

### **Chapter 3: Gone...But Not Deleted**

Communication technologies, more specifically the internet and social media platforms, play a crucial role in contemporary western perceptions of death, grief and memorialisation, ultimately shifting their macro-level construction. The integral nature of technology to contemporary society has led to an inevitable evolution in “public and private discourse”<sup>98</sup> regarding death through the implementation of new traditions which simultaneously “complement and at times replace more traditional social structures of grieving.”<sup>99</sup> Surprisingly, the integration of technology in memorialisation practices has been largely accepted cross-generationally, with 61% of both Generation X and Generation Z participants stating that it has contributed positively to commemoration of the deceased.<sup>100</sup> Differences do arise, however, in consideration of the role of technology with Generation X far more likely to accept the use of video technology through “*slideshows and live streaming of funerals*” however, state that memorialisation via social media is an “*invasion of privacy*” which “*causes more heartache through constant reminders*”.<sup>101</sup> In contrast, the use of social media has been significantly embraced by Generation Z adolescents who challenge the traditional memorialisation practices of the 1960s to 1980s, and reflect the core social media conventions for sharing and connecting by utilising digital commemorative practices.<sup>102</sup> This is supported by the results of the conducted questionnaire whereby 43.4% of Generation Z participants stated that an important part of grieving was sharing the loss on social media, as compared to only 8.3% of Generation X adults,<sup>103</sup> suggesting continued generational differences in grieving processes. Aligned with a Generation X perspective, media specialist Agger challenges the incorporation of digital media in memorialisation and is critical of the overly sharing nature of Facebook,<sup>104</sup> stressing the need for a return to the division between public and private spaces. However, it can be argued that online commemoration does not drastically differ from the 1960s to 1980s where newspapers publicly announced the death of individuals, and in a similar way to obituaries, the internet “*overcomes geography and social isolation and does allow people to remain connected in their grief*.”<sup>105</sup> Previously, the social expectation after losing a loved one was to mourn in order to move forward, as proposed by Freud and Kubler-Ross in their ‘Letting Go’ Theory,<sup>106</sup> however, virtual bereavement prompts ongoing connection with the dead, thus altering the relationship with the deceased, as aligned with the Continuing Bonds Theory.<sup>107</sup> Consequently, rather than moving past the relationship with the deceased individual, through methods such as altering the deceased’s online accounts to be a continually accessible memorialized account, the internet permits a continuation of the bond between deceased and bereaved. Thus, as one Generation Z participant articulated, the use of technologies such as social media “*cements a person’s legacy...providing them with digital immortality which effectively becomes a way to cope with loss as they can hold a piece of them forever*.”<sup>108</sup> However, whilst this process of mourning can be largely affiliated with the democratizing of grief, allowing for an open expression of emotions on a macro-level, this constant reminder can be “*more psychologically damaging for a person*”<sup>109</sup> acting as a constant reminder of their loss. Additionally, the growing omnipresence of social media and its utilisation in mourning practices does pose a challenge to users in understanding when the practice becomes disrespectful.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, a Generation Z focus group participant stated that “*the timing needs to be appropriate*”,<sup>111</sup> demonstrating the controversial perception and difficulty to balance death and mourning as a “vicarious

observation”<sup>112</sup> in the public sphere and as their own private reality.

<sup>98</sup> Cann, C.K. "Speaking to the Dead: Social Network Sites and Public Grieving." *In Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-First Century*, 105-32. (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), p.106

<sup>99</sup>Ibid

<sup>100</sup> Questionnaire, Question 9, Generation X and Generation Z responses, 10/03/2021

<sup>101</sup> Focus Group, Female Generation X Participant, Question 10, 26/03/2021

<sup>102</sup> Arnold, M. Carter, M. Gibbs, M. Meese, J. and Nansen, B. "#Funeral And Instagram: Death, Social Media, And Platform Vernacular," *Information Communication & Society* 18, (2015), accessed from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.987152> <sup>103</sup> Questionnaire, Question 4, Generation X and Generation Z responses, 10/03/2021

<sup>104</sup> Agger, B. *Oversharing: Presentations of Self in the Internet Age*. (Routledge: New York, 2012), p.67.

<sup>105</sup> Questionnaire, Question 10, Generation X respondent, 10/03/2021

<sup>106</sup> Bovero, A, Botto, R, Fonti, I, Torta, R, Tosi, C. "Death and Dying on the Social Network: An Italian Survey" *Journal of Social Work in End-of-Life & Palliative Care*, (2020). p.270

<sup>107</sup>Ibid

<sup>108</sup> Questionnaire, Question 10, Generation Z respondent, 10/03/2021

<sup>109</sup> Focus Group, Male Generation Z Participant, Question 2, 26/03/2021

<sup>110</sup> Wagner, A.J.M. "Do not Click "Like" When Somebody Has Died: The Role Of Norms For Mourning Practices In Social Media" *Social Media and Society* 4, (2018), accessed from: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305117744392> <sup>111</sup> Focus Group, Female Generation Z Participant, Question 5, 26/03/2021

<sup>112</sup> Wagner, A.J.M. "Do not Click "Like" When Somebody Has Died: The Role Of Norms For Mourning Practices In Social Media" *Social Media and Society* 4, (2018), accessed <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305117744392>, p.1 24