spaces for mourning, remembrance, and community-building. Yet grief is not only about what is shared—it is also about what remains unseen, unspoken, and deliberately withheld. This paper explores non-sharing as grief work, interrogating the ruptures that emerge when grief does not align with platform logics of visibility, algorithmic curation, or public engagement. While digital mourning has been framed as a way to maintain bonds with the deceased (Walter et al., 2012), the question of what is not shared, and why, remains understudied in internet research.

Drawing on interviews with individuals navigating grief in digital spaces, this paper examines the tensions between grievability (Butler, 2016), platform affordances (Eriksson Krutrock, 2021), and the politics of invisible grief. In doing so, it situates the practice of non-sharing as a critical form of engagement with grief in the digital age, raising methodological questions about how internet researchers can study the unseen, the absent, and the intentionally withheld.

Methods

Over a four-year period, we used an ethnographic and creative-practice framework to examine how individuals experience and express mourning on mobile media. During this time, we carried out interviews with more than 57 participants in Australia, all of whom had firsthand experienced grief or were professionals in the field. These conversations covered a variety of circumstances, including the deaths of parents,

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children, and pets, as well as more abstract forms of loss such as climate anxiety and major career shifts.

In this paper, we concentrate on seven participants whose experiences highlight the nuanced role of non-sharing in digital mourning. They underscore how platform features, social expectations, and personal boundaries intersect in complex ways. By thematically analyzing the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2021), we identified core themes around practices of purposefully not sharing grief online. These findings show that what remains unseen in digital environments is essential to understanding how people navigate loss.

Ruptures of Digital Mourning

The theme of ruptures offers a compelling lens to examine how grief unfolds in digital contexts. Social media platforms promote continuous connection, yet grief is often marked by withdrawal and fragmentation. The expectation to publicly perform loss can create tension between personal mourning and platform affordances. As a result, digital mourning does not unfold seamlessly—it is disrupted by grief policing, algorithmic moderation, and self-censorship. These breaks challenge the narrative of social media as a purely connective space, revealing its limits in accommodating the messy realities of loss.

One such rupture emerges for example when algorithms block posts to suicide or death (Ducharme, 2024). Although intended to reduce harm, these measures can render certain forms of grief invisible, forcing users to adopt euphemisms or coded language like ‘unaliving’ (Tait, 2022). While some bereaved individuals adapt, others opt out entirely, highlighting a paradox in which grief is both hyper-visible in viral mourning trends and obscured when deemed inappropriate or too risky.

Invisible Grief and the Work of Non-Sharing

Not all grief is equally visible on social media. Judith Butler’s (2016) concept of grievability underscores how some losses are socially acknowledged, while others remain unrecognized. This also applies online, where stigmatized deaths—such as those by suicide, miscarriage, or overdose—may face judgment or erasure. In such cases, non-sharing can serve as a protective measure, allowing individuals to retain agency over narratives otherwise shaped by platform algorithms or external scrutiny.

Our participants noted that social media fosters selective grieving. Jack, a funeral director, observes that “acceptable” forms of death are more readily acknowledged, leaving complicated losses in the shadows. Alexa, a bereaved mother, describes withdrawing from social platforms after her son’s suicide because it exacerbated her pain rather than providing solace. In both instances, silence emerges as a strategic response to social and technological pressures that can intensify grief.

How Social Media Connects and Disconnects

Although digital platforms foster new kinds of collective mourning, they also introduce vulnerabilities: grief policing, social judgment, and algorithmic oversight. These challenges create moments of what we call grief ruptures, where platform mechanisms do not accommodate the complexity of loss.

For instance, the rise of grief influencers on TikTok highlights how digital mourning can be performative (Abidin, 2022). While viral trends may offer connection, they also push mourners to adhere to specific emotional scripts. Those who either cannot or will not share in these ways may feel alienated. As Melanie, a grief educator, points out, social media often emphasizes immediate emotional release over longer-term processes of making meaning. This dissonance can leave users feeling that their unspoken grief is devalued or invisible.

Implications for Internet Research: Studying the Unseen

For internet researchers, the challenge lies in examining both visible and invisible aspects of digital mourning. Traditional digital ethnography focuses on hashtags, posts, and comments, yet grief can manifest as absence, withdrawal, or refusal. Non-use theory (Satchell & Dourish, 2009) frames this deliberate opting out as an active practice that needs to be examined. Internet researchers could consider participatory methods centered on lived experience to capture how people navigate grief without leaving a digital footprint.

Shifting platform policies further complicate efforts to study digital mourning. Sites like X (formerly Twitter) and Meta revise moderation practices and legacy features under shifting economic and political pressures. These changes underscore the precarity of memorial content online and highlight the need for researchers to document evolving grief practices over time.

Conclusion: Reframing Ruptures as Grief Literacies

As social media becomes an increasingly dominant forum for mourning, the practice of non-sharing complicates accepted ideas about digital grief. The ruptures between sharing and silence, visibility and hiddenness, connectiveness and withdrawal lie at the heart of how people experience loss online. By considering non-sharing a valid form of grief work, this paper contributes to broader discussions on platformization, internet research methods, and the evolving nature of digital mourning.

If platforms shape how grief is expressed and remembered, then acknowledging what remains unseen is essential. For internet researchers, that means developing frameworks that recognize non-sharing as neither a failure nor a void, but rather a meaningful dimension of grief in a digital era.

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