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## REMEMBERING THOSE WE HAVE LOST; COLLEGE STUDENTS' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CONTINUING BONDS OF GRIEF

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# REMEMBERING THOSE WE HAVE LOST; COLLEGE STUDENTS' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CONTINUING BONDS OF GRIEF

## Abstract

This dissertation is an exploratory study of grieving college students and their usage of social media and if this usage creates a continuing bond. In this mixed method study, the researcher explored grieving undergraduate and graduate students ages 18-24 who had experienced a death within the last 24 months, their use of social media and their understanding and creation of continuing bonds. Students received an email and self-selected to answer a survey and two instruments describing how grief and continuing bonds are experienced and how social media influences their ability to cope with loss. The data did not support that college students use social media to create or maintain a continuing bond, however exploratory data indicates that students do find a continuing bond important. In this sample, descriptive analysis indicated that college students do use social media to express and cope with their grieving experience and are often ambivalent about sharing their grief and loss experience over social media. Further research is needed to explore how students use the ever-evolving platforms on social media to express their emotions and thoughts during the grieving process.

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Dr. Carla Sofka, Ph.D.

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REMEMBERING THOSE WE HAVE LOST; COLLEGE STUDENTS' USE OF SOCIAL  
MEDIA AND THE CONTINUING BONDS OF GRIEF.

Suzanne R. Black, MSSA, LSW

A Dissertation

In

Social Work

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Social Work

2020

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## *Dedication*

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the college students I have served as an educator. It has been my honor to be a part of your collegiate experience and for some of you to hear your grief narrative. Thank you for allowing me to share my love for the grief and loss process with you. To the participants who completed the survey and provided great insight into your unique grief journeys, I am forever grateful. My hope is that your responses will add to the knowledge base of what we are learning about the impact that social media has on the grieving process and how we can further assist you with remembering the loved ones that you have lost.

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Finally, God thank you for all the gifts and talents you have bestowed on me, I am not worthy to be your vessel.

## ABSTRACT

### REMEMBERING THOSE WE HAVE LOST; COLLEGE STUDENTS' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CONTINUING BONDS OF GRIEF

Suzanne Black, MSSA, LSW

Dr. Kate Ledwith, DSW

This dissertation is an exploratory study of grieving college students and their usage of social media and if this usage creates a continuing bond. In this mixed method study, the researcher explored grieving undergraduate and graduate students ages 18-24 who had experienced a death within the last 24 months, their use of social media and their understanding and creation of continuing bonds. Students received an email and self-selected to answer a survey and two instruments describing how grief and continuing bonds are experienced and how social media influences their ability to cope with loss. The data did not support that college students use social media to create or maintain a continuing bond, however exploratory data indicates that students do find a continuing bond important. In this sample, descriptive analysis indicated that college students do use social media to express and cope with their grieving experience and are often ambivalent about sharing their grief and loss experience over social media. Further research is needed to explore how students use the ever-evolving platforms on social media to express their emotions and thoughts during the grieving process.

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## **CHAPTER 1: PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Beyond the classroom, the college experience is full of unknowns and new events in this transitional phase from adolescence to adulthood. Arnett (2001) named this developmental period, ages 18-25, as “emerging adulthood” in which individuals begin to take responsibility for their actions, beliefs and values (p. 10). Universities anticipate issues that may emerge around students’ adaptations to leaving home, meeting and being in new social groups, and adjusting to the rigor of the educational setting. These adaptations produce variations in psychosocial functioning, such as “psychological functioning, cognitive affective strategies and social well-being” (Conely, Kirsh, Dickson, & Bryant, 2014, p. 196). Unanticipated events can have an effect on the completion of classes, graduation, and relationships (Cox, Reason, Nix, & Gilman, 2016). Unexpected events that happen to loved ones may include death, accidents and health issues, which can cause secondary losses such as financial hardship, physical disturbances, and psychological difficulties (Cox et al. 2016; Niemeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Haridson, and Currier, 2008).

A significant portion of college students are grieving or mourning a loss. Studies by Balk, Walker and Baker (2010), Balk (1997), found that 22%-30% of college students are in the first 12 months of bereavement. However, a study by Cox, Dean and Kowalkski (2015) found nearly “60% of the college seniors interviewed had lost a family member or since the end of their first year of college” (p. 283). If the bereaved individual does not seek assistance with this experience, it could become debilitating. Grieving college students try to cognitively understand how to manage the manifestation of the emotions that erupt during this experience; however, managing this response during this stage of life can be rather difficult and lonely (Niemeyer et. al, 2008). In their study of bereaved college students, Cupit, Servaty-Seib, Parikh, Walker, &

Martin (2016) found that colleges need greater sensitivity to students who are experiencing grief and/or loss.

College students have found different methods to navigate the experience of loss and grief using social media. Turner (2015) describes individuals who are “born in the mid 1990’s through late 2010 as Generation Z, I-gen, net gen and digital natives”(p. 104). According to a Pew Research Center study (2010), “72% of online 18-29-year-olds use social networking websites nearly identical to the rates of teens” (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, p. 3). Lenhart et. al (2010) measured young adults’ usage of Twitter higher than any other cohort. Since this generation utilizes social media to communicate and find support, it is a natural outlet for them to share their feelings about a grief or loss experience.

In grieving, the term “thanatechnology” was coined to describe the use of technology and the internet as a tool for educating about death, counseling and research related to thanatology (Sofka, 1997). Social networking sites (SNS) have allowed those who are mourning to have various outlets during their grief and mourning process which include support, memorialization, and engagement with a community. Additionally, SNS could provide a mechanism to maintain an attachment or bond with those who have died. A study completed by Pennington (2013) found that college students “did not defriend a Facebook friend just because they died” (p. 624). The mourner was still able to visit the Facebook site to have a reminder of the deceased and seek support. In another study about bereaved college students and memorializing via social networks, Hieftje (2012) discovered that “web pages provided a way to continue their relationship with the deceased” (p. 40). Rossetto, Lannutti, and Strauman (2015) found that Facebook was a space for mourners to connect with others who are grieving. These interactions allowed for the mourner to grieve and continue the bonds to the deceased.

## **Purpose of Study**

According to Balk (2011), emerging adults need time to heal from the loss and require some support strategies other than counseling which could include “journal writing, talking with friends and bereaved peers about the loss” (p. 148). These grief expressions could be beneficial during the mourning process and are an example of how an individual creates their own narratives about the bereaved. These stories often create a continuing bond to the person who has died.

Social networking sites have become a necessity among college students and could serve as a catalyst toward creating a continuing bond with the deceased by allowing the mourner to express their emotions on social media. Could this bond that is created through social media impact the grieving process of college students? Further research is necessary to understand this phenomenon of continuing bond(s), grieving and the online world for college students. This research study explored how college students utilize social media to express their grief and if this action provides a continuing bond to the deceased. *To what extent do grieving college students use social media to cope with death in their lives? Is social media used to have a continuing bond?*

## **College Students and Social Media**

College is a time of growing, learning, and gaining independence. Those who attend college are often seeking answers to “Who am I?”, “What do I want to become?”, “What is independence like?” The traditional college student is leaving adolescence and becoming an adult and/or an emerging adult. The goal of this developmental period is to seek and develop an identity that will continue throughout their professional life and adulthood. Following Erikson’s (1980) model of psychosocial development, college students are experiencing the stage of identity vs. role confusion. Some of the goals of this stage of development are to become independent both from parental control and to develop one’s sense of identity both personally and socially. If students are indifferent to developing their own sense of identity, then they will often have role confusion (Erikson,1980).

Identity formation in college is more than just finding one’s self, it also includes forming lifelong relationships. As students enter and proceed through the college experience, many spend quality time developing new and lasting relationships with a chosen few. Developmentally, students are becoming more skilled in their “cognition, emotions, and interpersonally” (Balk & Varga, 2018, p. 304). Time and energy are often placed into these few relationships to develop deeper connections.

Undergraduate institutions strive to assist students in the process of growing into thriving productive adults. This occurs through teaching students how to critically evaluate and disseminate research to gain insight. It is imperative that universities understand their students and what makes each cohort different from the others. The current generation comes to the collegiate world with the idea that multitasking is necessary and most of their relationships are held together by the internet and social media sites.

The current cohort of college students who have entered and continue to attend higher educational institutions consist of those who were born between 1995-2001. As this cohort entered kindergarten, this group had a front seat to history beginning with the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001; they continue to see ramifications of this attack (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). They witnessed the election of the first African American President. They have observed immigration reform and the current policy changes. They have experienced or heard of more school shootings than any other cohort in history, with the first most memorable being the Columbine shooting and later the devastation at Sandy Hook, among others. They have had access to one device that plays movies, music and can communicate either via texting or voice since prior to preschool. Generation Z is significantly different from any other generation that has entered the college realm.

In their book, *Generation Z goes to College*, Seemiler and Grace (2016) describe this generation's personality traits as "loyal, compassionate, thoughtful, open minded, responsible, and determined" (p. 8). This generation looks to their parents for guidance when making decisions on important matters (Seemiler & Grace, 2016). Students seeking parental guidance is opposite to what Erikson hypothesized in his writing about the life cycle. According to Erikson (1980), the developmental stage of the college student includes aims to gain independence with decision making and development of oneself.

This generation has changed the landscape of popular internet platforms. In a survey completed by the Pew Research Center on the topic of internet and technology, Anderson and Jiang (2018) found that teens age 13-17 stated that Facebook is no longer the preferred platform for communication and information. The social media sites that are most used by this age group

are YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat. However, YouTube and Instagram were visited the most by the teens surveyed.

In her book *The Happiness Effect: How Social Media is Driving a Generation to Appear Perfect at any Cost*, Fretas (2017) interviewed college students about their use of social media and its effects. She found that students appreciate the ability to self-express yet are weary due to the continued expectation of utilizing the space for self-disclosure. The culture created by Generation Z is that many life experiences should be out in the open for the digital world to appreciate and either “like or not like.” Students in this cohort expose themselves on a daily basis to those with whom they are “friends” on social media. The term “friends” is often expansive and may include individuals that they have never met. This extensive network allows college students to have different definitions of friends and support systems. Is it likely that social media is creates a space for college students to express their grief and loss feelings, or is this a place that students prefer not to expose something so vulnerable? According to Balk and Varga (2018), students are cautious about grieving online and use social media while grieving for limited purposes.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Grief Conceptualized**

#### **Grief and Loss Theory**

Sigmund Freud was one of the first to write about grief and loss in his paper entitled 'Mourning and Melancholia' (Freud, 1914). He noted that "the experience or reaction of loss contains the profoundly painful dejecting, cessation of interest in the outside world, and loss of the capability to love" (p. 244). To understand and overcome the loss, according to Freud (1914), "the individual must take and reinvest the loss into another person or object (p. 244). He postulated that if an individual does not have complete relinquishment of the person or object, then the grief will become pathological.

Bowlby advanced Freud's research on grief and mourning. He suggested that even in healthy adults, "mourning can and does last longer than six months with natural responses of anger to the individual lost, self, and disbelief" (Bowlby, 1982, p. 672). This mourning is activated when the attachment figure is unavailable (Bretherton, 1992). Bowlby along with his colleague, Colin Murray Parkes, identified four phases of grief during adult life: numbness, yearning and protest, disorganization and despair, and reorganization (Bowlby & Parkes, 1970). With this work, Bowlby led the way for future research about grief and mourning. He understood that there was a relationship between the individual who was mourning and the experience of the loss. He postulated that as humans, we become attached to one another and an emotional bond occurs. When a death event happens, the loss may feel incomprehensible and the person is irreplaceable (Balk, 2011). The response to the loss may depend upon the type of attachment they had to the person who died.

In her writings in “*On Death and Dying*,” Dr. Elisabeth Kubler Ross, a physician working with terminally ill patients, developed the stage progression that is widely understood in western culture. She identified that individuals who are dying go through a progression/stage processing of their own grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression/Despair, Acceptance. The goal of these stages is to move from one to the next until acceptance is attained. This stage-like progression has also been used in the mourning process; however, research has not validated this progression.

Walsh and McGoldrick (2013) identified four major developmental tasks that offer guidance to the mourner and the family. The tasks focus on the change in the family system and how it adapts to the death experience, and over time how loss can strengthen the family. The tasks include the following: “shared acknowledgement of the death and loss, shared experience of the loss, reorganization of the family system, and reinvestment in other relationships and life pursuits” (p. 21).

Grief theorists have identified the process of mourning through phases, stages, or tasks. The task-oriented process gives the mourner the ability to choose their own path of adaption toward their own reconciliation mourning process, while the phase model gives the expectation that one stage will eventually come after the next (Worden, 2009). This research focuses on the task-oriented model.

Worden (2018) identified four tasks of mourning. The first task is to accept the reality of the loss. This processing is often difficult for mourners to achieve. Death even when expected is a harsh reality. The mourner’s world is never the same again, as the death has left its mark on the individual and their daily living. Denial is often a coping mechanism that is utilized to understand this new reality. This type of coping is utilized to assist with the understanding of the

loss or to minimize the reality of the occurrence. Coming to terms with the loss takes time and in the current landscape of our culture, time to mourn or experience natural emotions often has limits. Those who have disbelief about the death often have a difficult time completing this first task.

The second task of mourning is to process the pain of grief (Worden, 2018). This could also be viewed as acute grief, meaning that this period of time for mourner is “often intense, highly emotional, dominating our minds and disrupting our lives” (Shear & Bloom, 2017, p. 7). Innately, individuals have different physical and emotional pain tolerance; however, can limits be placed on the processing of the pain of grief? There are not two human beings alike in this world, which means that how each one cognitively and physically processes the experience of loss is different. Some will minimize their feelings, and then project onto other people or areas of their lives. This defense mechanism is used to cope with the underlying feelings that the mourner may not even understand. Eventually this delayed mourning processing will come to fruition in the mourner and the grief work will need to be done. This task of processing takes work and often is tiresome for the bereaved.

The third task suggested by Worden (2018) is to adjust to a world without the deceased which includes three areas that require adjustment: external adjustments, internal adjustments and spiritual adjustments. External adjustments take place at the pace of those who are mourning and often is dependent upon the attachment to the deceased. Some adjustments or skills that the mourner may need to facilitate could be in the areas of financial, planning for the future, discipline of children, etc. Daily living can be difficult, however navigating a new life story without the deceased is part of the healing process.

Internal adjustments include finding oneself without the deceased. This could include self-worth, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Worden suggests that completion of the third task begins when the mourners can redefine the loss. Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) expanded this concept by suggesting that those who can find meaning or reconciliation after the death can further process the loss and view the world without the deceased with a new or different view.

Spiritual adjustments are another aspect of the third task. Finding comfort in spiritual beliefs is often a coping mechanism for the loss. The beliefs are that an individual's values can be strengthened or in some cases questioned by this grieving experience. According to Worden (2018), if an individual fails to adapt to the loss it could hold great consequences for both mental and physical health which could be evidenced by withdrawing from interactions with others or feeling a sense of helplessness.

The final task in Worden's model (2018) is to find a way to remember the deceased while embarking on the rest of one's journey through life. This task is active, where the mourner is remembering and integrating the deceased into their life. Worden has updated this task of the model from the previous edition in 2009. He suggests that this new task is a way for the bereaved to remember the deceased while moving forward with life. This emotional processing allows for the bereaved to make their own place for the deceased in their lives. The emotional or continuing bond that is created allows the mourner to process their grief at their own pace, with the ultimate goal of continuing on with life without the deceased. Not progressing through this task is not living or getting stuck in the grieving process. Worden suggests that these tasks are not linear, they can be worked through separately or simultaneously. This type of processing can allow the mourner to grieve and express their loss at their own pace.

Social media has been utilized to express feelings of grief and loss. In a study by Willis and Ferrucci (2017) they reviewed 30 deceased Facebook users' pages to understand what individuals wrote on those pages. While evaluating the participants' comments, the authors found that many individuals wrote on the pages to process their grief and loss. This was often done by writing about memories or memorialization. This action correlates with Worden's task of processing the grief. Individuals may write Facebook posts to have emotional relinquishment and process their grief with others who may have known the deceased.

### **College Students and Coping with Grief**

In their study about college students and grief, Balk, Walker and Baker (2010) found that 22-30% of college students, were in the first 12 months of bereavement. This study produced almost the same results as Balk (1997). These studies imply that a significant portion of college students are grieving or mourning a loss. Balk et al. (2010) discovered that around 50% of those who died were friends to the participants, followed by grandparents and other family members.

The emotional responses to grief are numerous. Worden (2009) defines normal grief as having some of the following feelings "sadness, anger, guilt/self-reproach, fatigue, and loneliness" (p. 19). He further describes some of the physical concerns as "hollowness in the stomach, tightness in the chest, over sensitivity" (p. 23, 24). Grief can manifest not only into health issues, but prolonged psychological symptoms. (Niemeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Haridson, and Currier, 2008). The number of college students dealing with bereavement issues is significant enough to warrant an understanding of how they respond, cope and communicate about loss.

LaGrand (1985) identified college students as the "forgotten grievers" (p. 15). In this pioneering study, he collected data from over a course of 6 years from 3,000 college students to determine the types of losses students experience in college and what coping mechanisms they

employed while grieving. He identified that college students experienced a multitude of reactions, including but not limited to emotional responses such as “depression, shock, numbness” (p. 20) and the physical symptoms of “crying, headaches, and insomnia” (p. 24). Wagner and Rhee (2013) suggest that college students would like more information about grief and loss and how to support themselves and others while grieving. College students may not know that services are offered through the university or be able to access them. Some students described that they did not have enough time to get to the counseling or thought the services would not be beneficial (Cox, et al., 2015).

College students can cope with loss in various ways. One way of coping is through the cognitive appraisal of the event. Often this processing is completed by either problem-focused coping or emotion focused coping. Problem focused coping relies on action toward the stressor, while emotion focused coping focuses on what feeling is elected in response to the event. Not coping with the grief could result in psychological, social, emotional and academic effects on their lives (Cox et al., 2015). Students coping with a death during their transition to college could also experience a lack of connectedness to the college community (Miller & Sevaty-Seib, 2016). College is a difficult time of transition and the experience of loss may compound this already stressful psychosocial developmental phase.

The typical college transition relies on support from family, friends, religion, and possibly alcohol (Zaleski, Levi-Thorns, & Schiaffino, 1998). Schlossberg (1981) identified a model for transition and coping. She devised the model based upon how an individual copes or adapts to a transition using the following characteristics: “the characteristics and the perception of the transition, the characteristics of the pre-transition and post transition environments and the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition” (p.5 ). If an individual understands

these three areas, then they can move through the transition of adaptation. This theory also accounts for the anticipated, unexpected and nonevent transitions that occur in life. Anticipated transitions are what the normative life cycle might produce such as leaving home. Unanticipated events are those not part of the life cycle such as unanticipated death, crisis, and trauma (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006).

Negotiating life after a grief experience for college students can be rather intense. Cupit et al., (2016) hypothesized that a students' grieving experience can be measured by where the student is developmentally, the relationship to the deceased, and the community culture of the campus. Their research indicated that students want more support from their academic institutions. Students could and do have more non-death life experiences in addition to their loss experiences. Changes in relationships could also be related to mental health difficulties related to the loss. When experiencing a death, there are times that the bereaved wished they could say one more thing to their loved one or create another memory. To fill this void, mourners will look to create a continuing bond experience with those that they have lost, and it can be fulfilled in various ways.

### **Continuing Bonds Defined**

The experience of death creates an empty space for mourners. Depending on the type of relationship that existed with the deceased, it is possible that one develops a yearning for a continuing bond. This desire could be met through reminiscence, shared stories or even conversing with the deceased as if they were present. A continuing bond is the "presence of an ongoing inner relationship with the deceased person by a bereaved individual" (Stroebe & Schut, 2005, p. 477).

John Bowlby, MD., expanded upon the research of Sigmund Freud. Bowlby (1950) studied “44 juvenile thieves and compared them with a control group of other maladjusted children” (p. 572). He found that the juvenile thieves who had been separated from their mothers for more than 6 months during the first five years of life had delinquent behavior. From this study, he proposed that the delinquent behavior was due to a “serious break” in the parent child relationship (p. 572). These findings and subsequent research led Bowlby to believe that early life attachment has ramifications on behavior and socialization. Bowlby (1982), theorized with his colleague Robertson that children, when separated from a mother figure, exhibit “protest, despair, and detachment” (p. 672). Bowlby (1969), in his book *Attachment and Loss Volume I*, stated that a child’s ability to establish early attachment provides a “sense of self-worth, the belief in helpfulness of others and a model to build future relationships will furthermore provide resiliency” (p. 378). Attachment behaviors are seen in early childhood and throughout life, especially when an unexpected event or loss occurs. Bowlby advanced his research to the application of mourning and loss. He suggested that even in healthy adults, “mourning can and does last longer than six months with natural responses of anger to the individual lost, self, and disbelief” (Bowlby, 1982, p. 672). This mourning is activated when the attachment figure is unavailable (Bretherton, 1992).

### **Continuing Bonds Theory**

Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996) theorized about the topic of continuing bonds, believing that a bond could assist with the healthy adjustment to the loss of a loved one. Klass (2006) furthered the discussion of continuing bonds by suggesting that a continuing bond can be normal behavior in grieving; however, individual grief stories may vary. The connection to the deceased may provide comfort and security in a time of despair and continued change. When a

death happens, individuals are often forced to believe that it is the end of the relationship with the deceased. A continued relationship is suggested as unhealthy, which could be true for mourners who decompensate and dissociate. Connections to the deceased are personal; there is not a prescription for the bereaved to follow, and oftentimes judgment is placed on the mourner and their own processing of the loss. The perception of the loss by the bereaved and how they construct their reality following the death impacts the continuing bond. The mourner may try to find the meaning of the continuing bond and why it exists.

During the experience of any loss, especially death, there is often a period of time where the mourner begins to question the meaning of what has occurred. While questioning the experience, the mourner may try to reconnect to the deceased. When grieving, the mourner tries to construct a new reality out of the deep despair and make meaning from their own personal narrative (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014). The significance of the loss experience can only be told by the individual who has encountered it. The bereaved may desire to tell their story and possibly retell it to a professional, family or friend in order to make sense of this new reality (Neimeyer, 2001). The meaning is individual and based upon how the bereaved see their world and what is important to them, such as spirituality and religion, cultural beliefs and social supports (Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002).

Gillies and Niemeyer (2006) propose that individuals engage in three different actions to respond to a loss: “sense making, benefit finding and identity change” (p. 36). “Sense making” implies that the loss must have a reason for it to have occurred and now individuals mourn what was lost. “Benefit finding” suggests that the individual find a “new meaning” or build on what happened after the loss (p. 37). Finally, the authors indicate that an “identity change” could occur from the experience of the loss. When any loss happens, it changes the bereaved forever,

and changes how they process or reconstruct their life. Some aspects of the response that could occur from this “identity change” could be more “resiliency, independence and confidence” (p. 37). If the bereaved’s identity is reconstructed, then they will look at life differently since experiencing the loss.

In their research about children and how they reconstruct and connect to the death of a parent, Silverman and Nickman (2006) found that the process is emotional and cognitive. They found that children engaged in actions to create a bond or be linked to the deceased. One of these activities included trying to find the deceased in the afterlife. Another connection was that the children thought the deceased was looking out for them. Others continued the connection to the deceased by visiting memorial sites such as a cemetery to have a conversation. Their research indicated that the children in the study tried to cope with their grief experience through constructing meanings that represented and personalized the deceased in their lives

Field and Filanosky (2010) further the continuing bonds theory to state that the attachment to the deceased could be deemed as problematic or an unresolved processing of the loss. According to the authors, the mourner will re-experience the loss whenever they misidentify someone as the deceased based upon physical appearance or the similarity in the sound of their voice. Continuing bonds could be very prevalent in more violent traumatic deaths due to complicated grieving that happens after such an event. In their research, they studied the internal and external aspects of continuing bonds. The term internal aspect means that the continuing bond serves as a form of positive attachment. An example of an internal aspect is if the mourner, when making a decision, would think about or use the deceased as a model to decide the action to be taken. The external aspect is often related to unresolved grief and can exemplified in hallucinations or delusions. Hallucinations are external as defined by Field and

Filanosky (2010), “given they are in the here and now quasi-perceptual quality existing externally as though the deceased were still alive” (p. 4). Those experiencing external features had a more difficult experience understanding the loss, while those who had internal meaning had more progressive growth in their grief process.

Ho and Chan (2018) furthered this research by trying to understand if there was a relationship between continuing bond and grief adjustment. They found that the connection or bond a mourner has to the deceased produced a variety of behaviors and stems from the relationship to the deceased and the type of bond perceived by the mourner. Each bond is understood to be an individual experience. For instance, Facebook will often show the account owner an anniversary or event that has occurred in the past. If the bereaved is reminded of the trauma that occurred, such as a suicide or accident, those reminders could trigger more complicated responses.

### **Continuing Bonds and Social media**

Williams and Merten (2009) completed research concerning adolescents and their responses to loss on social media. When the adolescents made comments on a social networking profile they were “using language that indicates they were talking directly to the deceased” (p. 85). This process of communicating directly to the deceased allowed the mourners to have a continuing bond, but also acted as a coping mechanism that was always available. This research furthers the idea that students seek a connection or continuing bond with individuals who they have lost. Those who posted on the online platform often updated the deceased on their current life happenings or discussed memories they shared together.

A study by Holland, Currier and Neimeyer (2006) indicated that meaning making allowed for the grieving individual to cope better with the loss. This process of meaning making

does occur on social media sites. Communication is important in the grieving process and some college students have found that writing on web pages allowed them to grieve without backlash (Hieftje, 2012). James (2014) researched adolescents and the use of social media for support after a grief and loss experience. She found that those who were able to connect to others who were grieving were able to “normalize” their own grief experience. These studies support the idea that students seek a continuing bond during their grieving experiences via social networking sites or other online platforms. Moore, Magee, Gamreklidze and Kowaleski (2019) developed a model of Social Media Mourners (SMM) to assist with the understanding of how mourners use social media to describe their grief experience. In their study they found that those who are grieving have specific reasons to use social media as an outlet.

Many individuals who are grieving go to grave sites to experience a connectedness to the deceased. Kasket (2012) completed research on continuing bonds and Facebook and found that many participants appreciated the availability and accessibility of Facebook rather than visiting a grave site or memorial. This allows for easy access for all individuals with Facebook access to a remembrance site rather than just the grave which is only available to individuals who can physically visit and desire to do so.

Stein et. al. (2018) researched the continuing bonds and post traumatic growth of young adults when they experienced the loss of a friend. The authors found that all 20 of the participants felt they had a continuing bond with the deceased. This continuing bond was through “personal communication, personal change and homage activities” (p. 725). The research does not indicate whether this personal communication was via social media but does mention that individuals would just speak out loud to the deceased.

A continuing bond can occur on a social media site for the bereaved. Mourners visit social networking sites for support and a space to possibly reminisce about the deceased. This space could provide a support system for the mourner with individuals. Sofka (2017) describes that teens go to social media sites to post possible apologies that they were not able to express to the deceased prior to the death. This could be done either privately or publicly on social networking sites. This type of support gives the mourner the ability to create a continuing bond that may not have ever occurred if social media was not available to the mourner. In the research James (2014) completed about adolescents' use of social media, some of the students interviewed posted on social media privately to the deceased as if they were alive. This is just one example of a continuing bond on social media.

Sofka (2018) created a pyramid to show how adolescents utilize social media while grieving. In this model, she describes that grieving adolescents begin by sharing the news of the loss and then create an online community of support. From this point, mourners may create online memorializations which could potentially create or maintain a continuing bond. Finally, teenagers may report that they are preserving their digital memories and could become a survivor advocate. Understanding this digital processing and how it impacts the continuing bonds experience of college students is an area of grief and loss studies that needs to be further explored.

### **College Students, Grief, and Continuing Bonds**

College students making the transition to adulthood have often created bonds between parental figures and other friend networks which could include their social networking "friends." According to Arnett (2015), there are five features of an emerging adult: "identity exploration, instability, self-focused, a feeling of in between, and age of possibilities" (p. 8). Due to these

features, college students begin to form lasting relationships with select groups of peers and often do not seek their parents' approval for these relationships (Balk & Varga, 2018).

College provides certain opportunities for students to achieve a new sense of independence and develop new norms. According to a study by Bucx and Van Wel (2008), parental bond influences how an individual reacts to transitions. The parent child bond is important to navigate life changes and transitions (Bucx & Van Wel, 2008). Additionally, the parental bond could influence how a college student experiences the mourning process and if they create a bond with the deceased.

College students have found methods to navigate the experience of loss and grief through social media. They are constantly connected to their phones, computers, tablets or anything that has internet access prior to entering college. Most students have laptops or smartphones that have unlimited connectivity to a large knowledge base (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). The tools developed by social networking sites (SNS) have allowed users to have interaction in various ways. In her research about a crash that occurred in her local community, Sofka (2017) found that 60% of those who participated stated they were notified about the tragedy via social networking sites within an hour of the crash. Students and adults often find out about a death via a social media outlet and then respond with condolences as a form of support to their family and friends. In other instances, the mourners themselves express their grief through a post. This type of online communication could allow individuals to share their feelings faster with more people (Falconer, Sachsenweger, Gibson & Norman, 2011).

Social networking sites are a “necessity” among the emerging adult population. Emerging adults use the sites to stay connected to friends, family, and support systems. Many students spend time responding to, reading and typing comments (Subrahmanyam, Reich,

Waechter & Espinoza, 2008). Some have used this platform to have a continued relationship with the deceased. Pennington (2013) found that a college student's "decision to maintain friendship ties to a Facebook page of someone who was deceased is a true embodiment of continuing bonds through the deceased online presence" (p. 630). The online self remains present even after an individual has died (Carroll & Landry, 2010).

There is little research on how college students create continuing bonds with the deceased through social media. In her research of college students and the role of social networking sites Hieftje (2012), found that students desired "connection, communication, commemoration and the continuation of the relationship" (p. 36). This affirms that the continuing bond that social media provides allows for mourners to have contact with the deceased as if they were here. Balk (1996) studied attachment and college students and how it affects their grief response. The results of his research, which evaluated bereaved college students, were based upon three different levels of attachment: little attachment, some attachment, and much attachment. He concluded that college students with continuing attachment to the deceased experienced "greater distress and sorrow" (p. 323).

Balk and Varga (2018) furthered the investigation of college students and grief to include social media or thanatechnology. Their research found that "26% of students who experienced a loss used social media as a means of grief support" (p. 308). The students used sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Many in the study felt that social media was not a place to discuss their grief experiences, or if they did, it was for information related to notification of death or funeral services. Further research is necessary to assess how social media can create a space for college students to express their grief and loss experience including the development or maintenance of continuing bonds.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

### **Introduction**

This research study was completed to explore grieving college students' use of social media to cope with death and whether this coping mechanism can create or maintain a continuing bond. This pilot research study design was a mixed methods design by way of a survey. This study gathered information via a questionnaire designed by the author including demographic information and open-ended questions about grief and use of social media, an 11-question continuing bond scale by Field, Gal-Oz and Bonanno (2003), and the Core Bereavement Items, a 17-question scale measuring the core grief experiences (Burnett, Middleton, Raphael, and Martinek, 1997). This data was collected online via SurveyMonkey®. The design, implementation, and administration of the survey was approved by the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, and St. Francis University, Loretto, PA, Institutional Review Boards.

According to Cupit (2012), utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches when researching thanatechnology permits both inductive and deductive reasoning. This allows the researcher to fully understand the depth and meaning of the loss and the impact social media had on the grief process. Thus, the mixed method design was chosen for this study.

### **Instruments**

An open and closed ended pilot questionnaire was developed by the researcher to assess the usage of social media platforms by undergraduate and graduate college students prior to and during the bereavement process. The researcher had assistance and guidance to develop the questionnaire from Dr. Carla Sofka, an expert on social media and grief. Questions for this survey were modified from "518 social media and grief survey" created by Sofka (2013). Other

questions were developed using the Bereavement Activities Questionnaire (the BAQ) created by Castle and Phillips (2003) and then revised in a dissertation by Graves (2009). Since psychometric properties of the BAQ have not been evaluated, the researcher chose not to use the actual scale but to use it as a guide for the pilot questionnaire. The answers to the open-ended questions were coded for qualitative analysis.

To measure continuing bond, the Continuing Bonds Scale (CBS) (Field, Gal-Oz and Bonanno (2003) was utilized. The authors of the scale suggest that a total of 11 questions cover many different areas of inquiry for the participant to assess their continuing bonds. These areas primarily ask how individuals maintain ties or have continuing bonds to the deceased. The overall internal consistency was  $\alpha = .87$ , according to Field, Gal-Oz and Bonanno, (2003). The 11-question CBS (Field, Gal-Oz and Bonanno, 2003) explores how the bereaved individual feels the deceased is part of their life. Niemeyer, et al, (2006) studied college students whose ages were 18-53 utilizing the 11- item CBS Scale. The authors completed a “principal component analysis and utilized a screen plot which included all 11 items and had an internal consistency of .90” (p. 724), similarly this study produced a Cronbach’s Alpha of .944. An additional 13 questions were added to the Continuing Bonds Scale (CBS) by the researcher to measure how participants behaviors/actions online or on social media are related to continuing bonds. Participants were able to respond using point response categories from 1 = “not at all true” to 5 = “very true,” and the Cronbach’s alpha was .877.

The Core Bereavement Items (CBI) a grief inventory was developed by Burnett, Middleton, Raphael and Martinek (1997) was used to assess the “core” grief experiences; the CBI had a Cronbach’s alpha of .91. The authors utilized the scale to address three different aspects of bereavement: images and thoughts, acute separation, and grief (Burnett, et al., 1997).

In a sample of young adults who had experienced a death /loss of a loved one within the last two years, Holland, Nam & Neimeyer (2013) showed the scale to have Cronbach's Alpha of .95. Because of the use of the scale on young adults, the CBI survey was chosen for this pilot study. Participants responded using point response categories from 1 = "never" to 4 = "a lot of the time," and the Cronbach's alpha was .877.

For the purpose of this study, the pilot questionnaire, the CBS, and the CBI were converted to electronic format via SurveyMonkey® platform. SurveyMonkey® is an online tool that can be found at [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com). This tool was chosen as it is readily available to the researcher via the Center for Teaching and Excellence at St. Francis University.

In addition to the CBI and the revised CBS, the researcher included in the pilot questionnaire demographic information which included gender, year of schooling, where the participant primarily takes classes and racial/ethnic identity. The complete survey can be found in Appendix C.

## **Variables**

Four variables were examined in this study.

### **Independent Variables**

#### **Frequency of participation on social media**

This variable was assessed by asking the participant if they used social media around the time they found out about the death, between the time they found out about the death and when the memorial or funeral service was held, after the funeral up through 6 months after the death, and between 6 months after the death to the present. These timeframes were adapted from a survey by Sofka (2013), "518 Social Media and Grief Survey." For each type of social media listed the

participant could choose between the response options of frequently, occasionally, and never (Appendix C, questions 21-24).

### **Close relationship**

This variable was measured by asking the participant to rate the closeness of their relationship on a scale of 0-5. (Appendix C, Question 11)

## **Dependent Variables**

### **Level of importance of having a continuing bond**

This variable was measured using a question that assessed if the participant found it important to have a continuing bond to the deceased, “*How important is it to have a continuing bond to the deceased?*” (Appendix C, Question 33). This question could be answered with extremely important, very important, somewhat important, and not important at all.

### **Experiences using social media to cope with death**

This variable was measured using the question: “*What type of experience(s) did you have posting on social media to cope with the death?* (Check all that apply) (Appendix C, question 29). The participant had the choices of positive, negative or mixed.

### **Importance of maintaining a Continuing Bond using social media**

This variable was measured using the questions that the author added to the CBS scale (12-24 Appendix C, question 35). Participants responded using point response categories from 1 = “never” to 5 = “a lot of the time”.

### **Continuing bonds**

This variable was measured by the 11-question CBS (Field, Gal-Oz and Bonanno, 2003). Participants responded to the questions by using the scale that was provided from not true at all to very true (Appendix C, question 35,1-11). Participants responded using point response

categories from 1 = “never” to 5 = “a lot of the time. Open-ended questions provided supplemental information which will be analyzed as qualitative data.

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

The data from the pilot survey, Continuing Bond Scale (CBS) and Core Bereavement Items were converted from SurveyMonkey® to SPSS version 26 so that the data could be analyzed and statistically evaluated. The data accumulated from all measurements were reviewed and analyzed. Reliability for the Continuing Bond Scale and Core Grief Inventory was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha. Analysis for this pilot study began with obtaining the descriptive statistics followed by an understanding certain frequencies, correlations and multiple regression. The CBS was separated into two parts. The original CBS by Field et. al. (2003), and then questions created by the author to understand the usage of social media and continuing bond questions 12-24. To understand the use of social media a specific question was asked if students used social media to cope with the death. Frequency of use of social media was assessed by four questions that evaluated certain timeframes during the grieving period. The research questions were assessed by analyzing the frequency of using social media to cope with the death, their experience, with the ability to create a continuing bond and the use of social media to create a continuing bond.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

The participants were asked multiple open-ended questions to gain more insight into their grieving experience and use of social media and to further understand the quantitative data. Participants were asked to provide more information about the closeness and relationship with the deceased and their level of awareness that the death was going to occur. To further understand their experience using social media to cope with the death, the participants were

asked to expand upon how they used social media privately or publicly, and whether their experience with social media was positive, negative or mixed. Participants were also asked to provide additional responses about the importance of creating a continuing bond. Using the qualitative data, the researcher evaluated the content of each qualitative question and then coded and categorized the participants' thoughts and feelings. The researcher created a chart to categorize the themes that emerged.

### **Research Questions and Hypothesis**

**This exploratory research examined the following questions:** *1) To what extent do grieving college students currently use social media platforms. If they use social media platforms, what types of social media platforms do college students use? 2) To what extent do grieving college students cope with a death in their lives using social media platforms? If they use social media to cope with the death, a) What is the frequency of use of social media by college students around the time of death, b) between the death and the funeral, c) from the time of the funeral through 6 months after the death and d) 6 months after the death to the present? 3) If they use social media to cope with death, do they have a positive, negative or mixed experience? 4) To what extent do grieving college students create/maintain continuing bonds? 5) How important is it to the grieving college students to have a continuing bond to the deceased? 6) How do grieving college students use social media to create/maintain a continuing bond to the deceased? 7) To what extent do grieving college students' perceptions of their behaviors/actions on social media create a continuing bond?*

## **Hypotheses**

*Grieving college students' frequency of participation on social media after experiencing a death will be positively correlated with the level of importance to having a continuing bond to the deceased.*

*Grieving college students who participated more frequently on social media after the death will be more likely to report positive experiences with using social media.*

*Grieving college students who had a close relationship to the deceased prior to the death will be more likely to report a higher level of importance of maintaining a continuing bond using social media.*

*Grieving college students who had a close relationship to the deceased will be more likely to report a higher level of importance of maintaining a continuing bond to the deceased.*

## **Recruitment of Participants**

A convenience sample was gathered via email to students at a small private university. A recruitment email was sent to all university students starting on November 25th and ending December 9th. The students self-selected to participate or not. However, they could not participate if they had not experienced a death within the last two years. Email delivery of the survey and questionnaire was chosen for multiple reasons: it allowed access to more participants, the free cost to the researcher, and presumed comfort with technology of the sample. The body of the email described the study and gave information about how to participate. The student read the informed consent and then clicked on a box that they have been

informed of the purpose of the study, assurance of the study, and how confidentiality of data would be maintained once collected. Participants could choose to discontinue their participation at any time by not submitting their answers or not completing the surveys. Once the student completed the survey and questionnaire, the student submitted the information and were directed to a “thank you page” for participating. The thank you page included a section that noted the college counseling center’s phone numbers and a national crisis hotline for those not on the college campus. The researcher provided this information due to the thoughts and feelings that may occur when answering questions or talking about a death. The following are the numbers that were listed.

**University Counseling Center: 814-472-3211 or 1-877-268-9463**

**Crisis Hotline Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255**

An example of the recruitment email is located in Appendix A.

The target sample size for this mixed method design was 100 students. The data collection ended at a sample size of 83 participants. Of the 83 participants, 15 were eliminated from the data analysis due to missing data. After further review and analysis another eight participants did not complete the entire survey or inadvertently did not complete the continuing bond scale, which was to be completed whether or not a participant utilized social media for grief purposes. The continuing bond scale was placed at the end of the survey and was missed or skipped, therefore not completed by most of these eight participants. Because part of this study was trying to understand the relationship between social media and continuing bond, the eight participants were not included in the study. The total N for participants was 58 which was 70% of the initial sample size.

This research adhered to the ethical guidelines of research practice. The research project was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board prior to distribution to participants. The survey was anonymous and no identifying information was collected and all information received followed the ethical guidelines and protocols of research practice. Data is kept confidential according to institutional regulations.

### **Confidentiality Anonymity and Protection of Human Subjects**

Those who voluntarily participated in this research study remained anonymous, as no identifying information was gathered. Responses to the surveys were only for data analysis. Some open-ended answers were quoted in the study; however, the researcher was not be able to identify the writer of the response. The data are stored in a secured drive to which that only the researcher has access.

This study had minimal risk to participants, although the topic of death can be difficult to discuss. In case students were triggered by the survey or their participation, community resources were placed at the end of the survey. This provided participants a resource to contact for support.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS**

### **Quantitative Results**

#### **Sample Descriptive Statistics**

The sample was almost completely female 93.1% (N=54) compared to male who represented 6.9% (N=4). The study included 18-24-year-old graduate and undergraduate students. The mean age was 20.43 with a standard deviation of 1.58. The sample included 50 undergraduate (86.2% of the sample) and 8 graduate students (13.8% of the sample). Most of the participants (89.1%) took classes on campus while 8.6% of the participants took classes both online and on campus. Only 1.7% of the participants took classes completely online. The majority of the racial identity of those who participated were white (98.3% of the sample), while 1.7% were people of color. (Table 4.1)

**Table 4.1***Basic demographic characteristics of the sample*

Variable	Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender:</b>		
Male	4	6.9
Female	54	93.1
<b>Age:</b>		
18	6	10.3
19	14	24.1
20	11	19.0
21	10	17.2
22	11	19.0
23	5	8.6
24	1	1.7
<b>Year:</b>		
Freshman	9	15.5
Sophomore	14	24.1
Junior	10	17.2
Senior	17	29.3
Graduate	8	13.8
<b>Primarily take classes:</b>		
Campus	52	89.1
Online	1	1.7
Both Campus/Online	5	8.6
<b>Race/Ethnicity:</b>		
White	57	98.3
Non-White	1	1.7

N=58

Participants were asked to identify if they had experienced a loss over the last two years. Some had multiple experiences with grieving a deceased individual or pet. The study asked the

participants to choose one individual or pet to consider when answering the survey regarding their experience with grief and loss. A grandparent was identified most often with 31% (N=18), followed closely by a friend 29.3% (N=17). The next three individuals most commonly chosen were uncle, aunt and others, all at 8.6% (N=5). Participants also chose a pet 6.9% (N=4), parent was chosen at 3.4% (N=2), while cousin was 1.7% (N=1).

Participants were asked to describe their relationship to the deceased prior to death using a Likert scale of 1-5 (1 = not close at all to 5 = very close). Results indicated that 32.8% (N=19) were very close to the deceased prior to death, 29.3% (N =17) were close, 25.9% (N =15) were somewhat close, 10.3% (N=6) or not close at all were 1.7% (N=1).

### **Exploratory Research Questions**

#### **1. To what extent do grieving college students currently use social media platforms, and if they use social media platforms what types do, they use?**

Participants were asked a series of questions to measure their frequency of usage of social media: never, occasionally, and frequently. Participants were given certain timeframes to answer their frequency of usage while coping with the death. Each social media question included a list of social media sites: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, blogging site and an option for other sites not listed. (Table 4.2)

Currently Snapchat had the highest frequency of use at 84.5% (N=49), followed by Instagram 75.9% (N=44), and then YouTube 34.5% (N=20). YouTube 53.4% (N=31) was occasionally accessed, followed by Facebook at 36.8% (N=21) and then Twitter 27.6% (N=12). One social media site that was never used was blogging sites 100% (N=58), followed by Tumblr 79.3% (N=45) and then other social media/internet sites 84.45% (N=38). (Table 4.2) Other social media sites listed by participants as used were TikTok, Pinterest, Group Me, and VSCO.

**Table 4.2***Current use of social media*

Variable	Frequency/Percentage of use		
<u>Type of social media</u>	<u>Frequently</u>	<u>Occasionally</u>	<u>Never</u>
Facebook	26 (45.60%)	21 (36.80%)	10 ( 17.50%)
Instagram	44 (75.90%)	12 (20.70%)	2 ( 3.40%)
Twitter	20 (34.50%)	16 (27.60%)	22 ( 37.90%)
Snapchat	49 (84.50%)	6 (10.30%)	3 ( 5.20%)
Tumblr	2 ( 3.40%)	10 (17.20%)	45 ( 79.30%)
YouTube	20 (34.50%)	31 (53.40%)	7 ( 12.10%)
Blogging Site	0 ( 0.00%)	0 ( 0.00%)	58 (100.00%)
Other:	3 ( 6.70%)	4 ( 8.90%)	38 ( 84.40%)

N=58

**2. Do college students use social media platforms to cope with death?**

Participants were asked to identify whether they used social media to cope with the death they experienced.

**Table 4.3***Using social media to cope*

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Using social media to cope:		
Yes	32	55.2
No	26	44.8

N=58

**3. a) If they use social media platforms to cope with the death what is the frequency of use around the time of death? (this research question has four parts)**

The social media sites that participants reported accessing most frequently around the time that they found out about the death were as follows (Table 4.4): Snapchat 62.5% (N=20), Facebook 53.1% (N=17), and Instagram 46.9% (N=15). Participants report they occasionally accessed the social media sites of Instagram 37.5% (N=12), YouTube 31.3% (N=10) and Snapchat and

Facebook 25% (N=8) around the time of death. Students reported never accessing the following sites: Blogging Site 100% (N=32), Tumblr 81.3 % (N=26) followed by Other sites 92.3% (N=24), around the time of death. Participants suggested that Group Me was another social media site that was also used but was not listed as a choice.

**Table 4.4**

*Use of social media around the time you found out about the death*

Variable	Frequency/Percentage of use		
	Frequently	Occasionally	Never
Type of social media			
Facebook	17 (53.10%)	8 (25.00%)	7 ( 21.90%)
Instagram	15 (46.90%)	12 (37.50%)	5 ( 15.60%)
Twitter	5 (15.60%)	7 (21.90%)	20 ( 62.50%)
Snapchat	20 (62.50%)	8 (25.00%)	4 ( 12.50%)
Tumblr	0 ( 0.00%)	6 (18.80%)	26 ( 81.30%)
YouTube	5 (15.60%)	10 (31.30%)	17 ( 53.10%)
Blogging Site	0 ( 0.00%)	0 ( 0.00%)	32 (100.00%)
Other:	0 ( 0.00%)	2 ( 7.70%)	24 ( 92.30%)

N=32

**b) between the death and the funeral**

Participants reported accessing the following social media sites frequently between the time they found out about the death until the funeral or memorial service (Table 4.5). Rates included Facebook at 56.3% (N=18), Snapchat 50% (N=16), followed by Instagram 40.6% (N=13).

Participants reported occasionally accessing Instagram 40.6% (N=13), Snapchat 31.3% (N=10) and YouTube 31.3% (N=10) from the death until the funeral or memorial service. Participants reported never accessing the following social media sites during this time frame: Blogging site 100% (N=32), Tumblr 93.8% (N=30), other sites 92.3% (N=24). Participants suggested that Group Me was another social media site that was also used but was not listed as a choice.

**Table 4.5**

*Use of social media between the time you found out about the death until the memorial/funeral service was held*

Variable	Frequency/Percentage of use		
	Frequently	Occasionally	Never
Type of social media			
Facebook	18 (56.30%)	7 (21.90%)	7 ( 21.90%)
Instagram	13 (40.60%)	13 (40.60%)	6 ( 18.80%)
Twitter	6 (18.80%)	8 (25.00%)	18 ( 56.30%)
Snapchat	16 (50.00%)	10 (31.30%)	6 ( 18.80%)
Tumblr	0 ( 0.00%)	2 ( 6.30%)	30 ( 93.80%)
YouTube	4 (12.50%)	10 (31.30%)	18 ( 56.30%)
Blogging Site	0 ( 0.00%)	0 ( 0.00%)	32 (100.00%)
Other:	0 ( 0.00%)	2 ( 7.70%)	24 ( 92.30%)

N=32

**c) from the time of the funeral/memorial service through 6 months after the death**

Participants reported that from the funeral/memorial service up through 6 months after the death, (Table 4.6), they accessed the following social media sites frequently: Snapchat 75% (N=24), Instagram 61.3% (N=19), Facebook 46.9% (N=15). Participants stated that occasionally after the funeral/memorial service through the 6 months after the death, they accessed Facebook 40.6% (N=13), YouTube 40.6% (N=13) and Instagram 35.5% (N=11). Participants reported never accessing the following sites from the time the funeral/ memorial service was held through 6 months after the death: blogging sites 100% (N=0), Tumblr 90.6% (N=29), and other sites 92% (N=23). Participants suggested that Group Me was another social media site that was also used but was not listed as a choice.

**Table 4.6***Use of social media after the funeral up through six months after the death*

Variable	Frequency/Percentage of use		
	<u>Frequently</u>	<u>Occasionally</u>	<u>Never</u>
<u>Type of social media</u>			
Facebook	15 (46.90%)	13 (40.60%)	4 ( 12.50%)
Instagram	19 (61.30%)	11 (35.50%)	1 ( 3.20%)
Twitter	10 (32.30 %)	6 (19.40%)	15 ( 48.40%)
Snapchat	24 (75.00%)	4 (12.50%)	4 ( 12.50%)
Tumblr	0 ( 0.00%)	3 ( 9.40%)	29 ( 90.60%)
You \Tube	7 (21.90%)	13 (40.60%)	12 ( 37.50%)
Blogging Site	0 ( 0.00%)	0 ( 0.00%)	31 (100.00%)
Other:	2 ( 8.00%)	0 ( 0.00%)	23 ( 92.00%)

N=32

**d) from 6 months after the death to the present**

Participants reported that from 6 months after the death until the present accessing the following social media sites frequently (Table 4.7): Snapchat 66.7% (N=20), Instagram 63.3% (N=19) and Facebook 56.7% (N=17). Participants reported accessing the following social media sites occasionally from 6 months after the death until the present: YouTube 43.3% (N=13), Facebook 30% (N=9) and Instagram 30% (N=9). Participants reported never accessing the following social media sites 6 months to the present: blogging sites 100% (N=0), Tumblr 89.7% (N=26), and other 88.9% (N=24). Other social media sites used by participants were Group Me and VSCO.

**Table 4.7***Use of social media after 6 months and to the present*

Variable	Frequency/Percentage of use		
	<u>Frequently</u>	<u>Occasionally</u>	<u>Never</u>
<u>Type of social media</u>			
Facebook	17 (56.70%)	9 (30.00%)	4 ( 13.30%)
Instagram	19 (63.30%)	9 (30.00%)	2 ( 6.70%)
Twitter	10 (34.50%)	6 (20.70%)	13 ( 44.80%)
Snapchat	20 (66.70%)	6 (20.00%)	4 ( 13.30%)
Tumblr	1 ( 3.40%)	2 ( 6.90%)	26 ( 89.70%)
YouTube	7 (23.30%)	13 (43.30%)	10 ( 33.30%)
Blogging Site	0 ( 0.00%)	0 ( 0.00%)	30 (100.00%)
Other:	3 (11.10%)	0 ( 0.00%)	24 ( 88.90%)

N=30

**4. If college students used social media to cope with the death, did they have a positive, negative or mixed experience?**

Additionally, participants were asked if they had positive, negative and or mixed experiences while coping with their grief on social media (Table 4.8). Participants could choose more than one answer for this question. According to their responses 73.3% reported having positive experiences, while not one participant suggested that their experience was completely negative. However, 26.7% stated they had mixed experiences.

**Table 4.8***Experience of usage of social media to cope with death*

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<u>Experience</u>		
Positive	22	(73.30%)
Negative	0	( 0.00%)
Mixed	8	(26.70%)

N=30

**5. To what extent do grieving college students create/maintain continuing bonds?**

This question was assessed using the continuing bond scale. Utilizing the scale below, participants were asked about whether or not they created or maintained a continuing bond (Table 4.9). Students 58.6% responded very true to the statements “I have fond memories that bring me joy,” and 53.4% to the statement “ I am aware of the positive influence the deceased had on who I am today.”

**Table 4.9***Extent grieving college students maintain/create continuing bonds*

CBS item	Frequency / Percentage				
	Not true at all	Rarely true	Moderately true	Usually true	Very true
I seek out things to remind deceased	4 6.9%	12 20.7%	20 34.5%	12 20.7%	6 10.3%
I keep items that belonged to or were closely associated with my deceased as a reminder of them	3 5.2%	8 13.8%	9 15.5%	12 20.7%	22 37.9%
I like to reminisce with others about the deceased	1 1.7%	6 10.3%	15 25.9%	11 19%	21 36.2%
I have inner conversations with the deceased where I turn to him or her for advice	11 19%	15 25.9%	11 19%	7 12.1%	9 15.5%
Even though they are no longer physically present, the deceased continues to be a loving presence in my life	4 6.9%	4 6.9%	17 29.3%	9 15.5%	20 34.5%
I am aware of having taken on many of the deceased habits, values or interests.	19 32.8%	8 13.8%	11 19%	10 17.2%	6 10.3%
I am aware of the positive influenced the deceased had on who I am today.	2 3.4%	1 1.7%	8 13.8%	12 20.7%	31 53.4%
I attempt to carry on the deceased wishes	5 8.6%	4 6.9%	11 19.0%	16 27.6%	18 31%
I have many fond memories that bring joy to me.	0 0.0%	1 1.7%	7 12.1%	12 20.7%	34 58.6%
When making decisions, I Imagine the deceased viewpoint and use this as a guide in deciding what to do.	13 22.4%	15 25.9%	12 20.7%	6 10.3%	8 13.8%
I experience the deceased as continuing to live on through me	14 24.1%	14 24.1%	6 10.3%	10 17.2%	9 15.5%

N=54

**6. To what extent is there an importance to the grieving college student to have continuing bond to the deceased?**

After being prompted to read a definition of a continuing bond, all participants, whether they used social media or not, were asked if they thought that it was important to create a continuing bond to the deceased. Participants rated how important it was to them (extremely important, very important, somewhat important or not important at all) (Table 4.10).

Over 50% of the participants responded that it was extremely important (33.3%) or very important (40.7%). Additionally, 22.2% felt that it was somewhat important, while 3.7% stated that it was not important at all to have a continuing bond to the deceased. Four (6.9%) participants did not respond to this question.

**Table 4.10**

*Importance of maintaining continuing bonds to the deceased*

Variable:	Frequency/Percentage
<u>Importance of Continuing bond</u>	
Extremely Important	18 (33.30%)
Very Important	22 (40.70%)
Somewhat Important	12 (22.20%)
Not Important at all	2 ( 3.70%)

N=54

**7. To what extent do grieving college students use social media to create/maintain a continuing bond to the deceased?**

After reading the definition of continuing bond that was provided, the participants were asked if social media was utilized to create or maintain a continuing bond to the deceased (Table 4.11).

Over half (70.4%) the participants responded that they did not create a continuing bond to the

deceased utilizing social media, while 29.6% responded that they did (N=54). Additionally, four participants (6.9%) did not respond to this question.

**Table 4.11**

*Use of social media to create continuing bonds*

Variable:	Frequency/ Percentage
<u>Social Media to create continuing bonds</u>	
Yes	16 (29.60%)
No	38 (70.40%)

N=54

**8. To what extent do grieving college students’ perceptions of their behaviors/actions on social media create/maintain a continuing bond.**

Participants were asked 13 additional questions that were added to the continuing bond scale.

The researcher chose nine questions that directly dealt with the use of social media and continuing bond to assess their perception of their behaviors and actions on social media to create a continuing bond (Table 4.12). Participants (85.2%) responded not true at all to the statements “I asked the deceased for advice through social media” and 79.6% to “I used social media to post private messages to the deceased as if I were talking to them.”

**Table 4.12***Extent grieving college students' perceptions of their behaviors/actions create continuing bonds*

CBS item	Frequency / Percentage				
	Not true at all	Rarely true	Moderately true	Usually true	Very true
I utilized social media to share stories, pictures, writings about the deceased.	20 37%	16 29.6%	4 7.4%	10 18.5%	4 7.4%
I used social media to post messages that were public messages to the deceased (as if I were talking to them)	41 75.9%	6 11.1%	3 5.6%	4 7.4%	0 0.0%
I used social media to post private messages to the deceased (as if I were talking to them)	43 79.6%	5 9.3%	3 5.6%	2 3.7%	1 1.9%
Posting messages to the deceased via social media helped me to feel connected to the deceased.	38 70.4%	5 9.3%	4 7.4%	5 9.3%	2 3.7%
Using social media allowed me to express my emotions directly to the deceased.	29 53.7%	12 22.2%	6 11.1%	3 5.6%	4 7.4%
I asked the deceased for advice through social media	46 85.2 %	5 9.3%	3 5.6%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%
I used social media to ask the deceased to watch over me	39 72.2%	7 13.0%	6 11.1%	1 1.9%	1 1.9%
I felt connected to the deceased through reading the posts, messages and comments online.	21 38.9%	8 14.8 %	13 22.4%	8 14.8%	4 7.4%
I felt connected to the deceased by watching videos of them.	9 16.7%	6 11.1%	13 24.1%	9 16.7%	17 31.5%

N=54

Participants were asked to complete the continuing bond scale. The overall mean of the continuing bonds scale was 3.41 and the items produced a Cronbach's Alpha of .906 (Table 4.13). Participants were asked 11 questions and choose how true each statement related to their

continuing bond to the deceased. Numbers were assigned to their responses 1 = not true at all to 5 = very true.

**Table 4.13**

*Continuing Bonds Scale*

CBS item	Mean	SD
I seek out things to remind deceased	3.07	1.096
I keep items that belonged to or were closely associated with my deceased as a reminder of them	3.78	1.284
I like to reminisce with others about my deceased	3.83	1.129
I have inner conversations with the deceased where I turn to him or her for advice	2.77	1.382
Even though they are no longer physically present, the deceased continues to be a loving presence in my life	3.69	1.256
I am aware of having taken on many of the deceased habits, values or interests.	2.56	1.423
I am aware of the positive influenced the deceased had on who I am today.	4.28	1.036
I attempt to carry on the deceased wishes	3.70	1.268
I have many fond memories that bring joy to me	4.46	.794
When making decisions, I imagine the deceased viewpoint and use this as a guide in deciding what to do.	2.65	1.362
I experience the deceased as continuing to live on through me	2.74	1.470
<hr/>		
N=54		
<b>Mean CBS score</b>	<b>3.41</b>	

The researcher added 13 questions to the continuing bond scale that specifically asked the participants about their use of social media to create a continuing bond (Table 4.14).

**Table 4.14***Continuing Bonds Scale with added social media items*

CBS social media item	Mean	SD
I utilize social media to share stories, pictures, writings about the deceased	2.30	1.341
I used social media to post messages to the deceased that were public (as if I were talking to them)	1.44	.904
I used social media to post messages that were private messages to the deceased (as if I were talking to them)	1.39	.899
Posting messages to the deceased via social media helped me feel connected to the deceased.	1.67	1.182
Using social media allowed me to express my emotions directly to the deceased.	1.91	1.248
I asked the deceased for advice through social media.	1.20	.528
I used social media to ask the deceased to watch over me.	1.48	.906
I felt connected to the deceased through reading posts, messages and comments online.	2.37	1.336
I felt connected to the deceased through leaving a voice mail on their phone	1.30	.792
I felt connected to the deceased by texting their phone.	1.41	.981
I felt connected to the deceased by listening to their voice mail messages	1.94	1.459
I felt connected to the deceased by watching videos of them.	3.35	1.456
I felt connected to the deceased when I read their blog	1.26	.732
N=54		
Mean Social Media Continuing bond score	1.73	

Participants were asked to complete the Core Bereavement Inventory (CBI). The overall mean of the CBI was 2.234, the items used produced a very strong Cronbach's Alpha of .944 (Table 4.15). Participants were asked 17 questions and were able to choose a response of 1 = never to 4 a lot of time. Numbers were assigned to their responses.

**Table 4.15***Core Bereavement Inventory*


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CBI item	Mean	SD
Do you experience images of the events surrounding the deceased's death?	2.08	.805
Do thoughts of the deceased come into your mind whether you wish it or not?	2.53	.890
Do you think about the deceased?	2.92	.829
Do images of the deceased make you feel distressed?	1.90	.799
Do you find yourself preoccupied with images or memories of the deceased?	1.79	.825
Do you find yourself thinking of a reunion with the deceased?	1.98	.866
Do you find yourself missing the deceased?	3.25	.875
Are you reminded by familiarly of the deceased objects (photos', possessions, rooms, etc.)?	2.53	1.012
Do you find yourself pining for yearning for the deceased?	2.25	1.090
Do you find yourself looking for the deceased in familiar places?	2.09	.986
Do you feel distress/pain if for any reason you are confronted with the reality that the deceased is not present of coming back.	2.17	1.069
Do reminders of deceased such photos, situations, music, places etc., cause you to feel longing for x?	2.34	.979
Do reminders of the deceased such as photos, situations, music, places, etc., cause you to feel loneliness?	1.81	.979
Do reminders of the deceased such as photos, situations, music, places, etc., cause you to cry a lot.	2.00	1.000
Do reminders of the deceased such as photos, situations, music, places, etc., cause you to feel sadness?	2.49	.846
Do reminders of the deceased such as photos, situations, music, places, etc., cause you to feel loss of enjoyment?	1.66	.732
<hr/>		
N=51		
Mean CBI	2.234	

**Hypotheses 1**

The first study hypothesis was the grieving college student's frequency of participation on social media after experiencing a death would be positively correlated with the level of importance of having a continuing bond to the deceased. Table 4.16 displays the results of the

bivariate correlations of the individual independent variables (frequency of participation on social media around the time of death, frequency of participation on social media between the death and the funeral, frequency of participation on social media from the funeral until six months after the death and frequency of participation on social media six months after the death to the present) and then all of the frequency variables combined.

There are five-time frames used to measure the use of social media, which is the independent variable in the hypothesis. These were correlated to the dependent variable of maintaining or creating a continuing bond. The results are presented in Table 4.16. As the table indicates there were no significant correlations between the use of social media and maintaining or creating a continuing bond. The results are not consistent with the study hypothesis.

**Table 4.16**

Bivariate correlations of the use of social media and continuing bonds

Variable	Coef	Significance
1. Around the time of death	.289	.16
2. Between the time found out of the death until the funeral or memorial service	.187	.37
3. After the funeral through six months after the death.	.04	.87
4. Six months after the death until the present.	.21	.34
5. All of the frequencies Combined.	.24	.26

Note: N = 26 around the time of death  
 N= 26 between the death and the funeral  
 N= 23 After funeral through six months  
 N= 24 Six months to the present  
 N= 23 All of four of the combined  
 N= 54 How important to have a continuing bond

**Hypothesis 2**

The second hypothesis was that grieving college students who participated more frequently on social media after the death would be more likely to report positive experiences using social media. For the second hypothesis, bivariate logistical regressions were conducted, and the results are displayed in Table 4.17. There were five-time frames used to measure the use of social media, which was the independent variable in the hypothesis. None of the independent variables for the use of social media had significant correlation on the dependent variable (dichotomous coded), experience of using social media to cope.

**Table: 4.17**

Bivariate logistical regression of experience on social medial platforms after a death

Variable	b	significance level
1. Around the time found out about the death	.000	1.0
2. Between the time found out about the death and funeral service	.048	.811
3. After the funeral service up through six months after the death	-.164	.549
4. Between six months after the death to the present.	-.097	.671
5. All the frequencies of use of social media	-.006	.931

N=22 around the time found out about death

N=25 between the time found out about death to funeral  
 N=22 after the funeral through six months after the death  
 N=23 between six months after the death to present  
 N=22 for all the frequencies of use of social media

### Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis was that grieving college students who had a close relationship to the deceased prior to the death would more than likely report a higher level of importance to maintaining a continuing bond to the deceased using social media. The results for testing this hypothesis are presented in Table 4.18. As the table indicates there were no significant correlations between the close relationship to the deceased prior to death and use of social media to maintain or create a continuing bond. The results are not consistent with the study hypothesis.

**Table: 4.18**

Bivariate correlation between closeness to the deceased and use of social media to create or maintain continuing bonds

Variable	Use of social media to create or maintain a continuing bond		Having a continuing bond	
	Coef	significance level	Coef	significance level
1. Close relationship to the deceased	.053	.70	.56	0.00

N=54 for first correlation  
 N=52 for second correlation  
 p >.01

### Hypothesis 4

The fourth hypothesis is grieving college students who had a close relationship to the deceased prior to the death will be more likely to have a continuing bond to the deceased.

As the Table 4.18 indicates closeness to the deceased prior to death is significantly correlated with having a continuing bond ( $r=.56$ ). The results support the hypothesis.

**Other questions evaluated from the survey**

Participants were asked to evaluate if they felt it was appropriate to express grief on social media. Over 98% of respondents stated that it was either always or sometimes appropriate to express grief on social media, while 1.7% felt that it is never appropriate (Table 4.19).

**Table 4.19**

*Appropriateness of social media used to express grief*

Variable:	Frequency/ Percentage
Always Appropriate	2 ( 3.4%)
Sometimes Appropriate	55 (94.8%)
Never Appropriate	1 ( 1.7%)

N=58

Participants were asked to evaluate if social media had a role in how they found out about the death. Social media had no role in how 59.4% of the respondents found out about the death, however 15.6% stated that it had a small role. Social media had a moderate role for 3.1% and a significant role for 21.9% for how they found out about the death (Table 4.20).

**Table 4.20**

*Role of social media in how you found out about death*

Variable:	Frequency/ Percentage
social media had no role at all	19 (59.4%)
social media had a small role	5 (15.6%)
social media had a moderate role	1 (3.1%)
social media had a significant role	7 (21.9%)

N=32

### **Qualitative Findings**

While creating the survey and reviewing the literature for this dissertation the researcher decided to gather qualitative data to gain more detailed information related to the survey and for participants to elaborate about the experience of using social media while grieving and if it helped create or maintain a continuing bond. By utilizing grounded theory to evaluate the qualitative data, the researcher was able to gain greater insight into the emotions and thoughts the participant had around the subject of grief, use of social media, and continuing bond.

Experiencing the death of a loved one can create many emotions and vulnerabilities. The themes from the participants' responses to the prompts are presented below.

#### **“Close” Relationship**

The relationship an individual had with the deceased prior to death could affect their coping process. Participants were asked to expand upon relationships to the deceased. Many described that they had important relationships to the departed loved ones.

*“My grandfather and I were very close. We saw or contacted one another at least once per month. He was my favorite guy.”*

*“We were extremely close at one point, but had lost daily communication with one*

*another in the months leading up to his death just due to graduating and moving away.”*

*“He came to all my school functions and sporting events. When I was in college, he was the first person I go see once I got home.”*

*“He was my next-door neighbor all my life and we became close friends.”*

### **Attention Seeking**

Social media platforms can be a space where grieving individuals’ express their emotions while mourning. Whether this is space is suitable to cope with death of a loved one is often a personal preference. Some participants described that mourners may grieve online for selfish reasons.

*“I feel it is important to make an initial post, then a memory or two of something should come up. After that maybe an anniversary of death or something in their birthday. People often over post, sometimes for attention, sometimes for an actual cry for help.”*

*“If social media is a way for people to express their grief then it’s appropriate. However, seeking attention is not appropriate nor posting info instead of saying it aloud to one’s family.”*

*“There is a difference in posting on social media as an outlet and posting solely to get attention and allow for individuals to question and react to the situation. There’s a time and place for it.”*

*“I think that it is alright to post a memorial of your friend/loved one. But some people do it too quickly, or in a dramatized manner. It is not appropriate to post a picture of yourself crying, that takes away from the situation and turns attention on yourself.”*

### **Public versus Private Grief**

Everyone grieves differently over the death of a loved one. It is also important to understand why mourners may choose not to use social media platforms as an outlet to cope. One common response by participants regarding why they do not use social media to cope with death is that grieving is more of a private emotion rather than public one.

*“To me grieving is more of a personal process that I didn’t feel like I was ready to express that in an open format such as social media.”*

*“I feel that grief post on social media is sometimes used to gain attention. Loss of a family member is very personal, and I do not feel it should be used to gain attention. I did mention his death on social media, but it was more of a tribute and information about funeral arrangements.”*

*“I don’t have family on social media, so I don’t feel the need to post about the loss, it feels like “fishing for sympathy” and I don’t want that kind of negative attention.”*

Moreover, another individual stated they are not comfortable with posting feelings.

*“I don’t feel comfortable doing that.”*

Others stated that privacy is important to them. For example,

*“I try not to put my life out there online. I like private grieving.”*

*“Some of it is personal information that is not appropriate to share with the general public.”*

*“I post privately for myself and publicly to raise awareness.”*

Some may post privately out of fear of scrutiny:

*“I didn’t want my family and friends seeing it and how I was affected and thinking I was stupid.”*

*“Did not need the entire world to see the post, rather those close to me know about the struggle with the death.”*

### **Positive and Ambivalent Experiences**

While coping with a loss, it is important for those who are grieving to be able to evaluate if the support they are receiving is sufficient to meet their emotional needs. This ability can sometimes guide the mourner with how to express their feelings. Participants describe their encounters on social media platforms to cope with their loss as affirmative and mixed.

*“They were positive because it was mostly for support and it made me realize that there were a lot of other people that felt the same way I did.”*

*“People posted nice things to remember our friend.”*

*“I found out through his father on instant messenger, I would hold on to our photos that I could find anywhere. I would listen to his YouTube channel as well.”*

Other participants described ambivalent or mixed feelings about their experiences.

*“It was nice seeing nice pictures or posts about my grandmother but it’s a reminder of how broken my mother and her sister still are.”*

*“No one was outright mean or rude about how I handled my grief on social media, but in real life I noticed that people start to pull away and I reduced how often I talked about it.”*

*“Getting on social media at the time was hard because it was a constant reminder about what happened.”*

*“Relieving to express emotions but still angry to posting due to situation (i.e. shouldn’t have to because it shouldn’t have happened).”*

### **Supportive Empathy**

Often if individuals do not feel supported while grieving, they cannot continue processing their loss. Support and connection from others are essential components when mourning a loss. Both of these themes emerged through the writings of participants when describing their experiences while using social media to cope with grief.

*“ It’s a good outlet for those who are grieving to receive support from family and friend and strangers alike.”*

*“It was a way to see that you weren’t alone in your grieving experience. It was nice to have people supporting me during this difficult time.”*

*“It was helpful to connect and share information with others, but also bittersweet in the way that you could see everyone’s grief which sometimes affected my own .”*

*“I felt supported and it gave me a way to remind people of the deceased It also reminded those that see me daily that it may be the reason I am struggling and sad on that particular day.”*

*“It was nice to know that I was not alone.”*

### **Reminiscence and Purpose**

The memories of the deceased impact the grief journey. These memories can include pictures, events, holidays or even specific places of importance. Some participants describe that

reminiscing about these events was done on social media platforms and was an important part of their mourning process.

*“Anytime I’m reflecting on the past or memories with him involved come up” or days I remember doing stuff together and look back the pictures.”*

*“I found out through his father through instant messenger. I would hold on to our photos I could find anywhere. I would listen to his YouTube channel as well.”*

*“I think people can live through memories. My grandfather was an amazing person and it would be wrong of my family and I to not keep him alive through our memories.”*

Holidays were of significance to a few such as an anniversary or “Military Holidays.” One participant used social media to create memorial fundraisers to remember the deceased.

*“I did a fundraiser for breast cancer with the women’s soccer team and told my mom’s story.”*

*“SFU has a suicide awareness walk. We post about our friend’s death there.”*

### **Relationship even in death**

Relationships are important in our daily lives, so why would a connection to the deceased not continue after a death occurs? Participants described their relationships with the deceased continuing even after the death. Some of the participants responses described the importance of keeping the continuing bond alive through multiple ways.

*“Talked mainly with my mother-still wearing his clothes to bed.”*

*“I believe that she is Heaven, and that I will one day be there too, so we will just be able to continue there and pick up where we left off.”*

*“I think a lot of the values and ideas that my deceased loved one taught me lives on through what I do every day.”*

Another described that they worry about the deceased being forgotten as evidenced by this statement.

*“I worry about people forgetting her. I would never want her stories of her life to go away. My family talks about her frequently.”*

Another participant felt that the deceased can still hear them, or they can communicate with them.

*“Not only with the loss but with others I check Facebook pages of the deceased. I sometimes send private messages.”*

*“I’d like to think he can hear me.”*

Continuing the bond was sustained through prayer and the afterlife:

*“Truth, I do believe in life after death, and I’m sure I’ll continue to pray for them for the rest of my life.”*

*“I want her to know she is still a huge impact on my life, and I plan to reunite with her whenever my time comes.”*

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

The prior chapters discussed the literature, methods, and the results of the research. The purpose of this study was to examine college students' use of social media while coping with grief and whether this usage creates a continuing bond. There is not a wealth of literature about this topic. The existing research surrounding social media usage among college students' while grieving is mostly qualitative. This pilot study combined undergraduate and graduate student's experiences of the grieving process and used both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Human subject research involves both limitations and insights. This study found that 55% of the participants did use social media while grieving. This was an affirmation of some of the previous research. Some participants reported they do desire a continuing bond. However, this study found that most do not use social media to create or maintain a continuing bond. Participants choose how they used different social media platforms and their frequency of usage during phases of the grieving process. This information adds insight to current and future research as there is little literature discussing frequency of participation on social media platforms while grieving. This section will explore the study results, discuss limitations, implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

### **Grief Theory**

The experience of grief and loss is not stagnant; it evolves, and changes as does those who experience it. Those who are mourning often wrestle with the reality that the deceased will not return. Society tends to place limitations, stages and tasks on people in order for the grief to end or to "get over the loss." For this pilot study, the view of grief and loss experiences was based upon Worden's (2018) tasks of mourning. The last task in this theory suggests that individuals can create their own place of mourning for the deceased while moving on with life.

This portion of his theory is more active and allows the griever to not give up on their relationship with the deceased, while moving forward in their reconciliation of the death. Expression of this relationship can be multifaceted as individuals can continue the relationship via journaling, praying, listening to music etc. However, social media platforms are a place where many digital natives (millennials, Generation Z and beyond) often go to understand, express and validate their emotions and feelings. The exploratory research in this study supports that students do go to social media platforms to cope and process their grief and loss experiences.

### **Experience Loss in College**

Participants in this pilot study confirm that college students do experience a death while trying to complete their undergraduate and graduate education and the individual is often a grandparent and/or friend. These findings are consistent with those reported by Balk et al.(2010), Cupit et al. (2016). Interestingly, the university that was chosen for this research study had three students die in the six months prior to the start of this study. Typically, college is a time of enjoying friendships not experiencing the trauma of losing one. It was very evident in some of the qualitative responses that the loss of friendship was difficult and unanticipated.

### **Use of Social Media while Grieving**

This pilot study confirmed the fact that college students do use social media rather frequently and tend to use the preferred platforms as reported by Anderson and Jiang (2018) of Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube. This study also corroborated that this generation utilizes Facebook less frequently than previous generations. This pilot study validates that generational usage of social media platforms is ever changing and evolving. While completing the study, three different social media sites were identified that could have been added to the study:

TikTok, Group Me and VSCO. These platforms were brought to the attention of the researcher by respondents as they were utilized but were not options in the survey.

Respondents in this pilot study reported that there are particular social media platforms that they used more frequently than others depending on the length of time since death. However, it was interesting that Facebook was intertwined periodically depending upon the timeframe of usage into the top three choices of Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube. This result may indicate that as respondents grieve, they go to other platforms to seek out information surrounding the death or even arrangements as relatives may use Facebook to keep others informed. These findings relate to the pyramid created by Sofka (2018) documenting how teens are using social media to cope with loss. She suggests that teens use social media platforms for various reasons such as: notification, communal support, online memorialization, continuing bonds, and digital legacy and advocacy. Through social media sites mourners are finding support and coping with the loss in various ways.

Facebook has been a staple in the social media realm and will continue to be a place where multiple griever go to express their emotions. This platform cannot be overlooked, as it was one of the first platforms to allow for an individual who had died to still have their social networking profile “alive” in the internet realm, which we now refer to as digital legacies. As this generation and future generations continue to grow their digital legacies in Snapchat memories, YouTube videos, Instagram, and other emerging platforms, it is likely that they will have multiple albums of not only their own digital memories but friends and relatives alike.

Social media has often been viewed differently across generations. Today college students often check their social media platforms as part of their daily routines and find this form of communication with their peers, family members and friends essential. Most individuals have

become so adept at sharing their own lives in this space that often times many forget it is public, until it is too personal and the thought of others seeing the inner self is too much of an intrusion. This pilot study showed how grief can be expressed in the private and public realm. Sixty-five percent of those who used social media to cope with death posted privately, while 25% posted both privately and publicly. Grief has often been viewed in society as something that is done in secret. Some hold beliefs that people are weak if they show how much the loss has impacted their daily living.

As a society, we still battle the negativity that surrounds expression of the grief and loss experience. Mourning is a healthy way of conveying the grief one feels inside and is natural for the body, soul and mind to heal. One form of expression for Generation Z is through social media yet many are ambivalent about utilizing the platforms for this purpose. Placing emotions about a loss on social media site whether private or public requires some vulnerability and risk on the part of the mourner. Other reactions to a grief experience can either benefit or hinder the mourning process.

The experience of using social media to cope with loss was mostly positive in this pilot study. Of those participants who used social media to cope with grief, 60% felt that it was somewhat helpful, which is comparable to the study by Balk and Varga (2018), where 54% of respondents felt that it was helpful. There is a complexity to the processing of grieving emotions on social media. To choose to dialogue with others on a social media platform about the very personal experience of grieving a loss could be intimidating. Online grieving may not be for all mourners, as 33% stated that they have not considered using at all about using social media to cope with the death of a loved one. However, some of the participants did find great benefit with the freedom to express their grief experience online.

Supportive empathy was a theme that emerged in this study as participants provided insight as to whether coping with grief on social media was beneficial. Empathy is a staple in the social work community; it is necessary in the therapeutic relationship. The study illuminated that supportive empathy can and will occur in the online world when grieving. Respondents suggested that they were reminded that they were not alone in their grieving process and found the support of others beneficial.

The ambivalence of posting on social media platforms was found in this research. Some participants did not post based on apprehension of what has been said or will be stated on social media platforms. There could also be the fear of what DeGrott (2014) describes in her research as “emotional rubbernecker,” individuals who may visit a social media site just for the information about the event or deceased surrounding the death. The intentional message by the mourner to the social media platform may be misconstrued or misused by those who are viewing information about the deceased. This action may deflect from the envisioned purpose of the post by the mourner. This is just one reason that social media platforms are not always used to cope with loss as mourners may fear that posting may lead to deeper despair and loss. Further research would be valuable in the area of how supportive empathy can benefit college students who are experiencing a loss, and if it benefits their journey into reconciliation of the death.

### **Continuing Bonds**

Continuing bond as defined in the study was “the presence of an ongoing inner relationship with the deceased person by a bereaved individual” (Stroebe & Schut, 2005, p. 477). Silverman and Nickman (2006) further described the continuing bonds as how the inner relationship (bond) to the deceased can be influenced by the interaction with the community. Based upon these definitions provided to the participants, close to 68% stated that a continuing

bond was either extremely important or very important. This means that an understanding of what a continued or maintained relationship to the deceased could look like or that it is not only an inner relationship but also a communal relationship was vital. Furthermore, it appears that assisting the participants with understanding the definition of a continuing bond was beneficial as it allowed them to have a reference point to view their own continuing bonds to the deceased.

There is much debate about whether having a continuing bond to the deceased is therapeutic. It is important to understand the nature of the continuing bond to the deceased by the mourner prior to making judgement about whether a continuing bond is something to keep or relinquish as an effective coping outlet (Stroebe & Schut, 2005). Others have described that the type of attachment to the deceased prior to death is vital to understanding whether or not a continuing bond is affirming or detrimental to coping with the death (Root & Exline, 2014).

This pilot study did not focus on the type of attachment that the mourner had prior to the death, yet the relationship between the closeness to the deceased prior to death and use of social media was studied and found not to be statistically significant. However, there is significance to understanding the type of attachment or closeness that could impact how one grieves.

Kosminsky (2018) describes that the type of attachment prior to death does have an impact on the how the mourner maintains a continuing bond with the deceased. The assumption that a close relationship to the deceased and use of social media was not found as significant in the quantitative portion of this study. However, participants did write narratives about how they used social media to continue a bond in the qualitative portion. Further evaluation of attachment, the use of social media and continuing bonds should be explored in a larger sample size.

In this pilot study, the respondents were asked to describe their relationship to the deceased prior to death and over 60% noted that they had very close or close relationships. For

example, two students described their close relationship to their departed friend as instrumental in who they are today and would define what a friend is based upon the deceased impact on their lives. The results of the study suggest that relationship and continuing bond could be connected, just not through social media. In a study by Stein et. al, (2018), all of the young adult participants (N=20), mentioned having a continuing bond to the deceased through personal connection, personal change and homage activities. This aligns with the current study as the participants desired or wanted a continuing bond.

Meaning making of the death or loss and the personal narrative of the death assists in the understanding the nature of the relationship, and attachment style prior to death. Understanding this process of continuing bond, attachment and nature of the relationship prior death could have implications on treatment and effective coping processes while someone is grieving. This is also evidenced in statements by two of the participants:

*“As he was my trainer, I keep his memory alive by constantly working hard on my health and wellness. It makes me feel like he is proud of me, even if I do not necessarily believe in the afterlife.”*

*“I think a lot of the value and ideas that my deceased loved one taught me lives on through what I do every day.”*

A mourner constructs their own meaning to the loss that has occurred. Allowing grieving individuals to respond in and make sense of their loss is a way to reconstruct their narrative or story.

### **Social Media and Continuing bonds**

At the onset of this study, this researcher thought that a continuing bond would be achieved through social media. Some of participants did express their grief experiences of creating or maintaining continuing bonds through social media, however future research with a

larger sample size would be beneficial to augment these findings. As stated earlier, participants were asked to read the definition that was provided to them by the researcher about continuing bonds and then were asked to identify if they used social media to create a continuing bond. Close to 70% of the respondents suggested that they did not use social media to create a continuing bond. Yet, in a recent dissertation by McBride (2019), she found, with a much larger sample size, that emerging adults positively viewed social media as an avenue for coping and maintaining continuing bonds. In another study by Thimm and Nehls (2017), mourners used Instagram to show a digital story of their grief or loss. Consequently, in this study, it could be surmised that the continuing bonds definition provided might not have matched the participants' view of the usage of social media to create or maintain a continuing bond while grieving. However, some of the participants actions did create or maintain a continuing bond to the deceased.

If mourners are sharing a digital story of their grief and loss, they are creating a community or having interaction with a community by posting pictures or writing comments on Instagram or other social media platforms. This behavior was indicated by the participants in the study, as almost 44% responded that they do go to social media to support others and look at pictures of the deceased. One participant responded that they use social media to speak directly to the deceased:

*“Not only with loss but with others I check Facebook pages of the deceased. I sometimes send private messages.”*

The definition of having or maintaining or having a continuing bond could have also meant something different to each of the pilot study participants. The use of social media to create or maintain a continuing bond might be perceived in a completely different manner by the

participant than how the researcher manifested it for the survey. Qualitative interviews could have gained greater insight into their individual use of social media while coping with grief or loss and if it created or maintained a continuing bond. Qualitative interviewing gives the researcher a more in depth look at the human experience and might have even provided the participant the opportunity to give the researcher their own definition of continuing bond, which could influence future research.

Another possible reason that social media was not used to create or maintain a continuing bond in this pilot study is possibly the fear of a secondary loss (Bassett, 2018; Kasket, 2012). If something occurs on the social media site that causes more harm, or the site is no longer available to cope with the loss, this could potentially become a secondary loss. In other words, it causes the bereaved to be even more vulnerable to another loss if the social media outlet is deleted by the internet platform or family members who are controlling the deceased's legacy.

### **Other Approaches to forming Continuing Bonds**

Klass and Steffen (2018) describe how grief and the continuing bonds can create an intersubjective meaning that it is between the individual mourning and the community of people that they are bonded to. Every mourner creates or attaches meaning to their own grief narrative as developed in their circle of friends and family, or even spiritual realms. Other resources or strategies that were identified by respondents in this study to keep the connection alive or cope with the loss were talking with family and friends, prayer, listening to music, and keeping a personal item of the deceased.

*“Reading our old conversations through texts or Memorialize through words expressed to them or old words social media was something I did a lot after his death. It helped me remember our friendship and how much I appreciated him.”*

*“I wear her earrings frequently.”*

*“ Remain in contact with the individual’s parents/loved ones.”*

*“Got a tattoo in memory of the deceased.”*

As evidenced by these statements, grief is intersubjective and mourning and continuing bond actions are multifaceted.

### **Limitations**

The research found that a little over half of those who participated used social media to cope with the grief. The results indicated that three major sources were used while grieving were Snapchat, Facebook and Instagram, while blogging sites and or Tumblr were hardly ever utilized to express grief. However, there is a limitation to these results as the sample size was N=58. Of the 58 respondents, only 32 utilized social media to cope with grief. This limitation caused some difficulty when gaining statistical significance in results, and with further analysis the sample was reduced even further due to missing values. The survey was created on Survey Monkey® and distributed via email. Some participants did not answer or skipped various questions, lowering the number of usable surveys. The quality of the data collected may be valid, but the results needed higher larger sample set to reach a statistical power. It’s possible that the data collection phase was ended prematurely, as the volume of incompletions rendered some data unusable. The amount of time since the participant experienced a death was also a limitation. A participant could not answer the survey if they had not experienced a death in the last two years. Expanding the timeframe may have allowed for more inclusion in the project. Nonetheless, the percentage who used social media to cope with death was comparable to a larger sample size research study completed by Varga and Varga (2019), which 43% of their participants used social media while grieving. Regardless, the study provided some necessary insight into the topic.

Another major limitation of this survey was the lack of diversity. Most of the sample size was of one ethnicity. This does not give an accurate description of how different ethnicities grieve and cope with loss or utilize social media. This limitation is also due to the convenience sampling and self-selection for this project.

Due to the ever-changing landscape of social media, not all platforms were explicitly included. TikTok and GroupMe were not social media options that existed when the survey was distributed. Some of the qualitative results indicated that students have used these sites to express grief. Continual appraisal of trends on social medial platforms and use in the grieving process should be ongoing.

The survey for this study was extensive as it had many questions related to the frequency of use of social media while grieving as well as many descriptors. The created survey had never been used before as this was a pilot study. Many of the questions were informed by the literature and reviewed by an expert in this field, however this actual survey was never tested until this study, so reliability and validity has not been established for this questionnaire. The qualitative responses were also expected to gain more insight into the use of social media while grieving, however some of the participants did not choose to expand upon their answers. The information gained was valuable, however in-depth qualitative interviews might have provided more insight.

Despite the limitations, the knowledge that was gained will further the study of grieving college students use of social media to create or maintain a continuing bond. The data provided greater insight into college student's various uses of social media while coping with grief. The exploratory quantitative and qualitative findings may provide future researchers with valuable knowledge about this topic.

## **Implications for Future Research**

This research adds to the limited knowledge concerning college students and their use of social media to create or maintain continuing bonds. The findings of this study confirm that college students experience deaths during their university careers. How they cope and handle the stress it creates has been studied; however, the student population that is currently enrolled in college and is going to enroll over the next few years are a different generation and have coped with stressors by using social media outlets as evidenced by this research. The survey could be replicated, using a larger more diverse sample size to expand upon the findings. Further study of how college students define a continuing bond on social media would give greater insight into whether it is actually already occurring on the current social media platforms.

The created survey for this study has some insightful questions and psychometric properties. Future studies could include the scales and they might have some of the same success with a larger sample size. The additional survey questions that were created for this study could be quite beneficial to future research and assist in continuing the research concerning college students and their use of social media to create or maintain a continuing bond.

The concept of continuing bond is important to college students as evidenced by the results of this study. This study did indicate that students do use social media when grieving. However, students in this sample did not use it to create a continuing bond. Future research could focus on the concept of what influences college students to use social media to create a continuing bond. It could explore behaviors occurring on social media that could indicate a continuing bond to the deceased that were not reflected on the survey used to complete this study. Is it because continuing bond may look different to every individual, and possibly they are creating a continuing bond using social media, but not defining it as such. Future research

could focus on the behaviors (posting pictures, creating a video) that mourners exhibit online to express their grief and does this contribute to the definition of a continuing bond. Further research would be beneficial to understand how college students are using social media outlets to grieve such as posting pictures on Instagram, creating a video on TikTok or using another social media method to memorialize or cope with loss.

Implications of the co-existence of the therapeutic alliance and online supports could also be areas of future research. Does the presence of an online community increase or decrease the longevity of treatment for the grieving individual? If there is substantial support online does it create or maintain a continuing bond and what purpose does this online support system provide to the mourner? Does this online support network help or hinder the grieving the bereavement process? All of the questions could be explored in future research and have implications on clinical practice.

### **Clinical Implications for Educators and Clinical Social Work Practice**

As I am writing this dissertation, the world is experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic and the landscape of clinical practice is evolving on a daily basis. If undergraduate and graduate college students were not using online services prior to COVID-19, now they are currently being forced to adapt to the online realm. Social media platforms are and will continue to be an outlet for students who are grieving. Grieving a death is not the only way that students are using social media platforms as we have witnessed over the last month. There have been protests associated with Black Lives Matter and other social justice movements informed by grief and loss that have occurred on social media or been organized on social media to happen in person. Social work values and grief are at an intersection at the micro and macro levels. This type of social work practice can be called survivor advocacy. Sofka (2017) suggests that survivor advocacy is a way

for grieving individuals to become active mourners. Social media platforms can become a space where grieving individuals can come together and react in response to traumatic events or loss. This type of reaction creates a space for the bereaved take action and move through the grieving process with purpose.

As an educator who is preparing entry level professional social workers and a practitioner in this field, understanding and assisting a client on their grief journey is often complicated and messy. Being forced to grieve online because of pandemic is quite complicated. I have observed the actions of students navigating the ever-changing space of what this pandemic has created and witnessed a lot of uncertainty. Currently students grieving the death of a loved one also are required to create a space for the loss of the traditional learning environment that they envisioned for their collegiate years. This generates an interesting paradox for students, clinicians, and educators alike. The uncertainty of the pandemic has added to the grief and oftentimes will create more anxiety for the mourner. To meet the rapid changes occurring during this time educators and practitioners have been required to transform their professional practice quickly and incorporate the use of different online platforms. Practicing clinicians converted from in-person therapy to tele-therapy and academics have switched their in-person pedagogy to online teaching. Students who are mourning a death during this time could have an increased anxiety while grieving due to modifications to their learning and supportive environment and loss of usual forms of social supports.

As educators of college students, it is imperative that we watch for and recognize the signs of a grieving student. Further development and training of college educators on how to recognize the signs, symptomology and adverse effects of grief is necessary to assist students. Also, training college educators to increase their knowledge about social media platforms in

order to gain an understanding about how and why students use these platforms to express themselves to others could be advantageous. Furthermore, as social work educators, it is important that we remind students about their digital footprints and the accessibility clients to those footprints. It's clear that we don't know what the future holds regarding how internet based social work services will be delivered in the upcoming years. We will need to stay current and fluent in the online interpersonal community.

As Cupit, Sofka and Gilbert (2012) describe in their book, thanatechnology allows for more possibilities for practitioners and educators. Furthermore, as practitioners it is important to include in our assessments, when working with the college students, questions about their use of social media platforms, their frequency of use, and if they have found it to be beneficial to their grieving process. Sofka (2017) describes having deliberate conversations with adolescents about their usage of social media accounts while grieving and furthermore if something were to happen to them how would they want their digital legacy preserved. These types of conversations could assist in the therapeutic process for the mourner to understand the benefits and shortcomings of using social media outlets to grieve.

Incorporating this into clinical practice may work for some clients who do use online platforms and find it beneficial. Goodyear-Brown and Gott (2020) in the edited book *Integrating-technology into modern therapies*, discuss how they use video games, apps, emojis, and virtual reality in trauma work and recovery with children. These mechanisms are used in Traumaplay® for children who have experienced complex trauma and have delays due to their experiences. These types of treatment modalities could be explored and incorporated into treatment of grieving college students who are adept with technology.

This pilot study confirmed that the use of social media platforms while grieving provides support for some. College students are utilizing social media to grieve and as educators and social workers, we must adapt and learn. The grieving landscape has changed as mourners have been mandated to social distance from one another, and in many areas of the country, funerals or memorial services have been considered unsafe, postponed, canceled or only allowed to have very limited attendance. Individuals are being forced to get support during their time of grief and loss through social media platforms both synchronously and asynchronously. If this study were to be completed again, the data would undoubtedly look differently due to the pandemic as online grieving has increased all over the world.

During this pandemic countless have experienced some sort of loss and may have even suffered the death of a loved one. Many grieving individuals have turned to social media to gain a support system or even community during this unprecedented time. In some cases, social media platforms were the only outlet to get support about the loss experienced. Human beings desire and long for connection. As an educator, it became very evident that some students desire and need a sense of community and many used their social media resources to fulfill this emptiness and lament with others about what they lost. These students have created virtual communities with different types of communal bonds which may have provided some healing during this difficult time.

As educators preparing for the incoming class of freshman entering college or traditional graduate students entering their master programs this fall, we need to understand that this class will be different from others. They have missed out on the pomp and circumstance of graduation and celebratory events. Some may not be about to go to their school of choice due to the pandemic. Their view and meaning of graduation and entering this new phase of life is different

and constructed around what they did not get to experience. Educators and practitioners must prepare a new lens of understanding this population. We are reminded that loss is universal. Supporting and connecting students to their ‘new culture’ requires all of us to find connections and implications for moving forward.

The relationship between therapist and client is vital to progression in the therapy setting. This unique bond is not easy to achieve and often takes weeks if not months to create a therapeutic alliance. A client who is mourning a loss may not know where to begin their grief journey, nor know that creating a therapeutic relationship is necessary to work toward the goal of reconciliation of their loss. As clinicians begin to understand the propensity to use social media platforms for grief work, we should be inclined to add more qualitative or verbal narratives to the intake assessment. This action will allow clients to bring up social media accounts in session to review and understand their grief processing. This may allow the client to tell their grief journey through the narrative lens of pictures, stories and anecdotes on their social media platforms. This type of work could be completed in many different modalities such as TF-CBT, narrative, EMDR and RCT.

Clinical social workers work to create a space for the mourner that is safe, yet allows for vulnerability. Creating a space that is conducive for this therapeutic work often takes time. Allowing the client to have a constructionist viewpoint of the loss gives them the freedom to create their own narrative from their grief story (Neimeyer & Currier, 2009). Assessing the client’s grief from this view gives them the freedom to share how they may have used other outlets such as social media platforms for support in grief.

Online spaces are often sought by those who are grieving as forms of support. Sometimes this may be because other support systems are lacking or they may not seek a

professional therapeutic relationship. Additionally, these spaces offer an opportunity to connect with others who are grieving. Emotional support is often found in the online community as evidenced in this study. This type of support often is sought out because it is an understanding community, a group of individuals who are grieving different losses but come to a place that is safe and where they can be known. In their metanalysis of qualitative studies of online communities, Robins and Pond (2019) found that an understanding community was a key to why individuals were using online support. Furthermore, it is place where those who are grieving can possibly bring up thoughts and feelings that they would not normally bring forth in any other setting. In the qualitative study by Varga and Paulus (2014) many individuals who had never utilized an online community for support, found that they could tell their narratives about their grief and loss journeys. Some described their use of online support to assist in their physical and emotional wellbeing. As in indicated by Moore et al. (2019), some of their research found that individuals use social media platforms to share information about the death and begin to share emotions and gain supportive empathy, which was supported in this current study.

In social work practice, we desire for our clients to have a community that supports and understands them outside of the therapeutic setting. For future practice, clinical social workers need to be prepared to discuss with their clients in the therapeutic setting the assistance they have found in the grief based online communities. This may influence the social workers' approach to treatment based on the information provided by the client. The clinician may want to provide insights to the client about the benefits or detriments they may have using an online community rather than support from those physically present.

## **Conclusion**

This study added to the knowledge of college students use of social media while grieving. It furthered our understanding about frequency of use of social media during specific time frames while grieving, which was not previously identified in literature. This study documented that college students do continue to have ambivalent emotions as to whether or not social media should be used to express grief and loss, but gave greater insight into why and how social media can be beneficial to the mourner. Furthermore, college students do believe that a continuing bond to the deceased is important; however, in this study the majority did not use social media platforms to achieve the continuing bond. It is evidenced in some literature that social media was used by college students to create a continuing bond (Balk & Varga, 2018, Varga & Varga, 2019). Continued research is necessary about the use of social media to create or maintain a continuing bond to the deceased and how we in both the clinical and educational realm can support their grief journeys.

## APPENDICES

Appendix A: Email for Recruitment

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Appendix C: Survey

## **Appendix A:**

### **Recruitment Email:**

Subject Line: Participants sought for study about college students and use of social media while grieving.

Dear Student at [REDACTED]:

My name is Suzanne Black, Associate Professor of Social Work at St. Francis University and doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy and Practice, and I am seeking participants for a research study. You are receiving this email because you are a student at Saint Francis University. This research study is trying to understand how college students use social media to cope with the grief after experiencing a death. Interested participants must be between the ages of 18-24 and be enrolled at [REDACTED] as an undergraduate or graduate student and have experienced a death of a loved one within the last two years.

If you choose to participate in this study, which is completely voluntary, you will be asked to complete a survey that will entail about 20-30 minutes of your time. Your participation is confidential and anonymous. If you are interested, please click on the link for the informed consent [www.link](#) to consent. Once the informed consent is read and understood you will be directed to the survey. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [sblack@francis.edu](mailto:sblack@francis.edu).

Thanks for your time:

Suzanne Black, MSSA, LSW  
Associate Clinical Professor of Social Work  
Saint Francis University  
Doctoral Student at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy and Practice

## Appendix B:

### Informed Consent

#### INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE FORM

**Title of Research Study:** **Remembering those we have lost through social media: College students and the continuing bonds of grief.**

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Kate Ledwith, DSW, LCSW  
[Kledwith@upenn.edu](mailto:Kledwith@upenn.edu)  
215-898-5538

**Co-Investigator:** *Suzanne Black, MSSA, LSW*  
[Sublack@upenn.edu](mailto:Sublack@upenn.edu)  
814-937-3431

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Your participation is voluntary, and you should only participate if you completely understand what the study requires and what the risks of participation are. Before you decide to participate you will need to know the purpose of the study, the possible risks and benefits of being in the study and what you will have to do to participate.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The research study is being conducted to assess if college students utilize social media to cope with their grief and loss experiences and to understand if a continuing bond is created through the use of social media. To further investigate this phenomenon, a mixed method research design will be utilized to assess college students' grieving practices on social media. Those who are eligible to participate in this study are undergraduate and graduate students who are between the ages of 18-24 and have experienced a death within the last two years (24 months). This study is being conducted in part to fulfill the dissertation requirements for a doctorate in clinical social work degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

#### **How long will I be in the study and how many people will be in the study?**

This one-time survey will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. All undergraduate and graduate students at [REDACTED] will be asked to participate in the study.

### **What will I be asked to do?**

First, you will be asked to provide demographic information. Then you will be asked to answer questions about a recent death in your life, identifying the relationship and type of loss. Then, you will be asked about your social media usage after you experienced the death, and did social media create a continuing bond. Finally, you will be asked to complete two scales, The Continuing Bonds Scale and the Core Bereavement Inventory. The survey will be anonymous, the researcher will not be able to identify the participant.

You have the right to stop the survey at any time during your participation.

### **What are the Risks?**

The risks of this study are minimal; however, the subject of this study may elicit some emotions. Death, grief and loss are difficult topics for some individuals. If the participant/subject does have an emotional response to this survey, please contact the [REDACTED] Counseling Center is available to you at 814-472-3211, a 24-hour crisis hotline at 1-877-268-9463 or the Crisis Hotline Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

### **How will I benefit from this Study?**

While you will not directly benefit from participation in this study, however, your participation could help the researcher understand the use of social media among college students while grieving and if it creates continuing bonds to the deceased. This could benefit you indirectly. In the future, this may help other universities better assist grieving college students. It will give us a better understanding of the positive and negative effects social media utilization can have on college students while grieving.

### **PUBLICATION STATEMENT**

The results of this study may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations; however, no individual subject will be identified.

### **How will confidentiality be maintained?**

All responses are anonymous and cannot be linked back to you. All information will be stored and be kept indefinitely and could be store and distributed for future research studies without additional informed consent.

### **SUBJECT RIGHTS**

1. I understand that informed consent is required of all persons participating in this project.
2. I have been told that I may refuse to participate or to stop my participation in this project at any time before or during the project. I may also refuse to answer any question.

3. Any risks and/or discomforts have been explained to me, as have any potential benefits.
4. I understand the protections in place to safeguard any personally identifiable information related to my participation.
5. I understand that, if I have any questions, I may contact Suzanne Black, MSSA, LSW at 814-472-3091. I may also contact Dr. Kate Ledwith, University of Pennsylvania faculty sponsor, dissertation chair at 215-898-5538.

Any questions regarding my rights as a research subject may be addressed to the Saint Francis University Institutional Review Board *Dr. Kristopher Wisniewski and Dr. Heather Vitko, co-chairs* and or the University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board(IRB) at, (215) 898-2614 for assistance.

All research projects that are carried out by Investigators at Saint Francis University and The University of Pennsylvania are governed by requirements of the University and the federal government.

*I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions to my satisfaction.*

If you agree to participate in this study, please indicate your consent below.

\_\_\_\_\_ I WILL participate in the survey research

\_\_\_\_\_ I will not participate in the survey research.

## **Appendix C:**

### **Survey**

#### **Demographics**

1. What is your gender identity?
  - a. Male
  - B. Female
  - C. Gender non- conforming
  - D. Transgender
  - E. Prefer not to say
2. What is your age?
3. What year are you in college?
  - a. Freshman
  - b. Sophomore
  - c. Junior
  - D. Senior
  - E. Graduate
4. Where primarily do you take classes?
  - a. campus
  - b. online
  - c. both
5. What is your ethnic /racial identity?
  - a. Hispanic or Latino
  - b. American Indian
  - c. Alaskan Native
  - d. Asian
  - e. Black or African American
  - f. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - g. White
  - h. Multi-racial
  - i. Race/ethnicity unknown

#### **Grief and Loss Experience**

6. Have you experienced the death of one or more family member(s), close friend(s) and/or pet (s) in the last two years (24 months)?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

If no, please stop. (The online version will have a thanks for participating statement).
7. Please identify the relationship to the individual(s)/pet(s) who died within the last 2 years/ (24 months). If you have had more than one, please check all that apply.
  - a. Parent
  - b. Step Parent
  - c. Spouse
  - d. Partner
  - e. Child

- f. Sibling
- g. Grandparent
- h. Step Grandparent
- i. Uncle
- j. Aunt
- k. Cousin
- l. Friend
- m. Boyfriend
- n. Girlfriend
- o. Significant other
- p. Roommate
- q. Pet
- r. Other \_\_\_\_\_

8. If you checked more than one individual who died over the last 2 years (24 months) in the previous question, please choose ONE individual or pet that you will answer the rest of the survey about.

- a. Parent
- b. Step Parent
- c. Spouse
- d. Partner
- e. Child
- f. Sibling
- g. Grandparent
- h. Step Grandparent
- i. Uncle
- j. Aunt
- k. Cousin
- l. Friend
- m. Boyfriend
- n. Girlfriend
- o. Significant other
- p. Roommate
- q. Pet
- r. Other \_\_\_\_\_

9. What was the date of the death?

10. How were you first notified of the death?

- a. Family
- b. Friends
- c. Social Media
- d. Email
- e. Television/news
- f. Other



15. **Prior to the death**, indicate how often you used each type of social media

Type of Social Media	Frequently	Occasionally	Never
Facebook			
Instagram			
Twitter			
Snapchat			
Tumblr			
YouTube			
Blogging Site			
Other: Text box:			

16. Do you believe that social media is an appropriate place to express grief?  
 a. always appropriate b. sometimes appropriate c. never appropriate

Text Box: If you wish, please, describe your answer.

17. Have you used any type of social media to cope with the death?  
 a. Yes b. No

Text Box: If you answered no, please describe why?

If you **did not** use any type of social media while grieving the deceased, please go question 31.

18. Did social media have a role in how you found out about the death?  
 a. Social media had no role at all  
 b. Social media had a small role  
 c. Social media had a moderate role  
 d. Social media had a significant role

19. Did you use social media to share information/news that the death occurred?  
 a. Yes b. No

If you answered no, please go to question 21

20. Please indicate the type(s) of social media you used to **share information about the death and how often you used it for this purpose.**

Type of Social Media	Frequently	Occasionally	Never
Facebook			
Instagram			
Twitter			
Snapchat			
Tumblr			
YouTube			
Blogging Site			
Other: Text box:			

**Frequency of Use Social Media Platforms when coping with a death:**

**To assist us in understanding your usage of social media while coping with the death, please check the types and frequency of social media usage during each time frame after the death.**

21. For each type of social media indicate how often you used it **around the time you found out about the death.**

Type of Social Media	Frequently	Occasionally	Never
Facebook			
Instagram			
Twitter			
Snapchat			
Tumblr			
YouTube			
Blogging Site			
Other: Text box:			

22. For each type of social media, indicate how often you used it **between the time you found out about the death and when the memorial service or funeral was held.**

Type of Social Media	Frequently	Occasionally	Never
Facebook			
Instagram			
Twitter			
Snapchat			
Tumblr			
YouTube			
Blogging Site			
Other: Insert			

23. For each type of social media, indicate how often you used it **after the funeral up through 6 months after the death.** (If the death occurred less than 6 months ago please indicate the number of months). \_\_\_\_ months

Type of Social Media	Frequently	Occasionally	Never
Facebook			
Instagram			
Twitter			
Snapchat			
Tumblr			
YouTube			
Blogging Site			
Other: Insert			

24. For each type of social media indicate how often you have used social media between 6 months after the death to the present.

Type of Social Media	Frequently	Occasionally	Never
Facebook			
Instagram			
Twitter			
Snapchat			
Tumblr			
YouTube			
Blogging Site			
Other: Insert			

25. Please use the chart below to answer the following questions about your usage of social media after the death.

	Frequently	Occasionally	Never
I accessed social media to learn personal information about the deceased.			
I used social media for support after the death.			
I used social media to support others after the death.			
I went to social media to post pictures of the deceased.			
I used social media to look at pictures that others had posted of the deceased.			
I visited the deceased's social media site(s).			
I used social media to gain information about the death itself or events (funeral plans, memorials).			
I used social media to read comments that others had posted about the deceased. I used social media to respond to others postings about the deceased.			

I used social media to start a dialogue or conversation with others who knew the deceased.			
I used social media to stay connected with the person who died.			
I used social media to make sure that the deceased is not forgotten.			

26. Since the death has occurred, have you used social media on any of these specific occasions to cope with your grief? (check all that apply)

- a. Birthday of the deceased
- b. Anniversary of the death
- c. Holidays
- d. Other important occasions/events or times of year.

Text box: Please describe the other important occasion(s).

27. When you used social media to cope with the death, were your postings private or public?

- a. Private
- b. Public
- c. Both

Text Box: If you wish, please describe what influenced your decision to post privately or publicly on social media.

### **The Positive and Negative Aspects of Social Media after a death**

28. Has social media been helpful to you as a resource to cope with your grief?

- a. Very helpful
- b. Somewhat helpful
- c. Neutral
- d. Somewhat unhelpful
- e. Not helpful at all

29. What type of experience(s) did you have posting on social media to cope with the death? (Check all that apply)

- a. Positive:

Text Box: Please describe your experience

- b. Negative

Text Box: Please describe your experience

- c. Mixed

Text Box: Please describe your experience

30. How often did you have the following occur while using social media to cope with the death?

	Frequently	Occasionally	Never
Social media allowed me to express myself while coping with the grief.			
I felt connected to the deceased while using social media.			
I learned new things about the deceased while using social media to cope with the death.			
Social media assisted me in believing that the death was real.			
I received support from others while using social media to cope with the death.			
I created a new support network while using social media to cope with the death.			
While using social media to cope with the death my personal feelings were validated.			
Using social media allowed me to process			

my thoughts and feelings about the death.			
Using social media to cope with the death allowed me to express myself through writing rather than talking about it.			
Using social media as an outlet provided comfort to me while coping with death.			
Using social media allowed me to memorialize the deceased.			
While using social media, I found that strangers would post positive or helpful comments about the deceased.			

	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
While using social media to cope with the death, I saw others' comment negatively about or toward the deceased.			
I did not receive support through social media that			

was helpful to me as I grieved the deceased.			
I did not feel that others validated my grief as I used social media to cope with the death.			
I felt disconnected to others who posted on social media to cope with the death.			
I got upset when strangers would post comments about the deceased.			
My feelings were hurt by the comments that others made about the deceased on social media			
Posting online did not help me cope with my grief.			
I felt isolated as I used social media to cope with the grief.			
I became angry at the comments' others made about the deceased while I was using social media to cope with the grief.			

I felt that I could not be myself online when I was posting on social media to cope with the grief.			
I had increased feelings of sadness, when I used social media to cope with the grief.			

Text Box: Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience on social media

**31. In terms of your own personal beliefs, how likely is it that**

	<b>Extremely likely</b>	<b>Somewhat likely</b>	<b>Neither likely or unlikely</b>	<b>Somewhat unlikely</b>	<b>Extremely unlikely</b>
<b>There is some form of ongoing consciousness or existence after death</b>					
<b>The deceased are aware of our activity online including messages we may send to them or post on social media</b>					

The deceased are aware of communication through non-technology mediated means (e.g., talking to their picture, visiting the gravesite					
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### Coping Resources

32. Did you use any other resources or strategies to help cope with your grief?

- a. Attended the funeral/memorial service
- b. Went to counseling
- c. Talked with family or friends
- d. Talked with a pastor, priest or spiritual mentor
- e. Prayer
- f. Attended grief support group
- g. Journalled about the deceased
- h. Created art
- i. Looked at art
- j. Played music
- k. Listen to music
- k. Visited the place of burial/cemetery/grave marker
- l. Created a keepsake of the deceased remains
- m. Scattered the cremated remains of the deceased
- n. Kept a personal item of the deceased
- o. Created an event or scholarship in honor of the deceased
- p. Wore a personal item that belonged to the deceased
- q. Other, please describe

Text Box: If you wish, please describe how you used the above or resources to cope with your grief.

### Continuing Bonds and Social Media

The experience of a death can create an empty space for mourners. Depending on the type of relationship that existed with the deceased, it is possible that one develops a yearning for

a continuing bond. This desire or need could be met through reminiscence, shared stories or even conversing with the deceased as if they were present. Continuing bonds can be defined as the “presence of an ongoing inner relationship with the deceased person by a bereaved individual” (Stroebe & Shut, 2005, p. 477). Silverman and Nickman (2006) further describe continuing bonds as how the inner relationship (bond) to the deceased can be influenced by the interaction with a community.

33. How important is it to you to have a continuing bond to the deceased?
- a. Very important
  - b. Somewhat important
  - c. Not important at all

Text box: If you choose, please, describe your answer.

34. Based upon the definition(s) provided, have you used social media to create and / or maintain a continuing bond with the deceased?

- a. Yes
- b. N

(Field, Gal-Oz and Bonanno, 2003)

**35. Continuing Bond Scale: CBS scale:** Complete the following questions using this scale.

**1 Not true at all   2 Rarely true   3 Moderately True   4 Usually True   5 Very true**

1. I seek out things to remind me of the deceased.

1      2      3      4      5

2. I keep items that belong to or were closely associated with the deceased as a reminder of them.

1      2      3      4      5

3. I like to reminisce with others about the deceased.

1      2      3      4      5

4. I have inner conversations with the deceased where I turn to him or her for comfort or advice.

1      2      3      4      5

5. Even though no longer physically present, the deceased continues to be a loving presence in my life.

1      2      3      4      5

6. I am aware of having taken on many of the deceased habits, values or interests.

1      2      3      4      5

7. I am aware of the positive influence the deceased had on who I am today.

1      2      3      4      5

8. I attempt to carry on the deceased wishes.

1      2      3      4      5

9. I have many fond memories that bring joy to me.

1      2      3      4      5

10. When making decisions, I imagine the deceased's viewpoint and use this as guide in deciding what to do.

1      2      3      4      5

11. I experience the deceased as continuing to live through me.

1      2      3      4      5

**If you used social media to cope with the loss of the deceased, please complete the following questions. If you answered no, please complete the Core Bereavement Inventory on page 19.**

**1 Not true at all   2 Rarely true      3 Occasionally True      4 Usually True      5 Very true**

**12. I utilized social media to share stories, pictures, writings about the deceased.**

**1      2      3      4      5**

**13. I used social media to post messages that were public messages to the deceased (as if I were talking to them).**

**1      2      3      4      5**

**14. I used social media to post messages that were private messages to the deceased (as if I were talking to them).**

**1      2      3      4      5**

**15. Posting messages to the deceased via social media helped me to feel connected to the deceased.**

**1      2      3      4      5**

**16. Using social media allowed me to express my emotions directly to the deceased.**

**1      2      3      4      5**

**17. I asked the deceased for advice through social media.**

1      2      3      4      5

**18. I used social media to ask the deceased to watch over me.**

1      2      3      4      5

**19. I felt connected to the deceased through reading the posts, messages and comments online.**

1      2      3      4      5

**20. I felt connected to the deceased through leaving a voice mail on their phone.**

1      2      3      4      5

**21. I felt connected to the deceased by texting their phone number.**

1      2      3      4      5

**22. I felt connected to the deceased by listening to their voice mail messages.**

1      2      3      4      5

**23. I felt connected to the deceased by watching videos of them.**

1      2      3      4      5

**24. I felt connected to the deceased when I read their blog.**

1      2      3      4      5

**36. CBI Core Bereavement Inventory:** Please answer the survey using the scale provided. Please substitute the x for the individual who has died.

0 Never      1 A little bit of the time      2 Quite a bit of the time      3 A lot of the time.

1. Do you experience images of the events surrounding x's death?

0      1      2      3

2. Do thoughts of x come into your mind whether you wish it to or not?

0      1      2      3

3. Do thoughts of x make you feel distressed

0      1      2      3

4. Do you think about x?  
0    1    2    3
5. Do images of x make you feel distressed?  
0    1    2    3
6. Do you find yourself pre-occupied with images or memories of x?  
0    1    2    3
7. Do you find yourself thinking of a reunion with x?  
0    1    2    3
8. Do you find yourself missing x?  
0    1    2    3
9. Are you reminded by familiarly of x's objects (photos, possessions, rooms, etc.)?  
0    1    2    3
10. Do you find yourself pining for/yearning for x?  
0    1    2    3
11. Do you find yourself looking for x in familiar places?  
0    1    2    3
12. Do you feel distress/pain if for any reason you are confronted with the reality that x is not present or coming back?  
0    1    2    3
13. Do reminders of x such as photos, situations, music, places etc., cause you to feel longing for x?  
0    1    2    3
14. Do reminders of x such as photos, situations, music, places, etc., cause you to feel loneliness?  
0    1    2    3
15. Do reminders of x such as photos, situations, music, places, etc., cause you to cry a lot?  
0    1    2    3
16. Do reminders of x such as photos, situations, music, places, etc., cause you to feel sadness?  
0    1    2    3

17. Do reminders of x such as photos situations music, places, etc., cause you to feel loss of enjoyment?  
0      1      2      3

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