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Challenges and opportunities of Facebook during bereavement: experiences from Taung in South Africa

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Bereavement is something that we experience in one way or another. It involves many steps from one culture to the other. Many scholars have documented the role of social media tools in bereavement processes. In this study, I look at the challenges and opportunities offered by Facebook during bereavement, especially in a community that is still traditional and has yet to fully comprehend the importance of social media, particularly in matters considered sacred. The study used interviews with residents from Taung to collect data. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data from the interviews. The study findings indicate some challenges associated with bereavement on Facebook: emotional shock, lack of sensitivity, misinformation, and cultural dilution. There are also opportunities: fast news sharing, ongoing emotional support, and sharing of memories. The study argues that the findings should expand our understanding and knowledge of bereavement in some African cultures and use social media tools to complement and not destroy African beliefs and practices.

KEYWORDS

Facebook, bereavement, social media, death, Taung, Africa

Introduction

Social media has had a significant impact on the world and has changed it in many ways. Social media has enabled the spread of information and news more quickly (Newman et al., 2012; Bergstrom and Belfrage, 2018). It allows users to share news, photos, and videos with millions of people worldwide in a matter of seconds. People worldwide use social media platforms to freely express their opinions and ideas and connect with others who share their interests (Jensen, 2015). People also use social media to create activism and social movements and organize and mobilize people worldwide to act on important issues (Murthy, 2018; Akpojivi, 2023). Social media has also transformed how people communicate, enabling people to connect with friends and family who are far away. These characteristics of social media make it a powerful force for change.

Social media platforms' continuous growth and influence allow users to maximize their full potential in active participation in social media and society. The role of social media users in (re)shaping the world as we knew it 20–30 years ago has been studied by scholars in different fields, such as media studies (Alfandika and Akpojivi, 2020; Buthelezi et al., 2021; Akpojivi and Aiseng, 2022), sociology (Ostertag, 2019, 2021), economics (Boumans et al., 2023; Tumasjan, 2023), and health (Mgudlwa and Iyamu, 2018; Elhajjar and Quaida, 2022). Social media users have transformed into interpreters, storytellers, and participants. They drive the narrative, and they influence society.

These considerations raise questions about the issue of digital transformation. We live in a digital society with pervasive, ubiquitous digital connectivity and, arguably, a quantified planet, wherein animate and inanimate objects increasingly have their digital twins and digital footprints (Biçer and Yildirim, 2022). It is also clear that the planetary population has been increasing not only in the physical sense but also in the digital realm. We now live in both physical and virtual worlds as citizens, institutions, nation-states, and micro and macro scales (Biçer and Yildirim, 2022).

Of importance, the digital age raises questions about the presence of death on social media platforms. Stratton (2020) explained that social media are pervaded by death. Death is a constant presence on social media. There are images, posts, and videos of people who died. It is common to see “RIP” (Rest in Peace) on social media platforms. Grief and social support are taking shape in online networks (Brubaker and Hayes, 2011), and the dead persist and continue to participate as social actors in social media platforms (Stokes, 2012).

The internet has also resulted in new online avenues where people report and announce death. It is also a place where some people seek help for grieving (Hoe-Lian and Sian, 2011). Social media affords people support during grieving periods. Brennan (2008) explained that this online support provides a means for expressing grief, helping to bridge the gap between the living and the deceased and between the bereaved individual and the larger community of mourners.

Facebook is a global social media platform with over three billion monthly active users as of January 2023 (Statistica, 2024). Ohman and Watson (2019) estimated that Facebook profiles belonging to the deceased will accumulate to hundreds of millions of dead users in the next few decades and that the profiles of the deceased might exceed the living ones before the end of the century. According to Trevisan et al. (2023), this accumulation of accounts of deceased people results from the fact that Facebook struggles to distinguish between profiles of the living and the deceased; the latter continues to be treated as if they are still alive. Death on social media is a phenomenon that has become increasingly common in recent years. When someone dies, their friends and family often use social media platforms to express their grief, share memories, and pay tribute to the deceased. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have become virtual memorials where people can gather to mourn and remember their loved ones. Users can share photos, videos, and messages in memory of the deceased. Some social media platforms even have features that allow users to create dedicated memorial pages for loved ones.

However, death on social media is also a complex and sensitive issue. Sometimes, people post inappropriate or insensitive content on social media when someone dies. This can include sharing graphic photos, making disrespectful comments, or posting jokes or memes about death. Such behavior can hurt the deceased's loved ones and be seen as violating their dignity. Social media can also exploit a person's death for personal gain or attention. This can be seen as disrespectful and can cause harm to the deceased's loved ones.

In this study, I look at the challenges and opportunities offered by Facebook during bereavement, especially in a community

that is still traditional and has not fully comprehended digitality and sociality.

Background

Bereavement in African cultures

Rituals are part of many African communities. They serve various social, cultural, and spiritual functions. Furthermore, death is one of the sacred rituals among Africans. Death has culturally prescribed rituals, such as slaughtering a cow, female chief mourner sitting on the mattress for the whole period before the burial, wearing black clothes (Mojapelo-Bakta, 2013), and avoiding certain places, for example, graveyards and being away from home at night. According to Sossou (2002), failure to fulfill any of the above culturally prescribed seclusion activities may result in being blamed by the family and community members for killing the deceased family member.

Bereavement in African cultures is a complex and diverse topic, as the continent is home to many cultures and traditions. However, some common themes and practices regarding mourning and honoring the dead can be found across many African cultures. One of the critical features of bereavement in African cultures is the emphasis on community and collective mourning. When someone dies, it is often seen as a loss for the immediate family and the entire community. Therefore, there is a strong emphasis on coming together to mourn, offer support, and pay tribute to the deceased.

In Africa, death is still accorded the most crucial significance amid other rites of passage. Hence, it is mourned with varied activities from one community to another (Ademiluka, 2009). Mourning is part of bereavement in most African societies. Mourning sometimes involves the number of days set aside, abstention from specific engagements, self-abasement, the dirge, etc. Ademiluka (2009) argued that funeral mourning and processes in Africa serve the purpose of preserving cultural heritage. Rituals such as funerals enable communities to take cognizance of themselves as collectives, symbolize their social order, and, in representing a totemic animal, gain an objective sense of their society (Ademiluka, 2009).

In most African societies, communal life is the order of the day. Hence, the bereaved families attempt to continue that cultural trait after the death of a loved one (Zungu, 2021). Africans also rely on rituals to express a sense of social unity. Hence, when people come together to mourn the deceased, they unwittingly gain a renewed sense of themselves and the legitimacy of social organization. Occasions like death enable the reunion of people and the reassertion of solidarity (Ademiluka, 2009).

Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata (cited in Thomas, 2021) explained that in traditional African worldviews, death is a transition into eternal spiritual existence as an ancestor or the living dead. Hence, bereavement is accompanied by cultural rituals meant to alleviate bereaved persons' grief and sense of loss and reinforce family and social ties within the bereaved family and social group (Thomas, 2021). This support structure also allows the bereaved to actively draw from various external resources to cope with their loss (Thomas, 2021). These include peers, family,

friends, and religious figures who provide psychosocial support to the bereaved (Sekgobela et al., 2019). The community also plays a role by attending to and performing chores in the bereaved household (Manyedi et al., 2003).

These discussions show that bereavement in African cultures is a collective process. Consequently, communication is essential for everyone to come together and offer social, moral, and emotional support. While in the past, people would be sent to deliver the news of death to their neighbors, telegrams sent to distant family members, and just recently, cell phones doing all of that, the prevalence of social media has transformed communication about death in many communities worldwide. This study asks the following question: What opportunities and challenges are presented by social media during bereavement?

Literature review

Social media and grief

Social media platforms influence our lives in many ways. They also influence how we relate to each other. Bevan et al. (2012) and Craig and Wright (2012) asserted that social media platforms such as Facebook can impact relational development, maintenance, and termination. Social media has also been studied as a platform that influences the way we experience relational loss because it provides a possible venue for grieving, mourning, and coping during bereavement (Roseetto et al., 2015). Research has studied ways in which memorial websites (Clark et al., 2004), web cemeteries (Roberts, 2006), and social media platforms (Carroll and Landry, 2010) influence bereavement. These spaces are used for mourning, connecting to bereaved others, and memorializing the dead (Roseetto et al., 2015).

Gibs et al. (2015) argued that a growing body of research examines how death is addressed in online environments. Many scholars have become increasingly interested in the digital mediation of death, commemoration, and memorialization. Moreman and Lewis (2014) stated that the internet is transforming the experience and performance of grief in contemporary society. Research examines how the dead participate as social actors through platforms and social networking sites (Marwick and Ellison, 2012; Stokes, 2012). Research also examines grief and social support in online networks (Brubaker and Hayes cited in Williams and Merten, 2009; Gibs et al., 2015).

According to Smartwood et al. (2011), the use of social media for grieving includes exchanges for hope, validation of grief, resource provision, and psychological support. Lester (2012) corroborated this by stating that social media platforms are used to express varied emotions, communicate with bereaved others, and communicate with and about the dead person (e.g., reminiscing, memorial sentiments, comments to the deceased, seeding guidance from the deceased; Carroll and Landry, 2010).

Research shows that the bereaved, by posting content about the death of their loved ones, benefit themselves (and others who are bereaved) and might also experience risks or harm (Roseetto et al., 2015). DeGroot (2012) stated that the ability to maintain communication with the dead may lead to continued connections between the bereaved and their loved one(s). This

can also lead to better grief outcomes (Klass et al., 1996). Also, websites and social media can create a meaningful grieving process, promote the connection between grieving individuals, and facilitate community-building practices for people across different geographic locations, ethnicities, and religious affiliations (Roseetto et al., 2015). Carroll and Landry (2010) stated that social media may also empower individuals who feel disenfranchised from grief. Because they provide a haven for self-exploration and self-disclosure (Roseetto et al., 2015), these benefits can be attributed to the inexpensive, accessible, and anonymous nature of social media sites, which provide unlimited access to others, allowing people to express grief, overcome distance to form a community (Carroll and Landry, 2010), and give/receive support (Smartwood et al., 2011).

Grief on social media reflects how users adapt traditional rituals to an online environment (Gamba, 2018). According to Falconer et al. (2011), grief on the internet and social media has made death and grief increasingly public experiences. Hence, online grief is increasingly seen as a more acceptable mode of dealing with bereavement (Egnoto et al., 2014). Likewise, Jacobsen (2016) maintains that we are now in a spectacular death, in which death is discussed and exposed in public through the media. Walter (2019) explains that digital practices surrounding death mean that the 21st century is marked by pervasive death, where the deceased has become a part of everyday life.

However, there are also challenges to online grief communication. According to St. John (2006), uncontrolled social media posts, texts, and grief messages may produce unintended memorials that may overwhelm loved ones. Also, advice that the bereaved may receive from social media may not be helpful. They may make grievers dependent on the sites (social media) with no guaranteed support (Smartwood et al., 2011). Moss (2004) explained that grief associated with social media platforms can also promote isolation from face-to-face interaction and act as a barrier to seeking other forms of support.

Methods

Interviews

The study was conceptualized to understand the challenges and opportunities faced by Facebook during bereavement in Taung. The research was designed using a qualitative approach and semi-structured in-person interviews with the participants to understand their experiences with Facebook during the bereavement period. Because this was a medium-risk study, ethical approval was requested and granted by the researcher's home institution. As part of the ethical considerations, participants were given contact details for grief counseling services, should they wish to use one. The author also gave participants consent forms and kept their anonymity and confidentiality. The author also invoked the notion of "verstehen" throughout interviews to ensure empathy toward participants' behaviors and perspectives.

Tracey (2013) defined verstehen as the participants' first-person perspective on their experience, society, culture, and history. It is a participatory approach to gaining empathetic insight into others' viewpoints, beliefs, and attitudes. Hence, the author used this approach to study the participants' understanding of Facebook

during bereavement in their families from their terms and points of view. The author strived toward empathetic understanding.

To collect the data for this study, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with ten individuals who had experiences with the use of Facebook during bereavement periods in their families. The author approached participants using his personal Facebook account and snowball sampling. Only three participants were known to the researcher, and they were asked to recommend other potential participants. Hence, the other seven participants were recommended to the researcher. The researcher was interested in the participants' age group, educational background, cultural and technological knowledge, and geographical background; they must have been from Taung.

The interview questions covered issues such as their use of Facebook, how often they use it, and how they understand the processes of announcing death to other family members. The sample included males and females between the ages of 20 and 65. The younger age group was chosen for their active usage of Facebook, while the older age group was chosen for their conservative and traditional values regarding funerals. All interviews were conducted in Setswana and English and lasted between 30 and 45 min.

Participants

A total of 10 people participated in the study. These included five males and five females. All participants were between the ages of 20 and 65 years. The majority of the participants use Facebook daily. All participants were approached because they had previous experience using Facebook during bereavement in their families. However, to minimize the risk of the study, the author did not approach participants directly affected by death in their families, for example, children of the deceased, partners of the deceased, siblings of the deceased, and parents of the deceased. Also, all participants had experienced death in their families at least a year before the interview for this study.

Facebook

Facebook was chosen for this study because of its usage in Taung across various age groups, particularly in comparison to other social media sites. During the interviews, it became apparent that people at Taung use Facebook because it is cheaper and simpler to use than other social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram.

Findings

Challenges of Facebook during bereavement in Taung

Emotional shock

Research has proven that the death of a loved one can cause emotional shock (Shear, 2012). Many problems,

including complicated grief, panic disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder, are likely to emerge after the loss of someone (Shear, 2012). Hence, one must be careful how they break the news of death to others. Naik (2013) explained that breaking the bad news to the bereaved family needs special skills.

Some participants explained that when they found out about the death of their family members on Facebook, they could not believe the news.

Participant 10: My cousin died in a car accident. No one at home had called to calm me down before breaking the news. I was so shocked to see the news on Facebook.

Another participant explained that finding out the news of the death of his friend on Facebook did not sit well with him.

Participant 6: This was my friend. Finding out that he is no longer on Facebook was not lovely. I knew that he was sick all along. However, I did not expect people to parade his death like that. That added another layer of pain to me.

Another participant also explained that news of the death of your loved one on Facebook is not the same as being reported in person.

Participant 2: Back then, when we were growing up, the elders would send some old person to report the news of the death in the family. The elders would know how to break the news to you. However, these days, it is no longer the case. Seeing that your mother has died on Facebook can also kill you. The sock can be too much.

Participant 1 echoes these sentiments.

Participant 1: As an adult, when I am sent to report the news of death, let us say your mother or your father died. I cannot just arrive at your place and say your "mother is dead." I will ask you to sit down, and maybe ask you to call the neighbours if you are alone, old neighbours. I would not even come to you alone. Other elders would accompany me. Then we would break the news to you. Before I do that, I would ask you to bring me a cup of water. When you give it to me, I take it, and immediately when you sit down, I splash you with that water on the face. When you get shocked, I break the news to you. We have our ways of dealing with the emotional shock associated with death.

Another participant discourages using Facebook to report the death of someone close to a person.

Participant 4: Reporting the death of someone with your cell phone is dangerous. That is why elders do not even call people directly affected by a family member's death. We go to them in person. Shock kills. Moreover, it needs to be approached carefully. The youngsters do not know that. That is why you think everything can be done with cell phones.

According to Participant 9, announcing the death of someone on Facebook does not help as it can add more pain to some people.

Participant 4 explains that when you receive news of the death of someone on social media, you are alone, and there is no one to comfort you.

Another participant explained that he has no problem using Facebook, but it must not be used for certain things.

Participant 4: Facebook is good. I use it, too. However, I believe there should be limitations to how it is used. Regarding sicknesses and death, we should practice caution in using Facebook.

From the interview excerpts above, it can be concluded that using Facebook during bereavement can present some challenges of emotional shock. Participants are concerned that when someone receives the news of the death of their loved one, in most cases, they are alone and might not get any emotional support. Hence, they state that using Facebook during bereavement should be done cautiously.

Lack of sensitivity

Ge (2020) stated that people perceive others less on social media than in real life. Cross et al. (2015) stated that social media interactions are often ambiguous because they lack social and emotional cues. This leads to some social media users struggling to sense other users' emotional reactivity.

Participants also raised concerns about the lack of sensitivity when the death of someone is announced on Facebook. Participant 9 explains that people on Facebook are not sensitive when they share posts about death.

Participant 9: Sometimes I get scared when people post about accident scenes, showing people amputated. Some of us are not strong enough to handle such things.

Another participant also raised concerns about the lack of sensitivity about the posting of death on Facebook.

Participant 8: Now imagine that it is your mother. I would scream. Imagine someone posting that my mother or sister was involved in a car accident. People do not consider the feelings of others when they post such things.

Another participant felt uneasy about viewing posts that have to do with car accidents.

Participant 3: I am terrified of accidents. Sometimes, people send you a picture of an accident scene on Facebook. That traumatizes me. Now imagine the families of those who do not even know their loved ones have died. Moreover, they see that on Facebook.

Another participant also explained that he once found out about the death of his neighbor on Facebook.

Participant 2: A few years ago, I found out about the death of my neighbour on Facebook. He got stabbed at a tavern. Immediately, people started posting about it. When I

woke up and checked outside, at his house, they were sleeping. Immediately when I saw that they were sleeping, I knew they had not heard anything. I went there and called his uncle outside. We agreed to take everyone's phones until we knew what happened. An hour later, police arrived and broke the news to us. Had we not done that, there is a possibility that his cousins would have seen his death on Facebook. People were parading his pictures there, lying in a pool of blood. That is when I knew that our children had lost it.

Other participants suggested that Facebook should censor explicit images and videos of death.

Participant 3: Facebook should not stop showing images of dead people. It is scary to see such things there. Some are pictures of children.

Participant 8: Maybe Facebook must close the accounts of people who do that. It is traumatic to see pictures of dead people on Facebook. Facebook must protect all of us.

From the above interview excerpts, it is clear that some users on Facebook do not consider other users' feelings when using the platform during bereavement. This is also a problem because sometimes people post about the death of a person while the family or friends of that person have not heard anything. It can be challenging emotionally for a person to receive the news of the death of their loved one on Facebook.

Cultural dilution

Social media have an influence and impact on cultures. However, sometimes, social media platforms cross the boundaries of cultures, leading local cultures to lose their identities and be replaced with a cross-cultural phenomenon (Tang and Tang, 2020). Social media sometimes affects cultural values, such as human behavior, beliefs, values, fashion, and lifestyle. Social media may lead to the invasion of these cultural aspects and replace them with foreign practices.

Participants also expressed views that what is happening on Facebook is killing the culture of African people.

Participant 1: According to us, as Black people, we have ways in which we approach death. Death is a sensitive and sacred thing to us. Talking about death is done respectfully. However, you, the young ones, do not respect death.

Another participant explains that posting about dead people on Facebook is un-African.

Participant 4: All the things you are saying about pictures of dead people on Facebook are a sign that this technology of yours is un-African. Back then, when we were growing up, discussing death with children was taboo. Children as young as you are would not even hear that there is death in the village. You were not even allowed to see a dead person inside the coffin. However, these days, you parade about death as if it is something to be celebrated.

Participant 6 explains that their usage of Facebook does not consider cultural aspects.

Participant 6: The truth is that when we use Facebook, we do not think of cultural aspects and how we can protect or destroy our culture with it. We use it for entertainment. However, we are harming ourselves and our culture with how we are using Facebook.

Another participant explains that Facebook is a “white people’s thing” and cannot fully accommodate the needs of Africans.

Participant 2: The problem is that we like adopting the things of white people and using them as ours. I am sure white people do not care about their late people and how they announce their death. To us, you cannot do that. As an African, you respect that adults must do certain things. However, the new generations want to replace the elders and do everything alone.

Participant 1 explains that culturally, they must protect the children as adults.

Participant 1: As adults, we must protect you as children. That is why we follow specific methods of telling you about death in the family. Now you see these things on your phones, which destroy you emotionally; suddenly, you no longer have peace. You have destroyed yourself. Allow us as elders to handle such things. Your time to handle them will come when you are also our age.

The findings above demonstrate concerns about Facebook’s role in removing African cultures. These views suggest that social media can replace African values and practices with foreign methods when not used consciously. It is also clear that some people in a community such as Taung are still conservative in how they want things done because they make cultural sense to them and want to maintain their culture. Hence, the use of Facebook during bereavement disturbs their culture.

Misinformation

As social media becomes more prevalent for news sharing and information, it also becomes attractive for abuse and manipulation. [Muhammed and Mathew \(2022\)](#) stated that rumors, misinformation, disinformation, and malformation are common challenges confronting social media platforms.

Participants also shared views that Facebook sometimes spreads false information about the death of someone.

Participant 5: Facebook is good; we all love it. However, sometimes people share fake news. With my uncle’s death, people on Facebook said Covid-19 killed him. Moreover, that was not true. Suddenly, people started being nasty towards us because they assumed we had Covid-19 at home.

Another participant also explained that people once reported his cousin dead, which was untrue.

Participant 7: The other day, people reported that my cousin had died. Moreover, he was still in hospital. The guy only died three weeks after that. The story was trending. My grandmother even traveled from Madibogo (one of the villages in North West) to Taung for a funeral. I was upset.

Participant 9 corroborated this argument and argued that sometimes Facebook is not a good platform as it can be used to mislead people.

Participant 9: The majority of the people in Taung are not educated. Some people take advantage of this and use Facebook to lie to people. Sadly, you see our people believing fake news stories, but due to their literacy levels, they cannot spot fake news. Hence, they believe everything they see on Facebook. During Covid-19, people spread lies about the virus, its associated deaths, and how to fight it on Facebook. Furthermore, our people believed it. At home, we buried three family members during the COVID-19 pandemic; people lied on Facebook that COVID-19 caused those deaths; they did not have any facts.

There were also concerns that Facebook is sometimes used to scare people with fake news.

Participant 8: Sometimes, people post things on Facebook to scare us. They would say a new disease is attacking people who drink certain alcoholic beverages, and it kills within minutes. That makes people panic and start sharing that information. The other day, my friends and I went out, and we were sick the following day. People posted about us on Facebook, that we got that disease and would die.

Participants also explained that trends are used to scare and scam people on Facebook.

Participant 3: There are trends these days at the home of reporting people as dead. I do not know where it is coming from. That is scary because you might wake up trending tomorrow that you are no more.

Another participant explains that some people use fake deaths on Facebook to scam others.

Participant 6: Sometimes, people use death on Facebook to ask for donations to bury their family members. Once you give them money, they disappear. A few years ago, there was an incident at Pudomoe (one of the villages in Taung) where a guy made more than R100 000 on Facebook because he posted that his younger siblings died in a car accident and he did not have money to bury them. People donated, and the guy disappeared.

The interviews also reveal that using Facebook during bereavement is challenging as it can lead to misinformation and fake news. Participants are concerned that those who use Facebook during bereavement in their families might be hurt further by fake news stories that are being said about their loved ones who have died.

Opportunities of Facebook during bereavement in Taung

Fast news sharing

Due to their convenient and easy-to-use tools for posting content, social media simplify and facilitate news sharing for media organizations and individuals (Kumpel et al., 2015). One of the advantages of social media is its ability to distribute content and reach more people quickly.

Participants explained that Facebook is good for reducing distances between families and friends during bereavement periods.

Participant 3: Facebook is good because we no longer have to wait for days to hear that a family member has died. News of a death in the family or the community can travel fast.

Participant 7: Facebook is an essential platform because many people use it today, especially in Taung. Using it to report a death, we can spread the news quickly and easily to friends and family members who may be far away.

Participant 5: Sometimes you realize you do not know all your family. Using Facebook to report the death of someone can help the news reach unknown family members.

It was also explained that Facebook is an affordable method of reporting a death to friends and other family members.

Participant 1: Because white people have brought us technology, we can use it. It saves us money and time. However, we must not lose ourselves in the process. We must maintain some things as Black people because they benefit us and our children.

Participant 9: Old people do not understand. They like spending money traveling far to report the news. Facebook is cheap. You spend R10 on data; you can reach many family members if you post there.

Participant 6: We cannot be doing things like they were done in 1982. Facebook is making our lives simple. It is simple to text someone on Facebook and tell them that a family member has died as long as you do it in a dignified and respectful manner.

The data above demonstrates that Facebook is a valuable tool during bereavement periods. Participants state that Facebook can be used for communication and reducing the distance between family members who are far away. However, they maintain that Facebook should be used dignifiedly during bereavement.

Ongoing emotional support

Shensa et al. (2016) stated that opportunities for connectedness and support have increased with the substantial increase in internet and social media use in the 21st century. Social networking affiliation has ultimately been associated with increased emotional support (Santini et al., 2015).

Another theme that emerged when discussing the opportunities provided by Facebook during bereavement was ongoing emotional support. Participants explained that they receive ongoing emotional support from their friends by using Facebook to post about the death of their loved ones.

Participant 10: When I lost my cousin, Facebook played some meaningful part when family and friends interacted with each other and me, offering support and comfort during that difficult time.

Another participant explained the significance of Facebook comments and messages.

Participant 2: Friends and family members can use Facebook to support each other. This can be done through comments, private messages, or sharing resources and information. These comments and private messages are essential; we might underestimate them, but when you are grieving, they mean everything to you.

A participant also noted that Facebook is good but should not be used nefariously.

Participant 4: I hear others share bible verses to comfort others on Facebook; that is good. That is good as long as you use it to build each other. Do not destroy each other by posting sad things that will hurt others.

A participant also explains that memories of their dead loved ones can be therapeutic.

Participant 6: Seeing memories of your loved ones on Facebook can also help you with healing and move on quickly. It happened to me after the death of my aunt. For a while, I hated seeing his pictures and videos online. However, the more I saw them, I got closure.

A participant also explained that the ability of Facebook to connect one with extended family members could be therapeutic during bereavement periods.

Participant 3: Facebook is good because it helps you connect with others who may be going through a similar experience. This benefits those who might feel isolated or alone after a loss.

Another participant explains that Facebook is a community with good benefits.

Participant 9: Facebook is a community. You can never feel alone there. Yes, some use it for nefarious reasons, but others use it for good purposes. Moreover, during the death in your family, you will see that Facebook has good benefits.

The findings suggest that Facebook is a good platform for building a sense of togetherness and support during bereavement. During bereavement, Facebook becomes a community that can help one heal and get enough psychosocial support.

Sharing of memories

Harju (2014, p. 124) described social media as “environment[s] built on the very idea of social interaction and sharing of effect.” Social media platforms constitute simple social spaces for sharing,

discussing, and negotiating information on death, grief, loss, and mourning (Gibson, 2015). These affordances allow the sharing of memories that connect offline to online contexts in mourning the death (Giaxoglou, 2014).

Participants also described how Facebook is good for sharing memories you have had with your loved one who has died.

Participant 2: Facebook is a good platform for sharing memories. Sometimes, when a person dies, we post pictures and videos of that person when they were still alive. We share these memories with others. Yes, it can be painful to others to see such memories, but we still do it.

Participants also explained that Facebook is good because it allows friendship to continue after death.

Participant 8: What I like about Facebook is that we can go through the posts of a person who died and still be friends with them even when they are dead; we can look back on memories. It is like the person is not dead to us. They are still with us.

Participant 6: What is nice about Facebook is that you post things like “rest in peace” and “we will always miss you.” It is like you are having a conversation with that person. Even after some time, you can return to Facebook, tag them, and say, “We still love you.” Friendship, even after death, continues on Facebook.

Other participants also explained that constantly seeing memories of those who have died on Facebook is good for keeping their memories alive and connecting with them.

Participant 2: Sometimes, I enjoy seeing pictures of my family members who died on Facebook. It is a good thing to see those people again. It is as if they are dead.

Participant 7: I still use pictures of my dead cousin as memories on Facebook. His Facebook account is still active.

The data above indicates that people also use Facebook during bereavement to connect with their loved ones who have died. They also use Facebook long after the death of someone to remember and connect with them. Facebook has become a vital tool for dealing with bereavement.

Discussions/conclusion

Social media has become an integral part of our lives, and its role during bereavement has also become increasingly significant. Social media can provide a unique space for people to express their grief, connect with others who are also grieving, and share memories and stories about the person who has died. The current study focused specifically on the opportunities and challenges presented by Facebook during bereavement in the community of Taung. The study's findings showed that people in Taung have different perspectives regarding using Facebook during bereavement.

The interviewed participants demonstrated that one of the challenges of finding out about the death of your loved one(s) on Facebook is an emotional shock. Participants argued that finding such news on Facebook can be traumatic as one is probably

alone when receiving such news. Participants also raised concerns about cultural dilution regarding bereavement on Facebook, lack of sensitivity, and misinformation. On the other hand, participants also noted that Facebook is vital during bereavement periods for sharing memories, ongoing emotional support, and fast news sharing.

The study has demonstrated that there are contrasting viewpoints on the role that Facebook plays in bereavement periods. According to Kohl and Gotzenbrucker (2014), while social media networks might facilitate the (re)organizing of social relationships and cultural identities, there are also anxieties about the erosion of the meaning of sociality, friendship, and community. However, participants' views in this study show that using Facebook during bereavement is a new mode of sociality that is emerging.

On the other hand, the views that problematized the use of Facebook during bereavement show that this is an induced social, emotional, and cultural disintegration. According to Chambers (2006), this type of techno-sociality is visible in Western societies where a growing number of individuals are networked and individuated. The views expressed by participants under the theme of challenges caused by using Facebook during the bereavement period question whether Facebook suits the local and cultural needs of the people of Taung. In this community, Facebook is encountering more traditional arrangements of norms and values.

Meyer (cited in Kohl and Gotzenbrucker, 2014) argued that every society has constant conflicts due to the multidimensional process of contemporary globalization, which includes elements such as modernism, traditionalism, and fundamentalism. This has led to traditional arrangements of norms and values being re-affirmed and contested. Within this process, the current study's findings show that Facebook is a space of contention in which individuals and groups try to preserve their norms and values.

Peters et al. (2015) explained that Facebook was developed in a Western context and, as a technology platform, has embedded in its assumptions and structures affordances primarily derivative of Western prerogatives and values. This explains why there are clashes of norms and values about using Facebook during bereavement in Taung, as the participants demonstrated. Some of the uses of Facebook during bereavement are deeply rooted in a Western epistemology and reveal some values and models that favor it. Moreover, some of these values and models do not align with the African values, norms, and models of bereavement.

Murrell et al. (2021) explained that using the internet and social media in everyday life has significantly changed grieving and memorialization processes. This has provided valuable insights into how online death practices can be discursive yet visual, public yet private, and individual yet universal.

Facebook has become a helpful platform that fulfills various functions in the bereavement and grieving processes. It becomes a means of communication, a channel for emotional expression, a source of information about social life, a space for ritualization, a social setting for the new digital performativity, and a tool for seeking social support (Marin-Cortes et al., 2022).

Marin-Cortes et al. (2022) stated that social media platforms are environments, not simply technologies people use. Hence, on social media platforms, it is not uncommon to find users with posts, tweets, or statuses such as “we will miss you” and “watch over us” (Williams and Merten, 2009). They are doing this to continue the

bonds between the bereaved and the dead. They are maintaining a relationship they had prior to death. Serrano-Puche (cited in Marin-Cortes et al., 2022) points out that the internet is a channel for communicating emotions and a technology that helps shape and amplify them. This means Facebook is not just a platform for entertainment and socialization but a space allowing connectivity and togetherness.

The current study's findings have a meaningful theoretical contribution to the literature on social media and bereavement. Little has been done on this subject, especially in African contexts. The current study adds to the previous scholarship by showing how people interpret and understand the role of Facebook during bereavement. The study showed that Facebook is an essential tool in Taung during bereavement but provides some challenges.

Solo-Anaeto and Jacobs (2015) argued that social media has allowed Africans to make unique sociocultural statements. According to Ohiago (cited in Solo-Anaeto and Jacobs, 2015), social media can help Africans develop, enrich, and preserve their cultural values and ensure they are conspicuously represented in the emerging global culture.

The current study has demonstrated cultural and technological clashes in the continent. The internet makes good affordances, but there are also bad affordances. These clashes make people reluctant to migrate fully to technology as their communication, information, and entertainment source. The other consequence of this clash is that it prevents Africans from endorsing technology to preserve and protect their culture.

The findings should expand our understanding and knowledge of bereavement in some African cultures and use social media tools to complement and not destroy African beliefs and practices. Solo-Anaeto and Jacobs (2015) asserted that Africans should find ways to harness the potential of social media and use them as channels to transmit and make for the sustenance of the African culture.

Despite the significant contributions of this study, some limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Although efforts were made to recruit diverse participants, the sample may not fully represent the larger population. Future studies with larger sample sizes are needed to confirm the findings and increase the generalizability of the results.

Secondly, the study was conducted in a specific context and at a particular time. Cultural or social factors may affect the result if the study were to be replicated in another context. Hence, more studies are needed to understand how other African villages respond to using Facebook during bereavement.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Rhodes University Human Ethics Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

KA: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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