GoodWork™ Project Report Series

**MySpace in Heaven:
Memorials on MySpace**

**Andrea Flores
HARVARD UNIVERSITY
Project Zero
124 Mt. Auburn Street, 5th Floor
Cambridge, MA 02138**
andrea_flores@brown.edu
November 2009

Howard Gardner, Series Editor

Abstract

1

In this paper, I examine how American youth use MySpace to mourn deceased peers. I conducted content analysis of 30 public MySpace memorials of recently deceased youth from the American Northeast, ages 15-24. These MySpace memorials illustrate two phenomena: 1) contemporary youth's understanding of mourning and 2) the potential of new digital media to enable a perceived supernatural connection between the dead and the living. In comments on their deceased friends' pages, mourners 'create' two sets of identities for themselves and the deceased. First, the mourners construct themselves and the deceased within the traditional understanding of the roles of mourned and mourner. Second, mourners elevate the deceased's identity to a quotidian patron saint that can intervene in the life of the mourner/supplicant. MySpace memorials may provide youth an opportunity to engage in their own kind of mourning. For researchers, these sites provide insights into youth mourning practices and bereavement.

Introduction

       4 May 2007 6:36 PM

> hey angel its been a long time since i left u anything i really miss u so much and sometimes its hard for me to get on ur page but i really miss u cant wait to see u some day everything hads been going ok so far i wish u were here prom is 2 morrow and its not going to be tht good bec u wont be there angel well i cant really say anymore bec im feeling like im going to cry so ill start leaving stuff more often on ur page ok good night and i love u ♥[i]

By 11pm on 2 February 2006, 38 messages had been posted on Allison's MySpace page.[ii] Her black and lime green page still played *My Own Worst Enemy,* listed her favorite movie as *Napoleon Dynamite,* and had her answers to a personality quiz; but, the content of the new comments suggested that something had changed. Friends began posting memories of Allison—shared inside jokes, memories of sports games, and other typical activities of teenage life. Later messages called her an 'angel' and asked for her intercession on a variety of issues—ranging from school tests to driver's ed.

At 3pm on 2 February 2006, fifteen year old Allison died in a car crash. For Allison's friends, her passing made death a personal reality that shattered their notions of teenage immortality, challenged or inspired beliefs in the afterlife, and transformed them into teen mourners. In the deluge of hundreds of new comments left in the days, weeks, and months following her death, Allison's page was further transformed. The identity Allison expressed on the site while living remained; however, it was now increasingly in the background of an ever growing chain of post mortem comments left on her page by mourners. Some comments were directed towards the mourners themselves, but the overwhelming majority were addressed to a new Allison—an Allison increasingly defined by her peer's memories, their gilded perceptions of her, and their hope that Allison lived on in cyberspace.

Increasingly, the lives and deaths of everyday American youth are documented in cyberspace, especially on widely popular social network sites (hereafter SNS). As defined by

boyd and Ellison (2007), SNS are composed of public or partially private user-generated profiles that list the member's connections to other users and allow for the viewing of and searching for other site participants. Further functions include sending messages, posting multi-media content, and sharing personal information (such as hobbies and demographic information). According to Lenhart and Madden (2007), 55% of teenagers ages 12-17 use SNS. This likely conservative estimate of the total percentage of youth users indicates that use of SNS has penetrated mainstream American youth culture and is a regular part of youth's lives.

One of the most prominent services is MySpace, the multi-million user SNS owned by NewsCorp. Initially founded in 2003 as an online home for independent musicians promoting their work among wired twenty-somethings, it quickly gained the attention of teenagers drawn to its musical content and endless customization features, such as the inclusion of music, video, and html formatting. By the time of Allison's death in 2006, MySpace reached 100 million users. Despite the increasing popularity of other SNS such as Facebook and concerns over MySpace's privacy settings, the site remains a vital community of youth users who build vibrant, multimedia pages and connections with one another.

An unanticipated use of this socializing space has been the emergence of MySpace pages for the memorialization and mourning of deceased peers. While webpage memorials have had an extensive presence on the internet almost since its advent, they have generally been created as specific spaces of mourning—unique sites created for the sole purpose of memorializing the deceased (deVries and Rutherford, 2004; Roberts, 2004) or sites dedicated to deaths of national significance such as 9/11 (Foot et al., 2005; Hess, 2007; Rainie, et al. 2002). Online memorials, including MySpace memorials, share common technical affordances such as low cost, ease of access, lack of restrictions on format, increased opportunities for creativity, inclusion of multiple

voices, and opportunities for community-wide bereavement (Foot et al., 2005; Hess, 2007; Moss, 2004; Veale, 2004).

However, MySpace profile-memorials are distinct from these online memorials in several key ways. First, these are not spaces originally intended as memorials; rather, the memorials that arise on MySpace or other SNS transform the social purposes of these sites into tools for expressing and coping with grief and for communicating with the deceased. Second, as these profiles are initially designed by the deceased, they differ from other online memorials in that they are personal articulations of self in a public context— in other words, these MySpace pages become memorials that the deceased had a hand, if inadvertently, in creating. Finally, while youth may have participated in other online memorials, these MySpace memorials are generally maintained by youth participants mourning the loss of a peer in a space that is largely free from the presence of adults. These youth-run memorials may then provide new insights into youth mourning, their conceptions of mourner identity, and their understandings of death.

I examine an ensemble of questions in relation to this emergent phenomenon: How are the identities of the deceased represented and even transformed by online mourners? How do these bereaved youth establish their identities as mourners in online spaces? How does the active memorializing content compare and contrast to the static memorialized content authored by the decedents on their pages? How do mourners use MySpace to maintain their relationships with the deceased? How do beliefs in the afterlife held by mourners affect the identities of the deceased?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted an analysis of 30 public MySpace profiles of deceased youth, ages 15-24 in the American Northeast. I contend that youth create two new sets of identities for the deceased and mourner in a unique memorial space that incorporates content

created by the deceased and his/her mourners. The first set of identities focus largely on the traditional roles of mourned and mourner. Youth participants valorize their deceased peer, through positive comments containing media-rich memories, to uplift the deceased to a notable individual worthy of near constant memorialization. Youth peer mourners, whose grief is often not recognized versus the grief of parents and family, seek to legitimize themselves as the rightful mourners of their deceased peer (Doka, 1989). Secondly, mourners elevate the deceased's identity to the supernatural. The deceased is now perceived as a quotidian patron saint who has the power to intervene in the life of the mourner/supplicant. However, mourners continued use of typical teen slang when addressing the deceased indicates that this 'saint' simultaneously remains the teen friend the mourner knew in life. In sum, MySpace memorials illustrate the ways youth understand the roles of mourner and mourned and the relationship between the dead and the living moderated by new digital media.

Background

SNS: Connections, Consumption, and Conceptions of the Self

The general purpose, norms, and importance of SNS to youth reveal why these pages become the site of memorialization. boyd (2007) asserts that SNS such as MySpace serve a unique social purpose for American youth. Given the lack of easily accessible physical social spaces, the dearth of unstructured time, and the seeming omnipresence of helicopter parents, SNS exist as a bastion of 'unregulated' social space where teens are free to explore their relationships with each other and their own budding adult identities without the intervention of parents. SNS are a repository of information that signal these burgeoning identities—ranging from listing music tastes to blog posts about one's daily life. According to boyd (2007) MySpace pages are where youth 'write themselves into being.' Therefore, every song, flash animation, font color, etc has

implications for how holders view themselves and how they want others to interpret their identities. This space serves an important developmental function; adolescence is when youth attachment to parents decreases and attachment to peers increases (Youniss and Smollar, 1985). Given the importance of peer feedback and low-stakes environments for identity exploration during this period, it seems natural that youth use SNS to engage in identity formation and socializing. This relationship between MySpace's functions and its ability to meet developmental needs are most obvious in three main aspects of the SNS: the construction of one's online identity through the profile itself; the display of peer group membership through the listing of friends; and the receipt of feedback from others through comments and friend requests.

The currency with which youth 'write themselves into being' often includes popular culture artifacts, such as songs, brand logos, television clips, etc. (boyd, 2007). Liu asserts that SNS allow youth to 'craft their taste statements' that in turn become stand-ins for personality and identity (2007). Consumption and taste as meaningful markers of social status and identity are interrelated concepts with a long intellectual history ranging from Veblen (1899), to Bourdieu (1986), to current work such as Stokes (2007). The music, videos, brands, and bands listed on youth SNS pages are uses of consumer culture to express identity. While listing massively popular American television shows as favorites may seem like a blind acceptance of mass media, youth are meaningfully appropriating mass media preferences as shorthand representations of the self. Mass media have long been the currency of youth social standing; SNS allow youth to articulate these taste statements as markers of themselves.

Finally, as SNS become integral to the social lives of youth, the adolescent identity process, and youth consumption, it becomes increasingly important not only to look at their intended uses (establishing friendships, social ties), but also to examine how unintended uses of these sites, e.g.

memorials, may have unintended effects on youth themselves. The repurposing of these sites for personal needs such as mourning suggest that SNS are not merely stand-in arenas for psychological development, puerile pursuits, or corporate websites where users follow top-down terms of service; rather, they are participatory media that can be transformed in meaningful ways (Jenkins, 2006). In the case of memorialization, these peer led spaces becomes a relatively safe environment in which to explore grief.

Death, Adolescence, and Bereavement

Much scholarship on death, dying, and bereavement in Western contexts focuses on the elderly and hospitals, examining the increased medicalization of death, the segregation of the dying and elderly, and the subsequent feelings of isolation among dying populations (Glasser and Strauss, 1965; Hockey, 1990; Myerhoff, 1978). Yet, research by Oltjenbruns (1991) and Ewalt and Perkins (1979) indicate that by age 18, 90% of youth experience the death of siblings, parents, relatives, or peers. Research on adolescent bereavement has grown over the past twenty years, especially in relation to youth's experience with the death of a parent (Gray 1987; Servaty and Hayslip, 2001) or sibling (Fanos and Nickerson, 1991; Davies, 1991). Given the importance of peer relationships to adolescent development, the intensity of these relationships, and the frequency and nature of peer death, peer deaths have been posited to be significantly troubling for youth (Dyregrov et al., 1999, McNeil et al., 1991, Servaty-Seib and Pistolte, 2006).

Pagli and Abramovitch's (1984) review of death scholarship highlights the importance of funeral rituals in relation to mourning; however, while youth may be greatly affected by the death of a peer, they are often left out of or marginalized in these restorative rituals—ordinarily, teenagers do not plan other teenagers' funerals, a teammate does not receive condolence cards. Doka (1989) thus characterizes youth (and other marginal groups, such as ex-spouses, gay

8

8

partners, or extramarital partners) as 'disenfranchised' in their grief. Their relationships with a deceased peer are not interpreted as important, especially as compared with the grief of the immediate family. Inasmuch as peer mourners may not benefit from the official rituals of bereavement, the process of sharing emotions, thoughts, fears, and doubts with friends can provide valuable opportunities for youth coping. In her work with bereaved adolescents, Schachter (1991) found that many of youth subjects 'wanted and needed' to write about their feelings of loss. Dyregov et al (1999), Floerchinger (1991), Mauk and Weber (1991), and McNeil et al (1991), all highlight the necessity of teenagers being able to speak about their losses, and importantly, process their losses with their peers.

Given the increased participation of youth online, it would seem natural that peer connections of shared mourning are increasingly experienced on the internet. Schachter's (1991) early emphasis on the importance of writing to the bereaved youth she studied seems to dovetail with methods being employed on MySpace. Teens on MySpace are able to share their individual feelings of grief and are able to, through the reading of others' comments, come to an understanding that their feelings of fear, sadness, and confusion are normal. Recent research by Williams and Merten (2009) highlight the general strategies employed by teen mourners on SNS and how these strategies facilitate the coping process. However, beyond this recent study, there is little known about how youth use SNS in their mourning.

Data Collection and Analysis

During July-August 2007, I took screenshots of and collected comments from thirty public MySpace pages of deceased young people in the American Northeast. Profiles were found through an obituary website that linked to the deceased's MySpace page. To select profiles, I used the following criteria:

- **Time elapsed since death:** Subjects had to be deceased for at least six months, but no longer than twenty months. In the sample, the shortest period was seven months and the longest period was seventeen months. This time frame allowed me to see the immediate responses to the death, as well as change over time. I choose not to include deaths older than twenty months to limit the present study to more immediate mourning.

- **Location of Deceased:** The deceased had to be from the American Northeast. By limiting the region, I attempted to control for possible regional variation regarding death attitudes. Despite similarities in contemporary American deathways, scholars have pointed to cultural and regional difference (Thursby, 2006).

- **Cause of Death:** The subjects' causes of death roughly correspond to the Center for Disease Control's 2003 summary data of common causes of death for youth ages 15-25. The most common causes of death are: accidents, homicide, suicide, malignant neoplasm, and heart disease. I excluded the second most frequent cause of death, homicide, as this presents a more extraordinary case with potential legal implications.

- **Gender:** An equal number of female and male subjects were selected.

- **Page Stability:** Pages that had been edited for content or style after the death of the subject or made into 'in memoriam' pages by others were not analyzed. I assessed this by last log-in date. Log-ins after the date of death indicated that the profile could have been edited by others.

Race and ethnicity could only be ascertained through the pictures posted on the deceased's profile; therefore, race was neither ascribed nor a selection criterion.

On the decedents' MySpace pages, the commenting function, once a place to make plans with friends, post birthday messages, etc., becomes the mechanism for expressing grief, memorializing the deceased, and maintaining a sense of connection to the deceased's identity. Therefore, the main content examined in this paper is the comments left by youth mourners on the SNS. The majority of these comments are text-only, followed by text and image based comments, and in only a few cases images only. The posts vary in length—from messages as simple as 'RIP' to lengthy essay-like posts with topics ranging from school gossip to requests for intercession by the deceased. The most messaging occurs immediately following the death, during holidays, on the deceased's birthday, and the death date anniversary. Immediately

following the death, the messaging frequency is both the highest and draws the largest, most diverse pool of mourners. These core mourners often post at designated times, e.g. monthly anniversaries of the death, weekly posts. I also noted the design, music, blogs, video, photos, or other flash-based programming set up by the decedent prior to death.

Using inductive content analysis methods, I coded 1,660 pages of text and image comments. A subset of 15 profile comments was first read for emergent themes. Following this close reading, the subset was coded in relation to four broad categories: emergent themes (ex: use of popular media; references to afterlife); recurring message structures (ex. RIP); time of posted message (ex: holidays, anniversary of death); and frequently invoked images (angels). Finally, the entire dataset was coded with the final set of codes that emerged from the thematic subset coding.

Results

Deceased and Mourner

The Deceased's Identity: Creating a Legitimate Object of Mourning

On the thirty MySpace memorials in this sample, mourners create an identity for the deceased as a legitimate object of mourning through their comments, often in contrast and in response to the materials originally created by the deceased. Youth mourners justify their near constant memorialization of their friends by elevating them to more valorized statuses. The prolonged outpourings of public grief for dead celebrities seem justified by the celebrity's supposed contribution to society. Twenty-eight of thirty of the deceased peers in this sample are legitimized in a similar way. In the comments, posters laud the deceased's accomplishments, flaws are overlooked, and superlatives are ascribed to the deceased. Overall, these 28 deceased are remembered as individuals who touched everyone. While this may seem no different than an

obituary written by an outside party, online memorialization is distinct in that mourners'

comments regarding the identity of the deceased are always situated within the profile that was

initially authored by the deceased as his/her multi-media cyberself.[iii] Much like the two sets of

identities formed in these memorials, the memorials operate on two levels of content. When

examining the pages of the deceased, it is clear that these memorials have two major content

components: static *memorialized* content generated by the deceased prior to death and dynamic,

memorializing content created by the mourners of the deceased

The following case of memorialization on MySpace illustrates how the dual authorship of

these memorials results in an identity for the deceased as a legitimate object of mourning. Chris,

(age 17) customized his profile background to be a sports car, listed his interests as "girls, sports,

girls," cited Playboy Magazine as his favorite book, and posted a profile photo of him making an

obscene gesture. Prior to his death, Chris received few comments from his 100 friends. After his

death, an outpouring of comments presented another identity for Chris—one far removed from

the one Chris set up for himself:

>
> **4 Jul 2006 5:38 PM**
> … i will never forget my first day of schools u was in the 3rd grade your mom and u
> schould me how to tie my shoes and a trick not to but them on the wrong foot thats the
> kind of person u are…
>
> **14 Nov 2006 11:23 PM**…you was tha only Friend to come out and see me at my house...
> you dont kno how that made me feel....then i relized who was tha real friend.....YOU….
>
> **6 Dec 2006 2:24 PM**
> …it was like only yesterday when you told me to stop crying because boys aint worth the
> tears. i miss you chris and i miss the days that u and Sam would walk over to my porch
> and chill wit me everyday while i waited for Roger to get home from school. yeah
> rememeber when u yelled at me for having a hickey on my neck...

These comments, along with the hundreds of others praised Chris for being an attentive friend, loving brother, and a caring teammate. Comments from friends and family revealed a sensitive Chris that both problematizes his original projected image and suggests a lack of social validation of his projected self—at least after his death (Erikson, 1980). In Chris's memorialized page we see a full version of Chris—his perception of what he'd like to be seen as (a macho, sporty, tough guy) and his social group's valorized perception of him.

Ultimately, the mourners choose to memorialize certain aspects of Chris's online (and offline) identities as a way of constructing their own Chris who is a legitimately worthy of remembrance. Chris's macho identity is peeled away and friends construct a more sensitive classmate. In memorializing him this way, his mourners create a Chris who they feel better about missing—a Chris who chastises female friends for getting hickeys, rather than a friend who was an avid Playboy reader. Chris's two identities lie on the extreme end of the spectrum of contrasting identities; however, each subject in this sample has, to greater and lesser extents, a dual set of identities—one created by the deceased and one by the mourners. As these profiles stand as testaments to an identity of the deceased, it is no surprise that they become the site of mourning—they are a forever alive manifestation of the deceased, a place to remember them as they were, as they wanted to be, or as the mourners wanted them to be. Chris's work is done; his peers' work on his identity continues.

The Deceased Identity, Part 2: Establishing a Legitimate Object of Mourning through Mass Media

Chris's page, along with those of other youth in this sample, consists of a smattering of music, videos, and images of brand names. As previously mentioned, Liu (2007) and Stokes (2007) identify the deep meaning of popular culture in establishing one's online identity for

youth. On 18 of 30 decedents' pages, mourners frequently reference shared media habits, media content on the deceased's page, or use media itself.[iv] Youth mourners' use of pop culture references in their comments to the deceased seems a potentially powerful statement. The mourner is worthy of remembrance through one of the highest forms of cultural currency, popular culture. By explicitly tying the deceased to valued cultural artifacts, the mourner implicitly places the artifact's value on the deceased. Decedents are now as valuable as the song, the brand, the television show. Peer mourners have few avenues to express their grief—and, generally, few economic resources to express their remembrance or pay tribute through donations, elaborate floral displays, etc. What they do have to express their loss is mass media.

As an example, while alive, Tina (age 19) used Cascada's song *Miracle* as her MySpace song, images of popular brands and celebrities (Juicy Couture, Bacardi Rum, and Jessica Simpson), and glitter graphics of the Playboy logo to represent a flirtatious, sexual, and 'fun-loving' club-going image. In her *About me* she states: 'hey wuts up im tina. i like 2 party go 2 clubs chill wid the guys n grls. Im single!!!'. Tina appropriates images, songs, and brand associations to indicate her personality, interests, and ultimately, herself. Tina's page is more than just a wholesale reproduction of dominant party girl images; it appears to be an interpretation of these images to represent herself as she understands herself.

After her death, Tina's mass media preferences expressed in her profile now serve not only as taste signals, but as both powerful stand-ins for Tina and as tools for valorized memorialization of Tina by her peers. Following Tina's death, her mourners cite *Miracle* in relation to how and when they remember Tina:

> **2 Sep 2006 11:29 AM**
> heyy jamie, . sometimes i cant listen to cascada and other times i come to yer page and force myself to listen to it jus to make me realize that yer rle gone….Eileen

13 Sep 2006 4:35 PM
Tina <33 i know i comment you alot but yur alwaiis on my mindd. last night i felt lonley so i called Z100 and dedicated miracle, and hips dont lie to youu. and then miracle came on and i just started crying and crying and i know youu saw me cause i felt your presence . im gonna keep requesting songs fer you tina, and im gna keep requesting that god send youu home. i miss youu more then anything and love you more then the worldd <3 Crystal

1 Nov 2006 5:50 PM
your myspace song comes on evetynight as soon as i turn the radio on. it gives me the chills. i told my deepest secret to hannah todayy <33 i bet i wudve told you if u wer here. yur family misses you. and ur friends as you can see<3 hows heavan boo? love youuu<33333 rip babygirll Eileen

Prominent in all three quotations is Tina's MySpace song. The song is both a trigger to remember Tina and a symbolic embodiment of her. Her mourners deploy the song to express their deep grief and to link Tina to a culturally meaningful object. Crystal's commitment to requesting songs for Tina is a memorializing practice where she feels close to Tina ('i felt your presence') and Eileen's 'chills' are also tied to her association of *Miracle* with Tina's presence. Perhaps for Crystal and Eileen, hearing and requesting *Miracle* (referred by Eileen as 'your MySpace song') is a way to connect to Tina's identity, a way to create a meaningful ritual. *Miracle*, a popular song that plays on Tina's profile becomes to her friends 'her song'—not merely a song that she plays, a song that she likes, but rather a song that stands for her and her identity. This deployment of media carries value. By referencing *Miracle* as something that is inexorably tied to Tina, Tina shares in the object's value. She is now as valuable as the song itself.

Mourner Identity: Legitimate Mourner though Relationship Status with the Deceased

The decedents' identities are not the only identities being created, revised, and legitimized in MySpace memorials; indeed, mourners also construct their own identities as legitimate mourners of the deceased. For all youth participants in this sample, simply leaving a

message at the page marks them as mourners, or at least concerned participants expressing condolences. Mourners demonstrate their knowledge of the deceased by recounting specific events, referencing inside jokes, linking their taste preferences to the deceased's preferences, or prefacing their comments with statements indicating shared classes, activities, or mutual friends. As previously mentioned, Doka (1989) characterized youth (among others) as marginal or 'disenfranchised' mourners in traditional mourning practices. MySpace memorials provide an enfranchising space for youth to mourn their peers, but they still may be compelled to establish their legitimacy.

When Jesse (age 16) suddenly died in a car crash, during the first few hours following his death his page received 61 posts, 35 of which make explicit reference to shared classes, activities, inside jokes, or personal memories of time spent with Jesse to establish their intimacy with Jesse. Some of Jesse's posters identify themselves as acquaintances; however, in their comments they highlight memories of Jesse as an important influence in their lives, despite only having minimal contact. Indeed, a large portion of the initial comments left immediately following the death, are qualified in this way—aligning with the fact that immediately following the death the participants are the most numerous and varied. Despite varied personal intimacy with Jesse, the messages often follow the same pattern in both establishing the mourner's identity and the identity of the deceased through personal memories. By recounting their memories, etc, they can illustrate a sense of intimacy with the deceased—it is this intimacy that makes their mourning legitimate. The two comments below illustrate the common attributes of the comments left by both close and weak ties:

> **14 Jan 2006 2:41 PM**
> Jeessee maa babbyyy...iiii willl always luuvvvv you....im gladdd i got to know u so well..u were such a GREAT friend to me..u were always by my side and always there to make me laugh..i loved when we hung out together becuase we wuld alwayas have a

great time full of laughters....i loved ur personality ur style ur everything..u were full of such life. ur life affected so many peers around u baby..u just dont know how important u are to others, to me..and nowww u will be in my heart foreva in a better place..ur my inspiration jesse... I LUV YOU... im so glad iu came into ma life...im glad we got to hang out on friday ....rest in peace buddy <3foreva Sadie

14 Jan 2006 5:17 PM
Dearest Jesse,
I know that we were only aquantences, but i always thought of you as someone who was so unique and so different than everyone else. You were someone that was loved by everyone and someone who always knew how to put a smile on everyones face. Everyone is going to miss you so much. Especially your amazing break dancing. No one could ever do the things that you were able to do. You were one amazing person. Rest in peace<333 Craig.

Both posters identify themselves in relation to their relationship to Jesse ('aquantences' or 'GREAT friend'). In doing so, they establish the extent of their relationship and the merit of their identities as rightful mourners. Craig's comment is based on minimal contact, but both posters agree on Jesse's positive attitude, unique sense of style, and abilities. As Schachter (1991) illustrates in her portrait of youth mourning in high schools, ancillary peers are often moved by social pressures to partake in the mourning process. The recognition of the deceased's worthiness as object of mourning creates an opportunity for less knowledgeable mourners to take part in the mourning process. Jesse's legitimacy as an object of mourning is strong; therefore, it would be expected that all, including those more marginal to Jesse, could recognize his greatness and mourn the loss of such a figure.

Legitimacy as a mourner is also regulated by other mourners. Frequency of participation is often used as a proxy of an individual mourner's devotion to the deceased. While participating in mourning online signals one's identity as a member of the devoted community, the individual acts of participation—the number, frequency, and the content of the comments— are used by some 'regulator mourners' to judge other mourners. The exact relationship of regulators to the

deceased are unknown: some appear to be close friends, based on their self reporting of their

relationship with the deceased, others appear to be frequent posters only. All regulators,

however, seem to have sufficient social standing to intimidate other users into participation. By

attempting to regulate activity on the page through judgment of the quality and quantity of

others' participation, it seems as though the regulators are attempting to place the deceased at the

forefront of mourner's lives.

Illustrating these factors at work, posters on 22 of the 30 pages in this sample preface or

include in their posts apologies for the tardiness of their posts or the time lapse between posts.

On Victor's (age 19), page, Jane begins her comment by stating: 'i'm sorry that i haven't left you

a comment on here yet, i've just found it too hard.' Paola apologizes in this way to her friend,

Mona, age 15: 'hey sweetheart, i havnt commented in a while, sorry. i just want you to know

that i love you and miss you like crazy. ♥ always, Paola.' Just as with Victor's poster, there is an

implicit assumption that comments must not only be posted, but also posted with sufficient

frequently to represent how truly central the deceased is to the mourner.

In implicit cases of regulation, such as Victor and Mona, it is difficult to assess whether or not

the posters feels responsibility to the community's stated expectations of their mourning

frequency or responsibility to the deceased. In explicit regulations of participation, however, it is

evident that responsibility to community expectations of one's commenting frequency is used as

a proxy for the quality of one's mourning and devotion to the deceased. The regulators can, and

it seems do, mete out social shaming to mourners they feel have been inadequate. This goal is

accomplished through public commenting by the regulator addressed to the deceased about the

inadequacy of others' participation. Luz, one of Serena's (age 22) most frequent mourners,

questions whether or not the small number of mourners represents a lack of devotion to Serena:

28 Jul 2007 9:18 PM
It seems like the same people write you week after week...Me, Gianna, Diane, Britta, and Elona. I don't know if the others have forgotten or that's just their way of dealing with it. Maybe it makes them sad to see your page. Sometimes it makes me sad to read how much you are missed and not here with us...why does God always take the good ones? I love you sweetie goodnight MWAH luz.

Luz allows for an understanding the variety of grief expressions and the difficulty of visiting Serena's page, but indicates some resentment that other people may have 'forgotten' Serena. Luz's posting of this statement regarding the participation of others, highlighting as it does the notion of an exemplary poster, seems to indicate an explicit coupling of expectations regarding the frequency of posting held by regulators and perceived devotion to the deceased.

   In contrast, Allison's regulators show little understanding of the variety of mourning and directly equate not posting to her page with a lack of dedication to Allison. While her regulators do not highlight any one poster as exemplary, they model frequent and emotionally wrought participation as the norm to be followed when remembering Allison. The following comments were posted two months after Allison's death:

6 Apr 2006 4:43 AM
hey baby.... i know this is a little late but i want you to know i did NOT forget the 2 months, ppl have been giving me shit b/c i didn't leave anything on here for your two months when the truth is i went to see you and left you stuff and not many other things were there...trust me i can not and will NEVER forget my BFFL... and plus i don't comment on here anyway maybe once... b/c i normally go and talk to you since your just right across town from me...♥ Alexa♥.

7 Apr 2006 2:25 PM
You know it really sucks that to be loyal to you, you beautiful thing, you have to come on your myspace and comment or people will give you hell… i need you...i miss you...i love you Rosa.

9 Apr 2006 8:33 AM
…And I can't believe that people were giving some other people crap for not leaving a myspace comment. Just because someone doesn't leave a comment for the world to see doesn't mean they forgot about you. No one will ever forget about you! I know if you

were here what you would tell those people! You're awesome honey, and always will be the greatest in my eyes.♥ Lee ♥

Lee, Rosa, and Alexa challenge the convention that leaving comments equates remembering Allison. Rosa's comment suggests that participating in online commenting demonstrates having 'loyalty' to Allison—a precept she disagrees with, but follows. Lee combats regulation by claiming that Allison wouldn't agree with the regulators. Alexa, however, draws the starkest contrast in that she has gone to the traditional site of remembering—the cemetery. Each subject links her comment to strong feelings for Allison—remembrance, loyalty, continued love. The comments reveal an inherent tension in all mourning—how much to mourn and when to stop mourning. Given the high quantity of comments that Allison's page receives from a large and consistent group of peers, it would seem the regulators who 'give other people crap' for not participating are largely successful in correlating quantity and frequency of participation with quality of remembrance and reverence for the deceased.

Supernatural Identities

Mourner and Deceased: Eternally Connected

Through participation in MySpace memorials, youth reveal not only their feelings about the deceased or their roles as mourners, but also a nascent understanding of the relationship between the deceased and the living. Unlike Alexa, many youth do complement offline acts with messages to the deceased; there were 255 references to the cemetery—either plans to visit the deceased or descriptions of past visits. The language of 'coming to see you' or 'im gonna come visit soon' (Victor's page) is similar to the plan-making language used in comments before the deceased passed away. These casual comments about visitation suggest a palliative effect regarding the solemn cemetery visits. Rather than make the gravesite a solemn occasion for

reliving loss, by posting it on MySpace, it is framed as if the poster is simply meeting his/her friend for something as mundane as dinner and a movie.

In a similar mode, rituals such as funerals and memorial services are unpacked by youth participants in their comments—not as last rites, but as part of a continuing conversation between deceased and mourner. Posters inform the deceased about the funeral, e.g. 'your viewing and funeral were beautiful' (Natalia's page), confess emotional distress and confusion regarding the funeral, e.g. 'Today was the hardest day of my life' (Patricia's page), or use the page as a surrogate funeral, e.g 'Cuz I don't even know if I can make it to your funeral' (Jesse's page). They tell their deceased friend that they were embarrassed to have tripped while walking to the casket, upset that they didn't know what to say to the deceased's family, self-conscious about kissing the casket or crying. By sharing these thoughts with the deceased, the youth in this sample seem to be looking for supernatural guidance regarding death, and its rituals, from their now deceased friend. Just as their peers served as points of guidance in life, there is an expectation that they now serve as connections and guides to the afterlife.

Saints and Supplicants

The most striking form of this perceived connection to an afterlife is the plethora of requests for intercession by the deceased. Requests for intercession place the deceased beyond the sphere of simply wanting to connect to one's lost loved ones; the deceased are transformed into relatable and intimate connections with a perceived afterlife. Whereas most memorials focus on the deceased as an object of mourning, SNS memorials problematize the deceased's role in the memorial—he or she is part creator and also part patron.

Rosenblatt et al (1976) contend that maintaining connections with the dead through communication with ghosts through supernatural means or simply talking to ghosts out loud in

one's everyday life is a strong cultural taboo in American society. However, the need to maintain connection with the dead is a strong motivator, evidenced by various movements of spiritualism and cultural beliefs in ghosts. With new media mourning strategies, Jones states 'we have at least increased the number of ways we have to maintain presence' and closer relations with the dead (2004). Online memorialization, especially at person-centric sites like SNS, is a powerful 'presence' maintenance opportunity, as the cyber-self remains almost always available and accessible. If one of the youth posters started talking to Allison, Chris, or Victor in their daily lives, surely this would be cause for concern.[v] However, youth are able to apply the seemingly mundane communication of SNS into something that transcends and transgresses past social taboos around 'talking to' the deceased.

Some of the deceased are positioned as almost quotidian patron saints who act benevolently in the survivors' lives—e.g., car accident victims are seen as protecting mourners from their own near-accidents, one deceased's page becomes a place to reveal bisexual identities. For example, on Laura's page, a seventeen year old car accident victim, several youth are convinced of her power to protect them in accidents. Across 27 of 30 pages, there were 802 references to either asking for personal intercession by the deceased or references to successful intercession by the deceased. Intercession was such a motivating force behind Chris's mourners' use of his page, that one participant encouraged Chris not to intercede: 'It bugs the living hell out of me when people on here leave messages for you to help them about their love like… Just worry about yourself and remaining happy in heaven.'

While saints and ancestors are generally treated with formalized reverence when praying for intercession, the deceased are considered and addressed with the same informality that they were once regarded in life in MySpace memorials. It is this marked informality that distinguishes

supplication on MySpace from the traditional invocations of the dead in formal religious

traditions. To return to Laura's poster, there is a balance between Laura's heightened

intercessionary power and the deceased's informal connection with the poster:

> **12 Jul 2007 9:16 PM**
> Lo..
> i wanna say thanks for saving me.
> it had to be you. i know it was. without a seatbelt i shouldnt be able to type this right
> now. thanks for keeping everyone here tho. your truly the best angel up there.
>
> i swear i felt you keep me in the middle of the seat. i didnt feel the impact from the other
> car or when we rolled and slid. i think i blacked out after it but im not sure. but im sure
> you protected me. and i cant thank you enough.
>
> i miss you and all the times we had as younger kids..haa i still remember the dances we
> made to destinys child and n'sync.. i get a weird feeling when i hear them, like your nexxt
> time me trying to remember the moves we did..
>
> THANK YOUUU
> i love you and miss youu <333 Angie♥

Laura has a supernatural presence, a protective saint to be invoked in relation to her cause of

death; at the same time, however, she is also a teenager immersed in pop culture, even from the

grave. The deceased's position is liminal—not entirely divine and not entirely worldly. This

view of their friend's new position in death gives an indication of how youth conceive of death:

death does not erase the connection or the person, but it does partially transform both into

something supernatural. Given the overwhelming majority of posts directed to the deceased, it

seems that youth use mediated technologies to 'talk' to and maintain an everyday and a mystical

connection with the deceased.

Indeed, many young people point to MySpace as a vital connector to the deceased; posters

describe leaving comments as giving the illusion that they are 'still talkin to you.' MySpace

perhaps serves this purpose given the asynchronous and symbolic nature of the media itself.

Participants in SNS typically post personal messages to each other with the understanding both

that they are as likely to be read first by a third party and that response is not immediate or even guaranteed at all. The profile pages these messages are posted on are largely symbolic 'stand ins' for one's identity that can be accessed when physical socialization is not possible.

Consider the case of Victor. Writing a message on his page prior to his death did not guarantee a response from Victor, but it was a way to connect to Victor socially when physical socialization was not possible. Writing on his page after his death is largely the same experience—it enables a connection with a version of Victor and it is still a way to 'talk to' him, even though he won't write back. When Meredith writes to Victor, 'I bet they have myspace in heaven,' she shows her hope that MySpace is a liminal connection to Victor's self and that Victor's death is a 'good' one with a heavenly reward.

Conclusion and Implications: Death Online

25 February 2006 3:40pm

Renee, i miss you so much already. i know its honestly kind of stupid for people to be leaving you comments on your myspace but it just seems right…

For the mourners of the thirty deceased youth in this sample, MySpace comments serve a deep need: namely, the need to process the untimely death of a peer in a meaningful way. Youth establish and define themselves as fully 'enfranchised' mourners and define their deceased peer by co-creating a living memorial within the static, memorialized online profile left behind by the deceased. This is not to say this process is uncontested; rather, the mourners struggle to define themselves as legitimate mourners, as well as to create internal hierarchies of legitimate mourning based on frequency of posting etc. Beyond finessing their understanding of traditional roles in the aftermath of death, youth participants are also crafting an understanding of the more 'spiritual' identities of deceased and mourner. The deceased's role is to hear the mourner from beyond, the mourner's role is to conjure the deceased from the afterlife through MySpace. My

24

exploratory analysis suggests that more research into how digital media affects youth understanding of death, mourning, and relationships with the dead is necessary.

Online, youth can have a contemplative moment separate from the social concerns about appropriate behavior at an unfamiliar ritual or grave site. Online is a place where they can process not only the meaning of the death itself, but also the rituals of death. Turkle's (2008) claim that modern youth are constantly 'tethered' to new media devices for peer feedback on emotions would seem apropos here; yet, the youth mourners in this sample will not get confirmation of their feelings, or even confirmation of receipt their messages, from their deceased friends. Their concerns could be answered by other mourning peers; however, the norms of these sites are to direct all communication to the deceased and only implicitly, if at all to other mourners. If they are coping with peers, it is offline and not indicated on these sites. Allison and Chris will not reciprocate with a comment to the mourner—emotional concerns will remained unanswered. Rather, more than tethering to others, perhaps online communication provides a genuine space for personal reflection for a population that often finds itself bereft of traditional supports, especially when coping with death. Online memorialization provides important, new opportunities for previously shut-out mourners to define for themselves their continuing bonds to the deceased. Youth are able to explore how these traditional rituals make them feel by writing about them in a space that feels safe, free, and for them—my space. For youth counselors and social workers, online memorials can perhaps be used as a therapeutic intervention or as an assessment tool to help them better understand grieving youth.

Ultimately, these MySpace memorials provide a window into something more than mourning. These are average American youth—dying in average ways—car accidents, suicide, cancer—but what their MySpace pages say about contemporary deathways among American

teenagers is decidedly special. American youth's lives are progressively broadcast over the internet to a vast and unknown public—in files, in web addresses, songs that play for eternity (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008). Now, their deaths are online too. Youth recreate dominant platitudes of death in their comments, but also create a connection to the afterlife. Their posts provide insights into the ways youth understand death and the ways they create themselves in an increasingly media saturated world. Renee's mourner believes that it feels 'right,' if strange, to mourn her on her MySpace. Death is, ultimately, life's 'strangest' experience; whether or not MySpace is the 'right' way to mourn should be left to the mourner.

Appendix

A. Image Sample
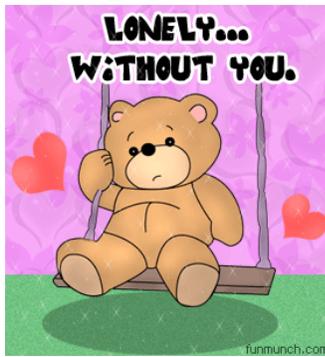
B. Insert Table 1: Geographic Distribution of Deceased

C. Insert Table 2: Subject's Causes of Death (CDC, 2003 data)

---

[i] These are verbatim quotations; spelling, grammar, and punctuation have not been changed.

[ii] The names herein are pseudonyms.

[iii] This is not to suggest that these representations of self are devoid of social cues or influences. However, despite the close reliance on peer vetting within SNS and the content of a profile, these profiles are ultimately mainly constructed by the deceased.

[iv] Mourners listed memories of the deceased in terms of the deceased's media habits (as fans of particular musical artists/TV shows), or shared experiences of mass media (such as attending concerts or watching TV shows together). Some mourners paste song lyrics from pop music as tributes to the deceased. For example, the Diddy (Sean Combs) tribute to slain rapper Biggie Smalls, *I'll be Missing You,* is often posted in comments. Another common use of mass media as mourning is asking the deceased to be in contact with deceased celebrities and performers, e.g. *r.i.p Chris can u pleas tell biggie* [Biggie Smalls] *i said was up nigga*.

[v] De Vries and Rutherford's analysis of web cemeteries further this claim: more than half of 244 memorials on the site directly address the deceased (2004).

References

Bourdieu, P. (1986) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

boyd, d.m. (2007) 'Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life', in D. Buckingham (ed.) *MacArthur Foundation on Digital Learning, Identity Volume*, pp. 119-142 Cambridge: MIT Press.

boyd, d.m. and N.B. Ellison (2008) 'Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13(1): 210-230.

Davies, B. (1991) 'Long-term Outcomes of Adolescent Sibling Bereavement', *Journal of Adolescent Research* 6(1): 83-96.

Doka, K. (1989) *Disenfranchised grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.*

Dyregrov, A., R. Gjestad, A.M. Bie Wikander and S. Vigerust (1999) 'Reactions Following the Sudden Death of a Classmate', *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 40 (3):167-176.

Erikson, E.H. (1980) *Identity and the life cycle.* New York: Norton.

Ewalt, P. and L. Perkins (1979) 'The Real Experience of Death among Adolescents: An Empirical Study', *Social casework* 60 (9): 547-551.

Fanos, J.H. and B.G. Nickerson (1991) 'Long-term Effects of Sibling Death during Adolescence', *Journal of Adolescent Research* 6 (1): 70-82.

Floerchinger, D.S. (1991) 'Bereavement in Late Adolescence: Interventions on College Campuses', *Journal of Adolescent Research* 6:146-156.

Foot, K., B. Warnick, B. and S.M. Schneider (2005) 'Web-based Memorializing after September 11: Toward a Conceptual Framework', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11(1): 72-96.

Golder, S., D. Wilkinson, and B. Huberman (2007) 'Rhythms of Social Interaction: Messaging within a Massive Online Network', *Communities and Technologies 2007: Proceedings of the Third Communities and Technologies Conference, Michigan State University* Springer-Verlag New York Inc, pp. 41.

Gray, R.E. (1987) 'Adolescent Response to the Death of a Parent', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 16(6): 511-525.

Hess, A. (2007) 'In Digital Remembrance: Vernacular Memory and the Rhetorical Construction of Web Memorials', *Media, Culture & Society* 29(5):812-830.

Hockey, J.L. (1990) Experiences *of Death: An Anthropological Account.* Edinburgh and New York: Edinburgh University Press, Columbia University Press.

Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide.* New York: New York University Press.

Jones, S. (2004) '404 Not Found: The Internet and the Afterlife', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 49(1): pp. 83-88.

Lenhart, A. and M. Madden (2007) 'Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview. 1st June 2007', URL (consulted May 2008): *http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_SNS_Data_Memo_Jan_2007.pdf*

Liu, H. (2007) 'Social Network Profiles as Taste Performances, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13(1).

Mauk, G.W. and C. Weber (1991) 'Peer Survivors of Adolescent Suicide: Perspectives on Grieving and Postvention', *Journal of Adolescent Research*. 6(1): 113-131.

McNeil, J.N., B. Silliman, and J.J. Swihart (1991) 'Helping Adolescents Cope with the Death of a Peer: A High School case study', *Journal of Adolescent Research*. 6(1): 132-145.

Moss, M. (2004) 'Grief on the Web', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 49(1): 77-81.

Myerhoff, B.G. (1978) *Number Our Days.* New York*:* Dutton.

National Center for Health Statistics, CDC (2003) '10 Leading Cause of Injury Death by Age Group Highlighting Unintentional Injury Deaths, United States—2003,' URL (Consulted July 2007) ftp://ftp.cdc.gov/pub/ncipc/10LC-2003/JPEG/10lc-unintentional.jpg

National Center for Health Statistics, CDC (2003) '10 Leading Causes of Daths, United States, 2003, All Races, Both Sexes,' URL (Consulted July 2007) http://webappa.cdc.gov/cgi-bin/broker.exe?_service=v8prod&_server=app-v-ehip-wisq.cdc.gov&_port=5081&_sessionid=Z1hQU/OEL52&_program=wisqars.percents10.sas&age1=15&age2=25&agetext=15-25&category=ALL&_debug=0

National Center for Health Statistics, CDC (2003) '2003 United States Unintentional Injuries Ages 15-25, All Races, Both Sexes' URL (Consulted July 2007) http://webappa.cdc.gov/cgi-bin/broker.exe?_service=v8prod&_server=app-v-ehip-wisq.cdc.gov&_port=5081&_sessionid=Z1hQU/OEL52&_program=wisqars.details10.sas&_service=&type=U&prtfmt=STANDARD&age1=15&age2=25&agegp=15-25&deaths=16614&_debug=0&lcdfmt=custom&ethnicty=0&ranking=10&deathtle=Death

Noppe, L.D. & I.C. Noppe (1991) 'Dialectical Themes in Adolescent Conceptions of Death', *Journal of Adolescent Research* 6(1): 28-42.

Oltjenbruns, K.A. (1991) 'Positive Outcomes of Adolescents' Experience with Grief', *Journal of Adolescent Research,* 6, (1): 43-53.

Palfrey, J.G. and U. Gasser (2008) *Born Digital : Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives.* New York: Basic Books.

Palgi, P. & H. Abramovitch (1984) 'Death: a Cross-Cultural Perspective', *Annual Review of Anthropology*13: 385-417.

Rainie, L., S. Fox, and M. Madden (2002) '*One year later: September 11 and the Internet',* URL (consulted May 2008): http://www.pewinternet.org/~/media//Files/Reports/2002/PIP_9-11_Report.pdf.pdf

Raphael, B. (1983) *The Anatomy of Bereavement.* New York: Basic Books.

Roberts, P. (2004) 'The Living and the Dead: Community in the Virtual Cemetery', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying,* 49(1): 57-76.

Rosenblatt, P.C., R.P. Walsh, and D.A. Jackson (1976) *Grief and Mourning in Cross-cultural Perspective.* New Haven, CT: HRAF Press.

Schachter, S. (1991) 'Adolescent Experiences with the Death of a Peer', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying,* 24: 1-11.

Servalty H.L. & B. Hayslip Jr. (2001) 'Adjustment to Loss among Adolescents', *Omega:Journal of Death and Dying,* 43(4): 311-330.

Servaty-Seib, H.L. and M.C. Pistole (2007) 'Adolescent Grief: Relationship Category and Emotional Closeness.' *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying,* 54(2):147-167.

Stokes, C.E. (2007) 'Representin' in Cyberspace: Sexual Scripts, Self-definition, and Hip Hop Culture in Black American Adolescent Girls' Home Pages', *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 9(2): 169-184.

Turkle, S. (2006) 'Always-on/Always-on-you: The Tethered Self.' In J. Katz (ed) *Handbook Of Mobile Communications And Social Change,* pp. 121-138. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Veale, K. (2004) 'Online Memorialisation: The Web as a Collective Memorial Landscape for Remembering the Dead', *Fibreculture* 3.

Veblen, T. (1899) *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions.* New York, London: The Macmillan Co; Macmillan & Co., ltd.

deVries, B. and J Rutherford (2004) 'Memorializing Loved Ones on the World Wide Web', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying,'* 49(1): 5-26.

Williams, A.L. and M.J. Merten (2009) 'Adolescents' Online Social Networking Following the Death of a Peer', *Journal of Adolescent Research* 24(1): 67-90.

Youniss, J. and J. Smollar. (1985) *Adolescent Relations with Mothers, Fathers, and Friends. Chicago:* University of Chicago Press.