

The University of Chicago

Conversations with the Dead:

An Analysis of Grief Narrative Sharing in Online Reddit Communities

By

Sophie Ennis

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Master of Arts Degree in the

Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

Advisor: Dr. Austin Kozlowski

Preceptor: Dr. Marshall Jean

May 2025

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Dr. Austin Kozlowski for your invaluable guidance and support.

Thank you to Dr. Marshall Jean for your insightful feedback since the beginning.

Mom, this, and everything I do, is for you.

Abstract

In our current digital age, social media has reshaped how individuals grieve, creating new avenues for maintaining bonds with deceased loved ones. This mixed-methods study investigates how posts that talk directly to and about the dead shape commenter engagement through reciprocal narrative sharing in grief-centered Reddit communities. Quantitative analysis of approximately 45,000 posts and comments reveals notable nuance: while posts that discuss the dead generate a higher volume of narrativized comments, logistic regression modeling shows no significant difference between posts that talk to and about the dead in their likelihood of receiving narrativized comments. This nuance insinuates that both post types may have their merits. Qualitative analysis of a select number of exchanges suggests that while talking to the dead fosters emotional resonance and talking about the dead offers relatable context, it is the combination of both within a single post that most powerfully invites rich narrative sharing among commenters. Ultimately, this study argues that online bereavement practices blend intimate expressions of loss with collective witnessing, transforming individual sorrow into a collective act of remembrance, and affirming that, even in death, human connection endures and finds new life in digital spaces.

Introduction

Death is inevitable, yet we choose to love in spite of this. This love does not end when death visits our loved ones' doors; it persists, keeping them alive in our hearts. Some scholars argue that this urge to hold on to the dead can lead to prolonged grief and thus diminished wellbeing. Lopata (1996) posits that the bereaved must resist this urge by breaking ties with their deceased loved ones so they can learn how to live without them, imploring the bereaved to pursue closure through detachment. This perspective suggests that clinging to the past may

hinder resilience from loss, preventing individuals from fully re-engaging with life. However, a growing number of grief theorists challenge this notion, proposing that it is not only possible but beneficial for the living to continue bonds with the dead (Vickio, 1999). Some note that the living engage in rituals such as verbal and written communication with their deceased loved ones to maintain these bonds (Matthews, 2019). Crenshaw (1990) posits that this continuation of bonds can serve to enrich the lives of the bereaved by providing them with a sense of purpose. Rather than an obstacle to healing, these grief theorists argue that communication that transcends death may serve to guide the bereaved towards a unique form of closure, allowing the bereaved to integrate their grief into their lives without erasing the presence of those they have lost.

New media has reconfigured modes of communication for the bereaved. As the prevalence of social media use has grown, the definition of written communication between the living and the dead has expanded. An increasingly digitalized world has transformed not only the ways we express our continued love to our deceased loved ones, but also what we feel comfortable sharing publicly in general. The prevalence of social media in our everyday lives forces us to negotiate the quickly closing gap between the public and private spheres, particularly in the sharing of the most intimate details of our lives. In contrast with historical rituals of death notices – such as the distribution of printed obituaries in newspapers – that have no expectation or method of direct response, posting about grief on social media has an interactive and instantaneous nature, where other users can reply directly (Lapper, 2017). Today, many feel not only comfortable but even compelled to post intimate details of their grief – a desire to have their suffering witnessed (Busch & McNamara, 2020). These posts invite responses, sometimes from strangers, as seen on social media platforms like Reddit.

Scholars have historically approached the study of online bereavement in two ways, but each perspective alone offers an incomplete understanding of mourning on social media. The first approach has involved studying the communication between users online through the lens of online support groups. These scholars solely focused their investigations on discussions between the living about the dead (Robinson & Pond, 2019; Varga & Paulus, 2013). The second approach has involved studying the communication by the living on social media directed towards the dead, this phenomenon given the name of “transcorporeal communication” by DeGroot (2008) to describe communication “aimed at, not with the deceased” (p. 199).

However, these approaches, when taken together, provide an opportunity to expand our understanding of grief in an increasingly digitalized world. Reddit, and more specifically the subreddits r/grief and r/GriefSupport, appear to foster a novel dynamic in which users do not just communicate with the dead but also with each other. I argue that transcorporeal communication, though initially defined by DeGroot (2008) as a one-sided dialogue between the living and the deceased, becomes part of a larger dynamic where talking to and about the dead serve complementary roles, together fostering relational exchanges and inviting narrativized comment sharing among the living. These relational exchanges are key to this transformed grieving process because to narrativize one’s trauma requires someone to bear witness (Busch & McNamara, 2020). This research bridges the gap between studies on conversations about the dead and those directed to the dead by analyzing how OPs’ communication online – whether to or about the deceased – affect the nature of responses in the comments section. I will show that grief expressed on social media is not merely a private conversation between the living and the dead. Rather, it evolves into a shared dialogue of remembrance through OPs’ pleas to the dead and commenters’ responses offering their shared sentiments, both knowing the dead will never

respond. Grief is thus transformed from an isolating experience into a communal act, reinforcing the idea that grief is a burden that is not carried alone but shared among those who bear witness.

Literature Review

The Private Burden of Grief

In dominant American culture, grief has long been framed as an individual, private burden. Charmaz (1997), drawing on Toynbee's (1968) assertion that "Death is un-American," argues that grief is effectively disallowed in the United States because it represents vulnerability and failure, attributes that are antithetical to the cultural values of strength, productivity, and independence. Charmaz (1997) explains that grief is viewed as a "private affliction" due to American individualism rooted in residuals of the Protestant ethic, forcing the burden of failure on the bereaved individual (p. 229). This burden of failure is composed of an assumed lack of will on behalf of the bereaved in 'getting over' their grief, for "Death and grief signify vulnerability, which is a sign of weakness," and "In a social system that is based upon competition...weakness is not tolerable, and so grief goes underground" (Harris, 2010). In this cultural context, the bereaved are thus pressured to contain and quickly resolve their emotions independently so as to not appear weak and thus incapable of pursuing American ideals. This American stigmatization casts grief as "something to be managed" rather than openly felt or publicly expressed (Charmaz, 1997, p. 230). Charmaz (1997) argues that this view arises from the professionalization of grief, framing it as something that requires treatment and ultimately emphasizing individual responsibility in its resolution through work – grief work.

Stroebe et al. (2015) describe the psychoanalytic view of grief work as a process that involves "free[ing] the person from the ties to the deceased, achieving a gradual detachment." This sentiment echoes Lopata's (1996) discussion of the necessity of learning to live without that

was introduced previously, but adds an additional layer to the conversation: freedom. This framing of grief work as a process through which the bereaved obtain freedom from their grief reinforces the American ideal that strength lies in independence, and that successful mourning means no longer needing others – not even the deceased. Through this lens, the bereaved are expected to reassert control over their emotional lives, not by seeking connection, but by letting go. The funeral, then, becomes the only socially sanctioned space for public mourning. As Leming and Dickinson (1985) explain, the funeral offers a brief, stylized ritual that legitimizes grief, but only within its time-bound framework. Afterward, mourners are expected to return to normal life, resume productivity, and manage their grief in private.

Yet when this expectation of private, isolated grief becomes unsustainable, mourners may turn to online spaces. These digital environments challenge cultural norms by making grief visible and social. In online bereavement communities, individuals are no longer expected to detach from their grief or grieve in silence. Instead, they connect with others who have experienced similar losses, often finding validation through shared expressions of mourning. Online bereavement appears to challenge Stroebe et al.'s (2015) notion of detachment for the pursuance of freedom by providing an avenue to bring the dead and the living back together. Online bereavement also appears to challenge the privatization of grief through isolation by bringing the living together, mediating relationships between those who share similar experiences and likely would have never met otherwise. Both of these challenges to historical rituals of bereavement center around the confrontation of isolation as a core tenet of grief. Rather than viewing grief as a private failure to be hidden or overcome, digital mourning practices allow individuals to grieve together – publicly, communally, and without shame.

Grief Through a Spiritual Lens

Yet even within these shared digital spaces, there exists a tension between the social and the private spheres. Talking to the dead is an inherently spiritual practice, in which the living attempt to transcend the boundaries between life and death, constructing a continued sense of connection with those who have passed. This inherent spirituality forges a path between traumatological theory and the sociology of religion, the latter introducing competing theories of religion as social or solitary to the conversation at hand. By viewing this phenomenon of using social media as a medium to talk to the dead from a religious perspective, these competing theories may offer insights about a practice in the digital age that has historically existed through the mechanism of prayer. On one hand, Émile Durkheim views religion primarily as a social construct rather than a manifestation of the supernatural (Ikkos & McQueen, 2019). He proposes that religious practices help individuals reinforce their connection to the broader community, producing feelings of emotional unity. According to Durkheim, what people regard as sacred in religious contexts is actually a reflection of the social group itself. The sense of awe or transcendence often associated with religious experiences, in his view, stems from the collective strength of societal bonds projected onto religious rituals.

On the other hand, William James argues for the importance of individualism in transcendence, claiming that the religious experience is born from turning inward to find answers (Okoli, 2024; Taylor, 2003). James' theory proposes that because "Solitary transcendence emphasizes introspection, self-reliance, and self-discovery" without external influence, namely through "the assistance of religious organizations or spiritual authorities," individuals can achieve a "deeper, more intimate relationship to the divine or spiritual world" (Okoli, 2024). These competing theories of religion become intertwined in a curious way through this

discussion of online bereavement. Talking to the dead weaves together the social and the solitary components of spirituality by transforming a typically intimate confessional into a dialogic conversation with the dead in users' attempts to transcend the boundaries between the living and the dead. On social media, the structure of the platform itself implores a response that OPs hope is from their deceased loved ones but, because the dead can't respond, is instead fulfilled by other users. Thus, when having this conversation with the dead in front of an audience, a personal post becomes social, in turn encouraging a cyclical sharing of other users' personal narratives in the comments, and engendering communal exchange born from individual mourning.

Collective Witnessing

Unlike the historically distinct approaches to studying online bereavement, I am interested in both the way users engage with the dead and with each other in digital spaces dedicated to memorialization. This online memorialization has been noted to induce collective memory when the mourning over one person or one traumatic event is socially shared. To this digital sociality, Harju (2014) writes that "...digital commemorative artifacts invite participation and engagement, resulting in collective acts of construction and negotiation of meaning(s)" (p. 12). Therefore, when the subject of this commemoration is shared, the online spaces dedicated to commemoration elicit engagement between users. I am curious, however, about the formation of collective memory that is constructed by strangers that have experienced similar tragedies and are thus compelled to engage with the individual that is posting about their personal tragedy. This curiosity contrasts with Harju's focus on collective commemoration, for instead of examining the collective longing for one person, I focus on individuals' longing for different people yet who still collectively witness each other's suffering.

Schönfelder (2013) notes that “Although ‘it is often the victims of traumas who most immediately and most naturally bond together’ ...for the construction of memory communities, ‘personal relevance of the traumatic memory’ can be more important than ‘personal witness to the trauma’” (p. 41). Despite their potentially differing levels of importance in the construction of collective memory, individuals’ relevance to the trauma may elicit witnessing, for they can place themselves in the OPs’ shoes. This witnessing is most likely to occur through comments replying to the post. The relevance users feel to the OP’s narrative may compel some to express how they relate to the OP’s trauma through the sharing of their own narrative, transforming the comments section into a haven of collective witnessing. Collective witnessing thus not only occurs in the context of collectively experienced traumatic events but also in different experiences of traumatic events that sum to be a collective experience. Communication directed to the deceased could elicit a strong feeling of relevance amongst the commenters, for they too have likely turned to the dead as a source of solace (Vickio, 1999). On the other hand, discussions about the deceased may elicit feelings of relevance amongst the commenters as well, through the commenters’ ability to relate to the details that OPs mention about their deceased loved one. Nonetheless, this relevance could therefore compel users not only to bear witness but also to share their narrative, creating a space for collective witnessing. This reciprocal narrative sharing in the comments thus becomes an important measure for this study.

Busch & McNamara (2020) argue that narrativizing trauma is a “dialogic matter” – that it is a process that requires an engaged listener, invoking a need for the “hearability” of trauma narratives (p. 329). However, this idea of ‘hearability’ is complicated by the imagined dialogue between users and the deceased in online grief spaces, for transcorporeal communication involves “communication aimed at, not with the deceased” (DeGroot, 2008, p. 199). This

‘dialogue’ online is therefore with an imagined partner that is not expected to respond. Relationships, as argued by Sigman (1991), are centered on the maintenance of continuous communication between two individuals and the anticipation of future communication despite the physical absence of one conversation partner. The lack of a respondent in users’ conversations with the dead thus disrupts the very notion of anticipated future communication upon which DeGroot’s (2008) theorization is built. Yet the narrativization of trauma necessitates someone to listen – to bear witness. A user can hope that their deceased loved one is still listening, but the hearability of these grief narratives may truly come about through the engagement of commenters with the OPs.

Discourse Communities

The Reddit platform appears to uniquely foster this engagement between commenters and OPs through its community-driven structure. Reddit is structured as a union of over 100,000 subreddits, and users tend to share a “set of communicative purposes” within each of these subreddits that are dedicated to various topics (Reddit, 2024; Kehus et al., 2010, p. 68). These subreddits thus form virtual “discourse communities” where users share common goals and engage in intercommunication, and in doing so, they negotiate norms (Kehus et al., 2010). The community website that Kehus et al. (2010) explored in their investigation into discourse communities is described as lacking “sufficient human feeling” and having little interconnectedness. However, this website was created for the authors’ experiment to analyze how adolescent writers connect with each other. Not only does the content appear more simplistic than grief-centered subreddits, but so does its communication structure, taking on an email format. Grief-centered subreddits, such as r/grief and r/GriefSupport, appear to foster the interconnectedness that this website for adolescent writers lacked, perhaps because of the more

personal nature of the content shared and the post-comment structure. Reddit, as a virtual discourse community, thus appears to engender collective witnessing as a novel mourning ritual.

Methodology

Overview

To investigate how grief becomes a shared experience rather than an isolating one through online communities in the digital sphere, I analyzed data from the social media platform Reddit using measures of the type of references made to the dead and the presence of advice seeking in the posts and narrativization in the comments. I first classified posts based on the type of reference the OP made to the dead, if at all. I then classified the comments based on if they contained narratives. I briefly reviewed the classifications to validate their alignment with expected patterns. The prompts I used for classification can be found in the appendix. I examined advice seeking present in posts as a prompting behavior that might result in more comments, ultimately removing posts that sought advice to achieve a more direct comparison of the presence of narrativized comments in response to posts to and about the deceased. I also removed posts classified as not making references to the deceased for this same purpose. I then directly compared posts talking to and about the dead by calculating the average number of comments containing narratives per post, and the proportion of posts with at least one narrativized comment, each across the pronoun categories. I then utilized logistic regression to investigate the probability that an individual comment is narrativized based on the pronoun category of the post. Finally, I dove deeper into the difference in emotional resonance between posts to and about the deceased by examining a small selection of posts qualitatively in an attempt to capture the strange but deeply human exchanges of narratives about the dead. I largely refer to talking to the dead as “second person” and talking about the dead as “third person” in

this section, reflecting the pronouns individuals use when referring to their deceased loved ones that were present in the examples I fed into the models. This investigation comparing posts that talk to and about the dead by the number and affect of narrativized comments they receive aims to uncover how these different forms of grief expression elicit collective witnessing.

Data and Preprocessing

The data used for this study was collected by the Knowledge Lab at the University of Chicago. The Knowledge Lab's dataset contains all Reddit data from June 2005 to December 2022. I narrowed the data I would work with down to from January 2012 to December 2019 from the subreddits r/GriefSupport and r/grief, as while both subreddits were created in 2010, the post and comment data from these specific subreddits began to appear in 2012. I also wanted to avoid the confounding variable of the COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating death toll that caused massive loss beginning around 2020 to narrow my research focus to less extraordinary times. The data from this period and these subreddits includes 35,836 comments that I matched to the 10,621 posts they were created under using the parent id of the post found in each comment. I cleaned the text data in the posts and comments by removing stopwords, while keeping a custom set of stopwords containing pronouns in the text. Stopwords are frequently occurring words (like "a", "the", "is", "and", etc.) that carry little semantic meaning and are typically removed from text data prior to analysis in order to give more attention to more semantically meaningful words that may better convey the message of the text. The custom set of stopwords of pronouns that I created and kept in the dataset can be found in the appendix.

Post Classification

To investigate potential differences between the comments elicited by posters either talking to or about the dead, I classified posts into three categories: using second-person pronouns, using third-person pronouns, or none. The use of second-person pronouns corresponds with talking to the dead (i.e. “I think about *you* every day”) while the use of third-person pronouns corresponds with talking about the dead (i.e. “I miss *her* so much”). The classification “none” corresponds with no reference being made to the dead in the post. To compare posts based on the type of reference the OP makes to the deceased, I employed a prompt-based machine learning model. I used GPT-4o mini, a pre-trained machine learning model, providing examples using few-shot prompting in addition to prompt engineering. Few-shot prompting involves providing the model with a small number of examples followed by their corresponding correctly labeled categories. Its purpose is to generalize over categories of data from limited labeled data. I based the few-shot examples I provided the model with on the commonly appearing phrases I was seeing across posts in my qualitative examination of the posts as I familiarized myself with the corpus. I also utilized a more structured decision making framework, providing an explicit set of instructions outlining the decision criteria the model should follow. In this prompt, I described how to prioritize second-person references to the deceased over third-person references, and to default to “none” only when no personal reference to the deceased is made. I also emphasized important edge cases, such as distinguishing when “you” is directed toward the deceased as compared to when the OP is addressing the audience.

Upon my qualitative examination of the posts, I found advice seeking to occur rather frequently, prompting my investigation into this prompting behavior as a potential influence on the average number of comments that posts receive. Therefore, I again employed prompt

engineering techniques to classify posts based on the presence of advice seeking behavior. I provided the model with instructions to prioritize if there is advice seeking present, and also provided examples based on frequently appearing phrases in the posts.

Comment Classification

Once the posts were classified, I then moved on to classifying the comments beneath them, specifically focusing on if the commenting users shared their own related grief narratives in response to the different types of posts. To identify comments that are imbued with reciprocal narratives, where comments share their own narratives in response to the posters' narratives, I again employed prompt engineering. I provided the model with a decision making framework explaining what a grief narrative is and what it is not, and provided examples, ultimately asking it to return a binary indicator of if each comment contained a narrative. Together, the narrative comment classification and the pronoun category post classification help identify which kinds of posts foster reciprocal narrative sharing, in turn setting in motion a cyclical transformation where personal grief becomes a shared social experience.

Analysis

I first computed basic counts of unique posts and total comments across the pronoun categories. I also calculated the average number of comments per post. This helped capture how frequently each pronoun category appeared in the data, providing context for the overall distribution of post types across all types of comments. To investigate the effect of the type of reference to the deceased on the comment type of interest, reciprocal narrativization, I first compared the mean and total number of comments containing reciprocal narratives across both the pronoun categories and the advice seeking classification. I then computed some descriptive

statistics across the pronoun categories, including the average number of comments containing narratives per post, and the proportion of posts with at least one narrativized comment, ultimately performing a t-test on these statistics. I then removed posts classified as advice seeking and as not containing references to the dead to get a more direct comparison of narrativized comments where the only prompting is made through OPs talking to or about the dead, and performed these statistical tests again. These analyses seemed to capture the volume of narrativized comments per pronoun category, but not the probability of a post within a pronoun category receiving a narrativized comment. Therefore, I performed logistic regression analysis, regressing narrativization on pronoun category to predict the likelihood of a post receiving a narrative comment based on the post's pronoun category. To investigate the emotional resonance that users may be experiencing beyond these quantitative measures, I then selected a few posts and their corresponding comments to qualitatively analyze in order to add a humanistic element to analyzing this uniquely human behavior.

Results

Quantitative

To investigate the initial differences between the pronoun categories, I began with calculating a basic count of the number of unique posts and comments as well as the average number of comments per post for each pronoun category.

| Pronoun Category | Number of Unique Post Titles | Number of Comments | Average Comments per Post Title |
|------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| None | 2644 | 9818 | 3.7133 |
| Second-person | 1678 | 4734 | 2.8212 |
| Third-person | 6959 | 21283 | 3.0583 |
| Total | 10621 | 35836 | 3.3741 |

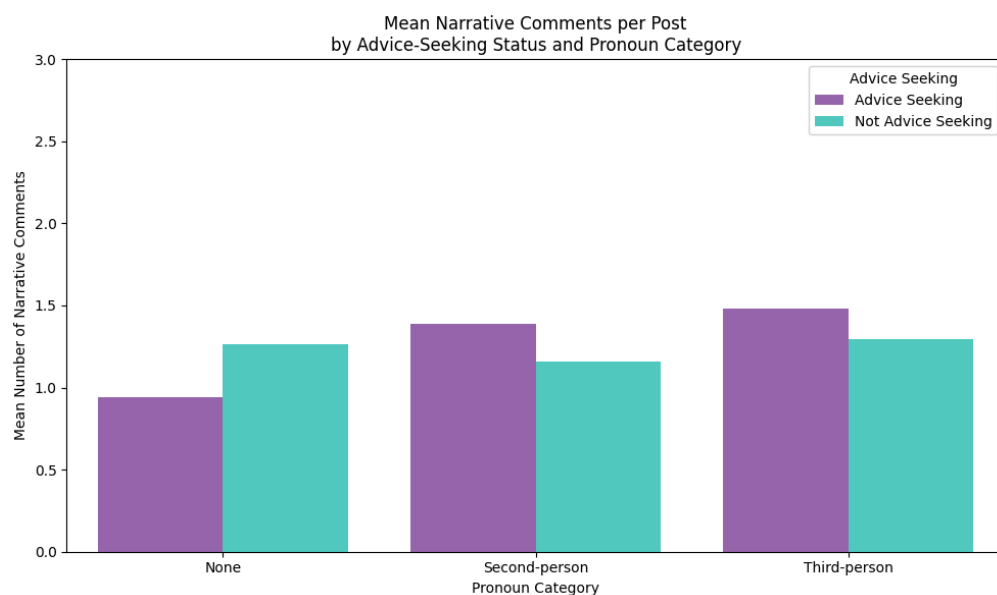
This table clearly indicates that third person posts, or posts that talk about the dead, have not only the highest number of posts (6,959) but also the highest number of comments (21,283). Third person posts thus represent the majority of the data, representing 65.52% of the total number of posts and 59.39% of the total number of comments. Third person posts have an average of 3.0583 comments of any kind made under each post, which is lower than the average number of comments made under posts marked as “none” (3.7133). Posts classified as “none” have the second highest number of posts and comments, with 2,544 posts (23.95% of the total posts) and 9,818 comments (27.39% of the total comments). Second person posts, representing transcorporeal communication, encapsulate the lowest number of posts, at 1,678 (15.79%), and the lowest number of comments, at 4,734 (13.21%), as well as the lowest average number of comments per post (2.8212).

Further investigation was thus needed to investigate how many specifically narrativized comments each pronoun category was receiving, as well as if there are other prompting behaviors occurring in the posts that may explain why other pronoun categories were receiving more comments. Therefore, to investigate the mean and total number of comments containing reciprocal narratives across the posts categorized by pronoun, I first compared across posts categorized by the presence of advice seeking as a prompting behavior.

| Advice Seeking | Pronoun Category | Mean | Count |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Advice Seeking | None | 0.9431 | 879 |
| Advice Seeking | Second-person | 1.3866 | 825 |
| Advice Seeking | Third-person | 1.4831 | 6217 |
| Not Advice Seeking | None | 1.262 | 2206 |
| Not Advice Seeking | Second-person | 1.1557 | 1314 |
| Not Advice Seeking | Third-person | 1.2946 | 3999 |

This table reveals that among advice seeking posts, third person posts received the highest average number of narrativized comments, with a mean of 1.4831 comments. This is also the highest average number of narrativized comments across all post types, as well having the highest number of total narrativized comments. Advice seeking second person posts receive the second highest average number of comments (1.3866), followed by non-advice-seeking third person posts (1.2946) and non-advice-seeking posts that don't refer to the deceased (1.262). The lowest average number of narrativized comments occur in non-advice-seeking second person posts (1.1557) and advice seeking posts that don't refer to the deceased (0.9431). Thus, across second and third person posts, advice seeking posting behavior prompts more narrativized comments than non-advice-seeking posts.

To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the differences between the average number of narrativized comments that posts across the advice seeking and pronoun usage spectrums, I created a visualization representing the mean number of narrativized comments per post within each post type.



This visualization more clearly shows that the “none” pronoun category is the only pronoun category where non-advice-seeking posts get more comments than advice seeking posts. The “none” pronoun category also has the highest mean number of comments on non-advice-seeking posts. The second person and third person pronoun categories are more similar, but still have compelling differences between them. The “third person” pronoun category has the highest average number of comments made under advice seeking posts, with “second person” posts close behind. The “third person” pronoun category has the second highest average number of comments made under non-advice-seeking posts (after “none”), and “second person” posts have the lowest average number of comments made under non-advice-seeking posts.

While this “none” category has compelling results, further exploration into these results will be saved for a future study. This study centers around conversations with and discussions about the deceased, so this “none” category, while extremely rich, requires its own separate study to disseminate its nuances. Therefore, the following table represents the same basic count of the number of unique posts and comments as well as the average number of comments per post for each pronoun category, this time filtering out posts that make no explicit reference to the dead and that explicitly seek advice to more rigorously investigate the differences in OPs talking to and about the dead without this prompting through advice seeking. This table is inclusive of narrativized and non-narrativized comments.

| Pronoun Category | Number of Unique Post Titles | Number of Comments | Average Comments per Post Title |
|------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| Second-person | 1678 | 4734 | 2.8212 |
| Third-person | 6959 | 21283 | 3.0583 |
| Total | 8315 | 26017 | 3.1289 |

I then calculated the average number of specifically narrativized comments per post and the proportion of posts with at least one narrativized comment across the second and third person pronoun categories. I used these metrics to run a t-test and assess whether the differences between the pronoun categories were statistically significant, including advice seeking posts in the dataset.

| Pronoun Category | Average Narrative Comments per Post | Proportion with ≥ 1 Narrative Comment | t-statistic | p-value |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|--|-------------|-----------|
| Second-person | 1.256 | 0.6224 | -3.9815 | 7.021E-05 |
| Third-person | 1.4324 | 0.6626 | -3.9815 | 7.021E-05 |

Third person posts received more comments per post (1.4324) than second person posts (1.256) on average. 66.26% of third person posts received at least one narrativized comment, as compared with 62.24% of second person posts. The t-statistic is -3.9815 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the difference between second and third person posts is highly statistically significant. The negative t-statistic means that second person posts had lower values compared to third person posts for the tested outcome, and therefore, that second person posts had fewer narrativized comments, on average. There is strong statistical evidence that third person posts are associated with more narrativized commenting behavior than second person posts, both in terms of narrativized comment frequency and in likelihood of receiving at least one narrativized comment.

| Pronoun Category | Advice Seeking | Not Advice Seeking | Chi-Square | p-value |
|------------------|----------------|--------------------|------------|-------------|
| Second-person | 1686 | 3048 | 812.8648 | 8.6109E-179 |
| Third-person | 12440 | 8843 | 812.8648 | 8.6109E-179 |

Third person posts are more frequently advice seeking than not, while second person posts are more frequently not advice seeking. The chi-square test investigating the correlation

between pronoun category and advice seeking behavior revealed a highly significant association between pronoun type and advice seeking behavior in posts ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the type of pronoun used in a post, and thus the communication type with the dead, is highly statistically significantly related to whether the OP seeks advice. These findings suggest that advice seeking prompts greater narrative engagement among third person posts.

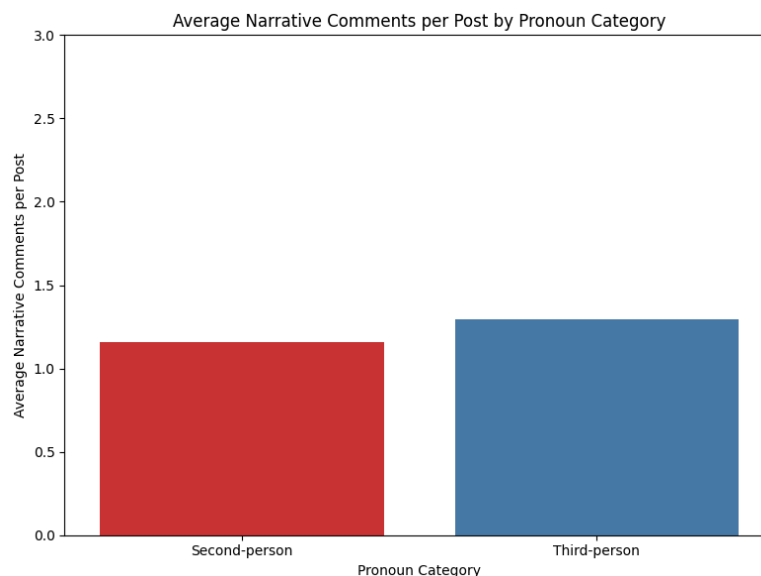
Therefore, to create a more direct comparison between how conversations with and discussions about the dead prompt narrativized comments, I filtered advice seeking posts out of the dataset and again computed the average number of narrativized comments per post and the proportion of posts with at least one narrativized comment, running a t-test using these metrics.

| Pronoun Category | Average Narrative Comments per Post | Proportion with ≥ 1 Narrative Comment | t-statistic | p-value |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|--|-------------|---------|
| Second-person | 1.1557 | 0.5928 | -2.5522 | 0.01077 |
| Third-person | 1.2946 | 0.6206 | -2.5522 | 0.01077 |

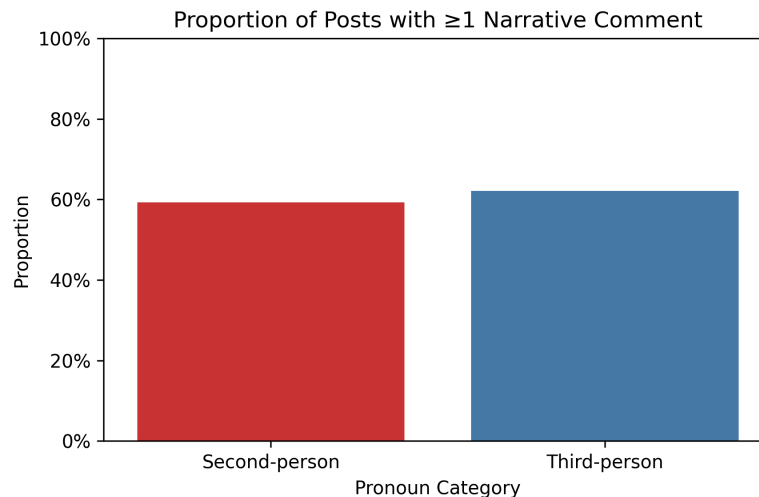
Third person posts received more comments per post (1.2946) than second person posts (1.1557) on average. 62.06% of third person posts received at least one narrativized comment, as compared with 59.28% of second person posts. The t-statistic is -2.5522 ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the difference between second and third person posts is statistically significant. The negative t-statistic means that second person posts had lower values compared to third person posts for the tested outcome, and therefore, that second person posts had fewer narrativized comments, on average. There is thus strong statistical evidence that third person posts are associated with more narrativized commenting behavior than second person posts, both in terms of narrativized comment frequency and in likelihood of receiving at least one narrativized comment per post.

Across the inclusion and exclusion of advice seeking posts, third person posts have a statistically significantly higher average number of narrativized comments per post and a statistically significantly higher proportion of posts with at least one narrativized comment, though the significance of this difference is not as strong after the exclusion of advice seeking posts. The t-statistic becomes smaller after the exclusion of advice seeking posts, which makes sense because the sample size of posts was bigger before excluding this type of post, which allotted more power and made it easier to detect smaller differences. The size of the differences is also very similar across both tests, but does decrease slightly in the second t-test after the exclusion of advice seeking.

To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the differences between second and third person posts, I created two visualizations, each representing the average number of narrativized comments that posts receive and the proportion of posts with at least one narrativized comment across the pronoun categories.



This visualization shows that third person posts do get a slightly higher average number of narrative comments compared to second person posts, but that this difference is not huge.



The difference between the pronoun categories here appears to be even smaller than in the previous visualization. From these visualizations, it can be concluded that although third person posts received slightly more narrativized comments on average and had a marginally higher likelihood of receiving at least one narrativized comment, the differences between second person and third person posts are relatively small. While statistically significant, these differences are modest, suggesting that second person posts addressing the deceased can elicit narrativized responses at levels that are somewhat comparable to third person posts.

While the above analyses computing the mean of narrativized comments per post provided insight into the *volume* of narrative engagement, the *likelihood* of narrativized responses at the individual comment level was still in question. To develop a deeper understanding of the probability that an individual comment is narrativized based on the pronoun category of the post, I utilized logistic regression. Logistic regression is useful here because it

estimates the probability per instance that a comment is narrativized, holding other measures constant, for a binary outcome (if a comment is narrativized or not).

MODEL FIT:

$$\chi^2(2) = 489.082, p = 0.000$$

$$\text{Pseudo-}R^2 \text{ (Cragg-Uhler)} = 0.031$$

$$\text{Pseudo-}R^2 \text{ (McFadden)} = 0.018$$

$$AIC = 27184.715, BIC = 27208.616$$

Standard errors:MLE

| | Est. | S.E. | z val. | p |
|-------------------------------|--------|-------|---------|-------|
| (Intercept) | -1.025 | 0.025 | -41.331 | 0.000 |
| pronoun_categorySecond-person | 0.714 | 0.044 | 16.238 | 0.000 |
| pronoun_categoryThird-person | 0.647 | 0.032 | 20.086 | 0.000 |

Model 1

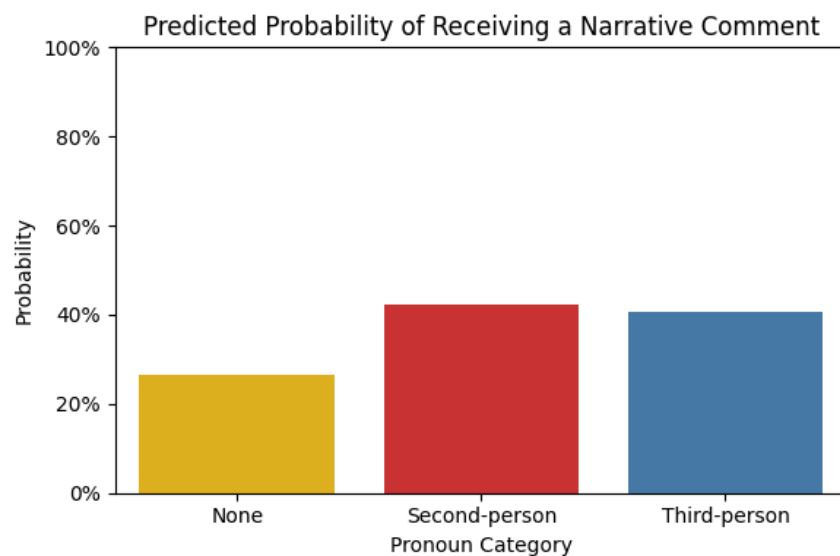
Both pronoun categories were significantly associated with increased odds of narrativized comments compared to the reference category of “none.” Second person posts were associated with a log-odds increase of 0.714 with a highly significant p-value ($p < 0.001$) compared to posts that don’t reference the deceased. Third person posts were associated with a log-odds increase of 0.647 with a highly significant p-value ($p < 0.001$) compared to posts that don’t reference the deceased. The model was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that pronoun category contributes meaningfully to predicting narrative responses. However, the pseudo- R^2 values were weak (Cragg-Uhler = 0.031, McFadden = 0.018), suggesting that while pronoun usage is a statistically significant predictor, it explains only a small portion of the variance in narrative responses. I then interpreted the probabilities by exponentiating the log-odds.

$$\text{None} = e^{-1.025} / 1 + e^{-1.025} = 0.3588 / 1.3588 = 0.2641 \approx 26.4\%$$

$$\text{Second-person} = e^{-1.025 + 0.714} / 1 + e^{-1.025 + 0.714} = 0.7327 / 1.7327 = 0.4228 \approx 42.3\%$$

$$\text{Third-person} = e^{-1.025 + 0.647} / 1 + e^{-1.025 + 0.647} = 0.6852 / 1.6852 = 0.4066 \approx 40.7\%$$

Second person posts had an estimated 42.3% predicted probability of receiving a narrativized comment, while third person posts had an estimated 40.7% predicted probability of receiving a narrativized comment, both in comparison with the reference group which had a 26.4% predicted probability of receiving a narrativized comment. This means that both second-person and third-person posts had a significantly higher likelihood of receiving narrativized comments compared to posts marked as “none”. I then visualized the differences between the predicted probabilities for each of the pronoun categories.



This visualization shows the first time we’ve seen second person posts receive more narrativized comments than third person posts, but this is all relative in comparison with “none” posts, so a direct comparison of probabilities across second and third person posts is necessary.

I ran a second logistic regression setting observations in the “none” category as NA and setting third person posts as the reference group to get a more direct comparison between second and third posts and the likelihood that they each receive narrativized comments.

MODEL FIT:

$$\chi^2(1) = 2.600, p = 0.107$$

$$\text{Pseudo-}R^2 \text{ (Cragg-Uhler)} = 0.000$$

$$\text{Pseudo-}R^2 \text{ (McFadden)} = 0.000$$

$$AIC = 17531.411, BIC = 17546.349$$

Standard errors:MLE

| | Est. | S.E. | z val. | p |
|-------------------------------|--------|-------|---------|-------|
| (Intercept) | -0.379 | 0.021 | -18.450 | 0.000 |
| pronoun_categorySecond-person | 0.067 | 0.042 | 1.614 | 0.107 |

Model 2

Second person posts were associated with a log-odds increase of 0.067 compared to the reference group of third person posts, but this increase was not significant ($p = 0.107$). This model was not statistically significant ($p = 0.107$), indicating that pronoun category does not contribute meaningfully to predicting narrative responses when directly comparing second and third person posts. The pseudo- R^2 values were extremely weak (Cragg-Uhler = 0.000, McFadden = 0.000), suggesting that a direct comparison pronoun usage does not explain any of the variance in narrative responses. Despite this extremely poor model fit, I then interpreted the probabilities by exponentiating the log-odds to see how different they would be from Model 1.

$$\text{Second-person} = e^{-0.379 + .067} / 1 + e^{-0.379 + .067} = 0.7320 / 1.7320 = 0.4226 \approx 42.3\%$$

$$\text{Third-person} = e^{-0.379} / 1 + e^{-0.379} = 0.6845 / 1.6845 = 0.4064 \approx 40.6\%$$

These probabilities largely remained consistent from the previous model, with the probabilities just barely decreasing from 0.4228 in the Model 1 to 0.4226 in the Model 2 for second person posts, and from 0.4066 in Model 1 to 0.4064 in Model 2 for third person posts. These probabilities translate into a 42.3% likelihood that second person posts receive narrativized comments and a 40.6% likelihood that third person posts receive narrativized comments, but

despite these numbers being so similar, Model 2, which directly compares second and third person posts, is not statistically significant. It appears that only under the condition of comparison with posts marked as “none”, as seen in Model 1, are these probabilities significant. Notably, the effect size for second-person posts relative to the baseline of not making references to the deceased is slightly larger than that for third-person posts in Model 1, suggesting that addressing the dead directly may carry particular relational or emotional salience – even though the difference between second and third person posts themselves is not statistically significant. Because these results were ultimately insignificant, I chose not to visualize them.

I then decided to incorporate advice seeking as an additional covariate in the model to expand upon the findings about advice seeking in the first section of the quantitative analysis. With a reference group of advice seeking “none” posts, I included the pronoun category and advice seeking covariates of post characteristics to see how they interacted in the probability of receiving narrativized comments.

MODEL FIT:

$\chi^2(3) = 1243.568, p = 0.000$

Pseudo-R² (Cragg-Uhler) = 0.044

Pseudo-R² (McFadden) = 0.024

AIC = 49924.884, BIC = 49959.048

Standard errors:MLE

| | Est. | S.E. | z val. | p |
|----------------------------------|--------|-------|---------|-------|
| (Intercept) | -0.618 | 0.027 | -22.798 | 0.000 |
| pronoun_categorySecond-person | 0.649 | 0.036 | 17.912 | 0.000 |
| pronoun_categoryThird-person | 0.620 | 0.026 | 23.607 | 0.000 |
| advice_seekingNot Advice Seeking | -0.384 | 0.022 | -17.270 | 0.000 |

Model 3

The log-odds for both second and third person posts decreased from Model 1 (0.649 and 0.620 respectively), indicating that advice seeking may explain some of the effect of pronoun category on reciprocal narrativization. However, these log-odds for second and third person posts remained positive and highly significant ($p < 0.001$) in comparison with the “none” reference group. In comparison with advice seeking posts, posts that did not seek advice had negative log-odds that were highly significant ($p < 0.001$). The model remained statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that pronoun category and advice seeking contribute meaningfully to predicting narrative responses. The pseudo- R^2 values, though still modest, increased from Model 1 (Cragg-Uhler = 0.044, McFadden = 0.024), suggesting that advice seeking and pronoun usage together explain a small portion of the variance in narrative responses.

Then, with a reference group of advice seeking third person posts, I included the pronoun category and advice seeking covariates of post characteristics to see how they interacted in the probability of receiving narrativized comments in a direct comparison of second and third person posts.

MODEL FIT:

$\chi^2(2) = 212.521, p = 0.000$

Pseudo- R^2 (Cragg-Uhler) = 0.010

Pseudo- R^2 (McFadden) = 0.006

AIC = 37118.115, BIC = 37142.734

Standard errors:MLE

| | Est. | S.E. | z val. | p |
|----------------------------------|--------|-------|---------|-------|
| (Intercept) | -0.009 | 0.017 | -0.513 | 0.608 |
| pronoun_categorySecond-person | 0.024 | 0.033 | 0.752 | 0.452 |
| advice_seekingNot Advice Seeking | -0.359 | 0.025 | -14.460 | 0.000 |

Model 4

The log-odds for second person posts decreased from Model 2 to 0.024, indicating that advice seeking behavior may partially explain some of the variance in narrativized responses. These log-odds remained positive and insignificant ($p = 0.452$) in comparison with the reference group of third person posts. Posts that didn't seek advice had negative (-0.359) but highly significant ($p < 0.001$) log-odds in comparison with the advice seeking reference group. This model, unlike Model 2 that did not incorporate advice seeking, is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that together, pronoun category and advice seeking contribute meaningfully to predicting narrative responses. The pseudo- R^2 values, though still extremely weak, increased from Model 2 (Cragg-Uhler = 0.010, McFadden = 0.006), suggesting that advice seeking and pronoun usage together explain a small portion of the variance in narrative responses in a direct comparison of second and third person posts. Interestingly, advice seeking behavior is significant across the inclusion and exclusion of posts marked as "none", indicating that advice seeking is important for reciprocal narrativization. However, I did not exponentiate these log-odds to find these covariates' probabilities, as advice seeking, while a fascinating component of narrative prompting, is not the main thrust of this paper. I still felt that it was important to include the log-odds of the advice seeking covariate because it appears that advice seeking helps explain some of the variance in reciprocal narrativization across the pronoun categories.

To summarize, third person posts received a significantly higher volume of narrativized comments than second person posts, bringing the average number of narrativized comments per post up for third person posts. The logistic regression results show that both second person and third person posts are significantly more likely to receive narrativized comments compared to posts without these markers. However, upon direct comparison of second and third person posts, neither has a significantly higher likelihood of receiving narrativized comments than the other.

On a slightly tangential note, advice seeking has a significant effect on reciprocal narrativization across the pronoun categories regardless of the inclusion of posts that don't make references to the deceased. Together, these findings introduce nuance into this study, for while the first part of the quantitative results showed that third person posts receive more narrativized comments, there is no statistically significant difference between the pronoun categories when it comes to the probability of receiving a narrativized comment. These differing outcomes can potentially be attributed to the group mean comparison being unadjusted, for it is likely that third person posts were getting more narrativized comments on average because they have more comments overall – perhaps not because they're more likely to receive narrative comments. When the pronoun categories are given the same baseline by holding all other measures constant, talking about the dead and talking to the dead have no statistically significant difference between their probabilities of receiving narrativized comments.

Qualitative

The results from the first part of the quantitative analysis point to a small yet significant difference between second and third person posts in which third person posts elicit slightly more narrativized comments. However, the results from the second part of the quantitative analysis point to an insignificant difference between second and third person posts in their likelihood of receiving narrativized comments. Thus, while talking about the dead generates a higher volume of narrativized comments overall, we cannot draw firm conclusions about which post type has a greater probability of receiving such comments. Given this nuance, a qualitative analysis of a few compelling moments in the textual data is warranted to investigate if the effect of transcorporeal communication on reciprocal narrative sharing is profound, or if, perhaps, both of these post types serve fascinating purposes in these online communities. Just as well, I felt the

need to share not just the numbers but the stories behind the posts that I've been reading this whole time in order to write prompts for the large language model. Talking to the dead despite knowing they can't hear us is a uniquely human phenomenon that requires an accompanying humanistic approach. After all, this is a story about stories. Therefore, to investigate the emotional resonance that the posts in these online bereavement communities have across different post types, the following is a qualitative analysis of a few examples of these online exchanges.

Some posts in these online communities invoked the format of a letter to the deceased, which were marked as direct addresses to the dead. The personal nature of these posts appears to prompt reciprocal narrativization in the comments, but, as can be seen in the following exchange, may elicit a small number of total responses. This first post is a heartfelt example of transcorporeal communication, where the OP speaks directly to their friend who has passed by using their friend's name, perhaps to ensure that, somehow, this message reaches them. This personal address creates a sense of presence, as if the OP is still in conversation with their friend. The OP's use of regret ("I regret more than anything not being there...") and apology ("I'm so sorry I didn't call or text this month") represents an unresolved emotional dynamic between the bereaved and the deceased. By ending the post with "I love you so much," the OP reaffirms their emotional connection with the deceased.

In the comments section, a lone comment lies. The commenter begins with empathy, saying "I'm so sorry you lost someone too," signaling a shared experience of grief, though they do not immediately delve deeply into their own emotions. They go on to say, "Unfortunately, there's no words. Only time will help," which, while sympathetic, feels somewhat distant, almost as if the commenter is unsure how to offer something beyond the general platitudes of grief. The

commenter then shares about their own loss: “My ex died 3 weeks ago and I still don't believe it.” This personal reflection helps foster resonance, but it doesn't necessarily build a deep emotional bridge because the commenter immediately pivots to a philosophical reflection: “The only thing you can do is living your life the best you can.” While this advice is thoughtful, it risks coming across as more practical than emotional. The commenter signs off their message with a wish for the OP: “I hope you'll find peace.” This wish is empathetic but also lacks the personal emotional depth that might further resonate with the OP. The emotional intimacy of the post creates a powerful connection with the deceased, inviting deeply rooted empathy with those who have had similar experiences. However, this emotional intimacy also seems to limit reciprocal narrativization in the comments, as we see a somewhat reserved response from the lone commenter.

Some posts solely talk about the dead rather than to them, often eliciting slightly more total comments than posts that talk to the dead as we saw in the quantitative results. However, a higher number of comments per post does not always translate to meaningful emotional resonance, perhaps particularly for posts that talk about the dead. Posts that discuss the dead seem to provide more detailed accounts of the deceased's life and the circumstances surrounding their death, which can resonate with a wider audience. For instance, the OP of the second post shares an emotional lamentation about their immediate grieving process in the aftermath of their mother's passing at “only 16 years old,” only 18 hours before writing this post. The OP appears to be bargaining with death, saying “Maybe if I cleaned my room, she'll come through the door next morning holding groceries, nagging me about getting my work done,” not only reflecting how early on in the grieving process they are but also a strong sense of storytelling. The immediacy of this post in the wake of the OP's mother dying may also contribute to other users'

feelings of obligation to respond, to provide support when it is perhaps most crucial. The OP ends the post with “God help us all,” this time the OP praying for other users rather than a commenter praying for the OP.

The first comment is not reflective of a shared understanding of grief, simply saying “I’m so sorry for your loss,” showing that just because an OP tells an intimate story doesn’t mean a commenter will do the same. But the second comment does reflect a fleeting sense of resonance, through the commenter’s brief sharing of their own narrative and of advice. The commenter explains, “I cannot help you, everyone is different, but I can only tell you my story. I am 22 and lost my mother about 1 month ago, cancer, we had hope, we thought she was getting better, just finished treatment, and one morning it was just all gone.” By sharing their story, the commenter introduces an avenue through which to share advice explicitly based on their experiences: “You do not get over it, but you will learn how to live with it. Weirdly, my mother having passed away is not the worst feeling, I feel worse when my father is sad because of it. It breaks my heart.” The commenter goes on to advise the OP to “be there for [your] father.” This commenter even offers that the OP contact them with any questions, going above and beyond resonance and offering a shoulder to cry on. The rich contextual storytelling offered by this second post opens the door for commenters to connect through shared experiences of loss, as seen in the second comment where the commenter relates their own loss of their mother to the OP’s narrative. This shared understanding, built through context, can invite more engagement because the story allows others to reflect on similar experiences. This exchange suggests that talking about the dead allows for more accessible entry points for others to relate their own experiences, though the emotional depth of the response may not be as intense as in other posts, given the first comment is a generalized platitude and the second is primarily composed of advice.

Other posts that solely talk about the dead appear to elicit a higher number of comments but also more variety of comment types, specifically through the mechanism of seeking advice from the audience, serving as a prompt that commenters can readily respond to. In this third thread, the last two comments were marked as containing reciprocal narratives, but no narrative was found in the first comment. This post reflects a grief narrative centered around loss and identity disruption, the OP saying, “I was still in high school when she died and I feel like I stopped growing when she died. I feel like I am still that young boy,” but only after discussing the circumstances of their mother’s passing using third-person pronouns (“My mother passed away 5 years ago. I never really got to say a proper goodbye to her because she was in a coma”). This post appears to be less about the current grieving process that the previous OP discussed and more about their feelings in the direct aftermath of their mother’s passing (“At first I didn’t really feel anything at all”). The post ends with an appeal to other users (“Has anyone ever felt like this?” and “...do you guys ever really get over something like this?”), prompting them to share their own experiences.

In response, the first comment provides a generalized take on grief, advising the OP that grief is different for everyone as well as sharing why they fear death (“For me each death is a reminder that one day I’ll die too and that’s the scariest [thing] I can think of”), but not explicitly sharing their experience of losing someone. This commenter shares the sentiment, “I hope you will find your peace,” that was found in the first exchange, but unlike the first exchange, this thread does not end there. Either unphased by the lack of narrativization in the previous comment or even more so emboldened to share, the second comment shares a detailed journey through the commenter’s grief, providing answers to the OP’s questions from experience by describing the “grief waves” between feeling “sad, but fine” and “sinking with heavy grief” they have endured

after losing their brother. The third comment shares about their healing journey after the loss of their mother through their participation in a grief counseling group, advising the OP that “it gets easier” with the wisdom of “people who understand grief.” These last two commenters that share their own personal narratives offer meaningful insights, but this exchange is very much one of call and response, where the OP poses questions and the commenters answer. The OP prompts others to respond through advice seeking, which is most definitely an interesting dynamic taking place in these grief-centered subreddits. However, unprompted reciprocal narrativization appears to be a more compelling phenomenon, at least for this study.

This phenomenon of unprompted reciprocal narrativization appears to occur in the fourth thread. This fourth thread entails a conversation with the dead in the post and a reciprocal narrative in all three of the comments, but, crucially, the post also contains a discussion of the deceased in the third-person. In the post, the OP lays out a detailed portrait of their deceased mother’s unrealized future, saying “She was going to retire, move to the cape and live her life by the ocean. She never got there. She was going to be a grandmother for the first time,” all while talking about their mother in the third-person. The OP describes how much of their mother they see in themselves, saying “The one thing that gets me by is that I am a part of her. She made me the person that I am,” this thought helping them keep going throughout their grieving process. Then, the OP shifts into an intimate direct address of their mother, expressing their thoughts about their regrets and the personal growth that their mother inspired but never got to see (“Mom, I just miss you so much. I wish I could have been a better kid for you but I am a better adult now because of you. I love you”). This narrative is deeply reflective, but, crucially, it is not interactive by virtue of advice seeking, making the responses that follow particularly noteworthy, for they are prompted by shared resonance, not by request.

The first commenter shares about their mother, contrasting the nature of their loss (“not untimely”), but emphasizing the emotional commonality between themselves and the OP, saying, “I have all the same emotions and reactions that you describe.” The second comment is a brief narrative about the loss of the user’s father. This commenter expresses relief in reading the OP’s narrative (“It’s relieving to me to read a peaceful testimony from somebody who also lost a parent so early”), revealing the solace users can find in each other’s narratives. The third commenter shares similar behaviors to the OP after loss, specifically wanting to call the deceased with life updates. The connection between the OP’s statement (“I am a part of her”) and this commenter’s reflection (“I can see so so very much of her in me”) reveals profound narrative mirroring. In this thread, all three commenters share their own grief narratives, indicating that when talking to and about the dead work in tandem, collective witnessing seems to flourish. The emotional intimacy of the second-person address in the post prompts strong, resonant responses, while the third-person details allow many commenters to find relatable points of connection through their own grief stories. These findings suggest that both talking to and about the deceased may have distinct but complementary strengths in engendering reciprocal narrativization.

While discussions of the deceased may lower the threshold for engagement by offering accessible, relatable points of connection, conversations with the dead appear to evoke a deeper emotional pull prompting commenters to share their own grief narratives as a means of collective witnessing. The emotional resonance in these posts truly comes about when the OP’s grief expression includes talking to and about them. This dual approach of addressing the deceased directly while also reflecting on their life creates a richer emotional landscape. When an OP speaks directly to the deceased, they establish an intimate connection that conveys the depth of

their grief and creates an immediate emotional pull. However, it is the addition of speaking about the deceased, through sharing memories or details about their life, that allows commenters to connect on a more universal level. By incorporating both direct address and reflection, posts can create multiple points of entry for engagement. Direct address fosters emotional proximity, inviting empathy, while references to the deceased's life provide contextual hooks that resonate with a broader audience. This combination encourages a deeper, more multifaceted form of reciprocal narrativization, where commenters can both relate to the shared grief and offer their own experiences through similar stories. Thus, posts that integrate both talking to and about the deceased create a space where emotional resonance thrives, offering intimacy and connection, while also inviting other users to share what resonates.

Discussion

In grief-centered subreddits, the act of commenting extends beyond mere sympathy. Commenting becomes an act of collective witnessing, where users engage with the emotional weight of another's loss by offering their own grief narratives in response. This collective witnessing is reciprocal, as the OPs extend an often unspoken invitation for connection through their expressions of loss, and commenters answer by sharing their own experiences of grief. As commenters offer their own grief narratives, they, too, become witnessed by the OP and others in the community. Their pain is met with recognition, validation, and sometimes even further shared stories, reinforcing the cyclical nature of collective grieving. The weight of loss is thus carried as a community.

Unlike traditional forms of mourning that often take place within close-knit communities, digital grief spaces, through their community-driven structure, allow strangers to recognize and

validate their experiences of loss. Schönfelder (2013) suggests that in the construction of memory communities, personal relevance to a trauma can be more important than personal witness to a trauma. This indicates that “victims of trauma who most immediately and most naturally bond together” are those that may not have witnessed the same trauma from different perspectives, but have experienced different, though similar, traumas from the same perspective (Schönfelder, 2013, p. 41). Because grief is a universal experience, even when its circumstances differ, commenters often react by bridging the emotional gap between themselves and the OP’s loss, responding not just with words of comfort but by sharing their own narratives of bereavement. This relevance of trauma is evident in how Reddit users respond to posts in which an OP grieves for a loved one, particularly when that grief is expressed through a combination of talking to and about the deceased.

The quantitative results, and particularly the insignificant logistic regression output, seem to insinuate that both talking to and about the deceased may have their merits in engendering reciprocal narrativization, though perhaps in different ways. Upon further qualitative examination, it appears that talking to and about the deceased, when co-occurring in a singular post, may produce the most compelling unprompted exchanges between the OP and their commenters because of the different functions each appears to serve. When an OP directly addresses their deceased loved one, they establish an imagined line of communication with the dead that, while inherently one-sided, paradoxically encourages dialogue among the living. The absence of a response from the deceased to a message from the living creates a conversational void that commenters instinctively fill by offering their own experiences as testimony. Direct address draws users into the OP’s emotional world, creating a strong emotional pull. Transcorporeal communication thus fosters a powerful sense of emotional proximity between the

OP and commenters, but it may paradoxically create a barrier to broader sharing. Because these posts often focus on the OP's intimate relationship with the deceased rather than providing concrete details about the person lost, commenters may find fewer external points of connection to anchor their own narratives, ultimately resulting in a lower number of narrativized comments. In contrast, posts that talk about the deceased provide context and shared reference points that make it easier for others to join in and connect with their own stories. The intimacy of grief expressed through transcorporeal communication deepens the emotional charge of the post, while the contextual details expressed in the third-person widen the circle of resonance, offering commenters more points of entry. When these two approaches of talking to and about the dead are combined in a post, they bring out each other's strengths. Together, these types of references to the dead not only invite both emotional mirroring and narrative sharing but also foster a richer, more layered collective grieving process.

These exchanges have the functionality of bearing witness, where the act of storytelling is only complete when it is met with an engaged listener (Busch & McNamara, 2020). Commenters do not merely listen to the OP's narrative, but contribute their own, evolving the discourse of loss. Thus, a post that begins as an individual's personal expression of grief often transforms into a thread of interconnected narratives, where different but resonant losses are woven together into a shared act of mourning. This dynamic suggests that witnessing grief is not a passive act; rather, it implores engagement. These comments are not simply reassurances for the OP; they are acts of shared mourning, where the commenters' personal narrative serves as both validation of the OPs' trauma and as means of processing their own. In this way, the original post becomes a communal space for mutual grief work that continuously fosters engagement. By sharing their own losses in response to others', commenters participate in a form of grief work that is reciprocal rather than

unilateral. In doing so, they transform posts about grief from isolated expressions of sorrow into interactive spaces where mourning is both witnessed and shared. Commenters find common ground through both the emotional proximity they feel with the OP and the details they can relate to that the OP shares about the deceased. Implored by the conversational void left by the deceased, commenters respond not just to offer comfort, but to place their own losses alongside the OP's, creating a space where grief is felt collectively rather than carried alone.

Conclusion

In an increasingly digitalized world, social media has transformed how individuals express grief and maintain bonds with deceased loved ones. Historically, scholars have examined online bereavement through two distinct lenses: communication among the living in online grief support spaces, and "transcorporeal communication," where individuals direct messages to the deceased. However, these approaches, when taken separately, overlook how social media platforms like Reddit foster an interactive grieving process, where posts addressing the dead become catalysts for relational exchanges among the living. This study has bridged these perspectives by investigating how addressing the deceased, in comparison – and also in tandem – with discussing them, influences commenter engagement through reciprocal narrativization in grief-centered subreddits.

Initially, commenters appeared to more frequently share their own grief narratives in response to OPs who talk about the dead rather than to the dead. However, these calculations merely represented the volume of narrativized comments, and most likely because there were far more third person posts than any other post type, they appeared to receive a higher average number of narrativized comments, especially when OPs prompted other users to respond by asking for advice. When looking at the probability of receiving a narrativized comment across

the post types, there was no significant difference between second and third person posts in their likelihood of receiving narrativized comments, though both post types elicit significantly more than posts that do not reference the dead at all. From this nuance, both of these post types appear to have their merits. Upon a qualitative examination of a select number of exchanges, when talking to and about the dead co-occur in a singular post, the combination appears to draw on the strengths of both approaches, encouraging deeper narrative sharing and richer communal engagement among commenters, though further qualitative examination is needed beyond just a few posts.

Ultimately, this mutual narrativization between OPs and commenters contributes to a larger story of how sharing one's grief on social media shapes our understanding of grief. These relational exchanges contribute to a novel mourning ritual of collective witnessing, reinforcing the role of social media as a space for evolving mourning practices. Grief expressed on social media thus does not just encompass conversations between the living and the dead. This discourse is instead transformed into a communal dialogue. Grieving OPs in these online communities do not just keep their deceased loved ones' memory alive by talking to them, but they also find solace in knowing they are not alone, for commenters who engage in reciprocal narrative sharing transform grief into a collective process. Through these online exchanges, grief becomes not just an individual burden but a communal act of remembrance.

Death is a deeply personal phenomenon, but it is also clearly deeply social. Mourners appear to experience competing needs of intimate connection with the dead and social support from the living. Through this study of online grief communities on Reddit, these competing needs coalesce, blending together to form creative practices that unite the personal and the social. Rooted in a history of spirituality, the bereaved have found a way to use social media as a

mechanism to communicate with the dead. This act of digitally reaching across the divide between the living and the dead reflects a profound human need: we don't want to feel alone in our grief, and perhaps just as importantly, we don't want our deceased loved ones to feel alone either. Grief is profoundly human, shaped by emotion and memory, but in this study, it unfolds within a technologically mediated environment. Social media extends the boundaries of grief, allowing private sorrow to become part of a collective experience. So, in a unique entanglement of humanity and technology, the bereaved have found a way to connect with the deceased through the living.

Appendix

Custom Stopwords

```
custom_stop_words = default_stop_words - {'i', 'you', 'your', 'my', 'he', 'she', 'we', 'they', 'me', 'us', 'him', 'her', 'them'}
```

Pronoun Post Classification

```
few_shot_examples = [
    {"role": "system", "content": "You are a classifier that categorizes grief-related Reddit posts."},
    {"role": "user", "content": 'Post: "I miss you so much. I think about you every day."\nCategory:'},
    {"role": "assistant", "content": "second_person"},
    {"role": "user", "content": 'Post: "My mom passed away last week. I still hear her voice."\nCategory:'},
    {"role": "assistant", "content": "third_person"},
    {"role": "user", "content": 'Post: "Grieving is hard. If you\'ve lost someone, know you\'re not alone."\nCategory:'},
    {"role": "assistant", "content": "none"},
    {"role": "user", "content": 'Post: "She was everything to me. I can\'t believe she\'s gone."\nCategory:'},
    {"role": "assistant", "content": "third_person"},
    {"role": "user", "content": 'Post: "You left too soon. I wish we had more time."\nCategory:'},
    {"role": "assistant", "content": "second_person"},
    {"role": "user", "content": 'Post: "Thanks for reading this. You don\'t know how much it means to be heard."\nCategory:'},
    {"role": "assistant", "content": "none"},
    {"role": "user", "content": f'Post: "{text.strip()}"\nCategory:'}
]
```

```
prompt = f"""
You're categorizing grief-related Reddit posts based on how they refer to the deceased. Prioritize in this order:

1. **second_person** □ If the post directly addresses the deceased with "you" (e.g., "I miss you", "why did you leave?", "I love you").
2. **third_person** □ If the deceased is mentioned in third person, using pronouns (he, she, they) or descriptors like "my mom", "my brother", "a friend", etc.
3. **none** □ If the post doesn't reference the deceased at all, or if "you" is directed at the audience (e.g., "if you've lost someone", "how do you cope").

Be very careful: **"you" does not always mean the post is talking to the deceased.** If "you" is used generically (to give advice, thank the audience, or offer support), categorize it as **none**.

Always choose the *most personal reference to the deceased*. If there's any second-person reference to the deceased, choose **second_person**. If there are no second-person references but any third-person references, choose **third_person**. Only choose **none** if neither appears.

Here are some examples:

- "I miss you every day. I hope you're at peace." → **second_person**
- "My dad was the kindest man I knew. I miss him so much." → **third_person**
- "Grief is strange. When you lose someone, nothing feels real." → **none**
- "She passed away last year and I still think about her every day." → **third_person**
- "If you're grieving, know that it's okay to not be okay." → **none**

Now categorize this post:

{text}

Respond with only one of these categories: **second_person**, **third_person**, or **none**.
"""
```

Advice Seeking Post Classification

```
prompt = f"""
Determine whether the following Reddit post is asking for advice, guidance, or shared experience
(e.g., "has anyone..." or "what do I do..." or "have you...").
If both advice seeking and not advice seeking are present in a post, prioritize if there is
advice seeking present and mark as **advice_seeking**

Here are some examples:

- "Has anyone ever gone through something like this?" → **advice_seeking**
- "Grief is strange. When you lose someone, nothing feels real." → **not_advice_seeking**
- "How do I get through this pain?" → **advice_seeking**
- "If you're grieving, know that it's okay to not be okay." → **not_advice_seeking**
- "Any thoughts on how to get through this?" → **advice_seeking**
- "Thank you for reading." → **not_advice_seeking**

Post: "{text}"

Respond with only one word: **advice_seeking** or **not_advice_seeking**.
"""
```

Narrativized Comment Classification

```
prompt = f"""
You are a classifier that determines whether a Reddit comment contains a grief narrative.

A **grief narrative** includes personal storytelling or concrete details about the loss of a specific person. These often involve:
- Descriptions of when or how someone died (e.g., "I lost my dad last year", "We buried her on a rainy day")
- Reflections or memories (e.g., "I remember the way he laughed", "It's been 5 years and I still miss her")
- Emotions tied to specific events or people (e.g., "I still see her in my dreams", "That hospital visit changed everything")

**Not** a grief narrative:
- General statements (e.g., "Grieving is hard", "It gets better with time")
- Advice to others (e.g., "If you're grieving, talk to someone")
- Supportive comments (e.g., "I'm sorry for your loss", "You're not alone")

Classify the following text by returning a **single number**:
- Return `1` if the comment **contains a grief narrative**
- Return `0` if it **does not contain a grief narrative**

Comment: "{text.strip()}"
Category (just `1` or `0`):
"""
```

Bibliography

- Busch, B., & McNamara, T. (2020). Language and trauma: An introduction. *Applied Linguistics*, 41(3), 323–333. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amaa002>
- Charmaz, K. (1997). Grief and loss of self. In *The unknown country: Death in Australia, Britain and the USA* (pp. 229–241). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Crenshaw, D. A. (2002). *Bereavement: Counseling the grieving throughout the life cycle*. Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- DeGroot, J. M. (2008). Facebook Memorial Walls and CMC's Effect on the Grieving Process. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, San Diego, CA.
- Harris, D. (2010). Oppression of the bereaved: A critical analysis of grief in western society. *OMEGA-Journal of death and dying*, 60(3), 241–253.
- Harju, A. (2014). Socially shared mourning: construction and consumption of collective memory. *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, 21(1–2), 123–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13614568.2014.983562>
- Ikkos, G., & McQueen, D. (2019). Reflections on The Elementary Forms of Religious Life – Reflections. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 214(5), 304–304.
- Kehus, M., Walters, K., & Shaw, M. (2010). Definition and genesis of an online discourse community. *International Journal of Learning*, 17(4), 67–86.
- Lapper, E. (2017). *How Has Social Media Changed the Way We Grieve?* (pp. 127–141). Transcript.
- Leming, M. R., & Dickinson, G. E. (1985). *Understanding dying, death, and bereavement*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Lopata, H. Z. (1997). Current Widowhood: Myths and Realities. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 29(1), 137.
- Matthews, A. (2019). Writing through grief: Using autoethnography to help process grief after the death of a loved one. *Methodological Innovations*, 12(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799119889569>
- Okoli, I. K. (2024). Transcending Without Transcendence: An Inquiry into the Solitary and Spiritual Liberation Without External Influence. *Nnadiesube Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(1).
- Reddit Inc. (2024). <https://redditinc.com/>

- Robinson, C., & Pond, R. (2019). Do online support groups for grief benefit the bereaved? Systematic review of the quantitative and qualitative literature. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 100, 48-59.
- Schönfelder, C. (2013). Theorizing trauma. In *Wounds and words: Childhood and family trauma in romantic and postmodern fiction*. Transcript Verlag.
- Sigman, S. J. (1991). Handling the discontinuous aspect of continuous social relationships: Toward research of the persistence of social forms. *Communication Theory*, 1, 106-127.
- Stroebe, M., Schut, H., & Boerner, K. (2015). Bereavement. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 531–536.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-097086-8.14061-9>
- Taylor, C. (2003). Varieties of religion today: William James revisited. *Pro Ecclesia*, 12(3), 375-377.
- Toynbee, A. (1968). Changing attitudes towards death in the modern western world. *Man's Concern with Death*, McGraw Hill, New York City, 131.
- Varga, M. A., & Paulus, T. M. (2013). Grieving Online: Newcomers' Constructions of Grief in an Online Support Group. *Death Studies*, 38(7), 443–449.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2013.780112>
- Vickio, C. J. (1999). Together in Spirit: Keeping Our Relationships Alive When Loved Ones Die. *Death Studies*, 23(2), 161–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/074811899201127>