

Tweeting Prayers and Communicating Grief Over Michael Jackson Online

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Abstract

Death and bereavement are human experiences that new media helps facilitate alongside creating new social grief practices that occur online. This study investigated how people's postings and tweets facilitated the communication of grief after pop music icon Michael Jackson died. Drawing on past grief research, religion, and new media studies, a thematic analysis of 1,046 messages was conducted on three mediated sites (Twitter, TMZ.com, and Facebook). Results suggested that social media served as grieving spaces for people to accept Jackson's death rather than denying it or expressing anger over his passing. The findings also illustrate how interactive exchanges online helped recycle news and "resurrected" the life of Jackson. Additionally, as fans of deceased celebrities create and disseminate web-based memorials, new social media practices such as "Michael Mondays" synchronize tweets within everyday life rhythms and foster practices to hasten the grieving process.

Keywords

computer-mediated communication, social media, religion, parasocial interaction, celebrity, Michael Jackson

Mass media has historically facilitated ritual communication (Carey, 1992) and imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) but most recently, new media technologies have supported the building of virtual networks that connect people across the globe who share common interests (Toral, Martinez-Torres, & Barrero, 2009). Within these virtual domains, one association people make is to link together with others who share their affection for a celebrity or media figure (Black, 2009; M. Williams, 2007). Recent studies of celebrity culture highlight how new media's connective capabilities provide an open forum for fans to interact with others who share their admiration or in some cases, contempt for a celebrity (Holmes & Redmond, 2006; Turner, 2004). Additionally, information and communication technologies (ICTs) also have become emergent forums wherein people can mourn for their loved ones who have passed away (Feigelman, Gorman, Beal, & Jordan, 2008; Foot, Warnick, & Schneider, 2005). These virtual environments enable individuals to construct fond remembrances of the deceased individual and connect with others who also are mourning the person's passing. The ability to create preferred memories about a loved one as well as accessing others who are sharing in a person's mourning seems to ameliorate the grieving process and offers a sympathetic domain wherein an individual's feelings about the deceased are both understood and valued (Hollander, 2001; A. L. Williams & Merten, 2009).

Much of the literature exploring grieving occurring over the Internet has focused on mourning for family, friends, and colleagues, those with whom a person has an actual, social relationship. However, we contend that online environments possess

valuable utility for those who are parasocially grieving—that is, mourning for the loss of a celebrity with whom they had parasocial interaction. Within the context of pervasive, contemporary, celebrity culture (Turner, 2004), it is argued that the expansion of death and grief has shifted from "sequestered death" in private spaces to "mediated death" in public spheres (Gibson, 2007). Given the burgeoning number of computer-mediated sites devoted to celebrities, it seems plausible that when a celebrity passes away, these forums may transform into rich sites wherein the persistence and changes in the grieving process can be explored. While there have been a number of celebrities who have recently passed away who would be worthy of study, the current study examines people's online grief discourses responding to perhaps one of the most prominent celebrity passings in recent years—Michael Jackson. Given the multitude of people who went online after news of Jackson's death broke, his passing provides a rich opportunity to investigate how grieving manifests online, including how people use postings and tweets to express the different stages of grief and engage in discourse about death and religion, which are traditionally taboo topics in offline spheres.

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On June 25, 2009, the world seemingly grounded to a halt as news of legendary pop-music icon Michael Jackson's abrupt death spread throughout the globe. Indeed, as the news broke that Jackson had been hospitalized and ultimately passed away, masses of people went online to learn the details of the tragic event to the extent that major Internet websites, such as American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), the *Los Angeles Times*, and America Online were unable to handle up to 90% of the people trying to access their sites (Bray, 2009). While some people turned to the Internet to follow the saga of Jackson's death, thousands of people began flocking to the UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles) hospital where Jackson had been admitted and subsequently died of cardiac arrest (*New Musical Express*, 2009). Similar mourning rituals occurred in, among others, New York City's Times Square, at Jackson's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, at the Lyric Theatre in London's West End (Case & Valler, 2009), as well as in France, India, Iran, Nigeria, and South Korea (*The Washington Post*, 2009).

A frenzied consumption for Jackson's music and merchandise also began occurring. For instance, Amazon.com, a leading online marketplace, reported sales that day of compact discs and MP3s at 720 times the normal sales volume, with Jackson's albums as the top 15 selling items on the entire site (Timpane, 2009). Similarly, Jackson's hit album "Thriller" was the top downloaded album on iTunes, and Internet auction site e-Bay reported that the average selling price for Jackson items had grown by 61% and the number of Jackson items sold had increased 210% from the previous week (Yan & Kitchen, 2009).

A fan flocking to a physical locale to mourn a deceased celebrity is a common ritual that frequently occurs when news of a celebrity's death first breaks. However, these gatherings soon dissipate and may not provide a fan with a forum to publicly express his or her grief for the celebrity and his or her views on the celebrity's legacy and impact. The advent of social media offers people the opportunity to connect with others and also to create content that memorializes the celebrity. Thus it seems plausible that when a celebrity passes away, particularly when their death is unexpected, fans will use social media to express their grief and interact with other fans who also are mourning. We contend that the global new flurry over Michael Jackson's death and overwhelming online traffic in response to this news provides rich opportunity to examine how fans employ social media to grieve for the loss of a parasocial partner.

Review of Literature

We now review literature relevant to the study: parasocial interaction (PSI), grief, and religion and popular culture. The paper then proceeds to discuss the methods used in the research study, followed by examples from the data supporting the analysis, and finally concludes with a summary discussing what the current study contributes to our understanding of social media and grieving, and how the prominence with which these media are used may play out in future celebrity news events.

Parasocial Interaction

PSI describes how media users relate to and develop relationships with media personae. In their original conceptualization, Horton and Wohl (1956) argued that radio listeners developed bonds of intimacy over time as they consistently consumed media personalities. These bonds facilitated audience members to engage media personalities in ways that resembled interpersonal social interaction, yet these displays were one-sided and mediated. Since Horton and Wohl's original conception, PSI has received considerable attention (Giles, 2002), and a number of scales have been developed to measure PSI (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Rubin & Perse, 1987). Research studies using these scales have found that PSI mirrors actual social relationships and that media users employ similar processes when evaluating both media figures and actual relational partners (Cohen, 2004; Giles, 2002; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Tsao, 1996).

Traditionally, PSI has been considered an introspective experience that is typically displayed to those in one's immediate vicinity (e.g., communicating to a character while watching a television show, talking to others at work). Yet outside of letterwriting and chance encounters, fans were unable to directly communicate their PSI to media figures. However, today, social media provides audience members with the capability to actively communicate their PSI directly to celebrities as well as access others who share a parasocial attachment with the same media figure. Digital media opens up important new spaces where celebrities may be found because media has historically been instrumental in the construction of fandom (Dyer, 1998). More recently, Mole (2004) observed that new media may boost our "hypertrophic celebrity culture." Just as an organic structure becomes hypertrophic when it grows in such an exaggerated way that its function in the ecosystem is affected, it is proposed that interactive media may rapidly engender collective efforts to augment celebrity profiles. Hence, PSI extends beyond one's immediate physical vicinity and widens into interactive forums.

When PSI opportunities with a particular media figure are lost, audience members may "move on" and search out new parasocial partners. And yet the inability to continue one's PSI can be troubling (Cohen, 2003; Eyal & Cohen, 2006) and thus, it seems imperative to explore how people communicate grief when such situations occur. In expressing grief over PSI loss, computer-mediated communication (CMC) may be valuable for audience members. That is, CMC provides a host of online and social media forums wherein one can disclose PSI (e.g., celebrity web pages, Facebook fan groups), and these outlets also possess functionality for people to express the struggles they face when PSI opportunities are lost.

Grief

Grief is a common behavior people enact when someone close to them dies (Spillers, 2007) and is considered to be one of the

most challenging human experiences (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005). Grief can have pronounced physical effects on an individual, including physical ailments, obsession with the deceased, and daily-life disruptions (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Lindemann, 1965). Freud (1917/1984) posited that grieving can manifest as melancholia, or the inability to “let go,” which prompts destructive thoughts and behaviors, hindering the ability to cope with the loss and move forward with one’s life. Accordingly, much scholarship has examined how individuals work their way through this process (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Moses, 1989; Shapiro, 1993).

Kubler-Ross’s (1969) model of the five grief stages has been the seminal framework in the grieving literature to analyze this process. These five stages are posited as follows: (a) denial, which is typified by statements such as “No, not me,” and “It cannot be true” (p. 38) and is characterized by the shock one feels in trying to accept that something tragic has occurred; (b) anger, often an outcome of the shock that one encounters, which results in the person adopting a “Why me?” mentality often accompanied with feelings of resentment and victimhood; (c) bargaining is generally employed as coping mechanism that one enacts for short durations in an attempt to pacify one’s grief, often reaching out to a Divine Being in hopes that intercession will occur; (d) depression can manifest as either reactive, characterized by the unrealistic shame or guilt that can be ameliorated by reassurances from others, or preparatory, which is generally more covert and facilitates the acceptance of loss (Courtney, 2008; Kubler-Ross, 1969); and (e) acceptance when one is neither “depressed or angry” about the loss (Kubler-Ross, 1969, p. 112). While one may pass through these grief stages chronologically, there are “no clear-cut dividing lines between each phase/stage of the grieving process” (Dillenburg & Keenan, 2005, p. 93), and not all people will experience all the stages during their grieving (Valentine, 2006). For instance, whereas one person’s grieving experience may involve only bargaining followed by acceptance, another individual may experience denial, bargaining, and denial again.

Kubler-Ross’s (1969) model has been useful in much grief research, and yet this model, has been overwhelmingly applied to face-to-face interpersonal communication contexts. However, computer-mediated forums are quickly emerging as spaces wherein people can communicate their grief privately and publicly as well as access others who can support them as they grieve for their loss (Sofka, 2009; A. L. Williams & Merten, 2009). Accordingly, research is beginning to investigate how computer-mediated forums assist people in dealing with the death of a loved one (De Vries & Rutherford, 2004; Grider, 2007). For example, A. L. Williams and Merten (2009) examined adolescents’ postings to Internet profiles of other adolescents who had passed away, and observed that the online environment provided a venue for participants to prolong their attachment with the deceased and where grieving could manifest in individually meaningful, rather than socially acceptable ways. Similarly, Hollander (2001) investigated Internet support groups for people who had lost a family member to suicide

and discovered that participating in this virtual community allowed people to reconstruct identities that had been stigmatized by their physical community.

While people clearly experience grief following the loss of a physical intimate relation (e.g., spouse), it seems plausible that grief also manifests when one loses a psychosocial or symbolic relationship partner (Rando, 1984; Shapiro, 1993), as in the case of the demise of Michael Jackson. Communicating grief online over the death of celebrities is particularly significant for understanding how fans and the general public react to mediated events of bereavement, given the recent intensified media publicity over the health struggles and demise of popular Hollywood celebrities, including Farah Fawcett and Patrick Swayze. However, little research attention has been devoted to exploring how people respond to parasocial loss and communicate their grief online for others whom they have not met in person or are linked to by a social relationship (see Wann & Waddill, 2007, for one exception). To address this gap, the current work seeks to investigate how the five stages of grief manifest in people’s computer-mediated messages responding to the news of Michael Jackson’s death. To guide analysis, the following research question is posed:

Research Question 1: How and to what extent is grief displayed over time in people’s online communication responding to Michael Jackson’s death?

Grieving, particularly when connected with the death of a loved one, is often comingled with religious discourse (Ens & Bond, 2007; Megoran, 2006; Mystakidou, Tsilika, Parpa, Katsouda, & Vlahos, 2004/2005). Thus, when a loved one passes away, using religious terminology provides a common language to draw on to “make sense” of one’s grief. While such attributions may be expected when one loses an actual relational partner, it seems likely that they also would appear when people communicate the grief they are experiencing when a celebrity or other media figure dies.

Religion and Popular Culture

Research suggests that religious discourse is comingled within popular culture (Laderman, 2009; Maltby, 2004), and there are multiple examples that vividly depict this intriguing alliance. For instance, the moniker “celebrity worship” is a common appellation applied to those who have extreme feelings toward celebrities (Ashe, Maltby, & McCutcheon, 2005; Sheridan, North, Maltby, & Gillett, 2007). Furthermore, fans have the tendency to invoke religious language to demonstrate their devotion to celebrities. Religious terminology functions to comfort fans when celebrities pass away and helps them in coping with this loss. For instance, Perry and Roesch (2004) investigated postings on a PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) website reporting the death of children’s television personality Mr. Rogers and discovered that people not only offered prayers and blessings for Rogers, but also used religious imagery (e.g., angel, saint) in describing Rogers.

Similarly, Sanderson (2009) explored individuals' message board postings responding to actor Charlton Heston's death, and discovered that people referred to Heston as "another God" (p. 13) and frequently referenced his iconic portrayal of Moses in *The Ten Commandments*, by suggesting Heston was in heaven visiting with the actual Moses. Thus, people seemingly invoke religious discourse as a comforting mechanism, in a sense; they draw solace from equating the celebrity with the divine, a correlation ideally suited for their memories of the celebrity. Considering Michael Jackson's global influence and cult-like following, it seems plausible that religious imagery and discourse may be invoked to facilitate the grieving process, thus, the second research question is posed,

Research Question 2: In what ways does online religious discourse function to express people's grief in their postings about Michael Jackson's death?

Method

One of the challenges in selecting data for the current study was choosing from an overwhelming number of potential online data sources. There were literally hundreds of websites, blogs, and social media forums devoted to covering Michael Jackson's death, many of which contained an exponential number of postings/comments. For example, michaeljackson.com initiated a "memory" section, which as of this writing (Summer 2009) had 560,281 postings. Thus, this research does not claim to even remotely capture the entirety of the grieving enacted after Jackson died. After reviewing multiple sites, three were chosen for data analysis—TMZ.com (TMZ.com, n.d.), a popular Michael Jackson Twitter feed (Twitter.com, n.d.), and the largest Michael Jackson fan club on Facebook (Facebook.com, n.d.). A brief description of each of these sites along with rationale for why they were selected for analysis follows below.

Twitter is perhaps one of the most popular social networking/communication technologies at the present time (Weingarten, 2008). Twitter allows individuals to create accounts that are linked to a user name preceded by the @ symbol. Users are limited to 140 characters per message, which are termed "tweets." Additionally, users become connected to others by choosing to "follow" another user, and thus, each "tweet" that person sends is transmitted to each of his or her "followers" who can respond by sending a "tweet" of their own. With the 140-character limit, "tweets" rely largely on abbreviations and given the brief nature of the messages, Twitter has drawn criticism for normalizing poor communication and encouraging people to communicate extremely mundane messages (*Boston Globe*, 2009). However, despite its detractors, Twitter has become increasingly popular with celebrities, journalists, and other media personnel "tweeting" to their fans across the globe. Moreover, many news organizations now allow people to link their news story directly to their personal Twitter feed (Daley, 2009). Michael Jackson News is one of the more popular

Michael Jackson Twitter feeds, with 59,818 followers as of this writing. Considering Twitter's burgeoning expansion into the social networking and media scene, it is worthwhile to explore how grief was tweeted on this emerging social networking site.

TMZ.com is a popular website that, rather intrusively, chronicles celebrity gossip, both online and via a television program (Stelter, 2007). TMZ is quite aggressive in their pursuit of celebrity gossip, relying heavily on paparazzi who relentlessly hound celebrities in hopes of breaking the latest celebrity scandal. Indeed, TMZ's efforts are so intense that they have been labeled as having no "pretense or kindness" (Gilbert, 2007, p. D3). TMZ was the first site to report Michael Jackson's hospitalization for cardiac arrest and was one of the first to report Jackson's death (Brook, 2009; Farhi, 2009). TMZ allows people to post comments reacting to stories reported on their site once the individual registers a username and e-mail address correlated with the user. The discussion forum connected to TMZ's report of Michael Jackson's death was selected for analysis.

Facebook is a popular social networking site that recently surpassed 100 million active users (Whitehead, 2008). Facebook allows users to post a variety of personal information that is distributed to others whom the person has selected as a "friend." Facebook then enables one's "friends" to view and comment on pictures, videos, and "status" updates—messages that detail what one is thinking or doing at the present moment—posted on the user's "wall." Additionally, Facebook offers users multiple capabilities that can enhance their self-presentation. These include creating quizzes about the user that measures how well their "friends" know them, as well as creating and/or joining multiple "groups" around among others, objects of affection, social events, and advocacy causes. There are a host of Facebook groups devoted to Michael Jackson, with membership ranging from a few people to some with over 100,000 members. The "Michael Jackson" Facebook group is the most voluminous, with approximately 112,350 members. Given the large membership, this particular group was selected for data analysis.

Privacy issues are one of the more daunting challenges with which Internet researchers are faced (Walther, 2002). Walther (2002) notes that the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Title 45, Part 46, Protection of Human Subjects protects the communication privacy in personal spaces such as a physician's office or an attorney's office (p. 207). He further notes that behavior in public settings is not protected from recording for research and that collecting data from publicly available sources qualifies for a human subjects exemption. Moreover, Walther contends that publicly available Internet archives are similar to newspaper story archives and Congressional Records, and notes that "any person who uses publicly available communication systems on the Internet must be aware that these systems are, at their foundation and by definition, mechanisms for the storage, transmission, and retrieval of comments" (Walther, 2002, p. 207).

Although we considered the postings and tweets in the current study to be "public domain," we were careful to protect

participants by not including usernames or any other identifying information in the postings and tweets used in this research. Additionally, we did not enter any private forums or private groups to obtain data. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are in their research infancy, and we agree with other scholars who posit that it is imperative to study human interaction occurring in these forums (Baym, 2009). Furthermore, we feel that the interactions and grieving expressions taking place on these sites are important phenomena to examine and as such, warranted research attention.

Postings and tweets from these sites were classified on a weekly basis for the first 4 weeks following Jackson's death. Thus, the first week was June 25 to July 2, 2009, the second week was July 3 to July 9, 2009, the third week was July 10 to July 16, 2009, and the fourth week was July 17 to July 23, 2009. During this time period, there were a total of 4,415 postings on TMZ.com, a total of 747 tweets on the Michael Jackson News Twitter feed, and 7,311 postings on the Michael Jackson Facebook group. Given the large size of the data in the TMZ and Facebook discussion forums, it was necessary to invoke a stratified random sample. For the TMZ data, not surprisingly, the first week consisted of the majority of the postings (91%), thus every 10th posting was selected for data analysis for the first week only, resulting in 798 postings used for analysis. For the Facebook postings, for the first week, there were 5,120 postings (70%), thus every 20th posting was selected for analysis, for the second week there were 1,284 postings (18%) and every 8th posting was selected for analysis. For the third week there were 628 postings (9%) and every 4th posting was selected for analysis, and for the fourth week there were 279 postings (3%) and every 4th post was selected, resulting in 643 postings used for the analysis.

Each posting or tweet served as the unit of analysis. Postings and comments were initially read to get a sense of the data and during this process, each data set contained postings that were unusable. This included postings/tweets not written in English, containing spam messages or messages not related to the topic, such as postings/tweets stating "hi," or "thanks." For the TMZ sample, there were 156 unusable postings, for the Twitter sample, there were 641 unusable tweets, and for the Facebook sample, there were 341 unusable postings. Thus, this left 643 postings in the TMZ sample, 101 tweets in the Twitter sample, and 302 postings in the Facebook sample, providing a total of 1,046 communicative messages for analysis. Postings were primarily from residents of the United States, but there were postings and tweets from individuals in other countries as follows: TMZ—16 countries, Twitter—2 countries, and Facebook—48 countries.¹

To determine how grief was manifesting in the data, a thematic analysis was conducted, using a deductive *a priori* template of codes outlined by Crabtree and Miller (1999). This approach was particularly pertinent to the research question by allowing the established grief stages (Kubler-Ross, 1969) to play an integral role in the deductive thematic analysis.

Each posting and tweet was read and classified into a category using Kubler-Ross' (1969) five stages of grief model. Postings and tweets were read and placed into a category based on the primary grief stage being described. The primary grief stage was ascertained by considering (a) how much of the posting or tweet was devoted to describing a particular grief reaction, (b) the degree to which one grief reaction subsumed or dominated other reactions in the posting or tweet, (c) how reactions were ordered in the posting or tweet, and (d) the degree to which the person identified a particular stage within his or her posting or tweet (Kassing, 2002). Analysis revealed that the postings and tweets were able to be classified into one of the stages of grief.

Additionally, analysis also revealed multiple postings (no tweets) that were very critical of Michael Jackson. These ranged from comments stating the person was glad Jackson was dead to very sarcastic comments about Jackson's legal troubles stemming from child molestation charges. Although these comments were not a manifestation of grief, they are included in the analysis as they facilitated reactions from other participants who rose to defend Jackson against his detractors. In valiantly defending Jackson and confronting his critics, they hastened their acceptance of Jackson's death, and actively proclaimed his legacy and global impact. Table 1 depicts the number of postings and tweets in each stage as well as displaying how these stages changed from week-to-week.

To understand how religious discourse was manifesting in people's postings and tweets, a thematic analysis was conducted using constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), with each posting or tweet serving as the unit of analysis. This methodology involves a microanalysis of data by using a "detailed line-by-line analysis [used] to generate initial categories (with their properties and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 57). Thus, the data were first micro-analyzed and classified into emergent categories based on how religious discourse appeared to be functioning. However, because of the interpretative nature of data analysis, overlap between categories exists and the researchers allowed for the chance that several themes could be evident in a single posting. After the initial categorization of data, a constant comparative methodology was used by returning to the data to gain insight into the usefulness of developed categories (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006). Through this process, development, clarification, and enhancement of categories continued until new observations failed to add significantly to existing categories. Table 2 presents the categories along with the number of occurrences in each category across the 4 weeks of data, and Table 3 presents elements and examples of the religious discourse coding themes (Boyatzis, 1998).

Results

We now discuss the results of analysis as they pertain to each research question and provide exemplars drawn from the data.

Table 1. Deductive Coding Themes

Week	TMZ	Twitter	Facebook
Denial			
1	106	13	25
2	32	0	13
3	11	2	10
4	4	6	0
Total	153	21	48
Anger			
1	4	2	1
2	6	0	0
3	0	0	1
4	5	0	0
Total	15	0	2
Bargaining			
1	5	1	1
2	0	0	1
3	1	0	1
4	0	0	1
Total	6	1	4
Acceptance			
1	178	48	92
2	125	19	77
3	42	8	53
4	26	7	17
Total	371	82	239
Critical			
1	66	0	2
2	24	0	3
3	6	0	5
4	2	0	1
Total	98	0	11

Table 2. Religious Discourse Categories

Week	TMZ	Twitter	Facebook
Coping			
1	61	4	13
2	44	0	6
3	11	2	7
4	3	8	2
Total	119	14	28
Empathy			
1	31	3	1
2	19	0	0
3	2	0	0
4	2	0	0
Total	54	3	1
Condemnation			
1	7	1	0
2	6	0	2
3	2	0	2
4	1	0	0
Total	16	1	4
Proselytizing			
1	3	63	61
2	3	16	27
3	1	14	41
4	1	9	34
Total	8	102	163
Worship			
1	26	0	13
2	39	0	11
3	5	0	9
4	6	0	4
Total	76	0	37

To identify the location of excerpts taken from the data, each posting or tweet is identified by its initials (TW for Twitter; TM for TMZ; and FB for Facebook) along with the week it was posted and its sequence in the data for that week. So, for example, the 15th posting in the third week of the TMZ data received the code (TM3-15).

CMC and the Stages of Grief

Acceptance. Analysis revealed the presence of all the grief stages; however, acceptance was very prominent in the early stages of Jackson's death. There were several ways that people demonstrated their acceptance of Michael Jackson's death. For instance, some individuals rationalized that Jackson was now in heaven, and therefore in a better place, wherein he was safe from his critics. Examples included, "you are now in a better place where people can no longer hurt you" (FB1-209); "but now he doesn't suffer anymore, he doesn't feel the pain anymore" (TW2-1); and "god [sic] has a better place for him" (TM1-246). While some people clearly drew solace from this attribution, others focused on their love for Jackson by

declaring, "We all love you Michael!" (FB1-90); "I will forever love and miss you" (TM3-85); and "He's a part of our life, heart and soul" (TW1-329). Others chose to share the intimacy they felt toward Jackson, dwelling on the "good times," they remembered about him. For example, "I remember the time very well when I saw the first moonwalk, thriller, [sic] and all of your videos" (TM1-290); "I [sic] grew up listening to his music. he [sic] was the first record i [sic] listened to, first song i [sic] danced to, first time i [sic] tried to imitate someone when I was three" (FB1-149).

While some individuals invoked fondness for Jackson and reminisced about him, others actively defended Jackson and championed his legacy, memorializing him in quite affectionate ways. Some people chose to defend Jackson by arguing he was unfairly characterized by allegations of inappropriate behavior. For example, "We know Michael is innocent" (TW1-258); while another person shared how they had established a Facebook group to protest the rebroadcast of an unfavorable documentary that had aired several years earlier, "Michael Jackson was a beautiful person with the kindest heart. Bashir [journalist] is a disgusting toad (FB3-12). Another person exclaimed,

Table 3. Inductive Thematic Code Elements

Theme 1	
Label	Worship
Definition	Postings that invoke religious language reflecting worship of Michael Jackson.
Indicators	Using affectionate and/or intimate language with appellations, such as “King” and “Prince.”
Differentiation	Postings that do not use appellations such as “King” and “Prince”
Example	“I am feeling a lot for the death of our King of Pop Michael Jackson.” (TM1-271)
Theme 2	
Label	Coping
Definition	Postings that use religious language to position Michael Jackson being in heaven or being in a “better place.”
Indicators	Describing Jackson as being with a Divine Being, making references to Jackson being in heaven, and/or in a “better place.”
Differentiation	Postings that do not designate Jackson as being in heaven, in a better place, or with a “Divine Being.”
Example	“Hope you’re doing well in Heaven!!!” (FB1-50)
Theme 3	
Label	Empathy
Definition	Postings that using religious language directed to helping others, particularly Jackson’s family cope with his death.
Indicators	Invoking a Divine Being’s blessing on others, or stating that they were praying for others to heal from this loss.
Differentiation	Postings that do communicate that one is praying for others or requesting a Divine Being’s blessing to attend them as they cope with Jackson’s death.
Example	“God bless the Jackson family in this time of grief.” (FB1-65)
Theme 4	
Label	Condemnation
Definition	Postings that use religious discourse to castigate Jackson and denote their contempt for him.
Indicators	Referring to Jackson as being in hell, or being glad that Jackson had died.
Differentiation	Postings that do use religious language to glorify Jackson and promote positive aspects of his afterlife destination.
Example	“Burn in Hell Michael!!!!!!” (TM1-344)
Theme 5	
Label	Proselytizing
Definition	Postings that using direct people to web content they have created to honor Jackson, to websites centered on Jackson, or to public gatherings to mourn Jackson.
Indicators	Requesting others to click on hyperlinks that direct them to content created material on the web that memorialized Jackson, websites about Jackson, or public gatherings to mourn Jackson.
Differentiation	Postings that do use hyperlinks to direct people to other websites honoring Jackson or announcing public gatherings mourning Jackson.
Example	“It’s Michael Monday, let’s celebrate Michael’s voice, music, and songwriting talent, share his music with your followers.” (TW1-22)

I think Michael was a very confused and hurt person because of the things he endured during his childhood, and I think even with the demons he had to face he came out to be a great person. Just because something is different than what you’ve been raised around doesn’t mean that they’re automatically child predators or are crazy. (TM1-241)

Still others proudly offered statements that emphatically heralded Michael Jackson’s impact and legacy. For instance, “He truly was a musical GENIUS. A brilliant song writer, extremely talented in every aspect” (TM1-184); “the best singer in the world” (FB1-70); and “he was extremely intelligent, had a lot of knowledge and wisdom about a lot of things” (TW1-218). Others suggested that Jackson’s legacy was incomparable, voicing that Jackson was “THE ONLY ONE” (FB3-84); the person who always made a difference” (TM4-11); “he was

music” (TW4-18); and “There will never be another Michael Jackson” (TM1-285).

Denial. Considering that Michael Jackson’s death was unanticipated, it was not surprising that in alignment with the grief model, denial was a common initial reaction as individuals attempted to make sense of his passing. Some individuals commented that it was “shocking” (TM1-11, 190, 351) Jackson had died, whereas others expressed that his death was “hard to believe” (TW1-37); that it was “Impossible” (FB1-2) he had left them; and that his death had left them “speechless” (FB1-1). For some, their connection to Jackson was so strong that they refused to acknowledge Jackson had actually died. This was more prevalent in messages posted in the initial hours after Jackson’s hospitalization and death were announced, such as “I refuse to believe that the King of Pop is gone” (TM1-167); “FALSE INFORMATION! he [sic] is not dead” (TM1-1114); and “he’s not dead yet” (TM1-26). Yet they also occurred in

the days and weeks after Jackson's death. For example, on June 27, "I don't think it's true" (TW1-267); on July 3, "MJ IS NOT DEAD" (TM2-7); and "I don't think he is dead yet, he is in the hospital in badd [sic] condition" (TM2-29); and on July 6, "Michael's body is yet to reveal that he is 100% confirmly [sic] death" (TM2-103). Despite the few individuals who held out hope that Michael Jackson was still alive, denial greatly decreased as time went on, although some people were still expressing passionate postings regarding their struggle with Jackson's passing close to a month after the news broke. For example, on July 10, "i steel can't belive that mj dead [sic]" (FB3-146); on July 18, "it's still hard for me to click on the links and listen to the music and watch the videos that are being sent to me" (TW4-110); and on July 22, "I can't believe it!! He's gone!! I'm in friggin' [sic] tears here!!" (TM4-52).

Critical. Although not a stage in the grief model, one of the more unique phenomena to emerge during data analysis was the number of postings (no tweets) that criticized Jackson, in many instances, quite hostilely. For example, "RIP MJ born a cute little black boy, died an ugly white woman" (TM1-20); "I am glad he is dead. NUFF said" (TM2-121); "has the almost [sic] the entire freakin [sic] world forgotten that this freak of a human being was an admitted pedophile [sic]" (TM2-144); "I'm not bothered he died. He was a paedo [sic]" (FB2-138); and "He molested children, he wasn't a great person" (TM1-122).

Anger, bargaining, and depression. Anger and bargaining were very minute in the data, and while some people may have been experiencing depression, this was masked by the shock and denial evoked in their postings. Previous research (Sanderson, 2009) has discovered that some people disclose strong behavioral reactions linked with celebrity's actions (e.g., unable to go to work), yet in the current data, such manifestations were subsumed by strong emotional reactions that reflected denial. For some, depression may have occurred later, after they had contemplated on Jackson's death, and it became more "real," yet given that Jackson's death was unexpected and the short amount of time that elapsed between reports of his hospitalization and his death, it is not surprising that denial was a common initial reaction, one that gained priority in the hierarchy of emotional displays.

In terms of anger, some individuals expressed a general sense of anger over Jackson's death, by making comments such as "I am so upset because of Michael Jackson's dead [sic]" (FB3-154); and "I'm at the anger stage too" (TW1-228). Others directed their resentment toward individuals who they believed played a role in Jackson's untimely death. For instance, "HOW- how did a man that beloved not have enough people in his life to stop enabling him and his habits?" (TM1-309); "the doctor kill [sic] my Michael Jackson and then ran away from the scene" (TM1-330); and "I really hope the accusers of Michael Jackson suffer such severe penalties, I really think those accusations about the child molestation drove him off the deep end" (TM2-69). Bargaining occurred through people disclosing that they were praying for Jackson to either escape

death—"praying that he will recover" (TM1-72) or to advocate to a Divine Being for Jackson's soul as he entered the heavenly realm, "Hopefully Michael Jackson accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior before he died" (TM1-173), and "please lord [sic] protect the soul of michael jackson [sic]" (FB1-163).

There were both similarities and differences in the ways that people used each social media platform to communicate their grief over Jackson's death. Twitter was primarily used to express short messages expressing acceptance of Jackson's passing, which may have been influenced by the character limits attached to tweets. Although acceptance messages did manifest in other forums, the grief disclosures on TMZ.com and Facebook were more detailed and elaborate, suggesting that the ability to construct messages without character limits is more conducive to voicing grief. Finally, it is worthwhile to note that critical messages were present in both Facebook and TMZ, but not in Twitter, indicating that some social media may be better suited to communicating critique than others. And yet all three outlets appeared to be viable channels for people to voice their initial reactions to Jackson's death in addition to following others' messages posted in these social media forums. Thus, a cultural practice of following celebrity news via social media is a trend worth watching. In light of the voluminous participation in these three forums alone, social media is emerging as the initial channel people turn to when seeking and disseminating feelings about celebrity news.

Religious Discourse

Religious discourse was widely present in the postings and tweets, and people used these discursive practices in multiple ways. The religious discourse in the data fell into the following themes: (a) worship, (b) coping, (c) empathy, (d) condemnation, and (e) proselytizing. We now discuss each of these themes along with exemplars drawn from the text following the same abbreviation system used in the analysis of grief messages.

Worship. Although celebrity worship is not typically associated with religion, the term itself clearly has religious overtones and people engage in behavior that mimics that of religious followers (e.g., visiting celebrity shrines). Additionally, Michael Jackson's global moniker as the "King of Pop" also has religious underpinnings. Thus, it was not surprising to see many people refer to Jackson in the religious sense as their "King" denoting the passion of their "worship." While some people simply referenced Jackson's status as the "King of Pop" (TM2-178; FB2-112; FB3-37), others were more literal in their connection to the divine realm. For example, "The great king is in heaven" (FB1-71); "My King" (FB1-94); "the King is gone" (TM1-216); and "I will keep thinking of you my King" (TM2-203). Yet others indicated that, similar to other deities, Jackson would have a presence with them while they were on Earth. For instance, "you will live with us as the king of pop [sic] for ever [sic] and ever" (TM1-399); "his spirit will live on forever and always" (FB3-173);

“[he] will continue to warm the hearts of the fans forever” (TM2-212).

Coping. People also invoked religious discourse as a coping mechanism to alleviate their grief. For some individuals, this emerged in the form of “better place” narratives, which posited that Jackson was now in heaven, free from his critics and detractors who could no longer harm him. For example, “he’s living in heaven with good people who don’t judge him” (FB1-116); “a true angel . . . his work was done and God called him home” (TM1-354); “Mike is in heaven, signing with Sam Cooke and Marvin Gaye and James Brown” (TM3-1); “You are safe from harm now” (TM2-118). Yet for others this involved acknowledging that it was “God’s will” that Michael Jackson died. For instance, “Michael, God said it was your time even though no one else thought it would ever be possible” (TM1-364); and “it was an acute shock for us all but that was God’s decision [sic]” (TM3-5).

Still others declared or requested God’s blessings for Jackson. Examples include, “God bless the one and only king of pop [sic] Michael Jackson” (FB3-109); “i [sic] hope Allah always be with you to not alone [sic] anymore” (TM2-113); “even a peadofile [sic] can be forgiven in heaven” (TM2-27); and “God please take care of him” (TM2-64). Some people also expressed how they were praying for Michael Jackson, performing advocacy that would influence his position with the Divine Being. For example, “there is nothing to do about it except pray to God and ask him to recive [sic] his spirit home” (TM3-68); “i [sic] pray he’s in heaven with the rest of the angels” (TM2-1); and “may God have mercy on his soul” (TM1-335).

Empathy. While it was clearly evident that many people were struggling with Jackson’s death, some individuals turned to religious discourse as an empathy mechanism, primarily by disclosing that they would be praying for Jackson’s fans and family to be comforted during this time of sadness. For instance, “My prayers and thoughts go to you and all the Jackson family” (TW1-321); “God bless the Jackson family in this time of grief” (FB1-65); “May your family and children find peace and comfort in Jehovah God’s promise of a new life in paradise” (TM2-54); and “My prayers are with the Jackson Family [sic]. May God massage your heart from the pain of loss” (TM1-306).

Condemnation. A noticeable contrast in the data was some people employing religious discourse to condemn Jackson for actions that they perceived warranted afterlife retribution. For instance, “Burn in hell Michael” (TM3-83); “Hell has a warm spot already picked out for this pervert” (TM1-230); “Now he will have to atone for his criminal activities” (TM2-130); and “do they have room for another kid toucher in heaven?” (TM1-37). Although such messages were clearly in the minority in the data, some people felt strongly enough about Jackson (negatively) to use this language to emphasize their contempt, perhaps because most people who would subsequently read their messages would attribute hell with punishment, damnation, and as a place reserved for those who are unworthy to dwell in paradise (heaven).

Proselytizing. Although people did not invoke religious discourse in their proselytizing, they nonetheless engaged in such activity through their postings and tweets. Many individuals used their postings to direct people to Facebook groups they had created, websites that were affiliated with Michael Jackson fandom, or YouTube videos they had produced as a tribute to Michael Jackson. In terms of Twitter, people used their tweets to not only redirect people to websites affiliated with Michael Jackson but also to promote activities that promulgated Jackson’s social remembrance. For instance, some tweets promoted physical sites where tributes or vigils would be held for Jackson, whereas others expressed Twitter-specific activities such as “Michael Mondays,” in which people dedicated each Monday to tweeting about Michael Jackson and promoting this practice to all their “followers” on Twitter. In other words, each Monday, one would tweet *only* about Michael Jackson (e.g., their memories, favorite songs, favorite Jackson “moments”) and encourage all their followers to do likewise. Thus, a ritualistic practice was created wherein a designated day each week was set aside for the specific purpose of remembering and disseminating intimate memories of Jackson. This activity then, became a ritualistic proselytizing effort that was consistently enacted to convert one’s followers to Jackson’s legacy, and persuade them to spread his legacy to their followers.

Similar to the grief expressions, there were several similarities and differences in the religious disclosures that appeared in these social media forums. First, while there were few Tweets expressing grief, Twitter seemed to be a valuable tool to proselyte, or to direct others to various Internet sites where tributes and memorials had been created. In other words, Twitter functioned as a forum where people could capitalize on audience members’ curiosity, and their likely propensity to click on the link that the fan had attached to their Tweet. Additionally, Twitter also operated as a space where rituals such as “Michael Mondays” could be easily practiced and distributed. Practices such as “Michael Mondays” committed one’s Twitter followers to regularly contribute and participate in this ritual, and in so doing, created a cultural practice amongst Jackson fans that simultaneously kept his memory alive and connected fans with others who shared their passion for Jackson.

Facebook and TMZ appeared to afford opportunities to contest Jackson’s legacy, which can be attributed to both the ability to construct lengthy messages as well as the popularity these sites hold. While it seems plausible that people who both adored and despised Jackson would visit a site such as TMZ.com and comment on his passing, the Facebook fan group became a convenient forum where those looking to castigate Jackson could easily access to stir reactions among fans who were sincerely mourning his passing. When dissenters enter, fans appear to band together to combat the celebrity’s opponents and develop a cultural practice of defending the celebrity and ensuring that preferred legacies are perpetuated.

Discussion

According to Sonia Livingstone's (1999) article in the inaugural edition of the *New Media & Society* journal, identification of what is "new" about new media must locate "technological developments within the cultural processes and associated timescale of domestic diffusion and appropriation" (p. 59). In this article, we investigated the use and timescale of technologically new(er) social media appropriation within the context of collective bereavement and religious discourse. Mourning and bereavement are traditional rites of passage, yet social media may help facilitate novel practices that support conventional stages of grieving over time. Our analysis suggests that CMC and online social media practices significantly aided people as they worked to accept Jackson's death and seemed to be a valuable outlet for grieving for a parasocial loss. One of the important conclusions from the current study is that social media is facilitating traditional grieving stages as well as enacting social change in contexts that are themselves part of a wider reformulation of the relation between the public and the private. That is, by entering an online forum dedicated to Jackson, fans were able to publicly disclose their feelings, transforming private practices of grief into public rituals over time and linking fans across time and space.

First, in connecting with others, fans are able to voice their own grieving practices as well as participate in others' grieving acts. In this way, social media facilitates the experience of "mediated death" (Gibson, 2007), whereby grief narratives are expanded into public spaces. For instance, the "Michael Mondays" on Twitter enabled participants to join in a public activity that allowed them to reminisce about their feelings for Jackson and to draw strength from the collective remembrances posted in this forum. Although people certainly can gather in physical locations to collectively mourn for a loved one, these events typically end within a short duration after the person has passed away, yet social media enables these sentiments to be shared well after the person's death and in an environment that can potentially connect fans across the globe.

Thus, grieving for the loss of a parasocial partner online facilitates network and community building, which enables public expressions to be interwoven into the fabric of everyday life. While a host of physical gatherings and memorials took place, CMC offered individuals a format wherein they could immediately post reactions to Jackson's death, or in which they could wait until they had gathered their thoughts to post messages or content creation devoted to Jackson. The exponential participation that occurred in the hours leading up to Jackson's death, along with the vast interactivity that continued in the days and weeks after his death, promulgated Jackson's legacy across a host of social media sites that they could conveniently access and draw strength from as they struggled daily to cope with Jackson's death. In this way, findings from our study illustrate how communicative mechanisms of hypertrophic celebrity culture (Mole, 2004) work to further amplify

a celebrity's public profile across interactive digital platforms, after the death event.

Second, these online forums also provided a point of connection wherein people across diverse geographic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds coalesced to promote Jackson's legacy and draw support from one another. In collectively coping, not only were these participants unified in championing Jackson's legacy, they also were aligned to protect Jackson against his detractors. This connection was quite interesting to observe, as some people may not join together with those who they perceive to be different from them, however, in mourning and defending Jackson, the reactions seemed ironically similar to popular contentions about Jackson's fan base—that is, they were united across cultural, ethnic, religious, and political contexts.

Third, it seems that online social media empowered individuals to grieve in ways that may have not been possible or accessible in physical settings, and through the creation of web-based content, enabled them to grieve for Jackson in ways that were meaningful to them (e.g., creating YouTube video tributes). While the mass media certainly developed and transmitted tributes for Jackson, the ability to put one's individual "stamp" on a memorial and transmit it to others as a meaningful tribute seems to allow one to transform one's grief into invention, an action that seemed to stimulate acceptance. In the case of deceased celebrities, with capabilities afforded by CMC, fans can create unique, personally meaningful tributes that highlight the celebrity's accomplishments that mean the most to the fan. Furthermore, the effort and attention to details that seems to go into many of these tributes enables fans to be reminded of the happiness they gleaned from the celebrity and seems to hasten their ability to come to terms with the loss of the celebrity's death.

Fourth, CMC, particularly Twitter, provides individuals with a platform to enact ritual practices that, when performed, contribute to the celebrity's legacy within public memory. For example, the "Michael Mondays" enacted by people on their Twitter feeds, not only created a sense of community, but designated a specific time and place wherein Jackson would be remembered, thereby creating a community of practice that stimulated positive memories of Jackson. Such practices are clearly not limited to CMC's domain; however, given the large public gatherings that can occur when a beloved celebrity dies, one may be hindered in their ability to disseminate their memories of that celebrity, and by turning to CMC they may find an active outlet for their grief. Although these resources may have been available to them in traditional face-to-face settings, it is plausible that after time, the support one receives from those in their physical community may dwindle as individuals "move on." However, the access and interactivity provided by discussion forums, Twitter, and Facebook (among others) provided online arenas wherein these individuals could access and connect with others who understood *why* Jackson's death was a tragic event and also with whom they could work together in collectively constructing Jackson's legacy.

Given the large number of people who went online to express grief for Jackson's death and mourn the loss of their parasocial partner, new social media practices may be emerging wherein individuals enact bereavement online by creating content that memorializes a celebrity. Research has observed that parasocial interaction is increasingly being performed online (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009), and it seems that the capability to create and distribute individualized tributes about celebrities may alleviate some of the suffering that people experience when a beloved media figure passes away. However, social media sites also enable people to post disparaging remarks about a celebrity and thus, it may be that a deceased celebrity's legacy, which have predominantly been shaped by mass media organizations in the past, will now be constructed and contested via social media, a process that be performed through the invocations of religious discourse.

The results of the current work also demonstrate that people perceive that religious discourse is a "common language" that they can use to communicate both their affection and contempt for celebrities. Social media offers a convenient forum wherein individuals can "resurrect" media celebrities into public consciousness, regardless of whether or not the celebrity is alive. Indeed, Facebook alone has multiple fan groups, with large numbers of members, devoted to celebrities who have long since left the world including John Wayne, John Lennon, and Elvis Presley. In resurrecting these celebrities, people can proclaim preferred legacies of these celebrities that create an alternative voice in public remembrance that may counter mass media representations of these celebrities, and through such action, people perform self-presentation vicariously for the celebrity.

In the current study, people clearly took it on themselves to defend Jackson's character and perpetuate his legacy as the "King of Pop," which many did with zeal that mimicked behavior that one would expect from a disciple of an actual religious figure. Jackson was clearly a beloved figure who people felt deserved to in death, be championed rather than condemned. Thus, when people turn to CMC channels and social networking sites to "resurrect" celebrities and perpetuate preferred representations of those celebrities, these mediated forums transform into battlegrounds wherein advocates and opponents of the celebrity engage in "virtual crusades" by constructing and contesting the celebrity's identity and legacy. And, while the degree to which fans are willing to "fight" for or against a celebrity may depend on a celebrity's popularity and prevailing public opinions, the interaction stemming from these virtual battles and other social media will provide a number of exciting opportunities for future research.

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