

LIFE DISCONNECTED

**CONTENT ANALYSIS ON THE DEATH
OF AN ONLINE FRIEND- NARRATIVES**

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Tiivistelmä:

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoitus on kartoittaa sitä, millaisen suruprosessin online-ystävän menettäminen aiheuttaa. Tämä tutkimus lisää ymmärrystä internetmaailmasta siellä aikaansa viettävien kanssa työskenteleville tai muuten aikaansa viettäville. Laadullinen tutkimusmetodi valittiin vastaamaan tutkimuskysymyksiin: Millaiset asiat suruprosessissa ovat ainutlaatuisia online-kontekstissa? Mitkä asiat ovat samankaltaisia olemassaolevan tutkimuksen kanssa? Miten online-ystävän menettäneitä voidaan tukea suruprosessissa? Millainen merkitys online-ystävyyksillä on?

Aineistonkeruumenetelmänä tässä tutkimuksessa on kirjoituspyyntö. Se mahdollistaa vastausten ohjaamisen teorian suuntaan sekä antaa tilaa kirjoittajien omille näkemyksille, jotta myös uusia asioita voi ilmaantua. Kirjoituspyyntö julkaistiin sosiaalisen median alustoilla ja aineisto kerättiin Webropol-lomakkeella. Tutkimukseen vastaanotettiin 34 kirjoitusta, joista neljä kertoi ihmissuhteen katkeamisesta ja 30 nettiystävän kuolemasta. Kirjoituksista tehtiin teoriaohjautuva sisällönanalyysi, jota täydennettiin aineistolähtöisellä analyysillä niistä asioista, joita teoreettinen viitekehys ei käsitellyt.

Kirjoittajien mediaani-ikä oli 30 vuotta, ja suuri osa heistä ei maininnut sukupuoltaan tai uskonnollista yhteisöään, vaikka sille oli annettu mahdollisuus. Monet kirjoittivat

ystävistään, joiden kanssa he olivat pelanneet videopelejä, mutta myös muita tapaamismuotoja ilmeni. Kuolinsyyt tässä tutkimuksessa olivat suurimmaksi osaksi yllättäviä: itsemurhia, onnettomuuksia ja nuorten ihmisten kuolemia. Kirjoittajat kuvailivat suhdettaan kuolleeseen online-ystävään läheisenä ja luottamuksellisena vaikka ystävyysuhteessa saattoi olla salamyhkäisiä piirteitä.

Surureaktiot online-kontekstissa korreloivat olemassaolevien tutkimuksien kanssa surusta, saadusta tuesta ja rituaaleista. Monet kirjoittajat mainitsivat kuitenkin online-ryhmänsä hajonneen kuoleman seurauksena. Joillekin kirjoittajista kuolema oli vaikea hyväksyä, kun rituaaleja ei ollut ja ihminen joka kuoli vain katosi online-maailmasta. Muutama kirjoittaja kertoi kuoleman vaikutuksesta omaan ajatteluun elämästä ja osa jakoi ajatuksiaan myös kuoleman jälkeisestä elämästä.

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Abstract:

The purpose of this research was to find out what kind of reactions and processes does the death of an online friend start in a person and add understanding about the internet world among clinicians and family members of those who spend their time online. Which things in bereavement are unique to online context? Which things in loss of online friends are in line with current understandings of grief? What kind of help can be offered to those who have lost their online friend? What is the significance of online friends?

Narrative inquiry was drafted so that the writers can talk about their experiences freely: this allows directing the writings to match the theory as well as finding out something new. narrative inquiry was published on internet platforms and social media sites, and the data collection was done via Webropol form. 34 writings were received, out of which 4 wrote about losing connection with one or more online friends and 30 about the death of an online friend. A theory-based approach was used, and it is complemented with inductive analysis on those topics that the existing theory did not cover.

The writers' mean age was 30 years, and most of them did not mention their gender. Many wrote about friends who they played video games with, but other ways to connect were mentioned too. The causes for death in this research were mostly sudden: suicides, accidents, and deaths of young people. The writers described their relationships with

those who died important, open, and trusting although there were mysteries around the people as well.

The grief reactions in online context correlated with previous studies about grief, support, and rituals. Many writers said that the death in an online group caused the whole group to break up. Some said it was difficult to comprehend the death since there were no in-person ritual and the person just disconnected and disappeared. Some talked about the changes in their life since the death, and thoughts about afterlife were shared.

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Theoretical Framework: Grief and Online Friends	5
2.1	Grief and Finding Meaning	5
2.1.1	Meaning in Life	6
2.1.2	Understandings of Grief	9
2.1.3	Continuing Bonds	13
2.1.4	Disenfranchised Grief	15
2.1.5	Rituals as Tools to Process Grief	18
2.2	Connecting and Disconnecting	20
2.2.1	Forming Relationships	20
2.2.2	Online Friendships	22
2.2.3	Grieving on the Internet	24
3	Data and Methods	27
3.1	Data and Participants	27
3.2	Narrative Inquiry and Content Analysis	29
3.3	Validity, Reliability, and Research Ethics	33
4	From Hello to Heaven	35
4.1	Losing an Online Friend	35
4.1.1	Significance of Online Relationships	36
4.1.2	Circumstances of Deaths	42
4.1.3	Hearing about the Death	48
4.1.4	Grief among Lifetimes	54
4.2	Grief Processes in the Narratives	55
4.2.1	Stages of Grief	55
4.2.2	Hidden Sorrow	62
4.2.3	Rituals Online and Rituals Offline	66

4.3	Meaning Making and Afterlife	70
4.3.1	Impact on the Social Groups	70
4.3.2	Perspectives on life itself	73
4.3.3	Life After Death	76
5	Summary of Findings and Discussion	82
6	Bibliography	86
6.1	Sources	86
6.2	Literature	86
7	Attachments	93
7.1	Narrative Inquiry	93
7.2	Publishing platforms	94

1 Introduction

Death is inevitable aspect of human life. In a world that is full of possibilities, people get in touch with others from the other side of the world. Life on the internet has similar aspects to real life: meeting new people, joining groups, talking, playing, and sharing experiences and creating long-lasting relationships. What happens when the person on the other side of the connection suddenly disappears?

This research on the death of online friends was conducted to find out what kind of grief responses the death of online friend's cause. The purpose of this study is to add understanding on the grief process after the death of online friends. Doka states that the importance of online friends may not be acknowledged, and therefore the bereaved may not receive adequate support for their grief, this may lead into complicated grief and intensified emotions of anger and guilt which makes adjusting to life after the loss more difficult.¹ Hensley adds that people who had lost their online friends benefitted from being able to talk to at least to one person about their feelings.² The research questions for this study are:

1. Which things in bereavement are unique to online context?
2. Which aspects in loss of online friends are in line with current understanding of grief?
3. What kind of help can be offered to those who have lost their online friend?
4. What is the significance of online friendships?

The theoretical framework of this study consists of two main themes: grief and online friends. The analysis will follow theories presented in the first chapters of this thesis. Grief

¹ Doka 2002a, 5-12.

² Hensley 2012, 132.

studies are presented from Freud's ideas to 21st century. Freud suggested that grief is a process after which one can move on with their lives without any bonds to the deceased.³ Lindemann and Corr's theories add understanding on the physical side of grief.⁴ The stages of grief by Kübler-Ross are presented in line with Alapack's theory of grief process. The writers' experiences are analyzed in the framework of stages of grief. In this research, many mentions were found that can be connected to stages of grief and other theories presented. Silverman et al. renewed the idea of disengaging the bonds to the deceased and created theories of continuing bonds: transformed relationships to the deceased.⁵ This research will discuss on how the bonds to online friends are altered after their death.

Janoff-Bulman suggests that the death of a loved one often seems to start meaning making process.⁶ Finding meaning in death helps adjusting back to life after a major loss.⁷ Different meaning making theories are presented and later applied to the analysis of data. Hensley has researched online friends' death in a quantitative survey in 2012, and her study focused on disenfranchised grief.⁸ The participants of this study were asked to write about the existence or lack of support from their environment at the time of their loss. The results of this study complement studies of disenfranchised grief by Doka but also the positive effects of support from family.

Rituals clarify the reality of death, help accepting the emotions connected to it, and offer social support to the bereaved.⁹ This study aims at acknowledging what kind of rituals can be conducted when the person one knew might have lived on the other side of the world. The writers talked about conducting rituals in both online and offline contexts.

³ Freud 2005 [1917], 160.

⁴ Lindemann 1944, 141 ; Corr 2011, 3-16.

⁵ Silverman et al. 1992, 498-501.

⁶ Janoff-Bulman 1992, 73.

⁷ Lichtenthal et al. 2006, 800.

⁸ Hensley 2012, 122.

⁹ Doka 2002b, 136.

Rituals seem to play an important role in understanding an accepting the death of an online friend.

The second part of theoretical framework presents studies of online friendships and their quality by Chan and Cheng, and Helmi et al. Chan and Cheng's study in 2004 showed that online friendships that lasted for over a year seem to have equivalent quality to face-to-face friendships.¹⁰ Helmi et al. present some of the main characteristics of online friendships.¹¹ The participants of this research were asked to describe their relationship to the deceased online friend in order to find out the significance of those friendships that are formed online. The online friends' significance for the participants of this study later in the analysis and similarities to previous studies can be found.

Chapter three of this study presents the data collected for this study: 34 writings about the experiences of losing online friends were collected using narrative inquiry. Four writings were about a disappearance, and one writer wrote about her daughters' death and what she did in the online environments after the death. The narratives were analyzed with theory-based content analysis. The results are experiences of people that bring understanding about their lives to the readers. Grief process and the participants' experiences are unique. Therefore, the study is phenomenal-hermeneutic.¹²

The results are presented in chapter four. First, the friendships of this study are presented. The significance of online friendships is important to notice so that the grief is easier to acknowledge. After the descriptions of the friendships, the result section goes on to present the unique qualities of the death of online friends such as the way of hearing about the death and the rituals that the bereaved have conducted. Disenfranchisement and stages of grief are discussed in results section. The last part of

¹⁰ Chan & Cheng 2004, 316.

¹¹ Helmi et al. 2017, 16–18.

¹² Saldana 2018, 7–8.

the results consists of major changes in the lives of bereaved, their thoughts about afterlife, and indications of continuing bonds with the deceased online friends.

This research helps those who read it, and especially those researchers, teachers, and priests in the field of death studies to understand the online world and its' significance to those who spend time in it. It will provide information on the reality of those people who wrote about their experiences: the phenomenal-hermeneutic way of analysis aims at showing a piece of the writers' world to those who want to understand it. One does not have to work in this field to find useful information in this research, it can help the family members and friends of those who have lost their online friends to understand them better.

2 Theoretical Framework: Grief and Online Friends

The theoretical framework of this thesis focuses on explaining the complexity of online relationships and the basic theories of grief and meaning making. The loss of a loved one often starts a meaning-making process in which values and purposes of one's life are rearranged.¹³ The meaning-making process is a part of the grief work that a bereaved person must live through. The loved ones that we lose will always stay in our hearts with reformed relationships after their death. In the field of death studies those relationships are called continuing bonds.¹⁴ When someone we have never met in person dies, it may raise questions on whether we really knew them, and is the grief we feel justified? The clinics explain the lack of empathy from friends and family members with disenfranchised grief.¹⁵ The last part of the theoretical framework consists of looking into how online relationships are formed and how do they differ from offline relationships in life and death.

2.1 Grief and Finding Meaning

Death of a loved one often causes a grief reaction, followed by search of meaning. Rituals are practiced somewhere along those lines to help coping with grief and to find ways to alter the relationship with the deceased. This chapter presents the theoretical framework on death, grief, rituals and finding meaning. Grief is often the initial reaction to death and meaning can be searched for later. Meaning making is a long process, and the reconstruction process of one's life stories plays an important role in it.

¹³ Neimeyer & Sands 2011, 11.

¹⁴ Klass & Steffen 2018, 2-4.

¹⁵ Doka 2002a, 10; Hensley 2012, 132.

2.1.1 Meaning in Life

Schnell defines meaning as unconscious “fundamental sense of feeling”. This means that one’s life is viewed coherent, and people work to achieve their goals. Crisis in meaning, instead is conscious and it can be triggered by loss.¹⁶ and Janoff-Bulman suggests that a loss often starts a quest for meaning making. The purpose for one’s own life, for the deceased’s life and for the death itself needs to be found. Reconstructing the previous positive assumptions about life that are shattered by a death, sudden negative event in their lives, help recovering and building bridges between the negative reality and positive expectations for life. The reconstruction process is often automatic, and not started by will.¹⁷ Neimeyer and Jordan add that people tend to tell stories about their lives in a way that they form shorter meaningful episodes, which together make a seamless flow of events. Those stories involve major themes that explain their relationships with others and create personal meaning. The complete story is called a self-narrative. People create their own personal life-stories which are affected by the era and the location that they live in. The self-narratives and the stories that other people tell build a way of understanding identity. Self-narrative is shaken by a death of a loved one, this creates the need for the story’s themes and plot to be altered. Furthermore, the death of a loved one shakes the belief system of a person and may start a spiritual journey.¹⁸

After losing a loved one, the process of finding meaning can happen on many levels: practical, relational, spiritual, and existential. The practical level of meaning refers to the actual events that lead to the death happened, and in life before that. The relational search means that the griever is redefining themselves, as well as their relationship with the deceased one either they were the parent, partner, or a friend. What are they now?

¹⁶ Schnell 2009, 487.

¹⁷ Janoff-Bulman 1992, 73.

¹⁸ Neimeyer & Jordan 2002, 109.

The spiritual and existential questions are assigned to God: why did this happen? What kind of God lets this happen?¹⁹

Meaning reconstruction in the grief process can explain how the bereaved intertwine their loss with their regular life: the positive and the negative changes after the death. The more intensely the bereaved look for meaning in loss, the more prolonged their grief may become. In young adults, failing to make sense of a death is associated with a separation distress until two years after the death.²⁰ The crisis in meaning is more severe in traumatic causes of death such as homicide, suicide, or accident than in a natural case of death, for example illnesses. Crisis in meaning in traumatic causes of death may lead into complicated grief.²¹

In parents who had lost their children, the search for meaning plays a significant role in adaptation. In fact, the time passed since death, the way of dying, or the gender of the parent did not have correlation to whether the grief would be normative or complicated, but the search for meaning had. Within Lichtenthal et al. study's sample religion and the will to help others in the same situation were the most important sense-making themes the process. The parents who were able to classify these sense-making themes about their child's death and believed, for example, that their child is in heaven now, had less grief symptoms that are maladaptive. Therefore, spirituality being a major theme for sense-making.²²

Frankl, the creator of logotherapy, states that therapists cannot give man a meaning for his life, but they can help someone to find meaning.²³ He has defined three major

¹⁹ Neimeyer & Sands 2011, 11.

²⁰ Currier et al. 2006, 405–407.

²¹ Currier et al. 2006, 408–409.

²² Lichtenthal et al. 2006, 800.

²³ Frankl 2010 [1953-1959], 89.

categorial values that derive meaning in human existence. Those three sources are creative, experimental, and attitudinal. Doing or creating something, such as working or taking care of a family, are creative values. Meeting other people, enjoying the nature, or listening to music are experimental values. The attitudinal values, in contrast, are those explanations that people make up for personal suffering and finally, their attitude towards that suffering and facing it.²⁴

Meaning making efforts must be made after a traumatic life-event to maintain sense and order in the belief and goal systems of a person. The beliefs are thoughts about life's fairness, control about own life, benevolence, and vulnerability.²⁵ The goals are personal, such as relationships, wealth and feeling of achievement. Some personal goals could relate to things that people are trying to do at the time: weight loss, being a better person or not being as materialistic as before. These goals work as motivational factors in life.²⁶ Global meaning refers to the grand goals in life such as developing and maintaining relationships in personal and professional context.²⁷ Situational meanings on the other hand refer to those events that seem to break the understanding of the global meaning by attacking their values, beliefs and goals.²⁸ Personalized goals refer to things that help people understand their lives.^{29,30} Meaning making must happen when the global meaning is violated and the personal values and beliefs are contradictory to the situation. People can either assimilate or accommodate to the new situation. Accommodating means a change in the global meaning system whereas assimilation refers to changes in

²⁴ Frankl 2010 [1965], 179.

²⁵ Davis et al. 2000, 492.

²⁶ Emmons 2006, 732-733.

²⁷ Park 2008, 972.

²⁸ Park 2008, 972-973.

²⁹ Emmons 2006, 69.

³⁰ Park 2008, 972-973.

the first given meanings of the traumatic event itself. Assimilation and accommodation are called meaning making processes.³¹

Park conducted a research on the meaning making after loss. She asked questions that measured belief violations, goal violations, meaning making and adjustment. Belief violations can be measured by asking questions about the participants' worldview, and the level of control they, or God have over their lives. The goal violations can be investigated with questions about relationships and other interpersonal matters such as social support and financial security. Those questions were posed to find out whether the event has significantly affected the participants' capability to maintain their efforts to achieve their goals in life.³²

2.1.2 Understandings of Grief

Freud suggested that grief is work to be done. It requires both emotional and physical energy. The traditional view of grief is that a person will move on after discontinuing the bonds with the deceased one, and after the grief work is done, the bereaved can feel free again.³³ Contrary to previous beliefs, maintaining and redefining the bonds with the deceased can help adjusting into life after the loss. Continuing bonds can concur in the meaning-making process after the death of a loved one.³⁴

Grief may be viewed as a form of love, making it personal and complicated to understand. A normal grieving process ends up in bittersweet memories and a new kind of relationship with the deceased. The feeling of disconnection and fear of never being happy again are normative in acute grief, but most people will be able to adjust back to

³¹ Brandtstädter 2006, 145.

³² Park 2008, 975–990.

³³ Freud 2005 [1917], 160.

³⁴ Neimeyer & Hooghe 2018, 74.

normal life in time and find meaning and joy in it. When a person can process the grief this way, it means the grief is integrated. If a person cannot accept the loss and it controls their life significantly for a prolonged time, the grief may be labeled to be complicated. Complicated grief is defined as something that limits the quality of life, exceeds the societal norms or is extremely intense.³⁵ The risk for complicated grief can be predicted by some situational factors, some of which are the mental state of bereaved such as depression, insufficient support, or traumatic death.³⁶

Mourning is widely used to describe something that follows the death of someone important. It is a reaction to the circumstances and never requires medical treatment since it is expected to pass after a while.³⁷ Freud defines mourning as the reaction to the loss of a loved one or abstraction such as a homeland or ideal.³⁸ Pearce and Artemesia compliment Freuds definition by adding in virtual worlds that can be viewed as imaginary homelands that can be lost.³⁹ Worden lists four tasks for mourning that lead to adaptation: accepting the loss, processing the pain of loss, adjusting to the environment after loss and relocate the deceased person so that they can memorialize him in a healthy way.⁴⁰ Corr states that mourning is coping in the context of bereavement. This means that mourning would be integrating grief in the regular life so that a bereaved person can adjust.⁴¹ People mourn not only a death, but also a minor death, such as a break-up, divorces, changes in work-situation or moving to another city. Processing grief is not something a person could do with a clear-mind and stable emotions. When hearing about a death of a loved one, a person is likely to face an existential crisis: they finally realize

³⁵ Iglewicz et al. 2020, 91.

³⁶ Lobb et al. 2010, 688.

³⁷ Freud 2005 [1917], 159.

³⁸ Freud 2005 [1917], 158.

³⁹ Pearce 2000, 92-93.

⁴⁰ Worden 2015, 94.

⁴¹ Corr 2002, 49.

the significance of the lost one and at the same time come to terms with their own time running out.⁴²

People are not designed to let things go, and therefore grieving is a complex form of work. Grief makes a persons' everyday life more difficult in four ways, suggested Freud in 1917. First, it causes almost intolerable apathy. Second, it makes people lose interest in things that surround them, third is that the activity level drops and the fourth one is that it can make people momentarily incapable of loving.⁴³ In addition to Freud's theory on the psychological components of grief, Lindemann has introduced the somatic side of grief that includes the physical reactions and actions that are needed in the times of grief. Those may include lack of muscular power, feeling shaky or having tightness in throat.⁴⁴ Corr adds that grief is often thought to be only emotional, whereas the behavioral aspect of grief and recognizing it, is usually overlooked. The behavioral changes such as anger, losing appetite and the difficulties in focusing as well as before, may become subjects to judgement and they are not understood in the working environment, or within the family and friends.⁴⁵

The initial grief is often defined as the phase from the moment of death until a few weeks after the funeral. In some cases, the initial grief may start earlier. It may start as soon as the friend or a family member hears about a diagnosis of a disease or that someone is leaving for a war.⁴⁶ Kübler-Ross, on the other hand, has identified five stages of grief that a terminally ill person would normatively go through that often applied to grief research: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In her model, the initial phase

⁴² Alapack 2010, 4-6.

⁴³ Freud 2005 [1917], 159.

⁴⁴ Lindemann 1944, 141.

⁴⁵ Corr 2011, 3-16.

⁴⁶ Alapack 2010, 14.

includes a shock-reaction and denial. A dying patient would deny their illness, visiting multiple doctors and trying to reverse their diagnosis.⁴⁷

The intermediate phase of sorrow follows the initial grief, around three weeks to one year after the rites are over. This is a crucial stage of grief and some of the main characteristics of it are replaying memories repeatedly and asking the question: what if? It is important to dive deep into the memory lane to find out which memories one should reminisce and which to forget about. A keepsake is an object that has psychological value to a person but not necessarily is worth much in money. This could be something that the deceased one owned or gave to the person who is left behind, such as a necklace, ring, or a perfume bottle.⁴⁸

In the Kübler-Ross model of grief, the intermediate phase would be anger and blame towards other people and self. She suggests that the loved ones of a dying person may help if they accept the anger and let the patient express it, even if it seems difficult to understand the sudden outbursts of anger.⁴⁹ Her study includes the next stage of bargaining; dying patients seem to make promises of doing something one more time before their death, but when they have done it, they break their promises and will try to do it again.⁵⁰ It resembles Alapack's description of asking oneself "what if-". According to Alapack, the third phase of grief is recovery, going back to the normal life.⁵¹

In Kübler-Ross' stages of grief model, there is one more stage before the acceptance of grief or one's fate, and it is depression. She differentiates two types of depression: reactive and preparatory. Reactive depression implies on losing self-confidence and can

⁴⁷ Kübler-Ross 1973, 33.

⁴⁸ Alapack 2010, 23-25.

⁴⁹ Kübler-Ross 1973, 45-46.

⁵⁰ Kübler-Ross 1973, 71-73.

⁵¹ Alapack 2010, 40.

be helped with positive encouragement, whereas treating preparatory depression must be handled with care and let the patient talk about those things that bother him.⁵² The last stage that she introduces is the phase of acceptance: the inevitable death is near, and the feelings of anger and depression are gone, although it does mean the phase would include positive moods. Acceptance may lead into isolation and an emotional void.⁵³ Although these five stages were originally created based on how the dying understand their upcoming faith, they have been generalized to describe a normative grieving process. The stages of grief and their ordinance can vary, and they are always unique. Only some people's grief truly follows a scale or a model of grief, yet they may express a feeling that does match the predefined theories. The grief theories do not have to be applied as they are, but to understand the different phases of grief may be useful for clinics when trying to help their patients to cope with a loss of loved one.

2.1.3 Continuing Bonds

Freud suggested that one must disengage all bonds with the deceased one to move on.⁵⁴ Lindemann believed that grief's purpose was to end the bonds with the dead person so that they can form new relationships with people around them.⁵⁵ The theories in the 1980's still suggested that continuing the relationship with the dead would lead to complicated grief.⁵⁶ In contrast, Walter argued that many people still continue the bonds with the deceased even if they have adjusted well.⁵⁷ Klass and Steffen add that people can alter their relationship with the deceased for example as a family member. They can

⁵² Kübler-Ross 1973, 75–77.

⁵³ Kübler-Ross 1973, 101–103.

⁵⁴ Freud, 2005 [1917], 160.

⁵⁵ Lindemann 1944, 141.

⁵⁶ Klass & Steffen 2018, 4–6.

⁵⁷ Walter 1996, 7.

still have emotional and psychological connection to the dead, and it is nowadays perceived as completely normal.⁵⁸

Klass and Steffen define grieving itself as an interpersonal relationship between two people who are connected to each other, the mourner, and the dead. Those relationships are a part of the everyday life of an individual and contribute into their identity.⁵⁹ There are two trails of narratives that a meaning making process: the narrative of the death itself and the backstory about the relationship with the dead and how to come to terms with unresolved problems with the deceased. The backstory about the relationship of two living people will evolve into continuing bonds after one's death.⁶⁰ In cases of complicated grief, professionals can help bereaved people to reconstruct the backstory, starting the process of meaning reconstruction of the past events.⁶¹

Continuing bonds can be maintained by trying to locate the deceased loved one by knowing where they are now, those places may be heaven or another place in afterlife. Another way is experiencing the deceased by feeling like the deceased loved one is watching them, having dreams about the deceased, and sometimes linking current events, such as the wind blowing at a certain time, as markers about their presence. Some maintain continuing bonds by remembering their deceased family members or friends by simply thinking about the things they did together. Another way is reaching out for a connection by visiting the gravesite or talking to the dead person, some children even reported hearing their deceased parents answering them. One way to stay attached to the deceased with the help of transitional objects. Transitional objects are those items that belonged to the deceased but bring comfort to the bereaved.⁶²

⁵⁸ Klass & Steffen 2018, 4.

⁵⁹ Klass & Steffen 2018, 7-8.

⁶⁰ Neimeyer & Hooghe 2018, 74.

⁶¹ Neimeyer & Hooghe 2018, 96.

⁶² Silverman et al. 1992, 498-501.

Most of 18–29-year olds' use social media daily and they belong to the generation that can be described digital natives.⁶³ College students use digital platforms for social interaction, self-presentation and to fulfill the need to belong.⁶⁴ Pennington suggests that college students continue their bonds with the deceased on Facebook by sending messages, sharing memories and commenting the pictures and visiting the profile of the dead. Most people did not post anything on the Facebook wall, but kept the deceased as friends on the social media site. Pennington's study found one incident in which another person had logged on a dead person's page and posted new photos, this was viewed as inappropriate by their friends.⁶⁵ In the study of more than 10,000 college students, 54% mentioned that Facebook helped them within their grief process whereas 46% reported that it did not. 30% of the students thought that social media is not a place for expressing grief.⁶⁶ Taylor adds that in-game worlds, it is not uncommon to find virtual memorials after one of the members have died.⁶⁷

2.1.4 Disenfranchised Grief

Doka has defined the term disenfranchised grief in his work in the field of death studies. There are five kinds of losses that can be disenfranchised. 1. The relationship might not be acknowledged. This category involves extramarital affairs, internet friendships and ex-lovers. This kind of losses are often disenfranchised by the society, for they are unaware that that kind of losses may cause a grief reaction. 2. The second category of disenfranchised grief is that the loss might not be acknowledged. It refers to those losses that others do not find significant. This category includes perinatal loss or a loss of a pet.

⁶³ Balk & Varga 2017, 304.

⁶⁴ Nadkarni & Hofmann 2012, 245–246.

⁶⁵ Pennington 2013, 627–629.

⁶⁶ Balk & Varga 2017, 308–311.

⁶⁷ Taylor 2002, 45.

Doka states that in this category there are also losses such as social and psychological death, in both cases the dead person still being alive. In social death, a person who is still alive gets treated as if they were dead. Others can perceive someone as psychologically dead, if they have a mental disease, a brain condition or if a major change happens, for example a major change of religion. In these losses, other people do not realize that the death causes a grief reaction. In some cases, the death is disenfranchised by silence. Other people simply do not know it happened, for instance an abortion might be kept as a secret.⁶⁸

3. The third category by Doka is that the griever is excluded. This kind of grievers could be children, persons with developmental disabilities or mental illnesses even though they do understand the concept of death. 4. The fourth category is caused by the circumstances of death. Those circumstances could be stigmatized, such as AIDS, suicide, or drug overdose, and even be kept as a secret when talking about them, never really revealing the true reason behind the anguish that the death has caused.⁶⁹ Jordan and McIntosh list elevated feelings that are typical for suicide survivors in contrast to other deaths which include: guilt, anger, disbelief, family system effects, and difficulty in finding meaning. Guilt may be caused because of failed attempts to help the person who committed suicide. Some suicide survivors join activist groups for suicide prevention.⁷⁰ 5. The fifth category for disenfranchised grief is the way that people grieve. For example, people who instead of showing emotions, grieve by getting busy with something else, could seem careless. One's grief could be disenfranchised in one or multiple of these ways. Disenfranchisement may lead to intensified emotions of anger, guilt, hopelessness, and sadness⁷¹

⁶⁸ Doka 2002a, 5-12.

⁶⁹ Doka 2002a, 12-20.

⁷⁰ Jordan & McIntosh 2011, 225-232.

⁷¹ Doka 2002a, 12-20.

The grief can be disenfranchised by the environment and the people in it. Disenfranchised grief might be caused by an empathic failure, which refers to one person, people or a community failing to understand the meaning of a death to another person. Empathic failure may happen on four levels which are self with self, self with family, self with larger community and self with transcendent. Empathic failure within self may be caused by guilt and blaming self for the suicide of a spouse, for example. Empathic failure with family may happen for example, when a child mourns a deceased parent who is not in good terms with the other parent, and the living parent gets upset about it. Empathic failure with a larger community refers to the community that we live in. For example, when tears come up in a grocery store and nobody knows what is going on. The empathic failure with transcendent happens when a religious community says that the death is God's will, when the bereaved is going through a spiritual crisis.⁷²

In the context of virtual reality, the surrounding family and friends may not be familiar with the digital environment. This may lead into misunderstanding the nature of the virtual relationships.⁷³ According to Pearce, virtual worlds have inhabitants who can explore it, those worlds are coherent, complete, and consistent and will not cease to exist when those inhabitants are not online. One inhabitants' action affects the others', and they all have a player representative, a profile, or an avatar, in the online world. Those avatars may resemble the offline qualities of a person somewhere from very similar to very little and anything in between, therefore making the online personality difficult to understand for people who are not familiar with online worlds.⁷⁴

Stereotypes about the people who spend their time gaming or on other virtual worlds such as discussion forums may cause the disenfranchisement of grief. The gamers are often viewed as young males who are trying to escape reality by playing. Another

⁷² Neimeyer & Jordan 2002, 108–109.

⁷³ Hensley 2012, 122.

⁷⁴ Pearce 2002, 18–21.

stereotype is that people who spend a lot of time on the internet have some sort of psychological condition, such as depression, that drives them into the online worlds.⁷⁵

2.1.5 Rituals as Tools to Process Grief

Rituals can be defined in various ways including symbolic action to express emotions.⁷⁶ Rituals are meaningful events that connect people to the transcendent and confirm the death and its reality, connect the bereaved to a larger community, and may serve as a passage rite as well as help the bereaved to connect the death to their religious beliefs.⁷⁷ They help understanding the existence and its' complicity. Rituals may help the role transition after a death occurs, the social status, the psychosocial dimension of bereavement. They may also moderate the sense of self before and after loss; the intrapsychic dimension and help adjusting the communal connection to the deceased. For rituals to be effective, Romanoff and Terenzio point out that they need to focus on the experience of the mourner, and they should be present conducted during the whole grief process. Rituals are usually tied to cultural context.⁷⁸

In the Western culture, bereavement rituals are practiced in order to extend the relationship with someone even after their death and to still have a bond with them. Rituals can be diverse and include speaking about the person, looking at their pictures, wearing their clothes, lighting up a candle or doing something that the deceased one would have enjoyed. Rituals are as unique as the person performing them: two people can conduct the same ritual for different reasons.⁷⁹ Vale-Taylor categorizes rituals as a) rituals that are carried out for the deceased that include for example doing things that

⁷⁵ Hensley 2012, 123.

⁷⁶ Vale-Taylor 2009, 541.

⁷⁷ Doka 2002b, 136–137.

⁷⁸ Romanoff & Terenzio 1998, 699.

⁷⁹ Vale-Taylor 2009, 539–541.

the deceased person enjoyed doing; b) rituals with direct link to the deceased that could be visiting the gravesite or places that bring up memories, having an item that used to belong to the deceased or writing and talking to the deceased. Category c) is rituals and community, and it includes talks about the deceased with other people, participating in memorial services in a church or visiting religious community for support. Category d) is Act of Remembrance which implies on for example lighting up a candle, or creative rituals such as writing stories.⁸⁰

Rituals may include common gatherings that give the mourners a place for peer support. Rituals help establishing an ongoing relationship with the deceased. Communal rituals are often absent from those who feel disenfranchised grief. The people that the dead person knew on the internet, for example, can be excluded from participating funerals because of the distance or simply because of the family did not know about the relationship. Those people, who are excluded on purpose, may find help in alternative rituals. To create an alternative ritual, it is important to choose which kind of ritual is in need.⁸¹

To complement Vale-Taylor's ritual categories, Doka introduces the four types of rituals: rituals of continuity, rituals of transition, rituals of reconciliation and rituals of affirmation. Rituals of continuity are those rituals that remind that the person existed and had impact on other people's lives. Those rituals can be lighting a candle in memory of the dead person or bringing flowers to the grave. Rituals of transition might be helpful when the loss is difficult to cope with, and there are objects that remind of it. One can have a ritual for removing the wedding ring after their spouse has died, for example. Rituals of reconciliation try to fix the tensions that there were at the time of the dead whereas the rituals of affirmation help to thank the person for their legacy and lived life.⁸² Post funeral

⁸⁰ Vale-Taylor 2009, 541.

⁸¹ Doka 2002b,146.

⁸² Doka 2002b, 143–146.

rituals ease the grieving process, especially if they are held in a safe environment, have personal meaning or the sense of sacred is present. Rituals facilitate accepting the death and grief. They also can help people understand that grief is an ongoing process and start the re-evaluation of life priorities.⁸³

2.2 Connecting and Disconnecting

The unique features of online friendships and the similarities to face-to-face friendships are presented in this chapter to create a basic understanding of the quality of online friendships. If there is no quality in the relationship, and it is not viewed as important, there will be no grief reactions in online friends' death narratives. Therefore, it is crucial to include theoretical framework for online friendship forming and maintaining. The writing inquiry included a request to describe the relationship between the online friend who died and the writer.

2.2.1 Forming Relationships

Friendship can be defined as situations in which two people who long for each other's company and seek to accompany each other time and time again.⁸⁴ Friendships evolve through time and involve voluntary communication that offers both people socio-emotional value.⁸⁵ Online representations of people may be complex, therefore making the relationships formed and maintained offline tricky to understand.⁸⁶

⁸³ Castle & Phillips 2003, 60–61.

⁸⁴ Hartup 1975, 11–26.

⁸⁵ Chan & Cheng 2004, 306.

⁸⁶ Hensley 2012, 122.

Social media sites enable keeping in touch with old friends but also creating friendships with new people, including the possibilities for romantic initiation. Facebook users in Michigan State University create and maintain social capital on the site. Social capital refers to the networks that people build with others.⁸⁷ These online friendships can be classified into two categories which are a) friendships that are formed online and stay fully online and b) friendships that are initiated online and later transferred into offline friendships as well, called the mixed-mode friendships.⁸⁸ Online friendships are based on computer-mediated communication (CMC). Chan and Cheng's research provides the information on online friendships' quality being lower than Face to Face (FtF) friendships in the beginning, but after enough time has passed, online friendships can have equal significance to FtF friendships.⁸⁹

Online friendships do not include as much nonverbal clues in communication FtF communication does. The lack of presence and social context can become a problem, since they are needed to form a friendship.⁹⁰ Knapp defines the five stages of relationship development as follows: 1) initiation, 2) experimenting, 3) intensifying, 4) integrating and 5) bonding. The model also suggests the five steps to separation: 1) differentiating 2) circumscribing, 3) stagnation, 4) avoidance and 5) terminating.

In the development of a new relationship, the first phase, initiation, refers to the first contact with another person, and first impression is usually crucial.⁹¹ For offline relationships, the looks of another person weigh more for the first impression, whereas in online relationship, common interests are given more value. Baker defines online

⁸⁷ Ellison et al. 2007, 1143–1145.

⁸⁸ Walther & Parks 2002, 530–535.

⁸⁹ Chan & Cheng 2004, 316.

⁹⁰ Kiesler et al. 1984, 1123.

⁹¹ Knapp 1984 (cf. <https://www.communicationtheory.org/knapps-relationship-model/>).

relationships as two-person relations that have romantic intentions.⁹² In this paper, the term relationship refers also to friendships. The second stage, experimenting means that two people scan each other for similarities and differences to decide whether to continue getting know to each other. The third, intensifying, phase includes sharing more information about their own lives and getting more invested into the relationship by spending more time together. On the fourth phase, the close relationship, either romantic or friendly, forms. Making it to the fifth phase means that the relationship is serious enough to talk about it to other people, and it can only be ended because of a severe reason and a mutual agreement, death, or another significant reason.⁹³

2.2.2 Online Friendships

Parks and Floyd use seven dimensions to assess the quality of a friendship. They are interdependence, breadth, depth, code change, understanding, commitment, and network convergence. Breadth, depth, and code change measure the communication; interdependence, understanding, commitment and network converge measure the ways that the two people perceive their relationship to each other.⁹⁴ Chan and Cheng used these dimensions in their research on comparing the qualities of online and FtF friends. They found out that close relationships are more complex to develop online than FtF, mostly due to the contextual clues. The quality of friendship was rated higher in FtF relationships in all dimensions.

Chan and Cheng's results suggest that the online friendships that lasted over a year, often reach the same level of quality measured by the Parks and Floyd's dimensions as FtF friendships. In contrast, the first months of the online friendship are ranked significantly lower in quality than the ones offline. This may be caused by the difficulty of empathizing

⁹² Baker 2008, 165.

⁹³ Knapp 1984.

⁹⁴ Parks & Floyd 1996, 85–107.

with the other person, and it leads to online friendships to develop slower than offline friendships during the first six to twelve months. After the first months, online friendships develop with a faster pace. CMC transfers less information per second than FtF communication, and therefore the quality of friendship is perceived lower in the first months of an online friendship. The rate of the messages may be higher in CMC than FtF, causing CMC to be as efficient as FtF during longer time periods.⁹⁵

Chan and Cheng suggest that the quality of a cross-sex (male to female) friendship is lower in FtF relationships than the quality of the same-sex friendships. Their results show that this is contradictory online: the cross-sex friendships are perceived as better in quality than same-sex friendships. This may be since the societal norms are missing on the online communities: one can hide their race, social class, and age. The friendships between men and female are not as difficult as offline because the physical appearance is missing and there are no significant others or workmates to criticize the friendship.⁹⁶

Helmi et al. categorize five dimension that are essential to online friendships: cautiousness, voluntariness, mutual support, companionship and sharing. These are based on the online communication model that includes only three ways of communication: text, image, and video and on how people use these. In this research, online friendship was described as unreal and dishonest, something that can be terminated as quickly as initiated.⁹⁷

Cautiousness refers to the fact that people are aware that not everything is what it seems, not everyone online is honest. People tend to do background checks on random people contacting them online. Whether to accept or discard a friend request? It depends on the mutual friends, the profile picture and other available information. If one has accepted a

⁹⁵ Chan & Cheng 2004, 316–317.

⁹⁶ Chan & Cheng 2004, 317–318.

⁹⁷ Helmi et al. 2017, 16.

stranger's friend request, they will make the decision on continuing the friendship based on the initial behavior of the person and whether they make a good impression or not.⁹⁸

Voluntariness means that a person can have thousands of friends on social media: friends, celebrities, politicians, and strangers. The friendship is easy to terminate based on one mistake the other person makes, such as speaking ill or posting something they dislike. Mutual support starts from an exchange: you give me something, I give you something. In online friendships it means that one must respond to their messages rather quickly- in offline relationships it can be accompanying each other in math class. Companionship is doing things together: playing games, chatting, and sharing favorite videos, photos, and music. Sharing in this case relies on the option to share information, experiences, and thoughts online.⁹⁹

2.2.3 Grieving on the Internet

Hensley has conducted a research on Bereavement in Online Communities using a quantitative method. She found the respondents by posting on Facebook and game communities and by encouraging the members of those communities to share her post. She categorized her questions in three different groups: those measuring the overlap between online and offline social networks, grief reactions and online versus offline bereavement. There were 41 persons answering her online questionnaire with Likert-scale-questions.¹⁰⁰

Lisa Hensley suggests clinics to ask their clients who are bereaved with online loss the following questions: 1) the frequency of communication, 2) characterization of the relationship, 3) way of finding out about the death, 4) overlap between offline and online

⁹⁸ Helmi et al. 2017, 16–17.

⁹⁹ Helmi et al. 2017, 17–18.

¹⁰⁰ Hensley 2012, 124.

communities, and 5) grief reactions. There are several issues to figure out with these questions with some additions to each category. First, to find out how often the two people talked to each other prior to the death, and if the other person was ill: did the other know of it? Hensley argues that it is important to ask if it was easier to share private information with someone online than it is offline.¹⁰¹

Lattanzi-Licht has conducted similar research on grief at the workplace. To help grieving workmates, he suggests that the key factors to know are the nature and quality of the relationship, roles played by the person who died, circumstances of the death and availability for support. Availability of support refers to which extent the support for grief is available. According to Lattanzi-Licht, the workplace support plays an important part in the grief regarding a death of a colleague. If the circumstances of death are traumatic, such as an accident, it is important to offer support for the trauma before the processing of grief. When a person dies within the work community, someone can take their tasks and do them, but will not replace the dead person. The responsibilities can be dealt with, but the expressive role of a person probably cannot. This expressive role could be, for instance, the funny person, the one who takes care of everyone else or the one that challenges everyone. The nature and quality of the relationship may even relate to a loss that is not death related, such as a corporate buyout that affects the workplace culture strongly.¹⁰²

Hensley encourages asking whether the offline friends and family knew about the relationship, its' significance and did they understand the importance of it. On the other side of the connection, there is another world that Hensley would also ask about: did the dead person's family and friends know about the bereaved one? The questions about death include asking how they found out about the death, were they able to attend the

¹⁰¹ Hensley 2012, 124-125.

¹⁰² Lattanzi-Licht 2002, 171.

funeral or say goodbye and whether they had found out something new about the person only after their death? Was there some sort of online memorial they could take part in?¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Hensley 2012, 125.

3 Data and Methods

Qualitative research method was chosen after writing theoretical framework for the study. Lisa Hensley had previously completed a quantitative research on the death of online friends and suggested clinics to ask questions about the quality of the friendship, possibilities to say goodbye, mysteries of the relationship and to which extent did the family and friends of the deceased knew about their online friends.¹⁰⁴ After careful thinking, a narrative inquiry was drafted so that it would correlate with existing theory but at the same time have room for finding out new things.

3.1 Data and Participants

34 participants wrote about their experiences, 33 responses were written in English and 1 in Finnish. Anne's writing which was written in Finnish, was translated into English to be coherent with the rest of the data. They had the possibility to mention their gender, age, and religious affiliation. 24 percent of the writers were women, 36 percent were men and 40 percent did not mention their gender. Pseudonyms for the writers were determined based on given gender. If the writer did not mention their gender, they have a name that is not tied to one gender but can be either a woman or a man. He/him is used for those writers that did not mention their gender, as it is a common practicality in academic texts written in English.

¹⁰⁴ Hensley 2012, 124–125.

Females	Males	No answer
Anne	Alexander	Dakota
Bea	Brandon	Taylor
Dawn	Cole	Jess
Erin	Erik	Parker
Patricia	Jonathan	Harper
Kate	Kurt	Skyler
Lily	Levi	Elliot
Molly	Max	Phoenix
	Paul	Elia
	Ryan	Paris
	Thomas	Ashton
	Zac	Jamie
		Robin
		Leslie

Table 1: Writers' pseudonyms

The writers' ages varied between 16 and 66. Table 2 shows the age division precisely. 20 out of 34 respondents gave their ages, and the mean age of those writers was 30.

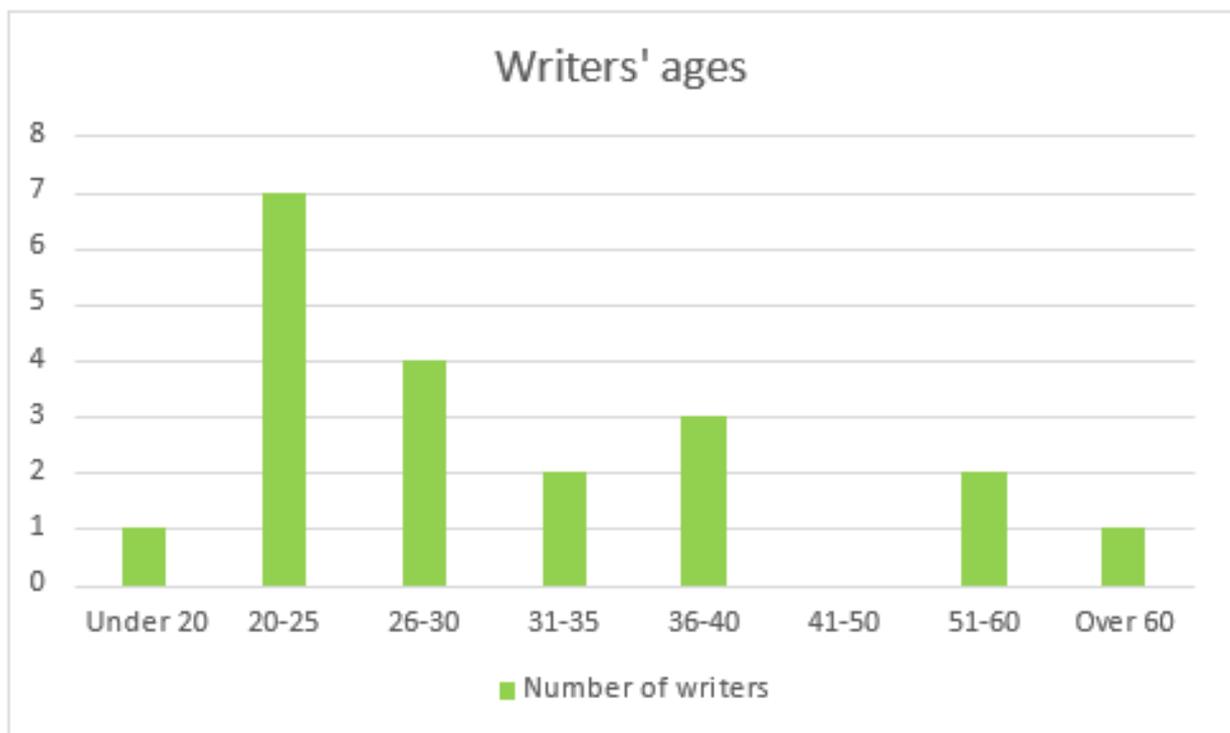


Table 2: Writer's ages

The writers' religious affiliations varied; most did not mention it. Religious affiliations are considered in the final chapters of this study when the writers had talked about afterlife and continuing bonds to the deceased. Most respondents had experienced a death in their gaming community. The writings included tragic deaths (suicides and accidents) as well as deaths from natural causes. Four (Max, Levi, Parker, and Phoenix) wrote about a loss of an online friendship that did not include death, and one writer (Taylor) mentioned a memory loss preceding death.

3.2 Narrative Inquiry and Content Analysis

Qualitative research is used in situations in which the data is uncountable, such as interview transcripts, video, or personal reflection. Qualitative approach may offer new insights, add understanding on personal and social complexity and can be used in several fields of study, such as psychology.¹⁰⁵ Narrative inquiry enables participants to share their experiences creatively in literary form. The participants can themselves structure narratives based on their own cognition: humans tend to make up stories about their everyday lives that help them to make sense of what is going on. Narrative inquiry as a method puts together pieces of often scattered pieces of writings that are written freely.¹⁰⁶ Content analysis is a method to examine texts and their apparent and latent meanings. Apparent meanings are the ones that the writer clearly mentions whereas latent meanings are underlying meanings that are to be found in the text after analyzing it.¹⁰⁷ Phenomenal-hermeneutic study method can be used when people derive personal meaning in their lives.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Saldana 2018, 3-4.

¹⁰⁶ Saldana 2018, 11-12.

¹⁰⁷ Saldana 2018, 10.

¹⁰⁸ Saldana 2018, 7-8.

This research is theory based, and therefore the grief theories were introduced in the first chapters of this thesis. Existing theories were used to create relevant research problems and research questions, and therefore content analysis can be used as a method of analyzing writings that are collected with a narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry enables finding new information that adds understanding about the study topic. It enables analyzing experiences to a wider audience of readers, giving voice to the writers. Death, dying, and grief are very personal experiences for everyone. Meaning making is unique to everyone and this gives space to phenomenological-hermeneutic approach with theory-based content analysis.

The writers were asked to describe personal experiences of the loss of an online friend and help the readers to understand their life situation. Qualitative research method was chosen to allow the respondents freedom to share their experience without limitations. An inquiry for narratives was drafted and redrafted until the last version was formed. The inquiry was drafted as survey-form based on the existing theory, then altered to interviewing question, and finally a narrative inquiry was created. The narrative inquiry was drafted and tested with the help from master's thesis graducafe group members online. It was tested also by native English to see how the questions are understood. After both feedbacks, as well as the feedback from the thesis supervisor, the request was theory-based but allowed writing very freely about individual experiences. This enhances the basic idea of qualitative studies in which different voices are present. This request included the possibility to leave contact information in case the person is willing to participate in an interview if the study is to be complemented. The survey was shared on social media platforms: Facebook groups, LinkedIn groups and Discord groups. Some discussion forum admins were contacted. Snowballing method was used to recruit participants.

The data gathering period was 2 weeks, but most of the answers were received within a week from the first posts in the groups. Webropol form was used to gather the writings. The possibility to send e-mail to the author was given. One person sent an e-mail tip about a news article on a man whose son's online community had become an important part of

his life before dying. One parent wrote about the death of her daughter and their common participation in online communities. Those writings would be great topics for future research, but this research did not have enough space to specify on those topics. The writing about the death of a daughter is included in the study for it is relevant to the topic. Most people who shared their experiences were World of Warcraft players, but the study includes other kinds of losses as well. Some of the writings were not about clinical death but losing a relationship. Those writings are included in the analysis since they may shed new light on the importance of online relationships and the loss of those.

Theory-based content analysis is used because linking the experiences to existing theory is needed to analyze the responses so that they can be comparable to current understanding of grief and place the research in context. The goal of this study is to help acknowledge and recognize loss of online friends and shed light on the importance of online relationships to those who are not familiar with online culture. Therefore, the descriptions about the quality of relationships are presented in the report. The need for this study derives from the culture in which people spend and increasing amount of time online. One of the respondents clarifies this by stating:

With online relationships becoming so prevalent so recently in history it is hard to know how to help people cope with their grief because no one really had the experience before, you have parents to help you learn about how to handle the death of someone you have a physical relationship with but really this is a new style of grief that the experience is very new to a lot of people. (Taylor)

Theory-based content analysis was used to identify those themes that appear in the existing literature. First, the descriptions of the relationships were searched to find out to which extent the writings correlate with previous understandings of friendships both face-to-face and online. This was done to determine the significance of online relationships to the writers. When the relationship is of significance, losing it is likely to

cause a meaning violation or a grief reaction. In case the relationships were not described as meaningful or important, the study would have had to shift focus.

Second, the features that are unique to the online context were looked for. Those include hearing about the death and the circumstances that led to it as well as the rituals of commemoration. One category that was formed based on the writings was helping or trying to help the person prior their death. Signs of disenfranchised grief were looked for since online losses significance may not be acknowledged. Some of the writers mentioned mysteries around the person who died or uncertainty about the death itself: those were added to the categories.

Third, signs that correlate with the traditional or new understanding of grief were looked for. The writings are presented side-to-side with grief and meaning making theories. Kübler-Ross' module of accepting death and dealing with grief was used to demonstrate that the traditional grief reactions are presented in the writings. The analysis is done under this module, although other grief theories are considered simultaneously, if they seem to apply.

Finally, the implication on the writer's lives in broader picture and their thoughts about continuing bonds and afterlife are presented within theoretical framework of continuing bonds and meaning making.

The writing request was formed to answer the following questions:

1. Which things in bereavement are unique to online context?
2. Which aspects in loss of online friends are in line with current understanding of grief?
3. What kind of help can be offered to those who have lost their online friend?
4. What is the significance of online friendships?

After answering these questions, the purpose of this study is to help professionals, friends, and families of those who have experienced cyber loss to acknowledge and understand grief reactions caused by it. How can clinics help patients recovering from cyber loss? What can friend and family do to help those who have experienced the death of an online friend?

3.3 Validity, Reliability, and Research Ethics

Reliability of this research is quite complex to assess, since all personal experiences that are viewed through a phenomenal-hermeneutical lenses are unique. Therefore, it is not possible to replicate all the result achieved in this research, but with a sample size big enough, it would be possible to find similar experiences, rituals, reactions, and other things that correspond to the current understanding of grief and its research. One can replicate the study as it is, or with a few changes and if the online communities of the research would be the same, the answers would be like those in this study. If the online communities would be different, it would be possible to find new things that are not presented in this study.

The research question needed to be answered with personal experiences since grief is unique to everyone, and all people react differently when losing a loved one. The person who dies and the relationship with this person is always unique, and in online context these relationships can be very complex to explain. The aim of this research is to add understanding on the meaning of online relationships and losing them, especially in cases of death. The writings received for the research enable answering these questions.

The writings of this research are handled anonymously, and it is not possible for the readers to find out who the writers were, although the online platforms and social media are mentioned, as well as the context of the loss. This research uses personal experiences without exploiting the writers yet revealing enough of the data collected to give the readers a wide understanding of the phenomenon. The writers cannot be identified, and the writings will be stored on local memory disk that only the author of this thesis has

access. Although the topic of this research is very sensitive and personal, the writers sent their experiences voluntarily, and those writings are handled with special care, without drawing any certain conclusions even when the writings are tied to existing theory.

4 From Hello to Heaven

Online relationship has its own part on my life. Whenever he is saying "hi" and "good night" or even just talking with random question makes my heart warmer. (Levi)

The narrative inquiry included a request to describe the online relationship before the death as well as the experiences and feelings after the death. Levi says that online friends hello makes him feel better instantly, and later in his writing he added that it is difficult for him to make friends in person, so online relationships have become significantly important to him. For some people, online relationships can be the only way to make friends, and the writers have emphasized it in their texts. This chapter will answer the questions about the nature and quality of the relationships that the writers had formed online. The special features of meeting and maintaining relationships online are presented.

For a lot of people their online friends are their only real connection to the outside world. We live in a time where the world can be harsh and making face to face friends can be a very daunting task. (Harper)

Harper states that especially with the covid-19 lockdowns around the world, it is difficult to meet people face-to-face. Making friends online becomes natural, since it is almost the only way to stay in touch with other people. Apart from covid, online friendships have been in the making for a while, covid just making the transition compulsory to many who were not familiar with online communities and applications already.

4.1 Losing an Online Friend

Losing, let alone making, online friends is quite unique to the times that we are living in. Online platforms allow discussing with strangers via text, voice, or video chat, playing video games and watching streams together. Sometimes a stranger on the other side of

the screen will become an acquaintance, a friend or even a lover. Online friendships can integrate into meaningful parts of people's lives. Those friendships have their special features, such as not being able to get physical clues in communication and not seeing the physical environment of the other person, such as their homes, families, friends, and workplaces. For people who are not familiar with online context, it may be difficult to understand why someone else creates relationships online, or how those relationships are.

4.1.1 Significance of Online Relationships

People say online friends are different than real life friends. But it isn't true. Even if you've never met them, they're still real people. (Patricia)

As Chan and Cheng suggest, online relationships can become as important as in-person relationships.¹⁰⁹ Hensley states that explaining the relationship between a person and their online presentation may be complicated, and it is even more difficult to explain the nature of an online relationship to someone who is not familiar with the online world.¹¹⁰ In this research, the writers were asked to describe their online relationships freely. Some wrote briefly about their experiences whereas some wrote detailed descriptions about the person they knew and how it was to lose them. A few writers had known the person they wrote about for over a decade. The most common place to meet was a video game called World of Warcraft (WoW). In WoW, the players can create their own avatars that adventure in the in-game world Azeroth. The players can join player groups, guilds, to complete in-game quests and events together.¹¹¹ There are different classes for the avatars such as Death Knights, Hunters, Magi's, and Priests. The players can level-up their

¹⁰⁹ Chan & Cheng 2004, 316.

¹¹⁰ Hensley 2012, 122.

¹¹¹ World of Warcraft website 2021.

avatars to become more powerful in the game.¹¹² While playing together, the writers used voice chat and text channels to communicate with each other. Helmi et al. categorized playing games together as companionship in online context.¹¹³ Harper mentions that he used to talk about almost everything with his online friend. The feeling of having had a close relationship with someone online is mentioned in many texts. The length of online relationships varies in the writings of this research. Many writers mention knowing their online friend for years, longest friendships having been over ten years long. Ryan compliments Harper's writing saying that his online friend knew him better than anyone else.

I had known this gentleman through most of my formative years as a young teenager and young adult. I relied on him for advice, trusted him with secrets I only told my closest of friends. (Harper)

I have lost my best friend last week. He's been a person that I have known for over 10 years now, about 12, and that has been with me through hell and back thrice over. He's been someone I have talked to every day and knew more about me than anyone else, all the non-online friends and family included. (Ryan)

Online relationships can help through difficulties in other aspects of life. Even if online relationships are not entirely fight-free, they seem to last through hard times too. Ashton says his online friend was the only one who would not bully him because of his father's profession as a pastor of the local church. Ryan says that although the relationship was not always easy with arguing and fights, he could not have imagined life without his friend.

¹¹² Wowhead forum 2021.

¹¹³ Helmi et al. 2017, 17-18.

It was a comfort to feel that someone outside of my parents wanted to spend time with someone like me. I had no friends, other than my parents and siblings, I had no close ties. I was a victim of a lot of bullying and slander and hate from the church my Dad pastored at. (Ashton)

While there was quite a bit of arguing here and there and some fights it became the kind of friendship where there was very little he could have ever done to get himself cut out of my life. (Ryan)

These friendships are close, and descriptions about the quality of online relationships includes trust, being oneself and feeling comfortable to talk about anything. Many writers specify that they make no difference between online and other friends that they have met in person. Helmi et al. researched online friendships and categorized sharing information, experiences, and thoughts online as an identifier of online friendship.¹¹⁴

He was a friend that I was very comfortable speaking to, I felt I could speak about anything with him, and we always had fun together. He made me feel like I could be myself without holding back. (Bea)

To me online friends are as important as RL friends. They become RL friends. Now that there is video call, is more common you actually can see them. (Paris)

A few writers mention a possible romance or platonic love between themselves and the person who had died. Zac describes the relationships between different avatars in Second Life having had complicated relationships with each other, becoming close before the disappearance of P. Kurt and Molly mention romances that can be picked up as

¹¹⁴ Helmi et al. 2017, 16.

apparent meanings in content analysis, and Alexander, who ended up his writing with a hope for conclusion, can be included into this category when searching for latent meanings in the writing.

I met up a girl which I connected with. We had a great connection, talking about our lives, sharing problems, and discussing solutions, we even talked about if we ever met, we could try something. -- her sister told me that she loved me, that she wanted to be with me and they talked a lot about what I could've been with her as a couple. (Kurt)

Even if many times our characters tended to have a romance between them; our relationship was merely friendly and platonical if anything. -- I hope there's something after because we owe each other a conclusion to our stories. (Alexander)

I met a man online with whom I started playing. We hit it off, and wound up logging into the game and chatting into the wee hours of the morning on a daily basis. Sometimes we'd chat briefly on the phone, and toward the end, romantic emails were exchanged. (Molly)

For a few years, my avatar in Second Life had been the slave of M. M had been a former slave of someone else in the game- but at that time had become P's partner. I live on the East Coast of the US and found out that my SL Master, M, actually lived relatively close to me, but we never made any attempt to meet in real life (Zac)

Online relationships are often described very close, including family-like bonds within online groups. Brother was mentioned seven times in the writings, and sister in two and viewing them as a family member was mentioned three times. Although online friends are talked about as family members, some describe having a sort of mystery in their relationship or not being sure if this person was who or how they claimed to be like.

Patricia says she knew much of the personal information about the person without having any proof of it, making it difficult to believe this person really was the same as they said they were. Thomas describes knowing each other's personalities but acknowledges that they did not know much other things about each other besides what happened in the game. Chan & Cheng stated that people can easily hide their gender, social class, and age online, and therefore cross-sex relationships form easier than face-to-face.¹¹⁵

My friend who passed away was a very close online friend for several years, yet in all the time he still led a private life. I knew his name, age, occupation, learned about his family, knew the city he lived in and even his apartment building. But I never saw a photo. I never saw proof of any of this. (Patricia)

We barely talk about our social life outside the game, but we know how we were physically and emotionally, we know each other personalities.
(Thomas)

Jonathan and Kurt mention cases in which they would talk to their friends about anything but having failed to realize what was going on the other end of the connection. They were not aware of their friends' depression, because they were always showing a happy face online. Helmi et al. had described online friendships in their study in 2017 as unreal and dishonest.¹¹⁶ Although the following friendships are not called dishonest neither unreal, the following statements show that online friendships can hide many things.

We would talk about absolutely everything, yet i did not know that she had severe depression because she was always happy and vibrant when we were talking. (Jonathan)

¹¹⁵ Chan & Cheng 2004, 317–318.

¹¹⁶ Helmi et al 2017, 16.

Years ago i lost a friend to suicide. we met in a gaming community back ten years ago and he was an extremely friendly chap from the states who seemed to always be happy. (Kurt)

In contrast to the previous descriptions, two writers mentioned that online relationships are not worth the time and effort that they had put into them. After the deaths two online friends, Robin thought that she will not get know to any strangers online anymore. One of them died in an accident, and the latter one committed suicide. He felt like the time and effort he put in that relationship could not prevent his friend from committing suicide.

Levi, whose online friend had not died, but told him that they should not talk to each other anymore, felt like friendships online are short-term because it is so easy to block someone and just disappear from their lives without leaving a trace. Levi and Phoenix's experiences correlate to the study of Helmi et al. in whose study online relationships were described dishonest and something that could be terminated as quickly as initiated.¹¹⁷

I began feeling like I shouldn't have even bothered getting to know a stranger online because even if you try to cheer them up or get to know them, they will ultimately forget you, disappoint you, or die on you. (Robin)

I realize that online relationship is one of short-term relationship because we can easily be gone by block/deleting our online contact with someone we just hate. (Levi)

But once she married her wife, she was being less open and would spend less time online. At a point she removed me from Battle.net and steam friend list. (Phoenix)

¹¹⁷ Helmi et al. 2017, 16.

Online relationships are complex to explain, especially to people who are not familiar with online context. Those people who wrote about their experiences on the death of an online friend for this research described their relationships rather deep. It is important for the clinics to ask the backstory of the relationship sensitively; in these cases, the relationships seem to have been important and meaningful to the writers. Online friends were described brothers, sisters, and family members, sometimes they were the only person besides family who treated the writers' well and with no intention to bully them. It is noteworthy to add that even if one realizes that they do not know their online friend completely, there can be unbreakable bond between them. Online friends become as important as face-to-face friends, and even romances can spark online. When these relationships break, one might lose their interest in forming other relationships online as well as in real life.

The experiences show that the writers had formed long-time relationships with people online. They had future hopes and dreams with those online friends, although they had not met in person. Kurt tells about his thoughts on the future and how had he known this person outside internet world, they could have been a couple. Bea says that she could be herself when she was talking to this online friend, and there was no need hiding the true self. Harper adds to this by saying that he told some of his deepest secrets to the person online. Ryan mentions that even arguments could not separate him from his friends, that is how deep their relationship was. As Paris states, online friends can become as important as real-life friends. Online friends are often described like family members: sisters, brothers, sons, and daughters. Those friendships seem to become important to the extent that it feels like nothing can break them.

4.1.2 Circumstances of Deaths

Reasons for the deaths, as could be expected, varied in different narratives. In four cases, the disconnection was not because of a death, but rather a case of breaking up a friendship with another person. Losing a meaningful relationship may cause a grief

reaction like what happens when somebody dies.¹¹⁸ Those writings include valuable information about the quality of online friendships and how it is to lose friends online. Therefore, it is essential to include those writings in the research. Covid-19 was reason for one death, brain aneurysm was the reason in two cases and accidents in two cases. Those are all sudden reasons for death, and may be classified as traumatic ways of dying, in the same main category with suicide. Those cases are more likely to cause a strong stress reaction in the bereaved and may lead to complicated grief easier than dying of natural causes. Cancer and other medical conditions such as vasculitis and brain tumors are often detected beforehand, therefore clinically defined as natural causes of death.

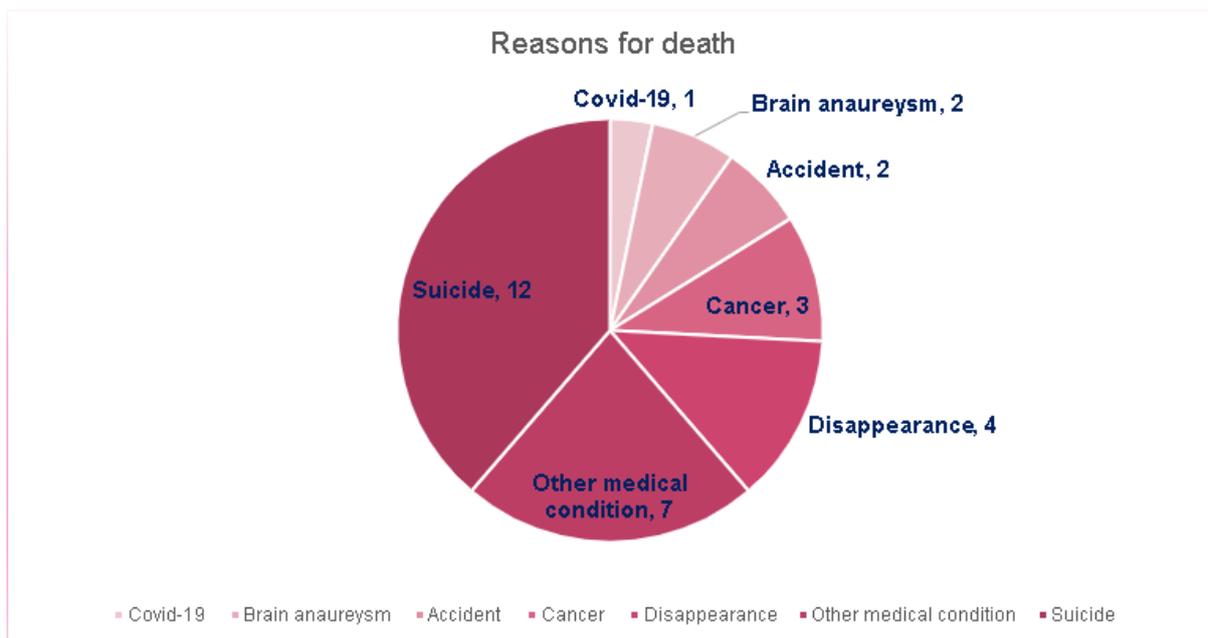


Table 3: Reasons for death

Some wrote about the circumstances before the death of their online friend. Suicide survivors often mention trying to help the person, and sometimes feeling incapable of doing enough because of the nature of online relationships. Two of the writers talked about receiving a goodbye message at night and failing to reach the person again.

¹¹⁸ Alapack 2010, 4-6.

I tried to help him, though he persisted, told me he took pills, saying that his vision went black, and nothing. -- Sitting here writing this story does make me sad, not knowing if he could have survived, not knowing if anyone was ever around him. (Brandon)

I just did my best to help him however I could, be there when he needed someone to talk to, but sometimes that wasn't enough. -- It was somewhere around 3am and I got an email from his ipod saying goodbye. Saying that he loved me and he was happy we had become friends. -- I tried calling him, but I never got a response. -- After some time we had to continue without him. That hurt in an entirely different way because it felt like we were replacing him and moving on. (Dawn)

Last week he left me a message that he could not keep going and I could not reach him as I tried to call him the moment I read the message. He wrote it while I was asleep. -- We both feel some sort of responsibility in the sense that we knew we couldn't do more than we did. (Ryan)

These experiences suggest that the writer was important to the person who died, because they received a goodbye message, sometimes telling how important the receiver was. The writers tried to help the other person, feeling helpless at times, since they could not do enough on the internet. These four writers show survivor's guilt after suicide. They mention not being able to do enough to help and guilt moving on with their own lives. Guilt is often intensified in grief reactions of suicide survivors because of the failed attempts to help.¹¹⁹ One of them mentions trying to find out their online friend's personal information so that they could help this person in real life. They knew that the company owning the game they played had the information he would have needed, and he messaged the company asking for it. He got the number for suicide prevention hotline. It

¹¹⁹ Jordan & McIntosh 2011, 225-232.

is typical for online relationships that people try to help each other out, sometimes feeling frustrated that there is only certain amount that they can do without meeting in person. Although the relationships formed online are strong, the capability to help the other person is limited, and the feeling of not being able to do enough seems to be persistent.

Leslie wrote about his friend who had committed suicide five years ago, still wondering whether there was something that he could have done to help him. This correlates with the studies about traumatic death leading to prolonged grief and distracting thoughts about the death.¹²⁰ Leslie still seems to be contemplating on the issue of not calling his friend before the suicide. Perhaps he thought that he could have said or done something to prevent the suicide if had he called his friend at the time. Jordan and McIntosh have found out that guilt, anger, disbelief, effects in family system and difficulties finding in meaning can be amplified feelings in suicide survivors.¹²¹

I woke up one morning and was goin thru fb and found out he had hung himself the night before I felt so terrible (he would have been 21 this yr he did this when he was 16) I wished I would have been there for him more I should have called him. (Leslie)

Apart from suicides and trying to help in times of depression, some writers knew that the person they have been talking to is terminally ill. One of the respondents wrote about difficulties in not being able to help a friend suffering from cancer, and having hard time not knowing whether they will ever have the possibility to meet in person. When there are still plans in the future, death may cause a goal violation in person's meaning system because the relationship is left unfinished.¹²² When two people are planning to meet, and one of them dies before they have had the chance to do that, the person left alive needs

¹²⁰ Lobb et al. 2010, 688.

¹²¹ Jordan & McIntosh 2011, 225-232.

¹²² Park 2008, 972.

to redraft the story of their friendship in order to make sense of life, and to derive meaning in the relationship.¹²³

Then he told us he had cancer. Our friend that we've known for years and spent hours every day talking to had cancer. He said that it was already in the late stages and they estimated he only had a few months left. -- It's hard to lose a friend, but to lose a friend that you know you will never get the opportunity to meet, that you won't be able to be there for to comfort them or help them through this hard time... that hurts. -- I wouldn't get to play that game with him that I promised to play with him a few months prior. I wouldn't ever get to meet him in person. (Patricia)

Patricia finds it difficult to accept the death, and what is left undone because of it. There are still some thoughts about what she never got to do with her friend, even though they were supposed to be doing those things together. Patricia mentions not being able to meet in person a few times. When meeting in person is a goal, there is a significant goal violation when a loved one dies. A goal violation makes accommodating to the new situation more difficult, and it may be difficult to make sense of the loss.

Other natural causes for death were arthritis, brain tumor and vasculitis. Some writers knew their friend was sick but were not sure what the cause of death was. When the person was ill prior to the death, it seemed to be easier to accept the death, and the feeling of shock was not mentioned in these writings, since the death was to be expected in near future and did not come in as a great surprise.

Her son would get on to tell us when she wasn't able to play. She had some form of illness that she never fully disclosed. All I knew was that she played WoW to experience the world. She was bedridden. (Paul)

¹²³ Neimeyer & Hooghe 2018, 74.

Some of the deaths were very recent at the time of submitting the writings (last week, this February), which has most likely affected on how the writer reflects on their experiences. They show disbelief and denial in their writings. They reflect on the past wondering if something could have saved their friends, which is normative for initial grief. According to Alapack, initial grief is what happens right after the death and usually lasts until the funeral.¹²⁴ These writers are different from Leslie, who was still contemplating with the same sort of feelings about a death that happened more than five years ago, because the death is so recent. Since the death has just happened, there probably is not any meaning made for it, and the writers are replaying the circumstances of the death in their minds and show confusion about the reality and acceptance of the death. As stated before, Ryan's comment could also relate to survivor's guilt.

We both feel some sort of responsibility in the sense that we knew we couldn't do more than we did but, in the sense, we wish that something we would have done would mean he might still be here. (Ryan)

I still cant believe that she's gone... Out of all the people to have died from covid, it had to be her. The most sweet, kind, gentle soul. Her family was confused as to how she contracted Covid. She apparently was very careful because of her dads condition, and wiped and sanitized everything. (Skyler)

In this research, the writers knew the reason for their online friends' deaths, even if they were not completely sure what was going on in the lives all the time. Most friends that had been ill, told their online friends about the illness they had, if it had been possible. Some of those who committed suicide, sent a goodbye message to inform their friends that they will no longer be available.

¹²⁴ Alapack 2010, 14.

4.1.3 Hearing about the Death

Sometimes the instant family does not know all or any of the online communities that the deceased person belonged to. In this situation, informing online friends about the death of a family member may be challenging. For online friends, it is normal to hear about the death with delay: Hensley has had the same results in her research in her Bereavement in Online Communities research project in 2012.¹²⁵ In the written narratives for this research, the family members seemed to have known the friends in some cases, since many of them talk about receiving a phone call or another sort of message from a family member of the person who died. Erin is a mother who wrote about her daughter Josefine who died of a long-term illness at the age of 27. Erin joined the online communities of Josefine prior to her death, making friends with her daughters' online friends. Josefine was ill for seven years before her death, so the community knew about her condition and Erin had kept them updated through several channels. Erin, in contrast to other writers who were the receiving side of the news, was the one giving out the news about the death.

Cole, Dawn and Ryan had exchanged phone numbers with their friends who died. They received phone calls from family members confirming the news soon after the death: on the same or next day. Ryan and Dawn mention some sort of disclosure even though they had heard about the death. Ryan felt like his friend's wishes were not respected while Dawn did not get any final message to know what was going on in her friend's life. In all these three cases, the family members were aware of the online relationships that their child or sibling had. Yet, in Ryan's case, it seems that the importance of the friendship was not either known or appreciated.

The next day I received a call around noon, it was his wife, Ana. She told me that at some point in the night he had taken a bunch of pills and that she found him dead in the living room. (Cole)

¹²⁵ Hensley 2012, 127.

I got a call later from his brother confirming that Kevin was actually gone. They found him with no note. He was just gone and there was no sense of closure. (Dawn)

Later in the day his mother called me as well as he had wanted me to be getting a few of his things and therefor left his mother my contact number, a wish that his family did not respect like many others. (Ryan)

When there are no phone numbers to call, it is more difficult to find information to inform online friends about the death. For online friends it may be difficult to receive the news purely because the family members may not know about the online communities that they had belonged in. In some cases, another person had logged on to the dead person's account to message and inform their online friends about what had happened. The person sending the message had been a family member of a mere stranger to those who knew the deceased person online. Patricia mentions that it took two weeks after her friend disconnected that the brother had logged in and informed them about the death.

A month or so ago, I found out from a stranger in a discord server we shared that he had died. (Bea)

We received a message from his Steam account almost two weeks later who said they were his brother and he was messaging all of us to let us know our friend passed away. (Patricia)

Then she got sick with Covid at the end January of this year. Her family notified us and the guild of her passing on the 16th in February. She had been fighting covid for weeks. (Skyler)

As Pennington's study suggested, it is alright to get on the deceased person's account to inform people that they have passed away but posting any new information or photos of

the deceased is not viewed as positive.¹²⁶ Erin had changed her daughter's Facebook account to memorial account after her death. Erin wrote that it may be difficult to get access to all accounts of a deceased family member and suggests designating a person to take care of those after one's own death.

I learned about changing a Facebook page from an active one to a memorial one after she died. It was fairly easy to do but I also learned that you can designate someone in advance to make it even easier. The biggest advantage to making the change is to stop the annual "Josefine's Birthday is Today" type notices because of course, she won't be having any more birthdays. (Erin)

Sometimes the children of those who died have been the messengers. They have had the chance to get in touch with their parents online acquaintances. Paul mentions that his friend's son had gotten online other times as well, when his friend was not feeling well enough to play with her friends. The son had access to the account, and it was only natural that he would get online to talk about his mother's condition, so he logged in quite soon after the death to let the internet community to know about the death as well. Since he had already been in touch with the online friends, he most likely knew about the importance of these people and the community, therefore letting them know very soon. Molly, on the other hand, got the information through e-mail "one day", which may implicate that the son did not have access to the account right after the death, or did not know about Molly until after the death.

Her son told us she had passed away in the night. (Paul)

One day I got an email purportedly from his son, informing me that he had died. (Molly)

¹²⁶ Pennington 2013, 627–629.

A few people had connected on Facebook, and they received the news on the Facebook page of a person. Thomas had seen memorial posts on his friends Facebook wall, Harper had been wondering why his friend had not posted anything on Facebook in a while, and Elia looked up the Facebook page because he was wondering where his friend had been for half a year. These people talk about the experiences of hearing about the death with delay. If online friends do not have any personal information about their friends, for example the full name, it may take even longer, or they may be left wondering what has happened to a friend whose avatar's life disconnected.

1 year later he died, we knew because a lot of his friends were posting in his facebook wall. (Thomas)

Three weeks went by and I hadn't heard anything from him. I worried about him since this was an individual I talked to every day and had come to view as family. I had also connected with him on Facebook and noticed that he had also not posted or interacted on that platform either. One day, suddenly, his wife posted that he had committed suicide. (Harper)

I found out over Facebook and our gaming clan at around the same time, about a couple of days after the incident. (Taylor)

There was an online friend of mine who died a few years ago. I discovered it half a year later about. He didn't come back online in our game so I wanted to write him in facebook and discovered that he died in a motorcycle accident. (Elia)

The writers had heard about the deaths of their online friends in various ways. Some had heard about the death almost as soon as it had happened, others heard weeks or months later. Those who found out about the death soon, had been contacted by the family members of their friend: children, siblings and parents were mentioned. Those who

heard about the death later had heard from another friend who knew the same person or looked their friends up on Facebook and realized it by seeing a memorial page or writings on their Facebook page. In these cases, the writers were able to confirm the death.

It is typical for online relationships to leave behind unanswered questions behind. Sometimes it is impossible to know whether the person has died or just disconnected from their online worlds. There seems to be some sort of mystery to some of the deaths in the writings. When the full name of an online friend is unknown, it may be nearly impossible to know the reality of their situation. Elliot has heard rumors that his friend may still be alive, although his whole community was mourning the death of this person. He mentions that it was heartbreaking to see everyone grieving in different ways, although not being that emotional about the death himself. This may be due to not fully accepting the death as reality since there were no rituals to help transforming the relationship to the deceased and accepting the death.¹²⁷

Very interested in those theories out there that he could still be alive, we all knew him for about 15 years or so, but he still had this mysteriousness surrounding him. (Elliot)

Zac and Patricia had tried to find online obituaries of their friends. Those are often posted by the funeral homes in the United States. They could not find online obituaries despite knowing the name and place of residence of their online friends. Since writing or reading obituaries can be a ritual which helps people to accept the death and understand the reality of it, the absence of it may lead to confusion in understanding the death. In theory, the person is dead, but it cannot be confirmed. Patricia mentions prolonged thoughts about hoping that her friend was still alive before she could finally accept that her friend would, in any case, be gone from her life.

¹²⁷ Romanoff & Terenzio 1998, 699.

I tried to find out what might have happened to him... by doing online searched for obituaries -- but we never found out. (Zac)

We spent weeks checking for an obituary every day that we knew we would never find. We checked all of the US. We were never invited to a funeral. -- The lack of proof of his existence caused us to struggle on the idea that he may still be alive, and it wasn't real. (Patricia)

These three writers still seem to contemplate whether the death of their online friend was real. They would know the whole name of the person, and sometimes more personal information about the person, yet they could not find their obituary online. Funeral homes in the USA often publish an obituary on their website free of charge (cf. Funeral Matters- website) and since it cannot be found, they are doubtful whether the person is in fact dead.

Parker mentions a situation in which he lost a bunch of online friends after one of them disconnected. His writing does not clarify whether this person died or quit the game even though the group had played together for two years. All Parker can do is to ask what happened. He mentions still having dreams about playing with his friends and feeling sad the next day when they never do. He finds it difficult to understand these dreams and how he feels like the next day.

After some time one person stopped logging in, noone knew what happened, did he drop the game? (Parker)

Zac, Patricia, and Elliot had all heard about their friend's death's somehow, yet they seem to be in a similar situation with Parker not knowing whether the friend is dead. Confirming the death is difficult when there are no traces of it.

4.1.4 Grief among Lifetimes

It is important to write about the experience of death of an online friend among the lifelines of the writers because it seems to influence some of the writers. Some writers said losing online friends was not that big of a deal to them whereas for some it was devastating and everything in between. It is noteworthy to point out that losing an online friend, for some of the writers, is the first time of facing the death of a loved one. For Ashton, this person was the first person outside his family that he learned to know. Cole says that this was the first time he experienced death this close. Both writers mention feeling crushed.

This was my first experience with the death of a loved one. It was soul crushing. (Cole)

Personally, I was crushed. One of the first people I learned to care about outside my family was gone. (Ashton)

Ryan says this was the hardest thing that had happened in his life. His loss was very recent at the time of the writing, he mentioned it having been “last week”. His feelings may still be intensified at this point, but he finds it helpful to talk to other people about the death. Lily says the death of her friend took a piece out of her life and herself.

Losing him has been the hardest thing that happened to be in my life so far and I am not entirely sure how to get through it. What helps me is to talk to two other people that knew him (Ryan)

It's a piece of me gone. A piece of a period of my life missing. (Lily)

Jamie and Erin say that they have both lost close people before, and they say losing an online friend was not to put in the same scale with it. This may be because Erin wrote about the death of her own daughter, and Jamie's online friend was a guild leader, and

he does not describe how the relationship with this person was, whereas Ryan for example, mentioned that his online friend was his best friend.

I have suffered great personal loss before and so I would not put it on that scale, but his death has definitely cascaded into further losses. (Jamie)

I have lost online friends from an arthritis support group which has been very sad, and I've gone through the "normal" grieving process. -- Nothing prepared us for the loss of our daughter. She was 27 and had been ill for 8.5 years before her death. (Erin)

For Jamie, the death of an online friend had not been as impactful as a previous loss in her life, but she mentions having further loss as in effects in the group after the death of a member. Erin had lost online and face-to-face friends before losing her daughter Josefine, but she talks about her relationship with Josefine's internet friends after the death in her writing.

4.2 Grief Processes in the Narratives

Grief theories about meaning making, grief and rituals were presented in the theoretical framework of this paper. In this section, those theories will be used in practice as tools to analyze the writings about deaths of online friends. This part investigates grief theories and whether they correlate to the writings about online context. Although the main themes for this chapter are the stages of grief, disenfranchisement and rituals, other theories are applied within this framework.

4.2.1 Stages of Grief

Kübler-Ross model of stages of grief includes the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Although the model cannot be applied to all cases of grief, and it has been used with various modifications, recognizing these feelings and thoughts

about bereavement can help professionals to assess the grief and its normativity and whether there are risks of complicated or prolonged grief. It is not certain that one person would go through all the phases, or that the phases would be in this order, but it is helpful to recognize the different possible reactions and feelings caused by grief. The five traditional stages of grief are presented on the table underneath, complimented with the writer's comments of this study to show how the stages are present. The writers had experienced the same feelings that Kübler-Ross presented in *On Death and Dying*. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance were all present in the narratives for this study.

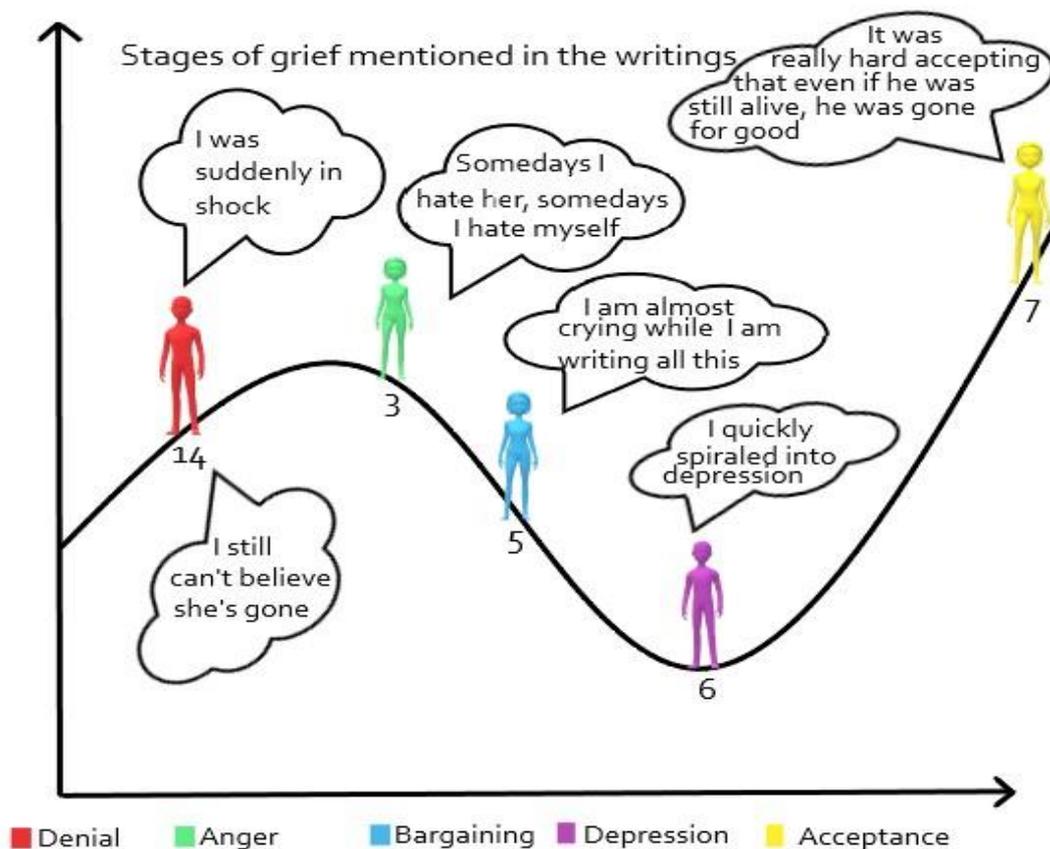


Table 4: Stages of grief mentioned in the writings.

Shock and sadness were mentioned multiple times, one example is the red module on the curve. In the traditional Kübler-Ross model, both of those feelings belong to the first stage of denial.¹²⁸ Those feelings were mentioned in 14 writings out of which Lily and Skyler 's comments represent disbelief. Skyler had experienced the death of an online friend quite recently, less than a month before she wrote about her experience. She mentions devastation and not realizing that her friend had been sick with covid. Lily shares her experience about heartbreak and thoughts about not hearing from her friend again.

The news hit us hard. I cried, and memories of all the years, all the laughter and support we all gave each other over the years came flooding back. Thinking that we wouldn't hear from her again broke all our hearts.
(Lily)

I was and still am devastated that this happened. It all happened so quickly. We hadn't even noticed that she wasn't logging onto the game, and I failed to wonder what was going on. -- I still cant believe that she's gone.. Out of all the people to have died from covid, it had to be her. (Skyler)

Disbelief and denial are common in the first stage of the model but those are likely to move aside quite quickly.¹²⁹ Harper mentions feeling shock and disbelief and writes about how she hoped for a long time that the death would be a joke, and her friend would eventually log back on. Kübler-Ross wrote about patients that seem to stay in denial until the day they die, but in this study, there was no evidence in staying in this phase. Those writers who mentioned currently having the feelings that relate to this stage such as shock, denial, disbelief, had recently experienced the death and show no proof of these

¹²⁸ Kübler-Ross 1973, 34.

¹²⁹ Kübler-Ross 1973, 34.

feelings to be extended. The shortest period from death to the writing was one to two weeks and the longest one was over a decade.

Initially all I felt was shock and disbelief. This person who I had come to view as family was gone. I kept hoping it was all some sort of horrible joke and that he would log on and be his old goofy self. (Harper)

The green module presents the stage of anger, which is the second stage of the grief model.¹³⁰ Paul, who experienced anger, knew their online friend was permanently ill and bedridden, yet they always made plans to play together. He mentioned that crying and sadness were the initial reactions to death. He had not experienced anger after disbelief or shock, but as Kübler-Ross states, the stages may occur in any order, one may not go through all the stages at all. He knew that this person would die sooner or later, so death itself was probably not something unexpected.

It broke me. I cried and got angry. I had never fully experienced death of a friend until that point. (Paul)

Robin, on the other hand, seems to have quite complicated thoughts about the death, as if she felt somehow betrayed by the person. She mentions self-blame and blaming the person who had died and feeling anger as well. She had one online friend who died in an accident and another one who committed suicide. Partially, her feeling of blame may be due to survivor's guilt.

For a long time, I did the usual "this is somehow my fault" way of thinking. For too long. Then I thought maybe she didn't actually like me enough. Followed by just anger at her, and then just myself and then just her again. (Robin)

¹³⁰ Kübler-Ross 1973, 43-44.

Bargaining is represented by the blue module, and in the traditional model it shows the phase of accepting one's forthcoming death by doing something "one more time" before the death, although always wanting to do it again.¹³¹ Kate mentions crying as she writes about her own experience, saying, she is not quite sure if she has had to confront her feelings about the death before. She has postponed confronting her grief. Bargaining phase often creates the need and space for discussion and telling one's story about their experiences, and Kate is one of the writers, among a few who told they have not talked about their experiences to anyone before, who may be in the bargaining phase as they write the narrative of their own.

I am not actually sure if I ever confronted my grief about this, as I am almost crying when I am writing all of this. (Kate)

The purple module represents depression, the fourth stage in the model.¹³² Depression is mentioned often in the writings of the respondents, very often it has something to do with tragic death such as suicide. One person (Max) sent a writing in which he said he has not lost any online friends, but if he did, he would probably fall into depression. One person talks about a person they have known online since they were ten years old, to their early adulthood. This person dealt with depression for 8 months after death. Harper had earlier mentioned that he had been waiting for his friend to show back up online and hoped that the death was just a joke. Later on, he had realized that his friend is in fact dead and hit a depressive episode. Molly mentions having depression because of the death, but later moving on in life and accepting the death.

¹³¹ Kübler-Ross 1973, 71–73.

¹³² Kübler-Ross 1973, 75–77.

I kept waiting for months for that to happen and then finally the grief hit me. I realized that he was never coming back. I went through a major depressive episode. (Harper)

I quickly spiraled into depression, and recognized that I was in trouble.
(Molly)

Ashton says that he still hits depressive spikes and thinks that he will always battle with those feelings. These depressive spikes may be at times when he thinks about the death of his friend, or when other stressful events take place in his life. It is not simple to state whether these spikes are due to depression as a part of grieving process, or does he have depression in general.

I hit a lot of depressive spikes for years and will probably always battle with it. (Ashton)

Robin and Bea reflect on changes on their own thoughts and behavior. They say that ultimately, they quit talking to other people, and no longer want to take part in life. The isolation phase could also relate to acceptance of the death, as some stages may be difficult to differentiate from one another. Acceptance of the death does not mean happiness and joy, but in fact may lead into wanting to be alone and in left in peace. Lack of empathy and stopping to talk to others may be signs of depression.

Everyone dies alone so having other people outside of survival is ultimately pointless to talk to others, and not worth pursuing interaction. (Robin)

My main coping mechanism is dissociation. -- I have been feeling like I no longer wish to participate in life. (Bea)

Robin's experiences of multiple death of friends imply strongly on having complicated grief reactions, although depression is a normative part of grief. She mentions not being

able to feel empathy; whereas inventory of complicated grief includes a statement about disability to care about other people after the death, she mentions becoming angry and bitter¹³³ after experiencing the deaths of loved ones. She mentions feeling lonely despite having close relationships with a partner and a parent.

The yellow module presents the phase in which the bereaved is adjusting to the fact that they will have to learn how to cope in this new situation. The yellow module presents the acceptance of the new situation¹³⁴: although this example phrase is from a text in which the death could not be confirmed, the writer had accepted the fact that this person was gone from her life for good. The death and reality of the situation are accepted, but it does not automatically mean that the writers would be happy. Ryan and Taylor mention having to get used to the emptiness and having to learn with a void inside.

My days are far more empty than they used to be before and I feel a certain void within me that I will have to learn to live with. (Ryan)

There was an emptiness that just seemed to envelope the whole situation.-
- I felt like he to would disappear from my conscious memory and faster since I didn't have any in person memories, and I felt like he deserved so much more then that. (Taylor)

The yellow module presents acceptance or adjusting to life without the person who has died. Patricia, although contemplating whether this person had in fact died or just disappeared from her life for good, seems to be in the phase of acceptance. These writings support the claim that a death can be accepted, although the person will always stay in the hearts and minds of their loved ones.

¹³³ Inventory of Complicated Grief.

¹³⁴ Kübler-Ross 1973, 101–102.

I wouldn't get to play that game with him that I promised to play with him a few months prior. I wouldn't ever get to meet him in person. It was hard to accept, but I was happy that I got the time with him that I did and I'll never forget him. (Patricia)

The different stages of grief are presented in the writings and therefore give a broad understanding of the bereavement process of online friends' death. Time since death influences on the writings and on the stage that the writer would be in, but many writers mention those feelings that they felt back when the death occurred. Some writers talk about a longer grief process that included more than one stage of grief.

4.2.2 Hidden Sorrow

Disenfranchised grief, the feeling of not being justified to grieve, is mentioned in several writings. Doka has created categories for disenfranchisement. First of them is when there is when the relationship is not recognized. Doka mentions that the effect of technology on grief has been overlooked and ignored in the field of study although many people form relationships online.¹³⁵ This phenomenon was shown in the writings about the death of an online friend.

Molly had met a man online, who later told her he had cancer. Since Molly and this man had not met in real life, nor had plans to do so, Molly's family and friends failed to acknowledge the relationship and its' importance to Molly. She later mentions still grieving the death of this man, ten years after his death, although still being married. She does not talk about the intensity of the grief but based on her not mentioning having any problems in other areas of life because of her grief, it is integrated. At the time of his death Molly had been dealing with her grief alone because people thought the romance was not real.

¹³⁵ Doka 2002a, 10.

I had no support from friends and family, since they were sure that my online romance had been a hoax. (Molly)

Ryan's experience is like Molly's since he has no support from his family. His family seems to lack understanding of the significance of online worlds and the relationships formed in them to Ryan.

One of the worst things that is happening is that barely anyone seems to be able to understand how someone so far away from me could have meant so much to me and that my family keeps urging me on to "just keep going" or "why are you sad" which I attribute to them simply not understanding the relationship one can form over the internet. (Ryan)

Although many of the writers' express disenfranchisement of their grief, Cole states the opposite. His family had understood him and helped him through his grief. His therapist had also listened to him, and the death itself was not the reason for why he visited the therapist.

The love and support of my wife and kids helped me through it, as well as my therapist (Cole)

Bea and Robin both feel like they do not have the right to grieve their online friends. They feel like the people in these people's lives outside online context deserve the support. Bea mentions that she probably did not even know the person properly, and she implicates that people around her would not understand it either. Kauffman calls this self-disenfranchisement that could happen due to the feelings of shame or guilt.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Kauffman 2002, 69-72.

I haven't spoken to anyone in my real life about it, it almost feels silly to talk about someone who I'd never met in real life. Like I don't deserve to be sad about his death because I didn't really know him. I don't think I will speak to anyone in my real life about it. (Bea)

It was very sad but I didn't know her well so I didn't have any sort of claim to grief, so I just got over the loss quietly by myself and tried to forget about her. People who knew her deserved all the support. I receded and stuck to people I already knew. (Robin)

Doka mentions another category, in which the loss itself is not acknowledged. One of the cases being a psychosocial death, a major personality changes due to an injury or even grand lifestyle changes.¹³⁷ Taylor mentioned a psychosocial death before the actual death occurred. His friend had lost his memory and never became the person he was again.

He was never really the same after that, he never did get his memory back, and we kind of grew apart a bit we'd still talk whenever he hopped online but it just wasn't like before. (Taylor)

Doka suggests a third category in which the griever is excluded and mentions examples such as the elder people and people with mental disabilities. In those situations, the need to mourn and their sense of loss is disenfranchised. Sometimes some of their real-life communities can be overlooked and not thought of any significance.¹³⁸ In the case of online friends, the online community might not be known or perceived important by the family members of the deceased. The online friends may be excluded from participation in the funeral, which is shown in the following citations. Although this may be due to the

¹³⁷ Doka 2002a, 11–12.

¹³⁸ Doka 2002a, 13.

relationship is not being acknowledged, some writers clearly state that they were either invited to the funeral or left out from the list of invitees.

Patricia says that the lack of invitation to the funeral or not finding this person's obituary online lead into thinking was the cause of his disappearance really dying, or something else. Since rituals help the mourners to understand the reality of the death and confirm it, missing the possibility to take part in funerals may prolong the grief process and accepting the death.

We were never invited to a funeral (understandable because of Covid but no virtual invite either). The lack of proof of his existence caused us to struggle on the idea that he may still be alive and it wasn't real. (Patricia)

Kate, on the other hand, mentions feeling guilty for not attending the funeral although she could have gone. The feeling of guilt could lead into depressing feelings that were presented in the stages of grief-model earlier.

I still feel guilty for not going to his funeral, but I did not feel that I would be welcome there. (Kate)

Sometimes the family and friends of the bereaved do not understand their grief. There are some who say they do not feel like they could talk to anyone because they are not sure if they even knew this person, although they mention that the relationship was significant. Sometimes grief is disenfranchised by the family and friends of the bereaved. One of the texts mentions that the online relationship had been a romance between two people who never planned to meet in real life. When one of them died of cancer, the writer's family did not acknowledge the whole romance as it was.

4.2.3 Rituals Online and Rituals Offline

Commemorative rituals help people to express their emotions and show their remembrance to the dead. Rituals are diverse, and online memorials have become common. In the writings about the death of an online friend, online memorials were mentioned as well as online obituaries, funerals, and other personal rituals, including those happening in real life. Doka classifies the rituals as of continuity, transition, reconciliation, and affirmation.¹³⁹

Rituals of continuity that took place in real life settings were mentioned by a few writers. Anne had taken candles to a graveyard in her hometown, and Patricia's friend had come over to support her. These rituals are often set up to memorize the dead person's life and show that they still have a role in the lives of their friends. Vale-Taylor's description of rituals includes lighting up candles as an act of remembrance.¹⁴⁰

We took a candle to the graveyard in my own hometown, to the memorial people buried elsewhere. – That's when I realized that she was gone – We did get invited to her funeral, and we traveled to another city for it. (Anne)

A good friend of mine came to visit. He didn't know our friend except when he played a game with us one time. But he knew how much he meant to me and my cousin so he set up a little remembrance for him. We went to the graveyard and set up a spot with some candles and flowers and said some words for our friend. (Patricia)

Rituals of continuity that took place online were mentioned as well. Rituals that take place online are common in different gaming communities.¹⁴¹ Skyler, Molly and Erik mention

¹³⁹ Doka 2002b, 143–146.

¹⁴⁰ Vale-Taylor 2009, 541.

¹⁴¹ Taylor 2002, 45.

rituals that are carried out for the deceased, doing things that the deceased loved doing. The ritual that Erik's online group had could also be classified as an act of remembrance since it is a creative ritual, creating a story together. Dawn's ritual is an online ritual with direct link to the deceased, since her online group held an online memorial for their friend.¹⁴² Rituals help maintaining continuing bonds to the deceased. Visiting the gravesite or favorite spot online can be a try to reach out for the deceased.¹⁴³

We took a break from raiding, we held a memorial for him in Stormwind City, and after some time we had to continue on without him. That hurt in an entirely different way because it felt like we were replacing him and moving on. (Dawn)

Since she loved gnomes so much, there are plans to have a gnome run in remembrance of her spirit. - The guild made a discord channel for her, so that friends and guild members could post their condolences and happy memories they have of her. (Skyler)

I often return to our favorite spot in World of Warcraft and remember our time together. (Molly)

We had decided to proceed with story time as usual, but the story wound up concluding with a vision of her appearing over the mountaintops as a gigantic angel, surrounded by singing doves, descending from the sky to solve the Plot of The Day. A group member had gone all in on the sendoff in tribute to her creative friend. (Erik)

¹⁴² Vale-Taylor 2009, 541.

¹⁴³ Silverman et al. 1992, 499.

Some people had meetings with their peers to talk about their memories of the dead person. According to Neimeyer¹⁴⁴ this is an important part of meaning-making in loss. The loss of a friend may cause a fraction in a person's belief system; the narrative of self and what has happened in life becomes incomplete. Therefore, it is important to retell the stories of lost loved one's lives to make sense in what happened and to find meaning to the death itself and to the dead person's life as well. Practical (what happened) and relational (one's relationship with the dead person)¹⁴⁵ levels of meaning making can possibly be found when talking about the memories of a person and how they were.

We held a meeting online to tell all our memories with him. (Paris)

We all agreed to watch our favourite movie, King Arthur (came out in 2004) together as a celebration of her life. (Lily)

My group of friends and I talk about him and remember some stories, when we played together. (Thomas)

Some writers talked about in-game memorial characters. Paul had a memorial character for his friend in game, and Erin plans to contact the game creator company to have a permanent in-game character for her deceased daughter who was also a gamer.

Even today I still have a memorial character for him in the game. (Paul)

One thing I have not done yet is approach Blizzard to make a permanent in-game character for my daughter-- In the meantime, I have found a gravesite in the game that I visit occasionally to place some stuffed toys

¹⁴⁴ Neimeyer & Sands 2011, 11.

¹⁴⁵ Neimeyer & Sands 2011, 11.

and take a screenshot to share on the WoW Blog and in my discord channel. (Erin)

In the writings, rituals were presented in various ways. Some had rituals that can be universal to any death: participating a funeral or taking flowers to the grave of a person or talking about the dead person with other people. Online gnome runs and in-game gatherings, taking a break from an in-game activity and returning to favorite spots in the game world are unique to online loss. Erin does mention other ways of online remembrance that she stumbled upon on the death of her daughter, including turning Facebook page to memorial page, watching videos of her daughter on YouTube, struggling to get owner rights to their shared blog, and creating a remembrance channel on Discord community as well as making friends and keeping in touch with her daughter's best online friends.

The writers mention some coping techniques with their grief: going back to in-game places that they visited together, writing poems, telling the stories of the individuals, and listening to music. Dakota writes in a poetic form, mentioning that writing has helped him to cope with facing deaths of online friends. Telling stories is a way to remember the deceased and reconstruct the meaning of their death.¹⁴⁶Alapack mentions that music can be viewed as ritualistic mourning¹⁴⁷, and Dawn mentions still listening to a song that reminds her of her friend.

I write notebooks. 75 since last March. I been, I've in going down the list of these funeral homes and writing the life and death stories of each individual. In life, these people created a life for themselves, In Death, There's the medical aspect of it all. -- And in some ways, Their Death story

¹⁴⁶ Alapack 2010, 20; Neimeyer & Jordan 2002, 109.

¹⁴⁷ Alapack 2010, 18.

becomes more powerful and tragic than their life story was. Because they lost that almighty fight. (Dakota)

Today, 3rd of March, 2021; I'll occasionally listen to Oblivion by Mastodon and think about our friend. (Dawn)

There are many ways that the writers memorialize their deceased friends. Many had attended an in-game funeral or memorial, created in-game memorial characters, and talked to the other members of their online group about the death. Some have had in-person rituals such as lighting up candles, putting up photos, listening to music, and writing poems. These rituals are often self-driven and created by those who attend them. They seem to help processing the death and accepting its reality even though they had not had the possibility to meet the other person or attend the funeral.

4.3 Meaning Making and Afterlife

This chapter introduces the changes in the lives of the bereaved as well as the changes in the relationship with the deceased. First, the changes in the online groups after the death of a member are presented. Second, the perspectives in life that have changed or shaken are shown. Third, the writers' thoughts about religion and afterlife are discussed. Continuing bonds with the deceased are maintained and those are discussed as well.

4.3.1 Impact on the Social Groups

When death hits a community or group, it seems to influence other relationships in the group as well. The death of an online friend seems to make the group relations complicated. It may be difficult to talk to others about what has happened, or the bereaved might not be completely comfortable sharing their feelings about the death with others; grief reactions are different, and sometimes it seems to be challenging to understand the way that others grieve. The crisis may break the group of friends for good, Jamie mentions that their community tried to stick together but could not for unknown

reason. The person who died may have been a leading character in their group, and without them, the group does not know how to work. It seems like for many communities the death causes grief reactions in its members that are complicated for others to understand. Online context lacks many physical clues that help finding empathy and understanding other people's feelings, and in a crisis, they might be crucial for communication. Lattanzi-Licht studied grief in workplace and stated that someone can do the deceased person's tasks but cannot replace the expressive roles that people take.¹⁴⁸ The death of a coworker affects the whole community, and these communal effects are seen in the deaths that happened in online groups of this study.

It was difficult to discuss what had happened in our group of friends --each one of us separated themselves from others and dealt with it alone. (Anne)

For me personally, I wasn't super impacted by his death itself. I was WAY more impacted by my peers reaction to the news, I think it all happened over a few weeks. Jesus man, my heart died when we were all grieving differently. (Elliot)

Everyone suffers grief in their own way. We all made our own tribute to him on our guild forums which we made available to his family, but in the end our guild and online community has fallen apart. (Jamie)

Some cannot specify why their group broke up after a death. The person who died might have been the glue that kept them together, or it could have just been too difficult to talk about the feelings that they had about the death. Some are still in touch with a few people from their online community although the original group had separated after the death of a friend. Jordan & McIntosh mention that suicide survivor's social relations may be

¹⁴⁸ Lattanzi-Licht 2002, 171.

disturbed due to the stigma around suicide, and therefore the lack of social support.¹⁴⁹ In the case of disenfranchisement due to suicide and online friendship, the social support may have not been available, and therefore the whole online group has fallen apart.

We had a in game ceremony and then we went about our time. Over the months we stopped playing and the guild fell apart. (Paul)

I still talk to many old guildmembers tho we all moved on to other games or quit gaming totally. (Paris)

Few weeks later almost everyone in guild parted their ways and only people left were me and 2 other friends. (Parker)

Taylor, on the other hand, mentions that their online group was a helping factor in dealing with grief. He is still a member of the community that faced grief together and managed to tackle it in a productive way, so that the community members could help each other through grief.

I think it helped that we had met in a gaming community because we were able to help each other through the grief. (Taylor)

The writings had many mentions about secondary losses such as friends of the group that could not understand each other's grief. Taylor presented a differing view, which shows that it is possible to find comfort in the online community. He mentions being able to help each other, but it is not always easy. When comparing Taylor's writing to the other writers with difficulties in group relations, it is not possible to pick up those factors that made his group thrive through grief together.

¹⁴⁹ Jordan & McIntosh 2011, 225–232.

4.3.2 Perspectives on life itself

Some writers mention the death affecting their thoughts about life in general, raising existential questions. Bea and Kate raise questions about not existing and not really understanding it. In a way, Kate says, it was not a major change, complemented by Elliot, yet put things into new perspective. For Kate, the death of her friend had started a process of wondering about life itself, and how small people really are in this universe. The loss for her personally has been major, although she seems to think about the world around her; everything goes on normally despite losing a friend she can no longer talk to. She mentions in her writing, that she wonders whether she has in fact confronted her grief, since writing about her experience makes her emotional. Kate defines herself as an atheist, who believes we are all connected, but people are responsible for their own lives. She does not believe in higher forces such as God. In previous studies, finding meaning in somebody's death has correlated with spirituality and faith. Elliot mentions new perspectives on life as well. Alapack acknowledged that a death of a loved one puts people into a situation in which they must adjust to loss, at the same time having to realize that their days are numbered as well, which may lead into personal crisis.¹⁵⁰

It was not that big of a change, just one person missing with whom you can no longer talk to and yet it does put things in perspective - how little we mean in a big picture and once you are gone, you are gone for good. (Kate)

His death was an important aspect of our lives and put a lot of perspective on life itself, as weird as that sounds. (Elliot)

Bea's friend had died of brain aneurysm at the age of 27. This made her think about her own accomplishments in life, and forced her to face the limitations of life, and the fact that one cannot know when it is their time to go. She seems to be thinking about her own

¹⁵⁰ Alapack 2010, 5.

life and death and shows signs of fear of sudden death- saying it is terrifying that she could just stop existing. Tervo-Niemelä has completed research on fear of death and categorizes the fear of sudden death as one of the eight classes that appeared in the narratives about fear of death. This sort of fear has no connection to religion, but religion and spirituality can be helpful factors in managing the fear. The death of a loved one may cause fear of death in the bereaved.¹⁵¹ Bea mentions not having religious or spiritual beliefs, which could be a factor in fearing death: there is nothing after. Jess mentioned being scared because his friend killed herself but does not specify what she fears. It could be fear of losing someone else close to her, fear of sudden death, or about her own death.

It makes me think about my own life, and my own struggles, and how I've achieved nothing and could be wiped out at any moment like he was. It's not fair. It's terrifying. I can't comprehend just- not existing. (Bea)

I was terrified cause well she took her own life. (Jess)

Ashton mentions how the life of her friend affected her as a person and how he learnt positive things from her friend. He is raised Christian, his father is a pastor, and he wants to bring understanding between Christians and the gaming community. He says his friend's legacy helps him to be a better person and treat other people the way that his friend treated him, genuinely and kindly. The death occurred eight years prior to this writing, and time has helped him to find meaning in the death. Although he still struggles with some depressive feelings time to time, he has learned how to help others through problems. Ashton seems to have made meaning in death and the friendship he had with his friend. She has positive attitude towards life. The attitudinal values of Ashton's seem to be kindness, compassion, and friendliness.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Tervo-Niemelä 2020, 137-142.

¹⁵² Frankl 2010 [1965], 179.

The church's I was in mocked and scoffed at me for gaming, yet I found a genuine friend, and now more, through it that I want to treat the way she treated me. With kindness, compassion, and love. (Ashton)

Robin says the deaths of his friends have affected him in such profound ways that he is struggling to participate in anything in life. He may be going through a crisis in meaning because he mentions still trying to have fun and being joyful but finding it extremely difficult. He mentions that he used to find consolidation in art and music, but those things do not seem to work anymore. Robin says he used to be extroverted and outgoing person, but the deaths and grief along with it has changed his behavior, if not the whole personality. He mentions losing two online friends, one in an accident and another one by suicide, and an in-person friend of blood clot. Losing so many people who he cared for, has made it almost impossible for him to enjoy the things he used to like doing, which implies on having depression and there are no meanings made for those deaths at least quite yet. Freud stated that grief makes life difficult by causing intolerable apathy, drops the activity level of a person, makes people lose interest in things that surround them and making them momentarily incapable of loving.¹⁵³ Corr adds that the behavioral aspects of grief, such as anger, are often overlooked and not understood by those around the bereaved.¹⁵⁴

I don't go out. I'm happy everyone in the world was freaking out about being confined to home, welcome to my existence. I'm pretty bitter but I like to try to be fun sometimes... So I chat with random people online when I get lonely or bored. But even when I'm around people I enjoy, I still feel lonely. -. Everything is pointless. I try to still have fun though and I'm in a healthy relationship but honestly I don't care about anything. - Music still

¹⁵³ Freud 2005 [1917], 159.

¹⁵⁴ Corr 2011, 3-16.

makes me happy or feel things. I used to make art but I can't anymore, it's pointless. (Robin)

The experience of losing an online friend has in many cases caused major changes in the bereaved. Some mention having an existential crisis. Thinking about their own lives and how they will die as well has made some fear death and not existing. Some seem to be dealing with crisis-in-meaning or find life meaningless whereas some have found meaning in death.

4.3.3 Life After Death

Most respondents did not find themselves religious, but they had hopeful thoughts about meeting somewhere after this life. Some feel like the person is still with them wherever they go, which is in line with the new understanding of grief and continuing bonds theories. Some are hoping for a closure. One of the writers is still contemplating on how the relationship would have been in person, and what kind of feelings there were.

Alexander who is an agnostic, says the person he lost was a good roleplaying friend of his, and will stay as an important part of him. The characters tend to have a romance between each other, but Alexander does bring up that him and his friend's relationship was platonic if anything. Now, eight years after the death, he hopes that he will find out how their story will end. Whether it is a question about a role-playing story or their personal relationships, there is hope for some sort of afterlife.

I hope there's something after because we owe each other a conclusion to our stories. (Alexander)

Dawn, defined herself as Wiccan/Non-Religious, seems to correlate with the Wiccan belief that human soul or spirit survives the death of body, and continues living in another form. She seems to believe in some sort of afterlife, but it is not defined where that life is, and 11 years after the death of her friend, she has accepted the reality of the death, and the

living circumstances of her friend that led to suicide, not hoping that he would be back in this world but instead happy wherever he is now even if it is without her. This mean that Dawn has located her deceased friend into a new life, locating the dead is one way to maintain continuing bonds. Patricia and Paul have located their deceased friends in either afterlife or heaven.¹⁵⁵

I still miss him but I don't wish him back here. I just hope he's happier in his new life. (Dawn)

I can't confirm or deny the existence of heaven. But I sure do hope it's real. And if my friend really is gone, I hope that's where he went. -- I hope his next life is better than his last. (Patricia)

I believe in the afterlife as some sort of meeting place where you encounter people significant in your life and your pets. All waiting to say hello. I hope to meet her and learn her name and her story. I miss her. (Paul)

Skyler and Jess do not mention their religious affiliation, but they think that their friends are in a better place now. Skyler's description about continuing bonds is multidimensional in a sense that whereas she places her friend into a better place, she simultaneously experiences her presence by hearing her laughter and remembers her by thinking about her.¹⁵⁶ Bea, whose loss was very recent at the time of writing, says that she still hears her friends voice in her head.

I still hear his voice in my head, excitable and saying my name in weird voices. (Bea)

¹⁵⁵ Silverman et al. 1992, 497.

¹⁵⁶ Silverman et al. 1992, 498–500.

There hasn't been a day so far that I don't think about her and hear her wonderful giggle in my head. I just hope her death wasn't painful, and that she is in a better place now. She will always be in my heart, and I miss her dearly. (Skyler)

I wish to never experience it again and I hope she is in a better place. (Jess)

Silverman et al. have mentioned that remembering the dead or waking memories of them is one way of maintaining continuing bonds.¹⁵⁷ Molly mentions still loving and missing the man she had known online over ten years ago. Molly, Jess and Elia all mention still thinking about the person who died, even though it had been from two to eleven years since the death, making continuing bonds with online friends long-lasting.

I love him still. I miss his company and grieve his death in December 2010. -
- I'm married now, yet I still think of him. (Molly)

Even though it was an online friend I still think of her to this day, it happened 2 years ago. (Jess)

He died in a motorcycle accident. - it made me very sad, that was 7 years ago, and it still hits me when i think about it. (Elia)

Continuing bonds theory suggests that the goal of grief is not to cut all the ties with the person who has died, but to alter them so that they can be a healthy part of a normal life again. Some of the writers wrote about things that may implicate that they are trying to achieve this state, or that the person who died is still a valuable part of their lives. Dawn,

¹⁵⁷ Silverman et al. 1992, 500.

whose friend died years ago, had been struggling with grief for a long time, and continuing to do the things they did together was difficult for her for a long time, because she felt like her friend might be replaced. Reflecting to her experiences now, years later, she says she has successfully transformed the relationship so that her friend can still be with her, although in a different way than before.

He could never be replaced. He would always be with us, no matter what, giving us strength when we needed it. (Dawn)

Taylor had lost an in-person friend years before he lost his online friend. At first, he was afraid that he would lose all memories of his online friend easier, since there were no in-person memories, items, or places they would have gone together to. He wanted to cherish the memory of his friend by changing his desktop background picture, something quite unique to the online environment, although many people do have photos of their deceased friends as well. Taylor and Dawn both say their online friend was still there with them while they were gaming, continuing the friendship bonds in the gaming world.

I downloaded a picture of him from Facebook and made it my desktop background, I left it that way for a couple years. It helped me feel like when I was gaming, he was still right there gaming with me. (Taylor)

Robin and Ryan still struggle to alter the bond, sometimes feeling anger or annoyance, yet trying to convey their feelings to positive and keeping the good things with them. Robin mentions having a photo up on her wall, close to the way that Taylor had changed his desktop background. The photo reminds Robin of his friend and even though the relationship still seems to include some unresolved problems due his friend committing suicide and making Robin feel like he was not important enough to his friend.

I still her have photo up on my wall as a reminder of whatever I feel.
(Robin)

I can't remember his name, but I still have pictures on my phone he sent me his name on game is wat I always remember -- I miss him. (Leslie)

Ryan and Robin both quite uniquely mention negative feelings about the person who had died either before or after the death. Despite the negative feelings, they felt like the relationship between themselves, and their friends was worth pursuing, and Ryan mentioned earlier that his friend could have done almost anything and not get cut out of his life.

In general, remembering the good moments, even the annoying things and we now miss and just all these little things that a person did and keeping him within our hearts. (Ryan)

Continuing bonds theory by Klass and Silverman explains how the relationship with a loved one does not end in death but in contrast, the relationship needs to be altered and the thoughts of the person need to be adjusted. These continuing bonds can be a part of a fulfilling life.¹⁵⁸ Although they are not present physically or online, Dawn mentions that her friend is always with her and their group of friends, helping them through tough times when they need it the most. Ryan mentions that their group misses even the annoying petty things now, yet they keep him in their hearts. Harri Koskela, in his doctoral work on parental loss, has received the same kind of mentions.¹⁵⁹ The writings about the death of online friends support the theory of ongoing bonds with the dead. Dawn, Taylor, and Ryan all mention that their friends still have a place in their thoughts or hearts.

Continuing bonds theory does have its part in online friendships as well as in losing a family member of a friend who one knows in person. Some worry that they will forget about online friends easier than face-to-friends though, possibly due to not having any

¹⁵⁸ Klass & Silverman 1996, 22.

¹⁵⁹ Koskela 2011, 207.

physical memories or objects about these people. When using voice chat or having pictures or videos about the person, those can be remembered, looked at or watched when memorizing the person who has died.

5 Summary of Findings and Discussion

Online friendships in this research were described to be close: the writers called their online friends' brothers, sisters, and best friends. The longest online friendships in these narratives were longer than decade, although the frequency of contact together with the discussion topics and shared things is probably a better indicator about the quality of the friendship.¹⁶⁰ Some unique features of online relationships are the fact that it is difficult to know whether the person on the other side is telling the truth about their physical and mental health, and it is difficult to help a person in need of help. It is possible to know someone's personality, profession, and many other things without knowing their names or how they look like. This could be one factor in making it easy to talk about anything and everything with someone that has no connection to one's family or friends. Sharing thoughts, experiences and feelings were found alongside companionship. Companionship was found in this study in friends who played videogames together.¹⁶¹ Not knowing the name of someone is certainly not a problem until the person disappears and finding them seems like a mission impossible.

The grief reaction that a death of an online friend causes is as unique as any, yet many similarities to current studies can be found in the narratives of this research. If the death has occurred recently, the bereaved seem to be struggling with the questions: "Why did it have to be just this person, why did I not realize to do something earlier? I should have spent more time with him" Devastation, shock, disbelief, anger, self-blame, depression, lack of interest in life, emptiness, adjusting and accepting the death are mentioned in the experiences about the deaths. This finding correlates with Kubler-Ross' stages of grief¹⁶², implicating that losing an online friend causes emotion that are like those that are experienced losing face-to-face friends, family members or acquaintances. The intensity of

¹⁶⁰ Hensley 2012, 124-125; Chan & Cheng 2004, 317-318.

¹⁶¹ Helmi et al. 2017, 17-18.

¹⁶² Kübler-Ross 1973, 33-123.

the emotions cannot be measured in this way of study. For some respondents this was the first time experiencing someone close to them dying, one mentioned that losing their online friend was not nearly as difficult as losing another close person in their lives.

Continuing bonds theory seems to correlate in losing online friendships as well as face-to-face friends, although the absence of physical reminders of the person may cause fear that the person will be forgotten from the memory. Continuing bonds in this research were found in the level of remembrance, reaching out, experiencing, and locating.¹⁶³ Rituals help transforming the relationship to the dead and maintain these continuing bonds.¹⁶⁴ Rituals found in this research happened both offline and online contexts. Online rituals included in-game memorials, participating in-game events that the deceased loved, having online gatherings, and having talks about the deceased friend. Rituals in the mourning of online friends took place also in offline world. One writer took part in the funeral, some lit up candles at graveyards of their own hometowns, listening to music and writing poems were mentioned as well.

Disenfranchised grief is a term that is used in loss that is not socially acknowledged or accepted. The death of pets, ex-spouses, same-sex partner or of an online friend are likely to left unrecognized.¹⁶⁵ People making friends online may face prejudice about the relationships. Others may think that the other person is lying about themselves. In this study, the family members of the bereaved did not always understand the grief that the death of an online friend had caused. Some writers felt strange talking about their grief with others because they felt like they did not know the person well enough. Because the family and friends do not know about the relationships people form online, the invitation to a funeral may be left unsent. The bereaved may not attend the funeral because they feel like they do not have the right to do so.

¹⁶³ Silverman et al. 1992, 498–500.

¹⁶⁴ Romanoff & Terenzio 1998, 699.

¹⁶⁵ Doka 2002a, 5–10.

Even though disenfranchised grief is mentioned in many narratives, some people were able to attend the funeral of their online friend, some spent time with face-to-face friends who understood their grief and received support from family or friends. What was unique to the online context were virtual memorials in the game worlds, watching a favorite movie simultaneously all over the world, visiting virtual places that remind of the person who died and creating memorial characters for those who have died. Creating discord channels for memorizing a member of the community and talking about the person who died are both ways to reconstruct the story of the person who died and help making sense or creating meaning in what had happened.

In this research, the difficulty to maintain relationships in the online community after a death was mentioned a significant number of times. It may be difficult to talk about something as profound as dying and death with people who have not met each other in person, or it may be too painful to talk about the person who died, yet it cannot be handled with silence since communicating online does require sending messages or using voice, especially in these cases when video calls are not used. Many people find the grief reactions of others to be hard to deal with. They are facing their own grief, and now seeing how others are reacting in various ways, not being capable of understanding why.

Deaths of online friends had caused significant changes in the thoughts about life in general in those who wrote about their experiences. Many mentions having changed their whole perspective in life: how little we are in the big picture; some had found meaning and wanted to treat other people like the deceased treated them. Deaths of online friends of this research were traumatic, and some writers mention having lost interest in life after experiencing death of a loved one. Although online friends do not always leave anything behind but profiles that say, "offline for x number of days", the online friends keep them in their hearts and minds.

The whole topic of this research is new to the field of death studies. Although some previous studies have been done, a qualitative study was first of its kind. This study

complemented many existing theories while adding understanding on the online friendships and losing online friends. In this research it was shown that online groups are vulnerable to break after a member dies, yet the reasons for this vulnerability are unanswered until further research is done.

This study shows that it would be important for everyone to assign a person who would be able to get on their online profiles after their death. This would make it easier to inform the online friends about the death that the family members may not be aware of. Closing the profiles that are not going to be used or changing them into memorial profiles is recommended to avoid confusion on what happened to a friend who does not connect anymore.

Rituals help people cope with their grief, and in most of cases of this research, the writers were unable to participate in an arranged ritual, the funeral or another in-person memorial. The writers have created in-game memorials, memorial discord servers, memorial characters, written about the deaths and created other sorts of rituals to have a place to grieve either together or alone. Those rituals can mean the world to those online friends who are for a reason or another unable to participate the funerals.

Disenfranchised grief was present in the writings for this study. When hearing about the death of somebody's online friend, the situation should be handled with care and in a same sort of manner as if it was a face-to-face friend. The grief reactions and feelings that the death of an online friend causes is like those that have previously been researched upon in other studies. Professionals, families, and friends of the bereaved can help by letting the bereaved talk about the person who died, about how they met, what they did together and how do they feel now that the other person is gone. Many of the writers mentioned not being able to talk to anyone about their grief and writing about it was the first time telling anyone, some adding "thank you for reading this" note in the end. This implicates that it is meaningful to the writers to talk to someone who listens to them without judgement.

6 Bibliography

6.1 Sources

The sources of this research consist of 34 writings about deaths of online friends collected with a narrative inquiry 1.3.2021–30.4.2021.

The writings are in possession of the author of this thesis.

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7 Attachments

7.1 Narrative Inquiry

Have you lost an online friend?

An online friend would be someone with whom you mainly communicate on the internet, even if you have met in person.

If you have lost your online friend, I would like to ask you to write about the feelings, thoughts and experiences that you have had. The texts will be used in master's thesis research at University of Eastern Finland, researching grief and recognizing it.

You may write in any form you prefer and for example, describe your online relationship and its meaning to you. How did you find out about the death, and how has the death affected your everyday life? What has helped or complicated coping with the death?

All kinds of experiences are valued. I wish you to write particularly about the support you have received, ways of commemoration, or the absence of those things and your thoughts about religion and spirituality.

All the writings will be handled anonymous and you do not have to tell your name, but I am hoping you will mention your age, gender, and religious affiliation. All the writings will only be used for research purposes and the respondents cannot be identified at any stage. The research may be complimented with interviews. If you are willing to participate, please leave your contact information on the form.

You can send your experiences, or any questions raised via e-mail katarki@uef.fi

You can submit your experiences also through a webform: [\(link\)](#)

Katariina Sjöholm

Thank you very much for sharing your experiences.

7.2 Publishing platforms

Date	Platform	Group/community	Publishing date (If missing, not published)
1.3.2020	Linkedin	MyPage	
1.3.2020	Linkedin	Theology for today- Admin contacted	3.3.2020 cannot be published
1.3.2020	LinkedIn	Psychology Students network- Admin contacted	5.3.2020 published (it seems to be a group for research requests)
1.3.2020	Facebook	Researching Death And Understand Dying. - Admin contacted	3.3.2020 published
1.3.2020	Discord	Group therapy and support group- admin contacted	1.3.2020 published
1.3.2020	Facebook	Philosophy of Death and Dying - admin contacted	3.3.2020 published
2.3.2020	Discord	Wowhead: World of Warcraft- admin contacted	4.3.2020 published
2.3.2020	Reddit	/LDR group admin contacted	
2.3.2020	Linkedin	Haaga-Helia alumni network - admin contacted	2.3.2020 published
2.3.2020	Kaikki syövästä	Foorum admin contacted	15.3.2020 published
3.3.2020	Twitter	Own profile hastags #etäopetus, #tulevaisuus : sharing the request in finnish	
3.3.2020	Discord	sharing with a friend	
3.3.2020	Facebook	post on my own page- in english	
3.3.2020	Facebook	Post request on "I will remember you, grief support and grief quotes"	
3.3.2020		Friend contacted and asked to share on discord server	
5.3.2020		Friend contacted and asked to share on discord server	
8.3.2020	Discord	Among Us Global server moderator contacted	
8.3.2020	Facebook	Second Life- page connected	
8.3.2020	Discord	CSGO Discord- admin contacted	
9.3.2020	Discord	SIMS Network admin contact	

9.3.2020 Quora	Direct message sent	
9.3.2020 Dota2	Dota2 discord moderator contacted	
9.3.2020 Discord	Twostarplayers contacted	
9.3.2020 Reddit	DOta2 discord moderator contacted	permission to publish 15.3. Decided not to
9.3.2020 90's gamer	admin contacted	
9.3.2020 Discord	Omega's cafe admin contacted	