

## Do not click 'Like' when somebody has died: the role of norms for mourning practices in social media

Anna J. M. Wagner

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# Do not Click “Like” When Somebody has Died: The Role of Norms for Mourning Practices in Social Media

Anna J. M. Wagner

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## Abstract

Social media constitute new social spaces where the topics of death, loss, and mourning are increasingly encountered and negotiated. Users might either engage in mourning practices themselves or be confronted with other users' mourning during their everyday social media use. The omnipresence of mourning in social media poses challenges to the users and increases the need for norms on how to engage in online mourning practices and how to react toward expressions of grief and mourning. This article systematically reviews 25 internationally published journal articles on norms guiding mourning practices and (non-)reactions toward these practices in social media. Three different types of norms related to different forms of practices are identified in the review. Results show that norms for mourning in social media are in flux and consistently negotiated between users. However, norms for mourning in social media often adhere to traditional norms that are adapted and reconfigured.

## Keywords

mourning practices, norms, social media, systematic review

Death, loss, grief, and mourning are topics of fundamental importance to human existence and cohabitation (Kern, Forman, Gil-Egui, 2013). In the context of mediatization and with the rise of new media technologies, these basic themes of humanity are evermore present in people's everyday lives (Walter, 2015). Yet, even though people are increasingly confronted with death and mourning, these experiences are primarily mediated as vicarious observations rather than as actual real-life experiences (Harju, 2014; Refslund Christensen & Gotved, 2015; Walter, 2015). Social media platforms constitute one of the “new social spaces” (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013, p. 153), in which death, loss, and mourning are growingly encountered and negotiated. Among others, these include social network sites with (memorial) groups, walls and pages, video platforms, support groups, blogs, forums for mourning and commemoration, and memorial webpages (e.g., Refslund Christensen & Gotved, 2015; Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2012). These platforms are either specifically designed for mourning purposes or appropriated for these purposes by the users (Sofka, 2009).

Empirical evidence suggests that there are two basic scenarios in which users might be confronted with mourning in social media: They either engage in mourning practices themselves or are confronted with other people's mourning in the course of their everyday social media use, which leaves

them with the decision to either visibly react toward the displayed practices or dismiss them. Whereas the main foci of research have concentrated on the question of *how* people mourn in social media and react toward these displays of mourning, the question *why* people (re)act the way they do, and what guides their mourning practices has often been neglected. Hence, this article sets out to discuss the norms related to mourning in social media and provides a systematic review of 25 empirical studies covering this issue.

## The Mediatization of Mourning

Like many other topics and areas of social life (Livingstone, 2009), death, loss, and mourning are increasingly shaped and influenced by media communication. The meta-process of mediatization (also called mediation or medialization) is used to describe this increasing permeation of social life by media communication (cf. Lundby, 2014). Two main traditions of

University of Augsburg, Germany

### Corresponding Author:

Anna J. M. Wagner, Department of Media, Knowledge and Communication, University of Augsburg, Universitätsstraße 10, 86159 Augsburg, Germany.  
Email: [anna.wagner@phil.uni-augsburg.de](mailto:anna.wagner@phil.uni-augsburg.de)



mediatization research (Hepp, 2013) can be identified: the *institutionalist* tradition (e.g., Altheide, 2013; Altheide & Snow, 1979; Hjarvard, 2013) and the *social constructivist* tradition (e.g., Couldry & Hepp, 2013), in which the terms mediation, mediatization, and medialization are, in fact, not used interchangeably (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Livingstone, 2009). Yet, the different conceptualizations and traditions of mediatization research converge, in that they assume a qualitatively and quantitatively increasing impact of media communication on social life—which is also visible in the way people nowadays grieve and mourn. As Lagerkvist (2013) puts it, “death has made a mediated return to the public sphere” (p. 9). The media, and social media in particular, pervading people’s everyday lives have become important new spaces for mourning. Social media can play a crucial role in mourning the loss of a loved one by fulfilling various functions for the bereaved. Among others, this includes coping with one’s own (disenfranchised) grief, engaging in collective mourning practices with other users, and facilitating the (semi)public expression of emotions (Döveling, 2015; Gibson, 2007; Hjarvard, 2013; Lagerkvist, 2013; Sumiala, 2014; Walter, 2015). This expansion of spaces for mourning through social media can also mean a shift in traditional forms of mourning: As Walter (2015) observes online environments and more specifically social media likely impact and possibly alter mourning-related social interactions and norms.

## Social Media as Virtual Spaces of Mourning

Social media can be described as “environment[s] built on the very idea of social interaction and sharing of affect” (Harju, 2014, p. 124). Due to their strong focus on interaction and emotion, social media platforms constitute easily accessible social spaces for the sharing, discussion, and negotiation of information on death, grief, loss, and mourning (Gibson, 2015). These spaces as well as the mourning practices taking place there are not entirely separate from other social spaces but provide an expansion to the existing “offline” mourning spheres, with which they are closely interrelated (Refslund Christensen & Gotved, 2015). Whereas many of the practices for mourning in social media, such as creating virtual memorial sites and sharing memories, are practices connecting offline to online contexts (Giaxoglou, 2014); due to the peculiarities of social media surroundings, their technological features and dominating norms, mourning practices taking place in social media can differ in some regards from traditional mourning practices.

### Expansion of Mourning Through Social Media

It is crucial to note that social media technologies are by no means the only media technologies influencing the way people mourn, neither are most of the transformations catalyzed

by social media entirely new. As Giaxoglou (2014) puts it, mourning in social media is “a reconfigured rather than an entirely new form of mourning” (p. 25). However, the virtual social space of social media features certain characteristics that distinguish it from other social mourning spaces. Moreover, certain phenomena we observe in the negotiation and construction of mourning online might be more particular to social media technologies (e.g., the grief for virtual acquaintances, see Klastrop, 2015) than to other—or no—technologies. Finally, the mourning practices in social media might in some cases take slightly different forms.

Brubaker et al. (2013) suggest that social media technologies, especially social network sites, expand the nature of mourning in various respects. They delineate three types of expansion for mourning created by social media: First, *temporal expansion* refers to the increase in *breadth* (integrating content related to the past, present, and the future) and *immediacy* of death- and mourning-related information intertwining experiences of grief and loss with everyday social media experiences. Second, *spatial expansion* describes the dissolution of geographical limitations, enabling participatory mourning practices not bound to specific locations. Third, *social expansion* is used to describe the *unification* of distinct social groups through the spread of information related to the passing of an individual user.

Drawing upon another characteristic of social media technologies and the function of mediatization to overcome “cultural distances between different (individual and collective) actors” (Schulz, 2004, p. 91), it seems legitimate to identify a fourth type of expansion, namely *cultural expansion*, which is closely linked to the phenomenon of social expansion. Social media constitute a melting pot for different cultures and offer the users a variety of cultural identity concepts to choose from (Hepp, 2010). As the nature of mourning practices in social media, as well as the social media use itself depend on the cultural contexts they are embedded in (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Schiefer, 2007), the negotiation and appropriation of culture play an important role for mourning in social media. Furthermore, culture-specific norms for mourning—that is, social norms that might apply in one culture but not in the other (Cialdini & Trost, 1998)—as well as culture-specific customs and rituals are core to the way people mourn, express their grief, and remember the dead (Fowlkes, 1990; Kern et al., 2013). As a consequence, culture-specific mourning practices and norms are nowadays also presented and negotiated within social media, leading to an expansion in the array of rituals and practices that might be adapted or neglected for mourning (Irwin, 2015). As has been shown, the characteristics of social media technologies expand the phenomenon of mourning in various ways and impact the mourning and mourning-related practices taking place there. They should, thus, be taken into account when taking a closer look at the way *how* and *why* people mourn and react toward mourning on social media.

## Mourning Practices in Social Media

Following Giaxoglou's (2014) definitions, mourning can be described as "public and socially sanctioned displays of grief" (p. 12), whereas the related practices "are social practices that vary across and within cultures and epochs" (p. 12). Mourning practices in social media are mediated practices, with social media platforms providing a set of technological features through which users act and communicate with each other. Examples for these practices include the sharing of memories (e.g., by posting textual or (audio-)visual content), creating virtual memorial sites (e.g., by setting up a memorial page), and communicating with the deceased and other bereaved (e.g., by commenting and liking; for example, Bailey, Bell, & Kennedy, 2015; Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Church, 2013; De Vries & Rutherford, 2004; Williams & Merten, 2009). As users mourn their deceased loved ones on sites either specifically designed for or originally unrelated to mourning (Sofka, 2009), the likelihood for other users to encounter mourning-related content during their everyday media use increases. Besides actively engaging in mourning practices and the "communication of, to, and about the dead" (Brubaker et al., 2013), social media users might, thus, intentionally or unintentionally receive information about the passing of an individual or the related mourning practices of the bereaved (e.g., Bailey et al., 2015; Carroll & Landry, 2010; Forman, Kern, Gil-Egui, 2012; Getty et al., 2011; Williams & Merten, 2009).

Both engaging in mourning practices and being confronted with mourning-related content not only can comprise certain benefits but might also pose severe challenges to the users. Expressing one's own grief and sharing it with others on social media has been shown to fulfill a variety of important functions for the bereaved, such as emotion regulation and finding emotional support (Döveling, 2015; Goldschmidt, 2013; Maple, Edwards, Minichiello, & Plummer, 2013), maintaining relationships with the dead (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Klass, 2006), connecting and networking with people in similar situations or addressing otherwise stigmatized topics of taboo (Bailey et al., 2015). However, mourning in social media might also mean dealing with possibly grief-disturbing phenomena such as *trolling* (Phillips, 2011) or *emotional rubbernecking* (De Groot, 2013), issues of post-mortal information management (Bollmer, 2013; Wright, 2014) or emotional strains when learning of the death of a loved one (Brubaker et al., 2013).

## The Role of Norms for Social Media Mourning Practices

When either engaging in mourning practices or encountering mourning-related information on social media, users will find themselves in specific social situations that entail various options to act and react toward mourning-related contents. A social situation can be defined as "an environment of

mutual monitoring possibilities," in which two or more individuals become aware of their mutual presence "however divided, or mute and distant, or only momentarily present the participants . . . appear to be" (Goffman, 1964, p. 135). According to Goffman, these specific encounters are both guided and limited by the norms considered adequate in the specific social situation. As noted earlier, social media platforms do not constitute isolated new mourning spaces disconnected from other social spaces but rather provide an expansion to the already existing spaces of mourning. Thus, in virtual spaces, as in any other social space, specific norms and rules of conduct exist that might impact the way people act, react, and interact with each other (Chambers, 2013). At the same time, mourning and the display of grief is and always has been impacted by social and cultural norms, which are also relevant to mourning in social media (Maddrell, 2012; Walter, 2015).

## Norms in Social Media

Norms are the "grammar" (Bicchieri, 2006) of social interactions and can be defined as implicit or explicit rules guiding behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs within a certain group. Being fortuitous results or by-products of social interaction, they are communicated between the members of a social group and established through the enforcement of sanctions (Kincaid, 2004; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Young, 2008). Lapinski and Rimal (2005) differentiate between the concepts of "collective norms" and "perceived norms." Whereas the former refers to norms that are established as collective rules of behavior, the latter describes the individual interpretation of these rules that can—but does not necessarily have to—comply with the collectively constructed and intended meaning of a norm.

Thus, norms in social media evolve—often without a specific agenda—in the course of interaction between users of specific applications, and are maintained and acted upon in order to establish group identities (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). The norms existent in social media, as in any other social space, are hence discursively negotiated, individually constructed, assigned meaning to within more or less tight-knitted communities, and learned through the observation of other users' actions (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2009; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). Social media norms can either be implicit rules of behavior, that is, rules that are not written but silently agreed upon, or explicit rules stating the conduct of behavior within a group (Burnett & Bonnici, 2003). The obedience to the respective norms likely increases the longer the user participates in the social online community (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000), such that users not participating in the communities might not adhere to the prevalent norms at all (Pennington, 2017).

As social media practices not only are social practices in their very nature but also embedded in technological surroundings, both norms and boundaries referring to the use of



available technological features (e.g., when to click a Like button or what emojis to use), and norms and boundaries regarding social behavior (e.g., not to offend other users or talking in second person when posting to a profile wall) are existent (Donath, 2014). Thus, the term *technology-related norms* (Sørensen, 2006, p. 52) can be used in this context to describe norms regulating the use of technological features on social media platforms. These include norms for be-/defriending other users, sharing content, commenting on and liking other users' content, tagging other users, regulating privacy settings, and so on (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). Similarly, the term *interaction-related norms* refer to rules of conduct for social interactions between users within different social media environments (Chambers, 2013). Both types of norms are closely interrelated and co-occur within social situations.

### Norms for Mourning in Social Media

Regarding the norms for mourning in social media, several authors, indeed, have observed that the ways people deal with death and loss in social media are influenced by norms for the use of technology and norms for social interaction (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Giaxoglou, 2014; Lingel, 2013; Marwick & Ellison, 2012). In the context of mourning, the interaction-related norms should comprise both norms on how to socially interact with other users and social and cultural norms on how to act and react appropriately within social situations of mourning (Kern & Gil-Egui, 2016; Walter, 2015). This includes norms for expressing emotions in social media contexts and for the level of grief deemed appropriate for public sharing (Giaxoglou, Döveling, & Pitsillides, 2017; Jakoby, 2012). As Hutchings (2017) states, "online networks, spaces, and communities develop their own emotional norms and enforce them on participants" (p. 94).

Following Lapinski's and Rimal's (2005) differentiation between collective and perceived norms, the technology-related and interaction-related norms for mourning in social media might differ to a great extent between users. Existing norms might not be recognized by all users, and actions might be perceived as norm violating by one but not by the other user (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). Additionally, norms can differ between the respective social media platforms in which mourning takes place, as "each of these media has its own microculture with media-centered norms" (Campbell & Twenge, 2015, p. 362).

### Types of Expansion and Norms for Mourning in Social Media

As stated before, social media norms for mourning are to some extent influenced by norms also applying to offline contexts (Marwick & Ellison, 2012; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012; Sabra, 2017; Walter, 2015). Moreover, several authors have claimed that social media technologies are responsible for shifts in traditional social and cultural norms on mourning

and emotion expression, as well as on social interactions between mourners (Jakoby & Reiser, 2013; Kern & Gil-Egui, 2016; Nansen, Kohn, Arnold, van Ryn, & Gibbs, 2017; Walter, 2015). The traditionality and newness of norms for mourning in social media are examined in more detail in the ensuing systematic review. Based on the discussion so far, though, it is suggested that norms for mourning in social media are to a certain extent linked to the four different types of expansion outlined before. With social media in some cases creating entirely new situations, in which users have to deal with death and mourning (Brubaker et al., 2013), users "are together co-creating new norms for mourning and memorializing" (Walter, 2015, p. 19).

The *temporal expansion* of mourning, for instance, has created and might create norms of rapidly informing others about someone's death or reacting toward it within a short period of time (Brubaker et al., 2013). *Spatial expansion* similarly might contribute to norms about participating in mourning (and even attending funerals via video chat), irrespective of where the users are physically located. Along these lines, interaction between users across different social groups and cultural contexts can create both new interaction-related and technology-related norms. *Social expansion* might, for example, influence the way the deceased's post-mortal virtual identity is negotiated between different social groups and require norms on how to behave in situations with formerly unknown users (Brubaker et al., 2013). Finally, and similar to the aforementioned type of expansion, *cultural expansion* might have implications for the cultural practices regarded (in)appropriate (such as religious rituals) and influence norms and expectations about which culture-specific traditions (not) to apply.

## Systematic Review

Even though norms are undoubtedly important for understanding situations of mourning in social media, empirical research on the norms for mourning-related practices is rather scarce. Hence, a systematic review has been conducted to grasp the current state of research and to suggest future directions in this area. The purpose of the analysis was to take a closer look at (1) the types of norms for mourning existent in social media and the factors impacting these norms. As norms are subject to social negotiation and change, it was (2) of interest to examine the way norms are negotiated, challenged, and changed within social media environments. Moreover, as social media provide different types of expansions to mourning that seemingly pose new challenges to the users, (3) the degree of traditionality or newness of the norms for mourning in social media environments is investigated.

## Methods

The systematic review comprised of 25 journals articles from years 2010 to 2017. Articles were not limited to specific disciplines but had to be published in peer-reviewed international

journals. Online databases *Web of Science* and *Google Scholar* were searched in the first step using combinations of the following key words in truncated form: *mourning*, *grief*, *loss*, *death*, *norms*, *social media*, and *social networks*. In the second step, reference lists of the retrieved articles were searched for further articles. An article was initially included if it empirically investigated mourning practices and reactions toward mourning in social media platforms and provided some kind of information on the norms guiding these practices. However, since the empirical corpus on norms for mourning in social media is rather small, articles theoretically discussing the topic of norms for mourning and drawing upon the results of former empirical studies were also included.

### *Types of Norms for Mourning in Social Media*

The systematic review enabled a differentiation between various types of norms related to specific social practices. Whereas the initial perspective differentiating between interaction-related and technology-related norms did become visible in the analyzed studies in some regards, it became evident that this was not a viable distinction in all cases. Rather, both types of norms seemed often to be inseparably entangled within the social situations of mourning and blend into a set of norms guiding users' practices. However, a differentiation between various norms emerged that were closely linked to the various types of mourning practices attested in social media. The three dominating themes that became evident comprised (1) norms on the *use* of social media for expressing one's grief and engaging in mourning practices in the first place; (2) norms referring to the *content* and *form* of mourning practices and grief expression displayed in social media; and (3) norms on *reacting* toward mourning-related content, *regulating* information on mourning, and *interacting* with users engaging in mourning. Whereas the norms identified under (1) and (2) mostly apply to people engaging in mourning practices themselves, the third type predominantly counts for people encountering and reacting toward mourning in social media.

**Norms on the Use of Social Media.** The first type of norms refers to the rules existent for using social media in order to express grief and engage in mourning-related practices in the first place. The studies examined suggest that users of mourning-specific spaces and platforms that are considered safe spaces for venting and releasing negative emotions are often encouraged to share their emotions and stories (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Christensen, af Segerstad, Kasperowski, & Sandvik, 2017; Döveling, 2015; Kern & Gil-Egui, 2016; Pennington, 2017; Swartwood, McCarthy Veach, Kuhne, Lee, & Ji, 2011). Contrarily, the use of originally mourning-unrelated spaces and platforms such as social network profiles is often considered inappropriate. This seems to be due to the dominating norms of positivity associated with social media, the perceived casualty, and

shallowness of the platforms in which users appear to be threatened by the display of negative emotions (Brubaker et al., 2013; Sabra, 2017; Walter, 2015). Furthermore, grief is closely related to matters of privacy and intimacy in the eyes of the users, which means that publicly sharing affect and linking it to self-presentation lead users to doubting the authenticity of the displayed emotions (Sabra, 2017). Overall, however, norms on the use of social media for mourning purposes seem to depend on the types of mourning practices intended to display, which apparently possess varying degrees of appropriateness: studies show that using social media for sharing information related to the passing and funeral of an individual, as well as for practices of memorialization, are deemed acceptable, whereas using social media for the public sharing and expression of grief is often frowned upon (Bell, Bailey, & Kennedy, 2015; Brubaker et al., 2013; Sabra, 2017).

**Norms on Content and Form of Mourning.** For the second type, regarding the *content* and *form* of grief expression and mourning practices, it appears that a plethora of norms exist in social media platforms on *what* to share and *how* to mourn appropriately. First, norms both guiding and restricting users' sharing of mourning-related content became evident in the review: For the case of posting in social media, for instance, norms refer to what the appropriate contents for sharing are (i.e., pictures, text-based tributes, and condolences) (Giaxoglou, 2015). Besides, users report that due to the nature of social media, religious contents and the display of belief systems in mourning is not appropriate and should thus be dismissed (Sabra, 2017). Second, and most prominently, norms regarding the "appropriate" amount of emotion shared and the "adequate" display of grief appear to be prevalent in social media platforms (see *feeling and display rules*, Jakoby, 2012; *feeling rules and emotional "wrongness"*, Sabra, 2017): mourning-related information should be moderate in duration, intensity, and expression of grief and negative emotion when posted; at the same time, grief is judged as insincere and inauthentic if "light contents" and heavy contents of mourning are alternately posted by a user (Jakoby, 2012; Sabra, 2017). Third, norms referring to the positions of the users and to the question of *who* is entitled to post impact mourning on social media. Several articles identify a so-called *hierarchy of legitimacy* or *hierarchy of legitimate mourners* determining who has the right to mourn (semi) publicly in which way; typically, family members take the highest positions within these hierarchies and are, hence, granted greater space for deviations from norms for mourning (Giaxoglou, 2014; Gibson, 2015; Lingel, 2013; Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Pennington, 2013; Sabra, 2017). The hierarchy of legitimacy not only provides norms for who is entitled to mourn but also appears to impact which technological features to use for these purposes (*technology-related norms*). For instance, Giaxoglou (2014) observed in her study that norms determine Likes on Facebook as a technological

option open to all and signifying support; whereas commenting is predominantly reserved for closer friends and relatives of the deceased.

**Norms on Reacting Toward Mourning.** Norms existing for the reactions toward mourning and dealing with mourning-related content seem to be primarily guided by non-disturbance of other people's mourning, showing compassion and participating in collective remembering (e.g., Leonard & Toller, 2012; Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Pennington, 2013; Walter, 2015). In contrast to the other types of norms laid out before, studies suggest that even though these norms are existing and acknowledged, users do not easily adhere to all of them. Whereas simple rules such as not liking a death-related posting appear to be followed by the users (Sabra, 2017), problems arise when social pressure to participate in mourning (e.g., liking a memorial page) is experienced (Walter, 2015) or when social norms go against the users' original intents. Studies illustrate that users are often motivated to avoid mourning-related content on social media (Brubaker et al., 2013; Pennington, 2013; Walter, 2015). However, norms such as not defriending the deceased or the bereaved pose challenges to avoiding these kinds of information. Whereas some users seem to actively act against these norms and defriend deceased and bereaved despite the emotional qualms they might feel, others search for alternative solutions such as hiding the information from their newsfeed or refusing to visit the memorial page (Brubaker et al., 2013; Pennington, 2013). The perceived norms of the users and the collective norms, indeed, seem to comply with this case: Bailey et al.'s (2015) study shows that the bereaved expect users to continuously participate in mourning and experience emotional distress when they cease to do so.

### *Negotiation of Norms for Social Media Mourning*

Besides differentiating between different types of norms prevalent in social media, the second goal of the review was to scrutinize processes of generation, negotiation, and change of norms in social media platforms and communities. The analyzed studies suggest—in line with theoretical assumptions (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012) outlined before—that norms for mourning practices are persistently in flux and consistently negotiated. This even holds true for tight-knitted social media communities that draw upon an already established specific set of norms (Christensen et al., 2017; Kasket, 2012; Sabra, 2017). Two main reasons for the phenomenon of shifting and developing norms can be identified in the review: first, new mourning practices and social situations arise and, second, participants' differences in perceived norms call for the establishment of new norms or the (re-)negotiation and (re-)affirmation of old ones.

Some studies point to the fact that certain situations within social media might be especially prone for norm renegotiations and reaffirmations. For instance, norms for mourning

and memorialization are often subject to negotiation when different social groups come together to mourn the deceased, and disagree upon the appropriate social and cultural norms for mourning (Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Sabra, 2017). Moreover, if norm transgressions occur either intentionally or unintentionally, this frequently leads to a renegotiation or reaffirmation of already existing norms (Christensen et al., 2017; Leonard & Toller, 2012; Marwick & Ellison, 2012). In the case of trolling, for example, threats to norms by people speaking ill of the dead often provoke counter-reactions from other users and lead them to defend existing norms. As Marwick and Ellison (2012) put it, users “work together to enforce norms of appropriateness and verbally discourage comments that do not correspond to their impressions of the deceased” (p. 395). Especially in the case of trolling, however, some authors have also observed the tendency to overrule and cut collective negotiation and/or individual questioning of norms through technical regulations by single-powered administrators (Brubaker et al., 2013; Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Varis & Spotti, 2011).

Finally, the review highlights the importance of norms to feelings of belonging, engagement in mourning practices, and participation in collective mourning: on the one hand, and as outlined below, users often participate in mourning because of the communities' prevailing norms; on the other hand, disagreement with the (newly) established norms can in some cases even lead to termination of participation and prevent people from further engaging in mourning in this particular place (Christensen et al., 2017). However, as will be discussed later, the studies included in the review only show negotiations evolving around norms for mourning but not for reacting toward displayed mourning behavior.

### *Traditional Norms, New Norms, and Lack of Norms*

The traditionality and newness of norms constitute the third focus of the review. The examination of the studies looked at the extent to which traditional norms from other social spaces are visible in social media, if and in how far these traditional norms are reconfigured, and finally, if and what types of new norms are developed in social media. Several trends have been derived from the analysis that apparently exist in parallel: As already mentioned, social media platforms, and especially communities with a strong focus on collective mourning, are in some cases perceived as safe spaces with their own specific sets of norms. They are often sought out intentionally because they contradict existing cultural and social norms and provide the chance for mourning practices that deviate from said norms (Af Segerstad & Kasperowski, 2014; Christensen et al., 2017; Irwin, 2015). The specific sets of norms within these communities comprise norms on the duration of the grief, the topics of discussion, as well as the forms of grief expression. Especially within mourning communities, users report not having to

adhere to norms on concluding the grieving process after a certain period of time but rather being encouraged to disregard this norm in order to process their loss (Christensen et al., 2017; Swartwood et al., 2011). Similarly, social media provides users with the opportunity to express emotions that are considered to move outside of social and cultural norms (Döveling, 2015) and discuss otherwise tabooed topics (Maple et al., 2013). As these examples illustrate, however, it appears that in most cases, it is not the establishment of entirely new norms but rather a reconfiguration of traditional norms that are adapted for social media mourning purposes: the “newly” established norms within the communities radiate an intended remoteness to traditional norms, while still relating to them to a certain extent.

Even though existing norms for mourning might be challenged in some cases, the opposite seems to hold true for the majority of the cases. Several studies show that traditional social and cultural norms on mourning practices and the display of grief are still dominating social media platforms, which is, for instance, reflected in grief being considered a matter of privacy, the language used for mourning and the conventional epitaphs and condolences users display on these platforms (Brubaker et al., 2013; Christensen et al., 2017; Giaxoglou, 2015; Irwin, 2015; Kern & Gil-Egui, 2016; Sabra, 2017). These findings confirm Walter’s (2015) similar observation. Especially the norms for reacting toward mourning appear to be guided by traditional norms that are not openly discussed and negotiated but rather silently undermined by use of the technological features of social media platforms.

The last trend that became visible was a lack of norms for new social situations arising due to the specific characteristics of social media spaces (Bollmer, 2013; Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Brubaker et al., 2013; Leonard & Toller, 2012; Lingel, 2013). For instance, the phenomenon of trolling, the posting of photographs of a dead child, or issues of post-mortal identity management lead to insecurities among users on how to react appropriately and call for the development of new norms.

In sum, the systematic review suggests that traditional social and cultural norms for mourning are very present and often dominant in social media platforms, even though the platforms do challenge and change existing norms in some regards. Additionally, the specifics of social media in some cases call for the establishment and negotiation of new norms to cover the new situations of mourning arising.

## Discussion

With media communication permeating our everyday lives, fundamental topics of humanity such as death, loss, grief, and mourning are increasingly transferred to and negotiated in media environments. Social media platforms with their strong focus on emotions and interactions are especially prone to expressions of grief and mourning, and provide an

expansion to traditional mourning spaces in society. In all social spaces of mourning, social and cultural norms are key to the way people express their grief, engage in mourning practices, and react toward the mourning of others. Since social media platforms possess their own rules of conduct related to their technological features and the social processes within these spaces, it is crucial to take a closer look at the norms for mourning existent in social media. The goal of this article was to systematically review existing scientific works on norms for mourning in social media. It aimed at providing insight into the different types of norms guiding mourning-related practices, the social processes through which norms are created and negotiated, as well as into the traditionality or newness of norms prevalent and valid in social media.

The review highlights the fact that various types of norms come into play in mourning-related situations on social media: technology-related norms and interaction-related norms (comprising social and cultural norms for mourning, as well as social and cultural norms for social interactions on social media, in general) seem to blend into an inseparable amalgam of norms, hardly differentiable and simultaneously important. Thus, a differentiation between norms referring to different types of mourning practices appeared to be more viable than the distinction between technology-related and interaction-related norms. More specifically, the review showed that norms on the actual use of social media for mourning purposes, norms for the content and form of mourning practices, as well as norms for reacting toward other users’ mourning can be differentiated. Interestingly, while the first two types of norms appeared to be rather straightforward and compliant with users’ everyday social media behavior, the third type was accompanied by a reluctance to expose oneself to mourning-related information. Instead of openly questioning and negotiating these norms, as it was the case with norms for engaging in mourning practices, users tacitly searched for opportunities to avoid the content without openly violating the norms. In the few cases, users actually acted against the norms, they experienced emotional qualms and sometimes distress. One possible explanation for this phenomenon might lie in the fact that grief and mourning are considered matters of privacy within Western societies (Pennington, 2017), and people nowadays have scarce direct experience with these topics (Harju, 2014). Hence, they might lack orientation on how to deal with the display of grief and mourning when being confronted with these contents on social media. Additionally, the technological features of social media platforms, such as defriending and hiding content, enable a silent way of bypassing existing norms and opting out of unpleasant social situations (see Walter, 2015).

Otherwise, the empirical evidence on norms for mourning in social media suggests that norms are evolving, changing, and regular topics of negotiations between users. Accordance with the prevalent norms is core to participation in



mourning-related practices, in the sense that non-compliance might lead to people abstaining from social media mourning practices or retreating to other niches and platforms. Surprisingly, discussions and negotiations of norms seem to evolve around traditional topics of mourning and not so much around the new phenomena created by the specifics of social media. Traditional norms on privacy of mourning, modest expression of grief, and appropriate ways to remember someone seem to prevail and are often transferred from other contexts to social media platforms. At the same time, media technologies are considered as a means to escape social and cultural norms (especially those regarding the duration and temporality of grief) with the option of creating reconfigured sets of norms within social media communities.

It was argued, in this article, that the four types of expansions to mourning might impact norms, lead to the development of new norms, and pose challenges to the users in some regards. Indeed, a lack of norms on mourning in social media platforms became apparent in some cases. There was little evidence in the reviewed articles, however, that the expansions social media provide, indeed, impact the norms prevailing there to a great extent. In the few cases, the specific characteristics of social media platforms and their expansions to mourning became relevant they referred to the aspects of social and cultural expansion. Scenarios specific to social media such as trolling (Phillips, 2011) and the unification of divergent social groups (Brubaker et al., 2013) tended to be discussed as challenges, while the norm-related discourses evolving around these topics often invoked rather traditional notions of mourning. This, however, might also be due to the fact that the studies analyzed in the review focused little on new scenarios of mourning in social media.

### Limitations

Some limitations of the article need to be acknowledged. As empirical research addressing norms for social media mourning practices is scarce, the number of studies included in the review is necessarily limited. Related to this issue, it was not possible to adequately differentiate between various types of social media platforms such as blogs, video platforms and social networks, since most of the studies focus on social networks, and more specifically on Facebook. As different types of platforms provide different technological features, serve different purposes, and likely attract different users (Campbell & Twenge, 2015), this would have been an important aspect of examination. Since the review was limited to norms for mourning in social media, the article only sheds light on one specific aspect of mediatizing emotion. Of course, mourning the loss of a loved one and being confronted with other people's mourning does not only take place in social media but permeates different social spaces at the same time. The interrelations between these spaces, the specificity of the norms and practices, and their reciprocal impact on each other could, thus,

not be reflected sufficiently in the analysis. This, however, would be crucial for painting a holistic picture of how people deal with grief and mourning. Finally, media technologies, mourning practices, and the connected norms are all subject to constant change (Walter, 2015). In this regard, the outlined observations are merely a snapshot in time, yet unable to reflect social and technological changes over a longer period of time.

### Conclusion

As the systematic review in this article has shown, norms play an important role in the way people mourn and react toward mourning in social media environments. It will, thus, be important to further investigate the role and nature of norms in more detail and with respect to the influencing factors outlined in this article. With the technological and social surroundings and the mourning practices within these platforms changing, norms for mourning in social media are changing too. The development of new technological features (visible, for instance, in the introduction of emoticons complementing the prominent *Like* button on Facebook in 2016), and the ongoing negotiation of norms for mourning and interacting in social media, will impact the way people act in situations of mourning. More empirical studies will be needed, which are capable of capturing these changes. Finally, entangling the relationships between mourning in social media and mourning in other social spaces will likely remain challenging. Yet scrutinizing these connections in more detail might be core to understanding the very nature of mourning as a deeply human phenomenon in mediatized societies.

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### Author Biography

Anna J. M. Wagner (MA, University of Augsburg) is researcher of Communication Studies at the Department of Media, Knowledge, and Communication in the University of Augsburg. Her research interests include political communication, health communication, and social media research.