

Opinions of Young Adults on Digital Mourning and Public Expressions of Grief on Social Media

Tasia Khairunnisa Azzahra* and Anasuya Jegathevi Jegathesan
Taylor's University, Malaysia

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Abstract: Mourning on social media platforms has become increasingly popular. Most studies in the past have focused on individuals who grieve or post grief-related posts instead of the average social media user who interacts with such content. In contrast, this study focuses on the latter. Specifically, this study aims to identify how Malaysians view digital mourning and public expressions of grief on social media. The study is qualitative in nature, adopting the reflexive thematic analysis method. The researcher posted the link to an online questionnaire on social media platforms which was shared 137 times. As a result, 50 participants completed the questionnaire, of which seven participated further in semi-structured interviews. The participants were Malaysian social media users aged between 18 and 25 years old. The themes identified are: a form of expression, doing it for reasons other than grief, the mental processes involved, closeness of relationships, and a mixture of positive and negative emotions. An important finding of the study is how relationship closeness plays a huge factor in determining the intensity of emotions, the pressure to engage, and the perception of authenticity. The findings of the study are discussed in the context of the Malaysian culture and the social exchange theory.

Keywords: Grief, digital mourning, social media, online grieving

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Introduction

Grief is an emotional response to a loss while mourning refers to how someone expresses his/her grief (Jakoby, 2012). Today, people commonly use social media to express themselves socially, including expressing their grief (Ware, 2016). Carroll and Landry (2010) mentioned that with increased mobility and the presence of social media, online grieving is more common now. Further, mourning in social

*Correspondence: Tasia Khairunnisa Azzahra, Taylor's University, Malaysia.
Email: tasiakhairunnisa@gmail.com

media allows others who are not physically proximate to the deceased to find closure (Carroll & Landry, 2010). More recently, mass grieving has been observed to contribute to the surge of online grieving. For instance, a video that showed the last moments of George Floyd, who died while in police custody, went viral online (Cooper, 2020). While Floyd's death caused a global reaction, many who wanted to mourn him were unable to do so due to the pandemic (Toner, 2020). In the same way, COVID-19 also created a situation deemed as communal grief where people all over the world collectively grieved the loss of their loved ones, employment, as well as the increasingly destabilised healthcare, work and education systems (Weir, 2020).

The continuing bond theory can be used to explain the efficacy of online grieving. This theory is a therapeutic approach that posits the bereaved should try to maintain relationships with the deceased (Rothaupt & Becker, 2007). Nasrullah (2015) found that some users have virtual conversations with the accounts of users who have passed. However, others mentioned becoming "frozen in time" and finding it more difficult to let go of a loved one (Falconer et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, there are known benefits of digital mourning. For example, it gives access to a bigger community for the mourner to share the grief with (Falconer et al., 2011). Ware (2016) also found that there is a lot of support for people who grieve online (Carroll & Landry, 2010). Further, digital mourning is less social-economically exclusive, as posting in social media is cheaper than spending on traditional rituals (Maddrell, 2012). It also helps individuals facing disenfranchised grief, where there is minimal social support due to the lack of empathy (Andsager, 2005). Examples are family members who died from suicide or the death of a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) partner. In social media, individuals could alleviate their disenfranchised grief as social media is a space for legitimisation (Harju, 2014).

There are however, also some drawbacks. Firstly, it could create an environment of competition with regard to who loves or cares for the deceased more (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013; Carroll & Landry, 2010). There can also be coercion to participate in grief (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013). Users may feel pressured that they have to contribute something to the deceased's profile.

Most of the studies in the past had looked at individuals who are grieving. Although this is important, a large portion of related individuals have been excluded from such studies. This refers to the average social media user who may not be mourning themselves, but are confronted with grief-related content. The present study will focus on this group.

Further, most of these studies have been centred on the West. There are minimal studies on this issue in the Asian region and none in Malaysia. This issue is just as important in these regions as grieving and mourning are affected by norms (Jakoby, 2012) and mourning norms on social media often align to traditional norms that are adjusted (Wagner, 2018).

Malaysia is composed of multi-ethnic communities such as Malays or *Bumiputera* (69.8%), Chinese (22.4%), Indians (6.8%) and others (1.0%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Each ethnic community has mostly maintained its own socio-cultural values in terms of religion, language, dress, and food while developing an integrated national identity (Tey et al., 2015). In this way, Malaysians associate themselves to their own ethnic identity and the Malaysian identity (Nor, 2020).

The Malay society has its own customs in funeral processions that combines Islamic aspects and cultural practices (Yusof & Ramli, 2021). For example, *tahlil* (recital ceremony for the deceased) and *Tunggu Kubur* (grave waiting). *Tahlil* is a custom that is widely used while *Tunggu Kubur* is commonly practised in Kedah and other east coast states like Kelantan and Terengganu (Yusof & Ramli, 2021). For Chinese families, preserving their cultural and religious beliefs is considered highly important in their decision-making process related to death and dying (Jiao & Mohamed Hussin, 2018). For the Malaysian Indians who practice Hinduism, they practise *Agni Sanskar* (cremation), which leads the dead from this world to the next.

Nevertheless, Malaysians share the custom of funerals as the final honour that family members and friends do on behalf of the deceased (Jiao & Hussin, 2018). For the Malays, attention is given to the last honour to send the body to Allah SAW and also to ensure that the soul of the deceased is forgiven (Yusof & Ramli, 2021). Chinese communities also have the desire to sacrifice something so that the deceased gains a better afterlife, in line with the law of karma and Chinese culture (Jiao & Hussin, 2018). Samarth (2018) mentioned that for Indians who practice Hinduism, death marks the end of life and the transition to the afterlife and the next life. This shows that there is an emphasis on the afterlife in the Malay, Chinese and Indian customs.

Previously, Wagner (2018) did a study on the norms of online grieving and found that social media users are motivated to avoid grief-related content. Wagner also found that grief posts should also be moderate in duration, intensity and expression. This could stem from the dominating norms of positivity in social media where users feel threatened by the display of negative emotions (Wagner, 2018).

However, due to the different norms between Western and Eastern communities, it is possible that the findings of Wagner (2018) may not align with Malaysians. This study in the context of the Malaysian population could offer a unique insight.

Thus, the objectives of the study are to understand how Malaysian young adults view digital mourning and public expressions of grief on social media. Next, it aims to understand the reactions that Malaysian young adults have when they are confronted with grief-related content.

The main theory underpinning this study is the social exchange theory. Homans (1950) theorised that human exchange follows a basic economic principle that revolves around rewards and cost. Individuals strive to maximise rewards and they tend to

repeat the behaviours that will bring more rewards to themselves (Homans, 1950). Surma (2015) posited that social media users also interact according to this theory. In social media, the strength of relationships can be maximised while minimising the cost of communication. The social exchange theory has also been used as a framework in recent studies on topics such as organisation behaviour (Cropanzano et al., 2017) and knowledge-seeking in online professional communities (Tsai & Kang, 2019) among many others.

A known criticism of the social exchange theory is the neglect of emotions and the impact of emotions on the transactions. According to Blau (1964), social exchange differs from economic exchange because the value of the social exchange depends on the individual. In this respect, Lawler and Thye (1999) contended that the social exchange theory assumes that actors are unemotional, self-interested and are only oriented to maximise rewards. Thus, emotions should not be neglected because an individual responds emotionally to the outcomes of a social exchange (Lawler & Thye, 2006). This theory will be used in analysing the results of the study.

Method

Study Design

The qualitative study adopted the reflexive thematic analysis design developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The three clusters selected under this analysis were critical realism ontology, inductive analysis, and semantic themes. Braun and Clarke (2013) explained that critical realism ontology believed that one truth exists. However, we can only partially know about it. Critical realism was selected for this study because although some opinions can be accredited to experience and culture, they would still not be able to explain the entirety of the viewpoint. Inductive analysis means that analysis is data-driven. Semantic themes means that themes are identified with the explicit or surface meaning of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The epistemology selected was contextualisation. Braun and Clarke (2013) mentioned that in contextualisation, knowledge comes from contexts. However, there is an interest in knowing the truth. While there is no single way to get to the truth in the absence of context, the knowledge will be considered as the truth in some contexts.

Sample Selection

The sample involved Malaysian young adults aged 18-25. According to Moran (2016), individuals in this age range are digital natives. They grew up with access to the digital communication technology.

The study used a snowballing method to obtain the sample. We created an online survey which was posted on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and users were encouraged to share the post. The post was shared a total of 137

times, 10 on Facebook and 127 on Twitter. Users from Instagram were redirected to the Facebook posts. In the end, a total of 50 participants undertook the survey.

Participants were given an option at the end of the survey if they wished to be contacted further for an in-depth interview. Those who agreed were contacted via email. The interviews were conducted to gain more insights on the participants' responses in the survey. A total of seven participants agreed to be interviewed, four males and three females. Three of the participants were Malays, one was Chinese, two were Indians and one was Eurasian.

Instruments

The online survey was developed based on the findings of Wagner (2018). Wagner did a systematic review of 25 journal articles published from 2010 to 2017. The review included information on people grieving and the general public, which rendered Wagner's study most suitable as a point of reference. The questions were all open-ended questions. Participants had to fill in a consent form before proceeding with the survey.

After completing the survey, participants were asked if they would like to be contacted for a further interview. The participants who agreed were sent an email providing details of the interview. A form containing an information sheet, consent form, and a selection of preferred medium and time for the interview was attached to the email. The mediums offered were Zoom, Skype, Whatsapp call, Discord, and others, whereas a participant had suggested Google Hangouts.

Before recording the online interview, we briefed the participants first about the contents of the information sheet. We informed them of their rights which included the right to withdraw from the study and to withdraw any information provided. Each interview was conducted as planned with a maximum of an hour. However, one participant willingly consented to a longer interview. After the interview ended, participants were sent a debrief sheet and service sheet through email.

Data Collection

After receiving permission to conduct the study from the Human Ethics Committee of Taylor's University, a pilot test was conducted with three respondents to check for language and consistency. After reading the responses, we made minor changes to ensure the accuracy of the questions. Then, we released the survey through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Data from the survey was transferred to an Excel sheet. No names were used and participants who undertook the survey were named by the order in which they completed the survey (Participant 1 to 50).

Since the questions for the interviews were based on the participants' answers, the pilot test was done with the first two participants. After the two interviews, the

researcher reflected on the questions asked. Data from the interviews was transcribed within two days and the audio recordings were deleted. Pseudonyms were used in the transcriptions to protect the participant's confidentiality.

The data from the survey and interviews was analysed following the reflexive thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2013). The three clusters selected were critical realism, inductive analysis and semantic themes. This study recognised that knowledge is shaped by different contexts; however, it is impossible to look past beyond all of them. Next, by using inductive analysis, analyses were only made based on the data acquired and no assumptions or themes were made prior to the data collection. For semantic themes, the researcher accepted the participants' answers without looking beyond what they said or wrote. This meant that the researchers took what was said at face value as the truth.

Reflexivity

Since this is a qualitative study, the data cannot be completely objective and free from the traces of the researcher. The researchers are also social media users. Since we use social media, we are also confronted with grief-related content. Hence, we might have our own opinions and might be able to relate to some of the experiences that were brought up by some participants.

However, some steps were taken to ensure objectivity. Since we took the semantic approach, the explicit content from the participants was used instead of trying to find an underlying assumption. This reduced our capacity to reinterpret data within our conception of reality.

For the interview, reflection was done after each interview. Data transcription for the interviews was done using otter.ai. Coding was done by the first author. A few steps were taken to ensure reliability and validity. First, after using otter.ai, the author listened to the recording multiple times to ensure that the transcription was accurate. Second, the transcription was sent back to the participants for transparency and truthfulness. Identical themes from the codes were gathered and categorised to answer the research objectives.

Results

The themes and subthemes of the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Form of expression	Express themselves Other options are limited or unavailable Their right to post

Table 1 (cont')

Theme	Subtheme
Other motives	Clout Attention To fit in
Mental processes involved	Remembering past memories of the deceased Thinking about life and relationships Judging the authenticity
Closeness of relationship	More intense emotions More authentic More pressure to engage
A mixture of positive and negative emotions	Concerned for the deceased Feeling down or sad Sympathy and empathy Reminded of own grief Comforted because they are not alone in their grief

The first research objective was to examine Malaysian young adults' opinions on digital mourning. It is linked to two themes which are form of expression and other motives.

Form of Expression

Express themselves

Participants were understanding towards individuals who grieve online. Participant 31, when asked about digital mourning, responded:

“Some people mourn differently i.e. crying, do something to distract themselves from the world etc. So I guess mourning online is one of the way to express themselves. It might be for people to read, or it might be a way for them to pour their hearts out.”

“Evan” (male, 24 years old, Chinese) mentioned that it is “a valid form of expressing grief, as social media is often an extension of oneself.” Participant 21 added that social media is “a common and necessary expression.”

Other options are limited or unavailable

Participants shared being “uncomfortable talking about it with people they know” and “not being able to express the feelings outwardly and the only way they can do it is by writing it.”

Another point mentioned frequently was that the bereaved have no one else to express themselves to, as reflected by this set of quotes from participants:

“Maybe they need attention from the public because they don’t have anyone close to express their feeling”
“Sometimes they don’t have other people to tell so they resolve by expressing grief in social media”

Their right to post

Participants also contended posting about grief on social media as a right, based on the quotes below:

“Everyone has the right to mourn publicly. It’s their right.”
“They have their rights on what to tweet and feel.”

Some participants even went as far as disagreeing with any form of regulation of how posts should look like, as can be seen here:

“If you don’t agree with what this person is posting, or you think you think it’s like affecting you in a negative way, you always have the option of just unfollowing or muting them...”
“These sort of things don’t really need to be regulated but it’s more simply up to the individuals themselves to take the necessary precautions to avoid seeing this sort of content la.”

These sentiments indicate that it is on the reader to avoid the post if they need to. Some participants think that having regulations is fair but it should not come at the expense of the person grieving. Participant 9 mentioned, *“I think it’s fair for regulations to exist. But I don’t think these regulations should come at the expense of limiting how much these people can talk about it.”*

Participants were also more accepting of these expressions of grief. This goes against past norms where the public display of grief is more or less discouraged by society (Ware, 2016).

Other Motives

Participants also stated that some people expressed their grief online for other reasons.

Clout

Participants expressed their ability to sense people who post it mainly for clout. “Allan” (male, 21 years old, Indian) stated, *“Some do it for clout and attention while*

some are sincere and do it as a way to cope, like writing in a diary. We could tell them apart from one another at times.” This is supported by Participant 24, *“Sometimes I can differentiate between someone who is genuinely just sharing news and another who is sort of using it for clout in hopes that it goes viral.”*

Attention

Posting about grief to seek attention appeared frequently in the participants’ responses. However, most participants admitted that this applies to only some people, and not every mourner. Some of their quotes are given here:

“May or may not be as authentic as some people use it just for attention.”
“Some are genuine while some are meant just to attract attention from others”

A small number of participants believe that people express grief generally to gain attention. Participant 19 mentioned, *“A small part of me feels that it is to gain attention but its[sic] not horrible to want attention either so idk.”*

To fit in

Participants shared their opinions on what other people might think if they do not engage in online grieving. “Evan” (male, 24 years old, Chinese) mentioned, *“Let’s say your parents passed away and you don’t post about it people will say, oh you’re so heartless and stuff like that...”*

“Clarissa” (female, 23 years old, Indian) shared the same opinion:

“... might as well post something to show that you know, I’m also being sad... They’ll think oh what would others think of me if I don’t do it.”

Participant 39 retorted, *“Personally, it seems like a nice gesture but similar to mob mentality, some people do it to feel part of a community, or to feed into their egos because it makes them seem more moralistic.”*

However, this is not exclusive to online grieving. “Evan” (male, 24 years old, Chinese) mentioned that *“Social media is all about social pressure... pressuring people to do things like to share or to like and post... that’s the whole gimmick of social media in the first place.”*

The second research objective explored Malaysian young adults’ reaction to digital mourning. This focuses on what they felt when they were confronted with such posts and is related to three themes :the mental processes involved, closeness of relationship and a mixture of positive and negative emotions.

Mental Processes Involved

Remembering past memories of the deceased

Many participants mentioned that memorialisation allows them to look back at memories of the deceased, as stated here:

“It’s a good way to remember someone who has passed on.”

“We can remember the soul that we lost.”

“It is a great feature so that we still can remember and pay respect to anyone who once were in our lives too.”

Some participants pointed out the importance in remembering the deceased in social media as *“their lives are already removed from the physical world”*. Hence, *“their thoughts and memories live through social media.”* However, a participant highlighted about posts that give inaccurate depictions of the deceased. “Ariel” (female, 20 years old, Malay) explained:

“It doesn’t really match ... they will always like praise him to be like this good... and so on. And so sometimes I feel that if you do have that memorialization feature right, people are more inclined to post positive things. But it also like hides the fact that there are people that actually have negative experiences with this person.”

Reflecting on life and relationships

Participants also opined that grieving posts serve as a reminder to cherish relationships. Participants mentioned, *“make the most of our time with our loved ones”*, *“appreciate loved ones that are still around”*, and *“value relationships”*. It makes them think of *“how loved most people are even if they did not realize it when they were alive”*.

These posts also made participants *“reflect life”*. Participant 42 admitted, *“It helps me remember that death is inevitable and we should prepare ourselves as much as we can.”* Whereas Participant 21 lamented, *“It makes me sad and reminds me of life’s temporary nature.”*

Judging the authenticity

When asked about authenticity, many participants believed that the expressions are authentic when they encounter these posts. Some of the quotes are given here:

“I think they are genuine. Even if we cannot judge with full certainty, it is better to just give the benefit of the doubt and value the posts as genuine and meaningful.”

“Honestly, I think it's pretty authentic. To come out and show a part of your vulnerable self to the world takes a lot of guts.”

However, some participants also believed that some posts are not authentic. Some even described indicators to determine the authenticity of such posts. Participant 31, when asked about the authenticity, said, *“To me it seems a bit weird for people to instantly post it on socmed[sic]”*. Meanwhile, Participant 21 stated, *“Personally I adjudicate the authenticity based on the words use, picture accompanying (assuming there's any) and the tone of the post”*.

“Evan” (male, 24 years old, Chinese) explained in length:

“One would be closeness and two also how closely they would identify with the individual, like say a member of their school, or like a member of a similar party that they're in or like a race or something like that. For example, this person has never posted anything about this individual their entire life and then all of a sudden they post like oh, this person passing away is so sad, it's such a tragedy and things like that. ... Feels more of a demonstration than uh- than an actual authentic- um grievance like uh- actual authentic form of grieving.”

Very few participants, however said that they did not think at all about authenticity. This suggests that when reacting to grief-related content, individuals tend to judge the authenticity of such posts.

Closeness of Relationship

Participants mentioned that the closeness between them and the deceased or the individual mourning influenced their reactions.

More intense emotions

Some participants described that the closer they are with the deceased, the more intense the emotions they feel. The following quotes reflect this sentiment:

“If it is someone I'm not affiliated with, then there's hardly any impact on my mental wellbeing apart from just sadness for them.”

“[on mental wellbeing] It depends a lot on the closeness/relationship one has with the deceased.”

More authentic

Participant 44 remarked, *“I think every public expression is authentic, but it may sound inauthentic from my point of view if it's from someone I don't know too well.”* A person

who posts his/her expression of grief online but is not close to the deceased may come off as inauthentic, as highlighted by the following quotes:

“Appears to be rather superficial most of the time when it comes to those who the author themselves are not close to the deceased”

“It starts looking like it's more about you than the victim if you're not close to the deceased/sickly.”

More pressure to engage

Participants closer to the grieving individual or to the deceased also felt more pressure to engage, as shared below:

“Especially if it comes from best friends, I'm quite afraid if I didn't respond, I'm not being a good friend.”

“People expect us to react or grief because we are close to the deceased.”

The closer the participant is to the person grieving, the more guilt they will feel if they ignore or do not offer help to the person grieving. Some of them stated the following:

“I don't know them personally. So it's easier to not feel guilty, it's easier to not care right but if it's someone I know then obviously I would I wouldn't just ignore it.”

“If that person is someone that I am close to. I will feel guilty.”

“That act of ignoring a friend who is grieving is something which will lead most people to feeling like they are being a bad friend and that they aren't being there.”

It comes as no surprise that the degree of human responses varies according to the closeness of their relationship. Close relationships might indicate stronger, safe, and secure attachments due to positive relationship development (Bowlby, 1973).

This finding is particularly important because previous studies described reactions in a more generic manner. For example, past findings show that one feels that they have to contribute something to the deceased's profile or memorialisation page (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013). Although this is true, this statement misses the nuanced ways different individuals feel different levels of pressure to contribute.

A Mixture of Positive and Negative Emotions

Concern for the deceased

Participants believed that the online space is where people “*express their mind without filters*” and “*air the worst of themselves*”. The reason why this is important is that “*people might incite hate or use their older activities against them*”.

Some concerns come from the basis of religion. For example, Participant 29 stated, “*In a Muslim’s perspective, It (deleting accounts) is good... deceased person may have tweeted something that’s unpleasant or uploaded revealing photos that weren’t deleted before passing away.*”

“Ariel” (female, 20 years old, Malay) added:

“I have this belief that your mistakes made when you were alive will continuously punish you in the afterlife. I wouldn't like it if I can't take down content which would actually bite me back later on”.

Feeling down or sad

Participants also expressed that viewing these contents made them feel down or sad. This is supported by the following quotes:

“Reading such content would sadden me and give me gloomy vibes which will then slightly affect my mood for a while.”

“It makes me sad”

“I would be saddened and emotional too.”

Sympathy and empathy

Feeling sympathetic and empathetic was also frequently mentioned by the participants as can be seen below:

“I just felt empathy towards them”

“I feel sympathy and would want to comfort my friends and family who are undergoing hardships and need help”

Reminded of their own grief

Participants were also reminded of their own grief, as reflected in the following quotes:

“Reminds me of my own grief but can't really blame them as they are on their own journey”

“It does make me upset and reflect on my own personal loss”

"I would be lying if I said it didn't make me remember what happened. That feeling... I miss that person... not a major trigger or anything like that."

Comforted because they are not alone in their grief

Participants shared that seeing other people's grief made them feel that they are not alone. For example, "Melissa" (female, 21 years old, Eurasian/others) stated, "... reminds you that you know, as painful as all of this is you're not alone, there are people grieving with you over the same person. So I found comfort in that." Participant 16 agreed, "It's somewhat comforting to know someone is feeling the same things I'm feeling when I'm going through grief."

Discussion

According to the social exchange theory, humans interact based on an economic principle towards cost and rewards. Behaviours that bring more rewards will be repeated (Homans, 1950). In discussing emotions and the social exchange theory, Lawler and Thye (2006) stressed that individuals respond emotionally to the social exchange that takes place. Put simply, they might feel good or bad about an interaction. If the emotions felt are positive, they are more likely to repeat that exchange in the future.

The second research objective in this study is understand the reaction of young adults to grief-related posts. Based on the results, there were more accounts of negative feelings. The subthemes that indicate negative emotions are concerned and worried for the deceased, feeling down or sad and reminded of their own grief. One of the subthemes also showed that there is a stronger pressure to engage in closer relationships. Since there are more negative emotions involved, the social exchange theory would predict discontinuation of engagement. However, most of the participants admitted continued interaction with such posts. Out of the 50 survey participants, 31 participants admitted that they do not avoid such content with a variety of reasons given such as "respect others for sharing", "helps to express condolences" and "death is inevitable", among many others.

The inconsistency between the findings and the social exchange theory could be attributed to a few things. Firstly, the increased acceptance and understanding of grief-related content. Insights gathered from the first research question on opinions of Malaysian young adults demonstrate that there is more understanding of the purpose of online grieving. Participants also showed understanding as the bereaved might not have other alternatives. One of the subthemes that emerged from the results was "their right to post". Participants even went further to emphasise that there should not be any guidelines that only apply to expressions of grief. This finding contrasts with Wagner's study (2018) which found that grief posts should

be moderate in duration, intensity and expression. In addition, another subtheme in this study is feeling sympathy and empathy. This feeling could also lead to more acceptance of grief-related posts. Since there is more understanding and acceptance, this could mean that the positivity bias is lesser. Wagner (2018) mentioned that there is a dominating norm of positivity on social media where users feel threatened by the display of negative emotions. Even though participants believed that some people do it for other reasons like clout, attention and to fit in, they still think that it only applies for some mourners.

Second, individuals might continue to engage despite the negative emotions felt because of the ambiguous value of reward and cost in a social exchange. A social exchange is different from an economical exchange which is more direct (Blau, 1964). According to Homans (1950), the value of reward and cost is different for each individual. Some individuals might put more value on their positive emotions and less value on the negative emotions. Hence, even though more negative emotions were felt, it might hold a lesser value than the positive emotions that they get from the exchange. There could also be intangible rewards such as love and acceptance (Redmond, 2015).

Third, individuals might be pressured to engage in grief-related posts. One of the findings of this study is that users will feel more pressure to engage with grief-related posts posted by someone close to them. Hence, individuals might choose to engage due to pressure. However, it is also possible that engaging with the content helps remove discomfort or pressure. Some participants even mentioned the feeling of “guilt” when not offering help or condolences if the grieving individual is close to them. Hence, engaging with the content might help them remove the feeling of guilt.

The fourth explanation is linked to the criticisms of social exchange theory. Redmond (2015) mentioned that people might not be as rational or as calculative as the theory assumed. It could be that people are more impressionistic.

Based on these results, we can see that the social exchange theory cannot be fully utilised to explain this phenomenon. The reason being there are a lot more variables that affect an individual’s decision-making which are beyond our knowledge and comprehension. Some could be unknown to the individuals themselves. Identifying more variables would be good, but each of its values is still dependent on the individual. As mentioned by Homans (1950), the application of the social exchange theory is more complex and not as straightforward as purported.

One of the subthemes from the results, which is feeling concern for the deceased, can be linked to the Malaysian custom in funeral processions. Participants were concerned for “*embarrassing moments*” and “*past mistakes*”. They mentioned that deleting accounts containing these mistakes are to “*make the person feel at ease*” and to “*protect their name*”.

A few participants explained their concerns from the perspective of religion, as reflected here:

“... (on deleting accounts of the deceased) In a Muslim’s perspective, it can be good as a deceased person may have tweeted something that’s unpleasant or uploaded revealing photos that weren’t deleted before passing away.”

I have this belief that your mistakes made when you were alive will continuously punish you in the afterlife. I wouldn’t like it if I can’t take down content which would actually bite me back later on.”

“She posted some sexual contents, before she died, and I think she’s quite famous, uh- unfortunately she died and a lot of people felt sorry for her and people start to block her and report her account as a solution to protect her privacy.”

This sentiment is aligned with the Malaysian custom of caring for the deceased and the afterlife. For example, Malay customs such as *tahlil* is a way of asking for forgiveness for the deceased. Another custom for some Malay communities is *Tunggu Kubur* which is an effort to pass the reward gained from reciting the Quran near the grave for seven days to the deceased (Yusof & Ramli, 2021). Another example is the Peranakan custom where a pearl is placed in the deceased’s mouth to light their way in the afterlife. The Peranakan Community is a unique mix of predominantly Chinese and Malay cultures (Lokasundari et al., 2016).

Conclusion

There are a few strengths to this study. Firstly, the method of data collection is fully online. Hence, the sample was not confined to the locality of the study and consisted of participants from different states in Malaysia. Next, this study was done in period that witnessed a spike in online mourning and grieving due to the pandemic and the increasing awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement after George Floyd’s death. Lastly, this study is unique because it was done at a time where people might be viewing such posts a lot more than usual, as mentioned by some participants.

Nevertheless, some weaknesses of the study need to be discussed as well. The first weakness is the different levels of exposure to public expressions of grief on social media. People with more and wider connections on social media are more likely to view more grief-related content as compared to people with smaller circles. The next weakness is the different levels of familiarity with online memorialisation sites. Some users have interacted with such sites more, making them understand the feature better and able to give more informed opinions. Some are not so familiar with the feature. The third weakness is that some participants have faced grief and posted about it online while others have not. According to the participants, having

experienced grief and posting about it changes their perspectives as they become more empathetic and understanding.

For future studies, it would be useful to take into account how frequently the participants have seen grief-related posts, whether participants have engaged in posting grief-related content themselves and whether participants have faced grief previously. This is because these factors could create a difference in their opinions. Next, it would be useful to replicate the study to other cultures or conduct a cross-cultural study to explore if the results are different in different cultures. Furthermore, more studies could be done on the values that people derive from helping or showing support to grieving individuals. This will give a better understanding of why people are willing to go above and beyond to help those who are grieving. This study can also be replicated for other forms of grief, for example, disenfranchised grief of mass grief. Lastly, future studies that can allow for a bigger sample would be useful.

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