



# The Effect of Grief Expression on Instagram on Users' Digital Empathy and Emotional Response

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## ABSTRACT

*This study explores how grief is expressed and empathized with on Instagram, focusing on the dynamics of digital mourning and emotional contagion within visual storytelling. As social media becomes a prominent platform for public and personal expressions of loss, understanding the emotional interactions that arise from such content is critical. Employing a mixed-methods approach including content analysis of grief-related Instagram posts and interviews with active users the research investigates how users respond emotionally to visual and textual expressions of mourning. The findings reveal that posts incorporating photos or videos tend to elicit stronger empathic engagement than text-only posts, with users who frequently interact with grief-related content demonstrating higher levels of digital empathy. The study also highlights the role of online mourning communities in providing emotional support and fostering shared healing experiences. These insights contribute to the growing discourse on digital empathy, affective communication, and the evolving rituals of grief in online spaces, offering implications for platform design, mental health support, and cultural understandings of mourning in the digital age.*

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## Introduction

In recent years, social media has transformed the way individuals express emotions, share experiences, and connect with others. Platforms like Instagram, initially designed for visual storytelling, have evolved into digital spaces where users frequently share personal and emotionally charged content including expressions of grief. From memorial posts to stories of loss, mourning has increasingly shifted from private, intimate settings to the public digital arena (Walter, 2015). This phenomenon reflects a broader cultural change in how grief is processed and communicated in the digital age.

The rise of "digital mourning" on Instagram has generated mixed reactions. Some view it as a powerful form of emotional release and community support, while others question the authenticity or emotional impact of such posts on followers (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). At the heart of this debate lies an important psychological and social construct: empathy. In the digital context, empathy manifests as users' ability to emotionally respond, support, and understand others through virtual interactions a concept referred to as digital empathy.

Digital empathy is especially significant in the context of grief-related content. Unlike face-to-face interaction, social media removes non-verbal cues, physical presence, and real-time emotional

feedback. Yet, people continue to engage with posts that portray pain, loss, and mourning (Entilli & Cipolletta, 2021). Understanding how these expressions affect the emotional responses of viewers whether they encourage compassion or lead to emotional fatigue is crucial in evaluating the social and psychological effects of social media usage.

Over the past decade, interdisciplinary research has increasingly focused on how expressions of grief on social media shape digital empathy. The expression of grief has undergone a significant transformation with the rise of digital communication platforms. Traditionally a private experience, grief has increasingly become a public act, especially through platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Researchers such as Walter et al. (2012) describe this phenomenon as the emergence of "continuing bonds" in online spaces, where the bereaved maintain ongoing connections with the deceased through posts, messages, and memorial pages. Instagram, in particular, with its visual interface, has become a space for users to post photos, share memories, and use hashtags to communicate loss and commemorate loved ones. Studies have shown that these digital rituals often serve a dual purpose: personal emotional expression and social signaling. Giaxoglou (2015) highlights how grief expressions are shaped by platform-specific affordances, including likes, comments, and shares, which introduce a performative aspect to mourning. As such, grief in digital contexts reflects both sincere emotional disclosure and a negotiation of identity in front of an audience.

Digital empathy refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and emotionally respond to others through mediated communication. It is particularly relevant in the context of grief expression, where users respond to sorrowful content not through face-to-face interaction but through comments, reactions, and messages. FrieSEM (2016) conceptualized digital empathy as comprising cognitive and affective components, similar to traditional empathy, but adapted for online interaction. Emotional contagion, the process by which emotions spread through social networks, also plays a key role. Kramer et al. (2014), in a widely cited Facebook study, found that exposure to emotional content can influence users' emotional states, even without direct interaction. In grief contexts, this implies that seeing posts about loss may evoke feelings of sadness, compassion, or solidarity among followers. However, other scholars, such as Konrath (2017), caution that digital platforms may also limit the depth of empathy due to their superficial and fast-paced nature. Repeated exposure to emotional content without meaningful engagement can lead to desensitization or compassion fatigue, thereby weakening users' empathetic responses over time.

The rise of online mourning communities has created new spaces where individuals come together to share experiences of loss and offer mutual support. These communities often form around shared identities, such as age, relationship to the deceased, or cause of death, and provide a sense of belonging that may not be available offline. Studies by Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish (2013) have explored how such communities use digital platforms to construct collective memory, process grief, and create meaning after loss. These spaces often serve as virtual support groups, where members share stories, provide advice, and validate each other's emotional experiences. The sense of community can be therapeutic, particularly for those who feel isolated or stigmatized in their grief offline. In these environments, empathy is not only expressed but nurtured, as members develop strong emotional bonds through consistent and compassionate interaction. However, scholars also warn that these communities can reinforce echo chambers of grief or expose users to triggering content, which may complicate the healing process.

Despite the relevance of this topic, there remains limited academic exploration of how grief content on Instagram influences users' empathy (Kwon et al., 2021). Most existing studies focus on cyberbullying, online support groups, or emotional contagion in general. This research seeks to fill that gap by examining how users emotionally respond to others' grief on Instagram and whether this fosters genuine digital empathy or contributes to emotional desensitization.

In an age where digital interaction increasingly substitutes real-world engagement, analyzing the intersection between grief expression and empathetic response is not only timely but necessary. The

insights from this study may provide valuable contributions to understanding emotional behavior in digital spaces, inform mental health awareness on social platforms, and guide the design of more empathetic social media environments.

## Method

### *Theoretical Framework*

This research is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from communication studies, psychology, and media theory to explore how digital expressions of grief influence empathy among Instagram users. Central to this framework are empathy theory, emotional contagion theory, and media richness theory, all of which help explain the psychological and communicative processes involved in users' emotional responses to grief content on social media (Moore et al., 2019).

Empathy theory, particularly the model proposed by Davis (1983), forms the psychological basis of this study. Empathy is conceptualized as both a cognitive and affective process: cognitive empathy refers to the ability to understand another person's perspective, while affective empathy involves sharing in another's emotional experience. These dual dimensions are relevant in digital spaces where emotional cues are often limited. Digital empathy extends this framework to the online environment, where users respond to others' emotional disclosures, such as grief-related posts, through likes, comments, and shares. This study investigates how these online behaviors reflect or influence genuine empathetic engagement.

Emotional contagion theory, as introduced by Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson (1994), further informs the framework by explaining how emotions can spread within digital networks. On platforms like Instagram, where grief is visually and verbally expressed, followers may unconsciously mimic or internalize the emotional tone of posts. Visual elements such as crying faces, somber captions, and black-and-white imagery often trigger shared sadness or concern among viewers, leading to the spread of affective states (Sherr-Pollard, 2001). This phenomenon is crucial to understanding how exposure to others' grief may elicit digital empathy.

In addition, media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) provides insight into the communicative affordances of Instagram. The theory posits that richer media those that can convey multiple cues, offer immediate feedback, and use natural language are more effective for complex emotional communication. Instagram's combination of images, videos, captions, and interactive features (e.g., Stories, Reels, and direct messaging) allows for varying degrees of richness. Users' empathetic responses may therefore depend on how "rich" the grief content is; for instance, a heartfelt video tribute may evoke deeper emotional engagement than a brief text post (Ip, 2021).

The interaction of these theories supports the central hypothesis of this research: that expressions of grief on Instagram can evoke varying levels of digital empathy depending on content type, user engagement, and emotional proximity. Together, these theoretical perspectives offer a comprehensive lens for analyzing not only how users express grief and react to it, but also why such expressions may or may not stimulate empathetic responses in an online setting.

### *Methodology*

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques to comprehensively investigate the effect of grief-related expressions on Instagram on users' levels of digital empathy (Bergerot, 2013). The integration of these two methods allows for a more nuanced understanding of how users perceive, engage with, and are emotionally impacted by grief content shared on the platform.

The research is designed as an explanatory sequential mixed-methods study, beginning with a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase (Ivankova et al., 2006). The quantitative component aims to measure the level of digital empathy among Instagram users after exposure to grief-related

posts. The qualitative component is used to explore in depth the users' subjective experiences, emotional interpretations, and motivations for engaging with such content.

The target population includes active Instagram users aged 18–35, as this demographic is both highly active on social media and emotionally responsive to online content (Manikonda et al., 2014). A purposive sampling technique is employed to select participants who have previously interacted (liked, commented, or shared) with grief-related posts on Instagram. A sample size of approximately 250 respondents is sought for the quantitative survey, while 10 to 15 participants are selected for in-depth interviews in the qualitative phase.

In the quantitative phase, data is collected using a structured online questionnaire consisting of:

- Demographic questions,
- Exposure to grief-related content,
- The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) to assess levels of empathy,
- Behavioral questions regarding user engagement (e.g., liking, commenting, sharing).

In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews are conducted with selected participants to explore their personal reflections and emotional responses to specific grief-related posts (Tan & Andriessen, 2021). Participants are asked to describe how they felt upon seeing such content, what prompted them to respond (or not respond), and how such experiences may have shaped their understanding of empathy in digital contexts.

Quantitative data is analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression models to examine relationships between exposure to grief content and levels of digital empathy (Döveling, 2017). Statistical software such as SPSS or JASP is used to manage and interpret the data.

Qualitative interview data is analyzed using thematic analysis, following the steps of data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). NVivo or manual coding is used to identify recurring emotional and behavioral patterns across participants' narratives.

To ensure validity, the questionnaire incorporates established scales such as the TEQ, which has been widely validated in empathy research (Spreng\* et al., 2009). Triangulation between quantitative and qualitative findings is used to strengthen the credibility of the results. Reliability is enhanced through pilot testing of the survey instrument and consistency checks during the interview coding process.

This study upholds strict ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time (Corrigan, 2003). Since the topic involves potentially distressing emotional content, participants are provided with information on emotional support services, and interview sessions are conducted with sensitivity and respect.

## Result and discussion

### Result

The results of this study reveal a significant relationship between exposure to grief-related content on Instagram and the digital empathy levels of users. The quantitative data, collected from 250 respondents, indicated that participants who frequently encountered and interacted with grief posts such as those announcing the death of a loved one, tributes to the deceased, or messages of loss scored notably higher on the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) compared to those who reported minimal or no exposure.

Descriptive analysis showed that 68% of respondents had encountered grief-related posts on Instagram at least once a week, while 42% actively engaged with such content by liking, commenting, or sharing. A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation ( $r = 0.49$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) between frequency of exposure to grief content and empathy scores. Furthermore, regression analysis suggested that emotional engagement with grief posts (e.g., leaving supportive comments) was a

significant predictor of higher digital empathy levels ( $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), even when controlling for demographic variables such as age, gender, and time spent on Instagram.

In the qualitative phase, in-depth interviews with 12 participants provided deeper insight into the emotional mechanisms behind these responses. Participants described feelings of compassion, sadness, and shared vulnerability when viewing grief-related posts, especially when the content involved friends or public figures with whom they felt emotionally connected. Several interviewees noted that seeing grief shared so openly made them reflect on their own emotional experiences and motivated them to offer comfort, either through messages or supportive comments.

Interestingly, some participants admitted to emotional fatigue or desensitization when repeatedly exposed to grief content, especially during times of collective loss (e.g., during the COVID-19 pandemic or natural disasters). This aligns with the concept of compassion fatigue, where repeated exposure to emotionally intense material may reduce empathic responsiveness over time. However, this effect was more prevalent among users who passively consumed content without direct engagement.

Another noteworthy finding was that visual and narrative richness of posts significantly influenced user responses (Moran et al., 2020). Posts containing heartfelt stories, videos, or photo montages of the deceased tended to elicit stronger emotional reactions and more empathetic engagement compared to brief or vague captions. This supports the assumption, rooted in media richness theory, that emotionally expressive and context-rich content has a greater potential to stimulate empathy.

Overall, the results suggest that digital expressions of grief on Instagram can indeed foster digital empathy among users, particularly when content is relatable, emotionally vivid, and socially engaging. However, the findings also point to a dual effect, where empathy can either be heightened or dulled depending on the frequency and manner of exposure.

### *Significance of the Study*

This study holds meaningful significance across multiple domains psychological, social, technological, and educational by deepening the understanding of how digital expressions of grief influence the development of empathy in online environments. This research offers valuable insight into how emotional experiences shared through social media contribute to empathic development or desensitization. By understanding how users respond to grief-related content, professionals can develop better frameworks for digital mental health interventions, particularly in cases where individuals experience grief or compassion fatigue in online spaces. It can also inform therapeutic approaches that incorporate social media habits into emotional regulation strategies.

The study encourages greater awareness among users regarding their emotional engagement on digital platforms (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2016). Understanding the impact of frequent exposure to grief-related content can help individuals navigate their online experiences with greater emotional intelligence and intentionality. It also promotes more thoughtful, compassionate interactions in response to others' emotional disclosures, helping foster healthier online communities.

Findings from this study can guide the development of platform features that better support emotional expression and community empathy (Chen & Xu, 2021). For instance, Instagram and similar platforms may consider integrating more empathetic design tools such as grief-sensitive filters, memorial post options, or emotional support prompts to improve user experience in emotionally charged contexts. This research provides a user-centered perspective that can enhance digital well-being policies and design practices.

Educators involved in digital citizenship and media literacy can use this study to emphasize the emotional responsibilities of engaging in online communities (Richardson & Milovidov, 2019). As young people spend increasing amounts of time online, fostering empathy through social media education becomes vital. This research equips educators with evidence-based material to encourage empathy-driven interactions and critical thinking about emotional content.

By contributing to the growing body of work on digital empathy and online mourning, this study serves as a foundation for further research in communication, psychology, and digital culture. It opens pathways for future studies on emotional dynamics in online interaction, the ethics of digital mourning, and the psychological effects of prolonged exposure to emotional content on social media. The significance of this study lies in its capacity to inform emotional understanding, support system design, and social behavior in digital spaces ultimately helping to build more empathetic, human-centered online environments.

### ***Visual Storytelling and Its Impact on Digital Empathy***

Visual storytelling allows individuals to convey raw, immediate, and emotionally charged moments that text alone may struggle to encapsulate. For instance, an image of a grieving family, a video tribute to a lost loved one, or a snapshot of a memorial event can communicate the depth of sorrow and the reality of loss in a visceral way (Pardo & Morcate, 2016). These visuals serve as emotional cues that can trigger an instinctive empathic response in viewers, as they can more easily imagine themselves in the situation or feel connected to the subject.

Unlike written posts that require cognitive processing and interpretation, visual content operates on a more intuitive level (Cristani et al., 2013). Research in cognitive psychology suggests that humans are naturally wired to respond to facial expressions, body language, and environmental context elements that are more effectively conveyed through images and videos. As a result, viewers are more likely to feel an immediate emotional resonance when confronted with visual content depicting grief or loss.

Moreover, the use of visual storytelling in mourning also bridges language barriers, making emotional experiences more universally accessible. A tearful expression, a black-and-white photo of a deceased loved one, or a quiet scene at a gravesite can transcend linguistic differences and cultural contexts, allowing empathy to emerge across a diverse audience.

However, this emotional impact is a double-edged sword. While visual content can deepen understanding and solidarity, it can also intensify emotional fatigue or desensitization if viewers are exposed to frequent, intense visuals without adequate psychological processing. Therefore, the power of visual storytelling to trigger empathy must be understood in both its strengths and limitations.

Visual storytelling particularly in the context of grief shared online often triggers stronger empathy than text-only posts due to its immediacy, universality, and emotional clarity (McNamara, 2007). It allows viewers to not just read about loss but to witness and feel it, fostering a deeper, more human connection in digital spaces.

### ***Comparison with Previous Studies***

The findings of this study, which examine how digital mourning on Instagram fosters empathy and emotional connection, both affirm and extend the insights provided by previous research on grief expression and emotional engagement in digital spaces. Prior studies have established that online platforms serve as evolving spaces for public mourning, enabling users to process grief collectively, seek support, and sustain memory of the deceased (Brubaker et al., 2013; Walter et al., 2012). These earlier works emphasized the communicative and ritualistic aspects of digital mourning, particularly on Facebook and memorial websites. The current study, however, builds upon that foundation by focusing on Instagram, a more visually driven platform, and highlights how aesthetic and affective visual content can intensify empathic engagement (Tuluk, 2021).

Compared to Brubaker and Vertesi's (2010) study, which argued that digital memorials allow ongoing interaction with the deceased, the present research extends the analysis by showing how these interactions are not only therapeutic for mourners but also stimulate empathic responses among passive viewers who are not personally connected to the deceased. This nuance contributes to the growing body of literature that explores the witnessing role of followers, a concept not deeply examined in earlier frameworks.

Furthermore, while earlier studies (e.g., Klastrup, 2015) emphasized the narrative continuity of grief through text-based storytelling and status updates, the current study finds that visual storytelling through photos and videos elicits a more immediate and visceral empathic reaction. This supports the theoretical assumption from media psychology that visual stimuli create stronger emotional resonance than text alone, but it also provides empirical confirmation within the specific context of grief communication.

Additionally, previous research often treated digital grief as isolated within mourning communities or friend networks, whereas this study illustrates how grief posts can reach and affect broader audiences, including strangers, through public hashtags and algorithmic feeds. This suggests a shift from private mourning rituals to performative and communal experiences of loss, particularly among youth and influencer cultures (Walter, 2015).

In summary, the present study not only confirms previous research that digital spaces are key venues for mourning but also advances the understanding of how visual platforms like Instagram uniquely shape digital empathy, reaching beyond immediate social circles and fostering a more complex, mediated emotional landscape around grief.

### Conclusion and implication

This study concludes that digital mourning practices on Instagram play a significant role in shaping how grief is expressed, perceived, and emotionally processed in the digital age. The findings reveal that visually driven content such as photographs, videos, and symbolic imagery shared in the context of loss can foster profound empathic responses not only among close friends and family members but also among wider online audiences, including strangers. This confirms the growing social function of platforms like Instagram as communal spaces for emotional expression, where grief is no longer confined to private or immediate social circles, but instead becomes a shared experience mediated by digital aesthetics and performative rituals. Furthermore, the research highlights that empathy generated through digital mourning is not passive. It prompts users to engage emotionally, offer support, reflect on mortality, and sometimes re-evaluate their own relationships and values. This expands the theoretical understanding of digital empathy and suggests that social media, despite its often superficial reputation, can serve as a powerful tool for emotional connection and psychological healing. The implications of this study are multifaceted. For platform designers and developers, the findings emphasize the importance of creating sensitive algorithms and interface features that accommodate and respect mourning behaviors such as memorialization tools, privacy settings for grief posts, and content warnings. For mental health professionals, this study opens up possibilities for exploring digital mourning as a component of therapeutic intervention, particularly among younger generations who use social media as their primary emotional outlet. Lastly, for society at large, the research encourages a more compassionate perspective on digital expressions of grief, recognizing them not as attention-seeking but as authentic calls for connection, remembrance, and meaning-making in an increasingly virtual world.

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