

## Uses of Facebook and grief: emotional expression and seeking support in social media

*Usos de Facebook y duelo:*

*expresión emocional y búsqueda de apoyo en redes sociales*

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ANDRÉS MARÍN-CORTÉS<sup>1</sup>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3181-2901>

SANDRA QUINTERO<sup>2</sup>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4475-4624>

SEBASTIÁN ACOSTA<sup>3</sup>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6081-7272>

ANDRÉS GARCÍA<sup>4</sup>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9156-5880>

FREDY GÓMEZ<sup>5</sup>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0881-1305>

This article discusses the use of Facebook in relation to grief by women who have lost a loved one. Qualitative research was carried out using a phenomenological-hermeneutic method, in which 29 bereaved women were interviewed. The results indicate that Facebook is a platform for emotional expression and for seeking support. This research contributes to the understanding of communicative practices in digital media, which blur the boundaries between what is private and public during moments of crisis.

**KEYWORDS:** Grief, emotions, social support, digital interactions, Facebook.

*Este artículo analiza los usos de Facebook relacionados con el duelo por parte de mujeres que han perdido a una persona amada. Se realizó una investigación cualitativa a partir del método fenomenológico-hermenéutico en la que se entrevistaron 29 mujeres en duelo. Los resultados indican que Facebook es una plataforma para la expresión emocional y la búsqueda de apoyo. Esta investigación aporta a la comprensión de prácticas comunicativas en medios digitales que convierten en borrosos los límites entre lo público y lo privado durante experiencias de crisis.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Duelo, emociones, apoyo social, interacciones digitales, Facebook.

*Este artigo analisa os usos do Facebook relacionados ao luto pela morte de mulheres que perderam um ente querido. Realizou-se pesquisa qualitativa com método fenomenológico-hermenéutico, na qual foram entrevistadas 29 mulheres enlutadas. Os resultados indicam que o Facebook é uma plataforma de expressão emocional e busca de apoio. Esta pesquisa contribui para a compreensão das práticas comunicativas em mídias digitais, que confundem as fronteiras entre o que é privado e o que é público durante experiências de crise.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Duelo, emoções, suporte social, interações digitais, Facebook.

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<sup>1</sup> Universidad de San Buenaventura, Colombia.

[andresfelipemarin cortes@gmail.com](mailto:andresfelipemarin cortes@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Universidad de San Buenaventura, Colombia.

[sandra.quintero@usbmed.edu.co](mailto:sandra.quintero@usbmed.edu.co)

<sup>3</sup> Unidad de Duelo Funeraria San Vicente, Colombia.

[sacosta@funerariasanvicente.com](mailto:sacosta@funerariasanvicente.com)

<sup>4</sup> Unidad de Duelo Funeraria San Vicente, Colombia.

[agarcia@funerariasanvicente.com](mailto:agarcia@funerariasanvicente.com)

<sup>5</sup> Unidad de Duelo Funeraria San Vicente, Colombia.

[fgomez@funerariasanvicente.com](mailto:fgomez@funerariasanvicente.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

When the social network Facebook was created in 2004, its creators and users did not imagine that people grieving for the loss of a loved one would use it in such diverse ways. Today, however, this social network offers multiple tools for expressing grief. For example, Facebook has a service for creating memorial pages for friends and family to remember those who have died by visiting their profile and interacting with it. In addition, users of the platform often spontaneously create online support groups concerned with the topic of grief, in which content is shared, emotions are expressed and mutual help is offered (Tudela de Marcos & Barrón, 2017). Facebook is also used for the bereaved to contact mental health professionals who offer accompaniment during grieving experiences. Thus, commemorating, interacting and seeking support on social networks evokes experiences similar to those that used to be found only in cemeteries (Dilmaç, 2016; Lamilla, 2016; Moore et al., 2019; Willis & Ferrucci, 2017).

Grief is an emotional experience that requires the ability to identify strategies for accepting death and adapting to it (Bermejo et al., 2016; Gamba-Collazos & Navia, 2017). Among the most common strategies for coping with grief is the practice of rituals. Traditionally, communities have used these as a way to help the bereaved deal with their emotions throughout the grieving process. In this context, the social sciences have begun to question the ways in which grief is currently experienced, and its relationship with the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Döveling (2015) points out that emotional expression in face-to-face settings during a grieving process is characterized by the search for social support to process emotions such as grief and sadness. In addition, grief cannot be understood as a one-dimensional emotional experience, as it involves emotions such as fear, guilt, anger and despair. In the case of emotional regulation during grief, people are challenged to use intraindividual and interpersonal strategies to cope with it (Gross, 2008).

Given the widespread use of social networks and ICTs in everyday life (Feijoo & García, 2016), it is necessary to understand how death

is dealt with in the digital era. Social networks offer a space to record and share experiences (Gurevich, 2016), including the experience of grief. Since the emergence of platforms such as Facebook, the bereaved have the possibility to post their memories, emotions and wishes to a wide audience (Perluxe & Francisco, 2017). Social networks allow for interaction with the digital profile of the deceased, sharing information with family and friends, and discussing topics concerning death (Blower & Sharman, 2019; Giaxoglou et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2019).

In relation to online support groups and their impact on mental health, Hartig and Viola (2016) found that 48% of their sample report feeling less intense grief since they began to participate in digital support communities. Furthermore, those who stayed for a year or more in such groups felt that their grief decreased, compared to those who stayed for less time. Perluxe and Francisco (2017) suggest that Facebook facilitates social support from different sources simultaneously. According to the authors, such support contributes to the restructuring and reorganization of the grieving process. For their part, Moyer and Enck (2018) note that the use of Facebook allows bereaved users to commemorate their deceased loved ones, maintain a connection with them, express emotions, and remember special occasions.

The bereft that use Facebook to express their emotions consider this practice to normalize the grieving experience, removing the sense of shame that is often attached to this experience (Moyer & Enck, 2018). Some research has found that posting photos on Facebook is a way to maintain a bond with the deceased, combat grief, and accept the reality of the situation (Keskinen et al., 2019). Facebook's algorithm that generates videos of deceased loved ones between contacts offers a new way for the bereaved to relate to those they have lost. Thus, social networks are not only information mediators, but technologies that transform practices of remembering (Lambert et al., 2018).

Traditionally, the experience of grief has been characterized as belonging to the private sphere. However, in the face of the huge influence of social networks, there have been changes in the forms of ritualization, which were previously intimate in nature but which have now acquired a public character (Perluxe & Francisco, 2017). This change has reintroduced grieving processes into the collective sphere

and has facilitated the public expression of private thoughts about loss (Cesare & Branstad, 2018).

Social networks allow their users to express themselves by posting texts, images and videos. They even provide the possibility for some people to join funeral rituals virtually, allowing them to see the deceased or talk to family and friends by video call (Bravo, 2017).

This research was conducted with users of the Bereavement Unit of the San Vicente Funeral Home in Medellín (Colombia). This institution offers psychological support services to people going through the experience of the death of a loved one. At the Bereavement Unit, users find psychology professionals who accompany them through psychotherapy and support groups. During the last few years, the professionals of the unit have realized that part of people's experience of grief occurs through online interaction and communication. Within this framework, the present study aims to find out whether the use of digital social networks favors the grieving process and the tasks involved. This work is novel, both for the field of the psychology of grief and for the field of communication and digital interaction studies.

The research aims to understand how Facebook is used by women going through a mourning process for the loss of a loved one. The study was conducted with the purpose of widening our knowledge in this field, in order to clarify whether interactions on social networks favor processes of grieving, and whether they promote states of emotional well-being.

## METHOD

This research had a qualitative design, using a phenomenological-hermeneutic method (Ayala, 2008; Salgado, 2007), and was concerned with interpreting the uses of Facebook related to processes of grief for the loss of a loved one. Phenomenology-hermeneutics is a method that focuses on the study of lived experiences, analyzing the meanings that subjects construct about them (van Manen, 2003).

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 29 adult women between the ages of 22 and 61, residents of Medellín, from middle-class socioeconomic sectors. All of

them are users of the Bereavement Unit of the San Vicente Funeral Home. This was a condition for their participation in the research, since it was required that, as part of the emotional care of the participants, they should have at their disposal the accompaniment of a psychotherapist on the subject of grief.

### *Instruments*

The data generation technique was the unstructured, in-depth interview (Schettini & Cortazzo, 2016). First, the interview guide inquires about the kinship and nature of the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased. Second, it explores the uses of Facebook by the bereaved during their grieving process. The interviews had an average duration of 60 minutes.

### *Procedure*

The participants were invited through the support groups of the Bereavement Unit of the San Vicente Funeral Home, located in the city of Medellin. A first meeting was held with those interested in participating in the research, in which the objectives, method and technique of the study were presented. In addition, their doubts and concerns were answered. In this phase, both men and women were invited; however, 100% of those interested were women.

An appointment was then arranged with the participants, in which the ethical conditions of their participation in the study were clarified and the informed consent document was signed. Each person was assigned an alphanumeric code with which they were identified in the following phases of the study. Finally, the interviews were conducted and recorded in digital audio format.

A strictly inductive logic guided the data analysis. First, a microanalysis was carried out to segment and code the audios (Strauss & Corbin, 2002). As a result of this process, 245 codes were generated referring to the uses of Facebook in relation to the experience of grief for the loss of a loved one. The conceptual density criterion (Monge, 2015) allowed the codes to be grouped into the following categories: emotional expression, search for support, and interaction with the profile of the deceased. Atlas Ti v.7.0 software was used for the data transformation process.

### *Ethical considerations*

The Bioethics Committee of the University of San Buenaventura evaluated and granted its approval for the execution of the research. The study was rated by the Committee as minimal risk. However, in order to ensure the psychological health of the women participants, psychologists with experience in clinical grief and qualitative research conducted all interviews. The participants had access to the psychological care services of the Bereavement Unit, such as individual psychotherapy and support groups. Finally, this study was directed in accordance with Colombian Law 1090 of 2006, which regulates research in psychology.

## RESULTS

The research results are presented below. The findings are grouped into three sections that correspond to each of the categories constructed during the data analysis process: 1) emotional expression; 2) search for support; and 3) interaction with the profile of the deceased.

### *Facebook as a platform for emotional expression*

Women going through a grieving process use Facebook to express emotions related to grief. For the case of this study, emotional expression is considered as a form of catharsis –in the vernacular sense of the word–. The ways in which painful emotions are expressed are: posting photos and messages or sharing songs. In turn, when such expressions find a response from the Facebook audience, participants interpret these interactions as manifestations of emotional support.

At the beginning, it was for me to transmit to people everything I was feeling. I would post photos, messages that came to me during the week or, when I was feeling very bad I would write “Why does it hurt so much?” When people expressed their support, I was happy (Matilde, 43 years old).

Although the participants know that their messages will not reach the direct recipient, i.e. the deceased, they will nevertheless be received by indirect recipients, i.e. the audience of their social networks. Thus, emotional expression during the grieving process is intended for two

subjects: the person who has died and the large number of viewers who make up the social network. Even when the messages could be written in a private diary, the participants feel encouraged to post them on a digital platform, where they become visible to many people.

One day, I posted a picture of her, telling her “I miss you”, “my dear, how much I miss you”, “dear mother, dear mother, I carry you in my heart”. At Christmas I also posted that I missed her a lot (Nubia, 50 years old).

Participants find in Facebook, on the one hand, a channel to express their emotions, and on the other hand, various ways to express themselves emotionally. That is, this social network provides both the platform for emotional expression, for example, in the profile of the deceased user, and the resources for such expression, for example, with likes, reactions, posts, comments, etc. In addition, the place that Facebook occupies in the emotional experience of the bereaved takes on greater relevance when they perceive that in other settings, for example in their family, they are not listened to when they want to talk about their grief. Most of the participants report that in face-to-face interactions they are pressured not to talk about their emotions or the deceased person. On social media, however, there is always someone who responds positively to their posts.

It’s a way of expressing myself. It’s a way of expressing what I feel, through the networks, because very few people listen to me anymore (Jenny, 50 years old).

For women going through a process of grieving for the loss of a loved one, the emotions they express on Facebook are indeed what they feel. It is not a mask or a pose, but a genuine manifestation of their emotional life. In addition, participants report that the use of social networks is linked to the immediacy of their emotional experience. This makes sense within the framework of the structural design of social networks, which include live posting options, and also take advantage of the connectivity and portability of cell phones.

I say that when you post an emotion on Facebook, it is what you are feeling at that moment. I use Facebook by posting pictures and some statuses of how I was feeling at that moment. Expressing how one is feeling at that moment (Katherine, 45 years old).

The participants state that, during the first phases of the grieving process, Facebook is a useful tool for expressing their emotions and seeking the support they consider so necessary during these vital moments. The posting of photographs, which characterizes the social networks, is accompanied by texts referring to the emotions experienced by the users. Thus, emotional communication takes the form of two registers: iconic and textual. This enriches the experience of the participants, as well as that of the other users of the social network who are the consumers of this content.

I put a photo, and then I wrote what I was feeling. At the beginning it was a way to feel support, and to be able to express what I was feeling. I post the photo and, according to what I see in the photo, I write how I feel (Luz, 38 years old).

### *Search for support on digital platforms*

Study participants often join online groups that address the topic of grief. These groups promote emotional expression, access to scientific information, and content about grief, death, and acceptance. This generates the perception that others who have also experienced loss understand their experience. In this type of group, participants offer and receive mutual support. In addition, the women interviewed reproduce in their own profiles the postings found in the online groups. The purpose of this practice is to ensure that messages reach new people who are going through a grieving process.

I looked for another group. It's called "I have an angel in heaven". There I watch videos, look at comments and I share all that. Many of those things I share with the people I have added on my Facebook page (Alba, 49 years old).

On the other hand, Facebook is a place where they can find help, both for themselves and for those close to them. For this reason, women join online groups and pages where they look for scientific posts that help to clarify their process. On these sites they find psychological support, which gives them confidence and clarity about the phases of emotional processing they are going through. In addition, they receive answers to their questions about how to cope with their loss, and how to develop strategies for the resignification of their life without their loved ones.

The articles I have read have helped me. In fact, they are from psychologists who post a lot there. I have several pages of psychologists; so at times I read things like that, which helps me a little bit (María, 54 years old).

Facebook offers people in a grieving process the possibility to support others, either by commenting on posts, reacting to posts, interacting with other members of grief support groups, or offering advice based on their experience. The above indicates a desire to give back the support found within the social network. It is a way of transmitting the lessons learned and an attempt to “help oneself by helping others”. This indicates that alleviating the pain of grief is achieved through interactive support processes, both what is received and what is offered.

I really like to post little phrases about grieving, about overcoming, that yes, you can, that storms have to pass, that after a storm the sun comes out. Because I like to show many people who are going through the same situations I went through when I experienced such hard times, that you can overcome it all, yes, we are capable of it (Dora, 48 years old).

Facebook is a free access tool for pain relief. Its users can access it whenever they wish, as long as they have an Internet connection. Although in the early stages of grief, the purpose of its use is to unburden oneself emotionally, in later stages the perception of its usefulness as a tool for giving and receiving support increases. This results in the generation of emotional states of relief and well-being for the bereaved, due to the perception of being accompanied in this process.

It was not a premeditated thing. It just happened. When I saw that I was writing and that people wrote back to me and that people asked me how I was doing, how my spirits were, that was nice for me, to see that at least the people on the network were writing to me (Catherine, 29 years old).

The tools developed by Facebook for interaction between users play a fundamental role in the perception of support. A like, a message, or an emoticon are responses that let the bereaved know that they have been seen, recognized and understood. Importantly, digital interactions convey emotions and attitudes such as caring and acceptance. Ultimately, these are the psychosocial aspects that make it possible to process grief and lessen the feeling of loneliness.

For me it has been very satisfying to be able to tell my friends, as well as my friends' friends, how I am doing. Also, I receive support from them, because they immediately send me a sad face, a happy face, or a comment which provides support (Isabel, 29 years old).

#### *Interaction with the profile of the deceased to keep their memory alive*

The participants report that they habitually visit the Facebook profile of the deceased person. The women interviewed interact with the profile of the person who died, looking at their photographs or liking the posts they made during their lifetime. The images stored in the social network have a special meaning for the bereaved. It is a way of preserving memories and having permanent access to them. They are always there and can be viewed from anywhere. For this reason, the study participants consider it important that the social network account of the deceased is kept active.

I used to visit my husband's profile to look at photos, to remember things, moments. He had posted some very nice pictures, it was easier for me to download them from his profile than to start looking for them (Paola, 37 years old).

The possibility of visiting the Facebook profile of the deceased brings the bereaved closer to a repository of texts and images that show how that person felt about the world. This allows the participants to

access a sort of intimate memory where the deceased narrated his or her life and highlighted the significant milestones in it. This contact produces a sense of closeness with the deceased, as if by accessing this content they were also accessing, in some way, the life of their loved one. For the participants, this is a way of maintaining a bond and mitigating their absence.

When I look at my sister's profile, to tell you the truth, it's kind of hard. It makes me sad, but it's like the way to see her, to look at the things she shared. It's the only way I have to see her, to express my feelings. I thank God for the shared moments. I always write to her that I miss her very much (Rosa, 46 years old).

Accessing the deceased's posts places the bereaved in an unusual situation: the digital content remains over time, but its interpretation varies with the changing circumstances. What could once have been an incomprehensible post may acquire a new meaning, especially when it comes to messages or posts with reflections. From these new interpretations, interactions arise between the bereaved and the content, which, according to the participants, is a form of communication with the loved one.

My mom had a page called "I am a survivor". I check it out a lot. It's very spiritual. She posted things like health tips, cancer management, but also very spiritual things, things that I have only recently come to fully understand. So it is through the profile and that page that I can feel she is talking to me (Dora, 49 years old).

The profile of the deceased becomes a space where participants ritualize periodically, on anniversaries and special dates. Memorial messages with emotional content are posted there, which validate the bond with the person who died. Friends and family members use the network to express their emotions. This prevents the profiles of the deceased from being closed or deleted, as they are attributed with a special status, making them places where it is permitted to say what needs to be expressed during the grieving process.

I wanted to close my husband's Facebook profile, but I didn't because one of his sisters, every month, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of every month, posts something on my husband's profile. Every month she posts something on his profile. She makes very nice collages and writes things (Monica, 47 years old).

To cope with the absence they face in everyday life, participants need to give a sense of continuity to the memory of their loved ones. This is where the use of Facebook makes sense, due to its tools for resorting to photos and messages posted previously. This allows for building memories in the present, as the memory is not lodged in a chronological past, but in a construction of subjective history and intimate memory of their loved one.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Perluxo and Francisco (2017) point out that Facebook users can choose the audience to which their emotional expression is directed. However, the authors do not take into account that the platform is the one who defines which contacts the posts will reach, due to a function that defines the audience based on their affinities. For this reason, everything a user posts does not appear in the newsfeed of all their contacts. Therefore, no matter how wide the audience is, it will always be limited to the contacts with whom the user interacts most frequently or who have been interested in similar topics to the post. In this context, the expressions of support that bereaved people receive on Facebook are determined by the access that their contacts have to their posts. Thus, they tend to receive likes, comments or messages from people with whom they generally interact.

This is similar to the way in which bereaved people find support in face-to-face settings. Dregrov et al. (2013) indicate that the value the bereaved find in face-to-face support groups is the information available to them related to the members of the group, the processes experienced in the group and the guidance offered. When people participate in face-to-face support groups accompanied by a psychology professional, as occurs in the Bereavement Unit of the San Vicente Funeral Home, they generate processes of identification and recognition among themselves.

According to the above, it is possible to affirm that in both settings—online and face-to-face—the support is not received from all those who know them, but from a specific group of subjects who are aware of the emotional process that the bereaved are going through, due to interaction and communication frameworks that are established both in face-to-face and digital settings.

The use of Facebook is so widespread that expressing an experience of grief on this platform does not seem to question the boundaries between the private and public lives of the bereaved. On the contrary, communicating the death of a loved one through this social network is one of the most common and naturalized actions. This coincides with the findings of Blower and Sharman (2019), indicating that the bereaved usually post the news that someone they love has died on social networks. In this sense, Facebook operates as a personal epitaph that materializes the “voice” of the deceased (Lamilla, 2016).

Facebook is a platform that fulfills multiple functions in the grieving process: it is a means of communication, a channel for emotional expression, a source of information about other social fora, a space for ritualization, a social setting for the new digital performativity, and a tool for seeking social support. During a process of grieving for the loss of a loved one, a social network is far from being a platform that serves only to entertain oneself by looking at travel photos posted by others. On the contrary, Facebook is a diverse and rich source of support for the bereaved during the emotional experience of grieving.

The use of digital social networks favors the processing of grief. One of the tools that enables this is the creation of online support (Hartig & Viola, 2016; Tudela de Marcos & Barrón, 2017). As found in this study, when progress has already been made in processing grief, there appears a desire to accompany others who are just beginning to experience it. That is, there is a transition in the use of Facebook in the grieving process, from the need to receive support, to an interest in offering it to others. Thus, sharing pain with others helps in the process of resolving grief.

Faced with a perceived lack of social support at home, the bereaved see Facebook as a place where they are accepted and can express their emotions with fewer restrictions and without being judged. Joining

online groups that address the topic of grief generates in the bereaved the perception of feeling understood. In addition, this enables the reduction of anxiety and depression symptoms, which are so common during the experience of grief (Glaser et al., 2018). In this way, Facebook becomes a resource for the improvement of mental health (Moore et al., 2019).

To understand Facebook as a space for emotional expression, it is necessary to link it to the Internet as a broader social setting. Only in this way will we be able to understand why people going through a process of grief often use social networks to communicate what they feel. In this regard, Serrano-Puche (2016) points out that the web is both a channel for communicating emotions and a technology that helps to shape and amplify them. In relation to the present research, this means that Facebook is not merely a display of emotions. On the contrary, its structure allows emotions to be expressed in a particular way; that is, they are related to a certain performativity.

In the words of Bossetta (2018), the structure of digital platforms influences the communication and decision-making of Internet users. For this reason, social networks should be interpreted as environments and not simply as technologies that people use. For Bucher and Helmond (2018), each platform possesses its own characteristics and “paths”. Although Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. are similar in some of their functionalities, they should be analyzed individually. Therefore, the findings of this research on the use of Facebook during processes of grieving cannot be unquestioningly extended to what might happen on other social networks.

Finally, grief is a process in which emotions are expressed that are important for the restructuring of the experience. However, there are limitations in finding face-to-face settings in which to deal with death, and which provide social support to lessen the pain of the loss. In this context, it is important to generate understanding about the use of tools such as Facebook for processing grief. Given the perceived lack of social support in homes and institutions, people see Facebook as a place where they are accepted, can express themselves, and always find a response from someone. This is a challenge for health and social science professionals who work with people going through processes of grief, as many of the online groups do not have

the support of professionals such as clinical psychologists, who, from a scientific standpoint, can guide the interactions and the dissemination of content in favor of resolving grief in a healthy way.

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