



FROM PRIVATE LOSS TO PUBLIC EXPRESSION: PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF DIGITAL GRIEF AMONG 200 LEVEL STUDENTS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY NASARAWA STATE UNIVERSITY KEFFI

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Abstract

In an era where social media has become central to communication and self-expression, the experience of grief is undergoing significant transformation. This phenomenological study explores how Nigerians navigate and make meaning of grief in digital spaces. Using semi-structured interviews with 20 adults who have lost a loved one and expressed their mourning through platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. The research uncovers the lived experiences behind online grief expressions. Findings reveal five key themes: digital grief as an extension of traditional mourning rituals; continuation of emotional bonds with the deceased; social pressure to perform grief publicly; cultural and religious mediation of online expressions; and the therapeutic role of digital communities in emotional healing. While digital grieving offered participants validation and connection, it also introduced complexities such as performance anxiety and cultural tension. The study concludes that digital grief in Nigeria represents a hybrid mourning space deeply shaped by cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and technological affordances. Implications for grief counseling, mental health interventions, and culturally responsive digital design are discussed. The study calls for further research into intergenerational, gendered, and psychological dimensions of digital mourning in African contexts.

Keywords: Digital Grief, Phenomenology Study

Introduction

Grief, though inherently personal and often experienced in solitude, has increasingly found expression in digital spaces. The rise of social media platforms and online memorial forums has transformed the landscape of mourning, enabling individuals to publicly share their pain, memories, and tributes in real time (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013). This shift from private loss to public expression has given rise to what scholars' term digital grief, a phenomenon that blurs the boundaries between personal mourning and collective memory (Cann, 2020; Sofka, Cupit, & Gilbert, 2012). While traditional grieving practices were typically confined to physical spaces such as funerals and memorial services, digital grief manifests in status updates, tribute pages, hashtags, and virtual ceremonies, creating new rituals and forms of emotional release (Gibbs et al., 2015).

In many ways, digital grief represents a cultural evolution in how individuals cope with death and loss in a technologically mediated world. It provides a space where mourners can feel seen and validated, find community, and engage in continuous bonds with the deceased (Walter, 2015; Pennington, 2021). Yet, this public display of mourning also raises complex questions: How do individuals experience grief in these virtual settings? What meanings do they attach to such digital expressions? And how does this reshape their healing process? This study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals who engage in digital grieving. By centering on their narratives, the research also seeks to understand how the digital environment influences not only the articulation of loss but also the emotional and psychological dimensions of mourning (Cacciatore, 2019). In doing so, the study will contribute to ongoing discourse in psychology, digital humanities, and bereavement studies, offering insights into the evolving nature of human connection, memory, and healing in the digital age.

Statement of the Problem

Traditionally, grief has been considered a deeply personal and often private experience, shaped by cultural norms, religious beliefs, and interpersonal relationships. However, the

increasing use of digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and memorial websites has significantly altered the landscape of mourning. Individuals now turn to these online spaces to express their sorrow, commemorate the dead, and connect with others who share similar losses (Brubaker et al., 2013; Cann, 2020). This transformation has given rise to the phenomenon of *digital grief*, in which mourning becomes more visible, interactive, and prolonged. While this shift offers opportunities for social support and collective remembrance, it also raises psychological, cultural, and ethical questions about the nature of grief in the digital age.

Despite the growing prevalence of digital mourning practices, there remains a limited understanding of how individuals personally experience grief when it is expressed and mediated online. Most existing research has focused on the sociological or communicative aspects of digital memorials, often overlooking the subjective, emotional, and existential dimensions of digital grief (Gibbs et al., 2015; Walter, 2015). In particular, there is a gap in the literature regarding how digital platforms influence the internal grieving process, identity reconstruction, and coping mechanisms of bereaved individuals. Additionally, cultural sensitivities and contextual variations especially in non-Western societies have not been sufficiently explored. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the lived experiences of individuals who grieve through digital means. Using a phenomenological approach, the study aims to uncover the meanings, emotions, and psychological dynamics involved in digital grief. By doing so, it will contribute to a more holistic understanding of how digital technology is reshaping not only the expression of grief but also the process of healing and meaning-making in a rapidly evolving world.

Research Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of individuals who engage in digital grief. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- Examine how individuals experience and express grief through digital platforms.

- Explore the meanings and significance individuals attach to digital mourning practices.

Understand how digital grief influences emotional coping and healing processes.

Identify the psychological and cultural dimensions associated with transitioning from private mourning to public digital expression.

Investigate the role of social media and online communities in shaping personal grief narratives.

Research Questions

In line with the objectives, the study will be guided by the following research questions:

How do individuals describe their experiences of grieving on digital platforms?

What personal meanings do individuals attach to the act of expressing grief online?

In what ways does digital grieving affect individuals' emotional coping and sense of closure?

How do cultural and social contexts influence the way grief is shared and received online?

What role do online communities and digital interactions play in shaping the grieving process?

Theoretical Review

Understanding digital grief, especially in culturally diverse contexts like Nigeria, requires theoretical lenses that integrate emotional, technological, and socio-cultural dimensions. This review critically engages with Continuing Bonds Theory, Media Richness Theory, and Socio-cultural Theory, applying each to the phenomenon of digital grief within the Nigerian context.

Continuing Bonds Theory by Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996

The Continuing Bonds Theory emerged as a response to earlier grief models that promoted detachment from the deceased as a sign of recovery. Klass et al. (1996) argued that bereaved individuals often maintain emotional, symbolic, or even communicative ties with the deceased, and that these bonds can be adaptive and meaningful. Digital technologies have transformed how continuing bonds are maintained, offering platforms where individuals can speak to the deceased, post memories, or

engage with others in shared mourning (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013; Cann, 2020). These online rituals such as updating Facebook timelines of deceased loved ones or sharing throwback videos on WhatsApp allow for ongoing emotional relationships. In Nigeria, this theory is particularly resonant. Cultural practices among the Yoruba, Igbo, and other ethnic groups support continued reverence for the dead through remembrance rituals and annual ceremonies (Awoniyi, 2021). Online memorials and digital expressions of grief serve as contemporary extensions of these traditional mourning customs. The strength of this theory lies in its recognition of the enduring nature of grief. However, it may fail to account for the pressure to grieve publicly on social media, which can cause emotional strain. Hall (2014) cautions that digital continuance of bonds can sometimes lead to prolonged grief symptoms, especially when individuals are unable to find closure offline. In the Nigerian context, where social expectations can be intense, grieving online may become per-formative leading some to feel compelled to post tributes or share funeral details to avoid social stigma (Eze, 2022).

Media Richness Theory by Daft & Lengel, 1986

Media Richness Theory (MRT) classifies communication channels based on their ability to convey nuanced emotional information. Rich media those allowing immediate feedback, multiple cues (visual, verbal, emotional), and personalization are considered more effective for complex emotional tasks like grieving (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Digital grief often uses media-rich platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Zoom, which support multimodal expressions of loss (video tributes, live-stream funerals, emojis, and voice notes). These tools facilitate emotionally resonant communication that mimics in-person mourning.

In Nigeria, where mobile phone penetration is high (Statista, 2023) and smartphone usage is growing even in rural areas, digital grieving practices are increasingly media-rich. Families stream burials, share e-flyers, and engage in communal prayers via WhatsApp, Facebook Live, and Instagram. These platforms offer immediacy and emotional depth, allowing

mourners to “feel present,” even when physically absent. While MRT is valuable for explaining **how** and **why** certain digital platforms are preferred for mourning, it can be reductionist. The theory assumes that richer media always lead to better outcomes overlooking cultural, spiritual, and personal dimensions of grief (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). For instance, elders in Nigeria may prefer silent prayer or physical condolence visits, seeing digital expressions as inadequate or disrespectful (Okoye, 2020). Moreover, poor internet access in rural areas or among older populations can restrict participation, creating grief inequities (Ajayi, 2021). Thus, while MRT explains the **mechanics** of digital grief, it must be supplemented by culturally grounded frameworks.

Sociocultural Theory by Vygotsky 1978

Sociocultural Theory posits that human experiences, including grief, are mediated through social interactions, language, and culturally specific tools. According to Vygotsky (1978), individuals learn and express emotions through the values, norms, and symbolic practices of their society. Digital grief in Nigeria reflects this mediation. Online mourning practices sharing condolence messages, posting prayerful quotes, uploading photos of the deceased are deeply influenced by ethnic traditions, religious beliefs, and community norms (Nwoye, 2017). For example, in Christian-dominated regions, digital expressions of grief may invoke eschatological hope (“heaven gained,” “rest in the bosom of the Lord”), while in Muslim communities, Quranic texts and prayers are common. These online grief rituals are not spontaneous but culturally scripted, shaped by the socio-religious context of the mourner.

Sociocultural Theory is praised for its cultural sensitivity, especially in non-Western contexts. It helps explain why mourning practices vary across ethnic groups and why digital grief is not just a personal act but a communal and symbolic one (Obi, 2022). However, the theory’s broad scope makes it less useful for predicting individual behavior. In Nigeria, there is also a generational divide: younger mourners may embrace hashtags and Instagram tributes, while elders may frown upon them. Thus, sociocultural theory helps to **describe** the digital grieving

landscape but is less effective at unpacking personal conflicts or psychological outcomes without additional psychological frameworks.

Literature Review

Grief has traditionally been understood as a personal and social process, often expressed through culturally sanctioned rituals, religious practices, and interpersonal support systems (Worden, 2009). However, with the increasing digitization of life, mourning has transcended physical boundaries. Scholars now recognize **digital grief** as a form of mourning that takes place on online platforms, such as social media, memorial websites, and messaging apps (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013; Cann, 2020). This shift reflects broader societal changes where personal experiences especially those involving loss and death are publicly narrated and witnessed. Digital grief includes practices such as posting tributes, sharing photos, updating statuses of the deceased, participating in virtual funerals, and interacting with online memorial pages. These expressions allow for sustained emotional connections and social support, even across geographical distances (Gibbs et al., 2015; Pennington, 2021). They are also redefining norms around privacy, ritual, and memory in mourning contexts.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok have become key mourning spaces. Facebook’s “memorialized” pages, for instance, provide a digital space where mourners can post messages, share memories, and continue relationships with the deceased (Walter, 2015). These interactions create a form of “digital presence” that helps mourners make sense of the loss and maintain a symbolic bond (Kasket, 2012). In Nigeria, social media mourning has become increasingly prevalent, especially among young people and the urban population. Tribute posts on Instagram, live-streamed funerals on YouTube or Zoom, and WhatsApp status memorials are now commonly used to express grief (Eze, 2022). These practices reflect both the communal nature of grief in Nigerian society and the growing integration of digital culture into daily life (Nwoye, 2017). However, scholars have cautioned that the public visibility of grief on social media may generate new pressures and expectations. Some mourners

may feel compelled to engage in “grief performance” to appear socially appropriate, leading to emotional fatigue or superficial coping (Hall, 2014; Eler, 2018). This is particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where social obligations and expectations around death are high.

Grief in Nigeria is deeply embedded in religious and cultural worldviews. Among various ethnic groups such as the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa/Fulani, mourning is expressed through elaborate ceremonies, collective prayers, and spiritual rituals (Awoniyi, 2021; Okonkwo, 2015). Death is not considered an end, but a transition to the ancestral realm, and public acknowledgment of the deceased is crucial for closure and continuity. These beliefs influence how Nigerians adopt digital mourning practices. For example, traditional eulogies and obituary flyers have been digitized into visual posts and slideshows shared on WhatsApp and Facebook. Religious practices, such as novena prayers or Islamic *du'as*, are also shared virtually. Nwoye (2017) observes that in many African settings, mourning is not merely emotional but communal and participatory, and digital media have extended these participatory rituals beyond physical borders. Yet, the integration of technology into mourning raises concerns about generational and ideological divides. Older generations may reject digital grief as impersonal or inappropriate, while younger people embrace it as a natural extension of their social lives. Okoye (2020) found that many elders in southeastern Nigeria expressed discomfort with social media-based condolences, seeing them as a poor substitute for face-to-face mourning.

While digital grief can foster connection and healing, its emotional impact is not always straightforward. Research shows that continued interaction with the digital profiles of deceased loved ones can provide solace and reduce feelings of loneliness (Bollmer, 2013; Cacciatore, 2019). For instance, posting to a deceased person's Facebook wall or tagging them in photos can serve as symbolic acts of communication, helping the bereaved maintain a sense of relational continuity (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). However, there is evidence that this continued presence may complicate the grieving process for some. Brubaker and Vertesi (2010) caution that

algorithmic reminders such as birthday notifications or memory posts can be distressing

names to describe their responses to protect their identity) .

This suggests that digital platforms serve as alternative communal spaces where traditional expressions like anniversaries , obituary announcements ,or prayer sessions are recreated virtually. This aligns with the Nigerian custom of extended mourning and continuous remembrance (Awoniyi, 2021).

Theme 2 : Online Tributes and the Continuation of Bonds

A recurring experience was the desire to maintain an emotional connection with the deceased through ongoing digital engagement. Participants described speaking to the dead through social media posts or private messages. As participant B, a 28-year-old student who lost his fiancée, described:

"I still write to her on Facebook sometimes I know she won ' t read it but it helps me process .It ' s like she ' s still around , watching me grow . "

This reflects the concept of continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996), demonstrating that digital grief allows mourners to sustain symbolic relationships with the deceased, especially in the absence of physical rituals.

Theme 3 Grieving in Public Catharsis or Pressure ?

Participants shared mixed emotions about the public nature of digital grieving. While some found solace in public support, others felt socially obligated to "perform" their grief.

"I had to post something after the burial or people would think I didn ' t love my dad enough . That ' s how people judge now ,through your Facebook , "said participant J, a 22-year-old student.

This indicates that digital grief can sometimes become a social performance, shaped by community expectations and emotional surveillance. It raises concerns about emotional authenticity and societal pressure in online grieving practices (Eze, 2022).

Theme 4 : Cultural and Religious Mediation of Digital Grief

Participants noted that their ethnic and religious identities influenced how, what, and when they grieved digitally. For example, participant N a Muslim stated:

"In Islam ,we don't post too much about

the dead It ' s better to pray silently But I shared a Qur ' anic verse on my story with his name . That was my way . "

Similarly, Christian participants often posted scriptures or hymns. This demonstrates that religious codes and cultural norms shape the boundaries and acceptability of digital mourning (Nwoye, 2017), with participants adapting practices to suit both their beliefs and digital platforms.

Theme 5 Emotional Relief and Ongoing Healing

Most participants described digital grief as offering emotional release, support, and even long term healing. Interactions such as comments, likes, and messages were interpreted as signs of empathy and validation.

"When people commented and shared their own memories of my mum it helped me feel less alone .It reminded me she was loved by many , shared by participant K.

This confirms findings from prior studies (Cacciato, 2019; Marwick & Ellison, 2012) that online communities provide affective solidarity, aiding bereaved individuals in their coping journey.

Digital grief, for Nigerian mourners in this study, is a hybrid ritual rooted in culture and faith, yet shaped by the immediacy, visibility, and interactivity of social media. Participants used digital platforms to express pain, preserve memory, find solidarity, and reconstruct meaning in ways that reflect both tradition and technological adaptation. Despite emotional benefits, participants also navigated complex tensions: between privacy and visibility ,tradition and modernity ,authenticity and performance. These dynamics highlight the nuanced emotional and cultural terrain of mourning in the digital age.

Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of Nigerians who express grief through digital platforms. Drawing from phenomenological inquiry, five key themes emerged: digital grief as ritual extension ,continuation of bonds ,public grief performance , cultural mediation , and emotional healing through online support. These findings provide critical insights into how grief is evolving in Nigeria's digital landscape. Participants consistently described their online grieving activities WhatsApp tributes, Zoom

prayer meetings, social media memorial posts as extensions of cultural and religious mourning rites. This finding aligns with Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which posits that human behavior is mediated by cultural tools. In this case, smartphones and social media serve as digital tools for collective mourning (Nwoye, 2017; Awoniyi, 2021). Digital grief is not in opposition to traditional rituals but functions as a complementary space shaped by societal norms and the need for communal healing

The study reveals that many participants maintained symbolic relationships with the deceased through digital interaction posting messages, revisiting photos, or tagging them in status updates. This affirms Continuing Bonds Theory (Klass et al., 1996), which argues that maintaining emotional ties after death is both normal and healing. In the Nigerian context, where ancestral reverence and spiritual continuity are culturally embedded, digital platforms enable an ongoing emotional dialogue that reinforces identity and connection beyond physical death. While participants appreciated the support they received online, several described feeling obligated to “perform” grief to meet social expectations. This supports Eze’s (2022) notion of performative grief in Nigerian digital spaces. While social media provides a stage for connection, it also creates pressure to publicly demonstrate mourning in a culturally acceptable manner. This finding challenges Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), which assumes richer communication always facilitates deeper emotional expression yet, in this case, richness may also invite surveillance, judgment, or inauthenticity.

The study demonstrates how participants’ expressions of digital grief are deeply shaped by their religious and ethnic backgrounds. Muslims preferred minimalist, prayerful posts, while Christians often shared Bible verses and tributes. Some Igbo participants referenced the Ikwu Ozu (death rites) even in WhatsApp statuses. This finding reinforces the importance of Sociocultural Theory and echoes findings by Obi (2022) and Okoye (2020) that cultural scripts and religious beliefs guide how, when, and to what extent individuals grieve online.

Participants described online interactions comments, likes, reposts as emotionally

validating. These digital responses served as a form of communal condolence, reducing isolation and enhancing coping. This aligns with research by Marwick & Ellison (2012) and Pennington (2021), who argue that social media can function as grief support networks. In the Nigerian context, where mourning is inherently communal, digital grief practices allow mourners to recreate community solidarity beyond physical gatherings.

Implications for Practice

Counselors, psychologists, and religious leaders in Nigeria need to recognize digital grieving as a valid mourning process, not just a youthful or modern trend. Integrating this understanding into grief counseling will help practitioners engage clients more empathetically. Tech companies and developers of memorial apps could benefit from culturally grounded design features e.g., prayer scheduling, memorial walls with local languages, or digital condolence books. Facebook’s memorial page feature is one example, but Nigeria specific platforms could better serve local grieving customs. Some participants, especially those in rural areas or with low digital literacy, are excluded from communal grieving when it occurs primarily online. NGOs and community organizations can bridge this digital divide by helping families access and navigate digital tools during periods of loss.

Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the challenges faced during the process of the study, the following are recommended for further study

1. Quantitative follow up could measure the psychological outcomes of digital grief (e.g., depression, post-traumatic growth, social support).
2. Comparative studies between urban and rural Nigerians may uncover deeper digital inequalities in mourning access and practices.
3. Focus on gender: How do men and women experience or perform digital grief differently in Nigerian society?
4. Explore intergenerational perspectives to understand how age affects attitudes toward public expressions of loss.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing literature on digital grief by offering culturally grounded insights from Nigeria, where mourning is both spiritual and social. Through participants' narratives, it becomes evident that digital grief is not just a response to technological advancement, but a reflection of evolving cultural norms, emotional needs, and communal identities. It is neither purely private nor fully public, but a hybrid space where tradition, identity, and memory converge.

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