

An Understanding of Grief in a Socially Networked World

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Abstract

Grief is a strong emotion that affects the lives of those experiencing it. Through technology, grief is no longer confined in its expression. Messages from those grieving are shared through websites, blogs, and social media networks. This project took personal experience with grief to examine some of the relationships between that grief, design principles, and the researched understandings. It started with the creation of a grief blog, meant to capture personal understandings of grief at a point in time. Those posts were then better understood through the lens of research studies.

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Introduction

A Brief Review on Historical Grieving

The act of grieving is about as old as humans. Ornate burials date back nearly 30,000 years

Early human burials varied widely but most were simple, 2013 . That is 30,000 years of real-world examples to study with divergent cultural attitudes and activities to understand. This can include studying the actions of specific communities and cultures, for example Mexican traditions with Mayan roots:

The Day of the Dead actually takes place on two days, November 1 and 2...To Mexicans, the dead are not scary. Instead, they are welcome visitors. The first day of the holiday is for remembering children who have died. The second day honors adults. "We cook the food they always loved and put it next to their picture," says Hernán. Waugh, 2010, p.17 .

Researchers also study the physical remnants of an act of grief. This can include the tombs built for them, the conditioning of the body, and the items left with it. Tombs can vary from a hole in the ground to a large pyramid; the body could be preserved, buried as-is, or cremated; and items left behind can be anything from household items to full boats. In the case of Viking burials:

The grave mounds in this cemetery date from the 8th century AD, perhaps even earlier, to the end of the 10th century AD...The most striking feature with regards to rituals is that all of these funerals were conducted differently. Although there were some inhumations, the majority of men and women were cremated. The burnt Viking ship is an anomaly as a funeral practice, but also two smaller boats were burnt Brandt, 2014, p.367 .

Despite a deep history of grief impacting human behavior, American behaviorists were hesitant to include it in studies, “Psychology had fashioned an objectivistic, utilitarian, atheoretical perspective whose many strengths did not include either the conceptualization or the study of death. Death was irrelevant to the systematic study of psychology and irrelevant to most of what psychologists do in the applied sphere” Kastenbaum, 2000, p.14 . Death was seen as an end. Kastenbaum goes on to describe two explanations for ignoring death, “The psychologist s separation from phenomenological and natural time; and b the preference for aggregated rather than individual nomothetic types of quantitative analysis” p.15 . Time is an issue because grief can change over time, creating a difficult to control variable. The individual nature of the study would further exacerbate the issue by limiting the dataset size and availability.

Online Grief

Today’s social media networks act as a natural aggregator, making the type of analysis psychologists ignored possible. Over 70% of Americans are using social media Parwani, 2019, p.1089 . Pew Research Center’s surveys found that Facebook, the largest social media network in the U.S., is used by 69% of U.S. adults Social Media Fact Sheet, 2019 . Today’s researchers can aggregate data on death and grief through content analysis. Kern, for example, analyzed 550 Facebook pages found by searching for RIP 2013 . This creates larger, easy to access datasets with timestamped content, alleviating the issues in early studies.

The transition to social media and Web 2.0 starts with the mass communication technologies popularized in the 20th century. This age of mass communication has changed where we grieve. The telephone allowed us to share our thoughts and feelings as we were experiencing them. Obituaries, once only found near the help wanteds in many newspapers, are posted on

web pages where they can be found through a Google search. Our loved one's own social media presence can become an interactive memorial, bringing family and friends together to remember their lives.

Early technologies like the telegraph started the age of near-instantaneous communication. Prior to the telegraph, "The [Pony] Express was carrying the mail at an average loss of thirteen dollars per letter," but, "Did succeed in achieving its objective of delivering mail between Missouri and California in ten days" Rienfeld, 2014, p.121 . The telegraph made it possible to alert family and friends from afar of failing health, giving them the opportunity to attend funerals and partake in shared grief; it mimicked in-person communication between people miles apart. The telephone incorporated the sound of individual grief in a personal one-on-one way although early telephone did include party lines, creating opportunities for group discussions . Newspapers may have been the first to share grief with an outside audience, but radio and television made it more sensorially impactful. All these technological advances would allow for a growing expression of grief.

Networked computers expanded the possibilities for expression and sharing. This two-way feedback is a hallmark of Web 2.0. These online worlds connect us like never before while providing us with an instantaneous communication method for sharing personal, written, visual, and/or auidial message. It provides a constant connection where we can share and experience grief. Our networks fill with friends, family, and colleagues. As our online connections to the living grow, so do the chances of a digital connection to someone tragically killed. In a survey, 55% of Facebook users said they have experienced the death of a Facebook friend Kuznetsova, 2016, p.4 . These experiences are even more common with college-aged

students. Pennington found that 60% of college students have experienced a death of a family member 2013, p.617 .

A Golden Age for Grief Research

Thanks to the changing nature of where we grieve, we are now in a golden age for grief research. Grief is now recorded and stored, it is public and shared, and it is organized and spidered. Server technologies store our messages, websites, pictures, and posts. Networking technologies connect that stored data to others. Search engines and social media networks spider our data by creating searchable databases.

The joining of web servers and networking is a relatively recent phenomenon, “By the summer of 1993, there were 130, mostly experimental, web servers worldwide” Campbell-Kelly, 2013, p.30 . Netcraft, an Internet security and research firm that works with Britain s government *Britain’s Cyber Security Bolstered by World-class Strategy*, 2016 , conducted a survey in March of 2020 that found, “1,263,025,546 sites across 257,194,796 unique domains and 9,659,223 web-facing computers” *March 2020 Web Server Survey*, 2020 . Search engines allow this depth of information to be found by researchers. Google acts as the largest search engine. Google self reports, “The Google Search index contains hundreds of billions of web pages and is well over 100,000,000 gigabytes in size” *How Search organizes information* .

The largest social media network is Facebook. Facebook is a social media network founded in 2004, with a mission to, “Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together” *Facebook* . Facebook allows users an opportunity to share, browse, and communicate. Through Facebook, grieving users are afforded a place to express their feelings

in both public and private arenas. This includes the memorial profiles, but expands to Facebook's chat functionality, status messages, group chat, and group/event pages.

While social media is actively creating online areas to grieve, the World Wide Web allows anyone to create their own spot with your own website. Creating your own site allows for some control over the exposure of your content. Creating a site is now much easier thanks to the growing marketing of easy-to-use tools like WordPress. "WordPress has matured from the most popular blogging platform to the most popular content management system...The future seems bright as WordPress has already got dozens of built-in features, which can be easily adapted to web application development using slight modifications" Ratnayake, 2015, p1 .

Literature Review

Online Grief

There is an openness to grieving online. In an online sampling of a grief community, Hoover found that, "Cultural rules and values serve as constraints, but concern for the rules of society at large seems to vanish on this website. The broader societal constraints are replaced by an alternative set of normative and code rules" Hoover, 2009, p.88 .

Some people experiencing grief utilize the online space to create websites and blogs where they can experience this openness. "Some grief bloggers start their blogs almost immediately after the loss. Others begin blogging after finding out that a loved one has a terminal illness; they also use blogging to grieve in an anticipatory way. Both categories use the blog as an outlet for their emotions. Generally, grief blogs are similar to other personal diaries. The

bloggers post pictures and links, share stories, and write about personal experiences” DeGroot, 2012, p.164 . In trying to understand why these web memorials are created When asked why they created their Web memorial, Roberts found that, “79% of respondents rated a statement taken verbatim from one of the cemetery guestbooks, “to give me a meaningful activity that I could still do for my child” as “very important” to their decision” 2004 p.61 .

Grief on Facebook

Websites and blogs require a certain knowledge set to create and sometimes lack the built in networks that social media has. Facebook launched memorial pages as a means to aggregate these expressions, offering grieving members a place dedicated to the deceased Graham, 2015, Irwin, 2015 . The page acts to “Preserve the memory of the child” Perluxo, 2018, p.84 . In this way, the page acts like a digital gravestone Graham, 2015 . Memorial pages are filled with posts, likes, and comments. Many grieving family members find comfort through these pages Pennington, 2017, Degroot, 2014, Perluxo, 2018, Willis, 2017 . Pennington found that users who spend more time with Facebook usually found it more useful and that those opinions did not change over time 2017, p.20-21 . In further research, Pennington found that even in cases where grieving families did not actively participate, the page still could have a positive impact 2013 . While Pennington explained it as giving something for grieving family members to read, showing the shared loss; Perluxo specifically notes in research on grieving mothers that likes on messages can provide comfort 2018 .

Although Facebook can help the grieving process, research shows that not all interactions were positive. Other users seeing public posts can often feel uncomfortable. Kuznetsova’s research found 37.5% found timeline posts regarding the deceased as uncomfortable and 12.8%

preferred to not see them at all Kuznetsova, 2016, p.6 .The public nature of the page can also attract “rubberneckers,” users who didn’t know the deceased and have inserted themselves into the grief Degroot, 2014, p.81 . These users can form a “vocal minority” that is not truly representative of the deceased’s life Pennington, 2013, p.628 . This external perspective can sometimes be identified by strangers using the third person in their related posts.

Grief posts can often be very emotional. The posts themselves can often read more negative than positive, although the most common are general expressions like, “I love you” and “I miss you.” Bouc found these common expressions in 72.6% of grief posts Bouc, 2015, p.639 .

The grieving family’s use of Facebook can impact close family and friends. Family may access the deceased’s Facebook profile for memories, but some users may be uncomfortable seeing them show as online Pennington, 2013 . Some users may prefer the page be deleted and support family members in making that decision all together. 75.7% reported they were ok with family deleting a memorial page Kuznetsova, 2016, p.5 . The acceptance of Facebook’s role in the grieving process varies. In general, users who have spent longer on Facebook tend to have a more positive opinion on its use Pennington, 2017 . This also impacts whether they believe it is ok to delete a memorial page. It has been shown that the more Facebook experience a user has, the more likely they will find deleting a page as being inappropriate Kuznetsova, 2016 .

The ability of Facebook to be available at a moment s notice may also impact their views.

Grievers of sudden deaths tend to prefer Facebook compared to those grieving someone with a prolonged illness Perluxo, 2018 .

Memorial pages are not the only way to express grief. Grief can be expressed privately as well. Some would utilize Facebook's private message system to send the deceased messages with interviews describing a comfort just from knowing this sort of communication is possible Kuznetsova, p.8 .

Private messages between those grieving can also assist the grieving process. Some have expressed a preference for that one-on-one direct message over impersonal comments and likes Perluxo, 85 . This draws comparisons to Itaru Sasaki's "wind phone," a spot where grievers can speak to their loved ones, sending their messages into the wind Hester, 2017 . This acts as a way to express oneself without the judgement of the public.

Understanding through Theory

Theories used by designers to better understand their audience and how those users interact with design are referenced as a part of this project. Concepts were strongly influenced by semiotics. "Semiotics' refers to both the specificity of human semiosis and the general science of signs," meaning, "We can approach signs as objects of interpretation indistinguishable from our responses to them. But we can also approach signs in such a way that we suspend our responses to them so that deliberation is possible" Petrilli, 2015, p3 . Signs offer us opportunities to not only study representative symbols, but how those symbols influence the understanding of the world around us.

The use of technology is better understood through Gibson's affordance theory. Goel define's Gibson's as, "Affordance theory states that an environment is perceived in terms of objects and spatial relationships and also in possibilities for actions, called affordances" 2013 p.198 . This

perspective is helpful in comprehending social media resources such as Facebook, as we understand its features through the interactions the technology allows for or affords .

Project

Project Background and Creation

I have created a blog in Wordpress meant to discuss my perspective on grief in social media.

The site is located at: <http://sociallygrievingdesigner.wordpress.com/>

Two years of hosting has been paid for, starting at the time on February 4, 2020. They are also available as Figures 1-10.

I chose a Wordpress Theme called Baskerville 2. Wordpress describes Baskerville 2 as, “A crisp, responsive theme that displays your writing, photos, and videos in a dynamic grid layout”

Norén . I was drawn to it by the fitting hero/banner picture of a dark road and its flexibility for customization. I customized the CSS Figure 11 to fit the tone, replacing white with a dark gray palette, consistent with both the top hero banner and the association with grief. Images that could distract from this tone were hidden from the homepage. I removed light-hearted cursive fonts and replaced them with a more serious typewriter-type font in Courier New. Blog links in the template were ill-defined. I added a link icon using Font Awesome to draw attention to where to click/interact. This increase in recognition through a symbolic icon a chain link is a simple way to improve navigability.

I decided on the blog's theme based on my experience with grief. In DeGroot's chapter called *Blogging as a Means of Grieving*, she notes the best description of the stages of grief when it comes to understanding blogging are Shock and Numbness, Yearning and Searching, Disorganization and Despair, Reorganization and Recovery 2012 . These are not meant to be exclusive stages; one can experience them separately and/or together. The project is not designed for self-diagnosis. Rather, the blogs offer an opportunity to note attributes from the stages that reveal themselves in the writing.

In October of 2018 I lost 10 close family and friends in a tragic accident. How I defined myself and my expectations for the future were forever changed. This transition in finding a new self can be seen in some of the blog postings.

Our realities are inevitably influenced by what is going on around us. For me this has been a wedding, my 9-5 job, and delving back into studies. I made a conscious attempt to relate some of what I learned in my studies to what I've learned through grief within the blog posts. In this way, design theory and experience acted as a way to deal with some of the disorganization grief can cause.

Project Content

The blog series begins with an *About* section Figure 2 , meant to ensure the site isn't seen as a guide to grieving. Grief is not unique to me, and even after a deep review of the literature, there exists no how-to guide on the best way to grieve. This was true prior to communication technologies involvement. This was the first piece I wrote. The normal blog style would place this at the bottom. I made a design decision to display posts in reverse order, putting this at the

top as it is important context to understanding the blog. Furthermore, I created a link to the same page in the top navigation for redundancy.

Signifiers of Grief Figure 3 discusses the difficulty in describing feelings of grief and offers a solution through semiotics. Semiotics is the study of signs, and for a designer, how signs can represent abstract ideas to create a desired response. In Eco's book *A Theory of Semiotics*, he presents the following example in a section entitled Ideas as signs:

“Suppose I am crossing a dark street and glimpse an imprecise shape on the sidewalk. Until I recognize it, I will wonder "what is it?" But this "what is it?" may be and indeed sometimes is translated as "what does it mean?" When my attention is better adjusted, and the sensory data have been better evaluated, I finally recognize that it is a cat. I recognize it because I have already seen other cats. Thus I apply to an imprecise field of sensory stimuli the cultural unit «cat». I can even translate the experience into a verbal interpretant /I saw a cat/. Thus the field of stimuli appears to me as the sign-vehicle of a possible meaning which I already possessed before the perceptual event” 165

Grief is an imprecise shape on the sidewalk. A sign offers an opportunity to provide definition to grief through objects and ideas we already recognize. The blog post uses simple objects: a box, a ball, and a pain button to represent grief in a way many others can understand and many more can relate to.

What happens when we aren't trying to represent an “imprecise shape” but instead finding a sign to represent the person we lost? Over time, the memories can be just as blurry as that cat in the distance. *Changing Signs* Figure 4 discusses that concept. It isn't a new idea, the post

pulls an example of a corncob pipe that signified Benjamin's grandfather. In today's social media world, we have signs that are less blurry, the social media profiles they left behind.

Despite being less "blurry," social media profiles can create a false representation of the deceased. It is a garbage in-garbage out situation, we don't create our social media profile to be representative of our true selves. Instead, they represent how we want to be seen. *True Reflections* Figure 7 examines this phenomenon using a content analysis on a single profile. This presents a limitation in semiotics. The shape of the cat can represent a cat but inversely, the cat isn't fully described by its shape. Information is lost when going back and forth.

In *Changing Signs*, a big moment for Benjamin Tousley is when his grandfather's corncob pipe finally broke. It represented his transition out of grief. Physical objects come with a lifespan of their own. Like grief, they aren't meant to be permanent, but sometimes grief lasts longer than is healthy. "Three defined features that were mentioned above to characterize CG [Complicated Grief] are deviations/differences from NG [Normal Grief] 1 in intensity, 2 in quality, and 3 in duration" Stroebe, 2013, p.296 . Stroebe also offers a definition comparing it to prolonged grief disorder PGD . Either way, the length of grief plays a part in whether it is healthy.

For Benjamin, the signifying object that represented his grandfather was temporary. For those grieving to a social media profile, that profile is more permanent. It can't break, get lost, or wear away. It consistently exists. This relationship is described in *Grief is Forever* Figure 6 through the Bicycle Tree. The tree grows, taking its very visible scars with it. *It's Complicated* Figure 9 delves into this idea deeper, comparing the time spent on social media to time spent at a cemetery. Like an undertaker with their family buried at their daily workplace, social media acts

as a daily reminder of who we have lost. Some ideas from DeGroot's Disorganization and Despair phase are represented here. In this phase, "Survivors might question how they now define themselves...the bereaved might start to have an interest in returning to some semblance of a 'normal' life" 2012, p.163 . The tree represents a new normal and an opportunity to redefine oneself while keeping those you lost a part of your life. This allows for Reconstruction and Recovery, where, "People develop an identity where the deceased is now part of the past self and not the present self" Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, 1998 as cited in DeGroot 2012 p.163

Part of the reason it is so easy to grieve on Facebook is because it is well-designed. *Wayfinding* Figure 10 goes on to compare the design features of a cemetery to Facebook. Facebook exhibits consistency compared to the varying designs of gravestones, paths, terrain, trees, memorials, and roads. These features can emphasize DeGroot's Yearning and Searching phase where, "Mourners are preoccupied with thoughts of the deceased person" 2012 p.163 .

Conclusion

Blog Conclusions

The blog allowed me to think about grief from a different perspective than I normally do. It was an opportunity to be introspective, take some of the emotional reactions out of grief, and consider its place in my life. Incorporating design principles in that discussion emphasized the fact that design isn't just about making pretty things, it plays a key role in how we understand and interpret the world we live in.

WordPress proved to be as easy to use as the research suggested. I have 10+ years of experience creating websites; surprisingly, this was my first time using WordPress. I had my first blog post up the same day I created the site. The simplicity can result in some limitations. For example, I wanted to have my blogs show up with the oldest first and was forced to manually change their dates to set the order, then hide the arbitrary dates. They do have plugin solutions as part of their more expensive plans.

Writing the blog posts was both therapeutic and stressful. I made a point to refrain from using names in order to depersonalize the writing, but it is impossible to totally separate from it. I had to walk away more than once. Beyond the natural procrastination, there is a self-protective side that can and did push me away from digging into these thoughts some days. To combat this, I tried to focus my writing on looking at grief from different perspectives, further depersonalizing it again. In the end, this taught me some defense mechanisms I can lean on in the future to manage grief.

Research Conclusions

Facebook, as the largest social media network in the U.S., has taken a lead role in affording users a place to express grief. It provides researchers a new tool to understand an impactful emotion that is lacking depth in study. As a relatively new medium for expression, the rules aren't codified. I would suggest, that may be a good thing. Grief expressions don't need to be comfortable. The real vital service is the networked connections it creates that ensure an outlet for that grief.

I found that much of the current research did not personally resonate with me. The focus on memorial pages seemed off-base to me. Memorial pages are easy to study because they are sometimes public, all of the posts and comments are on one page, and assumptions can be made that improve the ability to research. For example, you can assume all posts on the memorial page are about or related to the deceased. This is convenient for research because everything is right there, ready to be analyzed. A less discussed explanation for why Facebook connects with those grieving is its ability to play many roles. Yes, the memorial profile has pictures, memories, and running comments; but Facebook Events allow you to plan and organize memorials. Facebook Live lets you broadcast that event. Facebook Groups allow for families to create a place to share memories privately. Facebook Chat allows you to check in on family and express emotions that you wouldn't want shared socially. Facebook Stories allow you to share a sad photo and not be reminded of it every time you see your timeline pictures. Facebook Marketplace allows you to sell their belongings, the ones you can manage to part with. Facebook Fundraisers allow you to collect money for a cause in their name. Facebook didn't create these features with grief in mind, but the final product affords those grieving a place that has a role in many aspects of the grieving process.

Facebook's popularity, particularly within multiple age groups, is another strong reason some research missed as to why it is a place for those grieving. Pew Research's previously cited surveys found that, despite a lower percentage of those who are 65+, in comparison it is very strong in each age bracket, as seen in the recreated chart [Figure 12 Social Media Fact Sheet, 2019](#) .

The large ranges of ages allows for Facebook's features to be fully utilized. For example, Facebook Chat groups are a useful way to get people on the same page. We used it to write an obituary, plan when we would show up at memorial events, and check in on each other.

Further Research

Further research is necessary in understanding the differences between healthy and unhealthy grieving. The line is blurry at best. Current research on Facebook and grief tells us the type of message grieving persons post on social media, but we lack any connection as to whether those messages are productive and healthy. Negative, angry posts *may* be therapeutic, or they may not be. Received messages that make grieving users upset may be things they need to hear, or they may not be. Uncomfortable reactions from non-grieving social media users may be representative of people who are just uncomfortable with real emotions, or maybe not. These connections are lacking in today's research, which results in no clear answer on whether social media is truly a valuable tool in managing and dealing with grief.

Figures

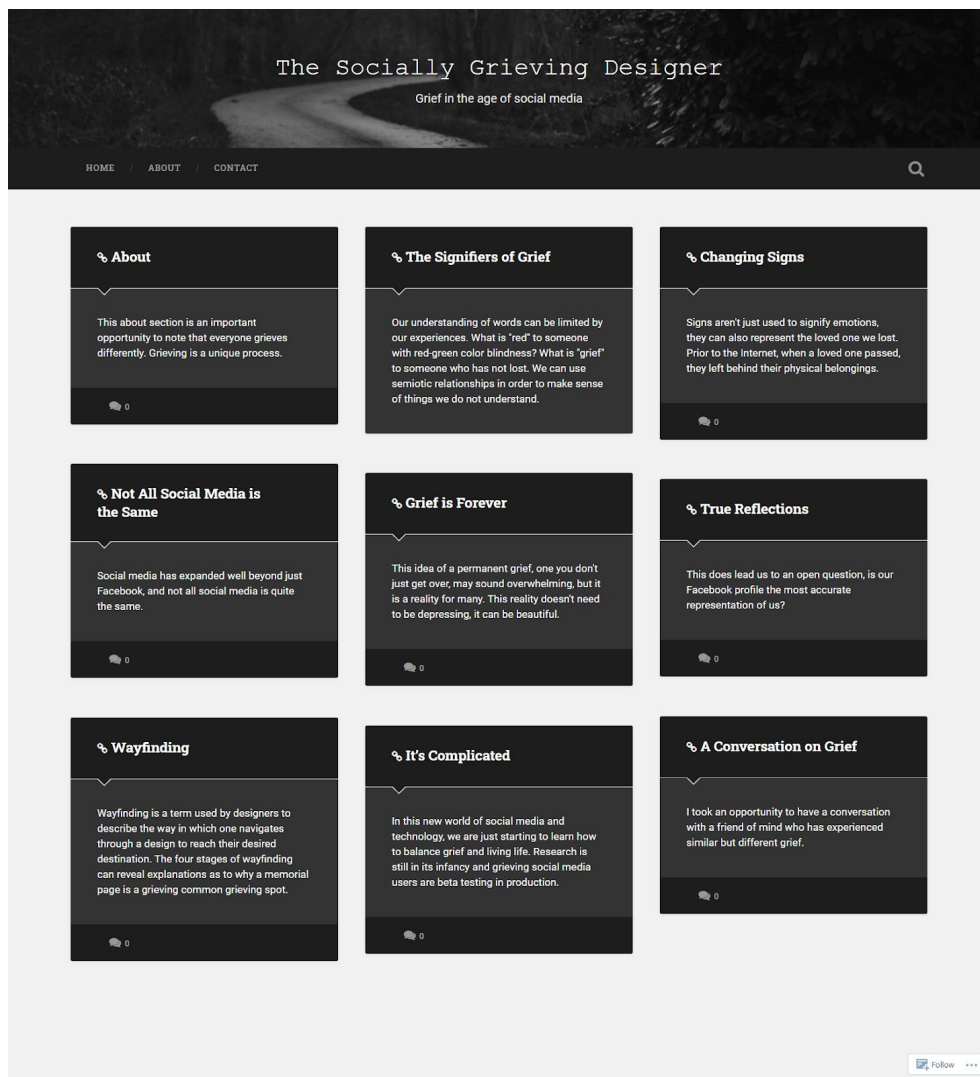


Figure 1 - The Blog Homepage

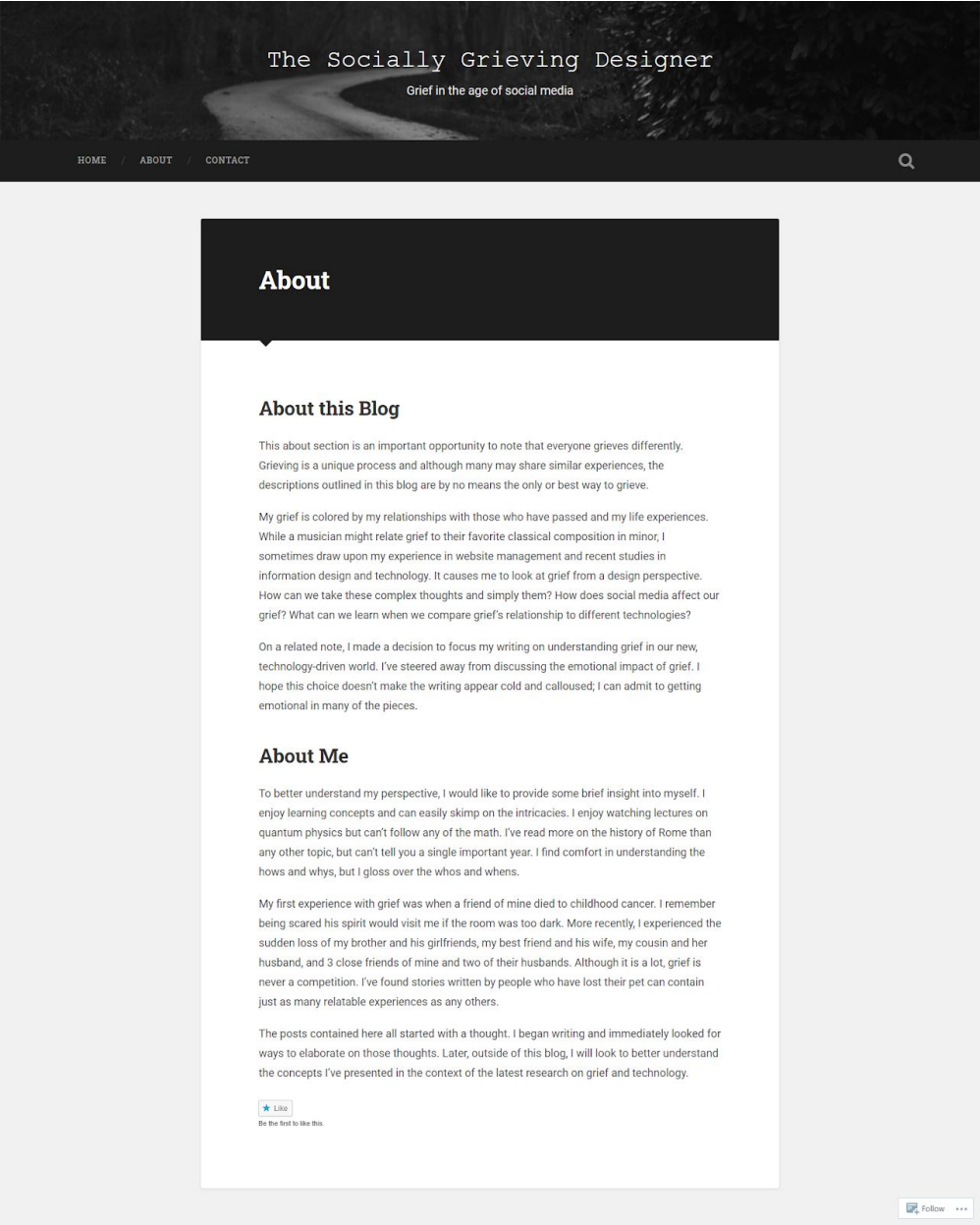


Figure 2 - The About Page

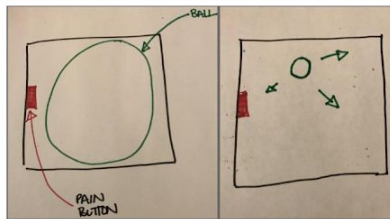


The Signifiers of Grief

Our understanding of words can be limited by our experiences. What is "red" to someone with red-green color blindness? What is an "ocean breeze" to someone who has never visited the coast? What is "love" to someone who has never loved? What is "grief" to someone who has not lost.

We can use semiotic relationships in order to make sense of things we do not understand. Semiotics is the study of signs and their representation of an object. ☺ signifies happy. Conversely, happy is signified by ☺. While no simple facial expression can represent grief, sign can still exist. Signs are a great way for someone who has not lost to begin to understand grief.

In 2017, Lauren Herschel shared a sign she created to represent grief while working with her Doctor. It takes object almost everyone can understand: a ball, a button, and a box.



The Ball and the Box was a Twitter post by Lauren Herschel that was designed to explain grief over time. The post and concept went viral as she gave a representation of grief that those grieving could relate to and those who weren't could understand.

Source: <https://twitter.com/LaurenHerschel/status/946898282444460033>

The visualization shows how time may decrease the chances of the "pain button" being hit, but there is always a chance an unexpected turn can press that same button again.

The beauty of signs is in their simplicity: an arrow; a smiley face; a ball, box and button.

SHARE THIS:



Be the first to like this.

🔍 Changing Signs

🔍 About

COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.

Figure 3 - Signifiers of Grief

The Socially Grieving Designer
Grief in the age of social media

HOME ABOUT CONTACT

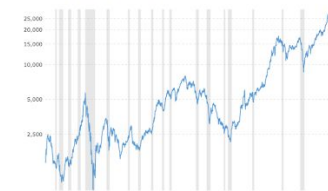
Changing Signs

In *The Signifiers of Grief*, I talked a bit about how we can use signs to describe grief to those who haven't experienced it. Sometimes a visual concept of a complex feeling can put one at ease. Think of it like looking at 100 years of Dow Jones data:

1902	49244	76251	76251	50276	50276	100.0%
1903	49179	49328	29131	41620	55.34	50.7%
1904	49380	42628	30242	28620	43.68	4.4%
1905	49337	30734	47530	37448	47.36	16.4%
1906	49176	44027	46166	44848	49.94	24.4%
1907	49227	46620	50717	49170	49.09	-1.7%
1908	49211	48126	39126	44126	49.02	1.0%
1909	49287	49287	38427	38220	49.12	20.7%
1910	49324	38228	49120	27827	44.70	45.8%
1911	49281	29217	38720	29149	36.84	1.0%
1912	27628	28224	28220	28220	28.20	4.0%
1913	28227	28220	28224	28220	28.22	14.0%
1914	27628	28228	28224	28224	28.22	11.0%

Source: <https://www.macrotrends.net/1316/dow-jones-100-year-historical-chart>

Versus seeing that same data in a line chart:



Source: <https://www.macrotrends.net/1316/dow-jones-100-year-historical-chart>

The line chart may lose some of the details about the signified data, but it is much easier to understand the trend.

Signs aren't just used to signify emotions; they can also represent the loved one we lost. Prior to the Internet, when a loved one passed, they left behind their physical belongings. Benjamin R. Toussley wrote in his journal about the pipe left to him by his deceased grandfather:

A horrible thing happened today. My grandfather's pipe broke. It was a cheap corncob pipe that probably cost about \$3 when he bought it. So what, right? That would seem like no big deal, but to me it is.

SOURCE: <https://www.grieftalkonline.com/showthread.php?p=156666>

Like Benjamin Toussley grandfather's pipe, today's generation has social media profiles that live on after death. Unlike that pipe, all of the deceased's friends and family can hold onto the profile. It contains feelings they felt. A corncob pipe can be just as representative as a post:

August 4, 2018

All of the girls eyes are puffed for the movie but that's ok because we found some of my old boys. (my boys are cooler anyways)

This short post shows a person who loves their kids, has a child-like personality, and has a sense of humor about it. The way a line chart can signify complex data, the same way a corncob pipe can signify Benjamin's grandfather, this post signifies his life.

SHARE THIS

Twitter
 Facebook
 Like

Do the math to get this

Not All Social Media is the Same
 The Signifiers of Grief

Leave a Reply

Enter your comment here.

[Back to homepage](#)
991

Figure 4 - Changing Signs

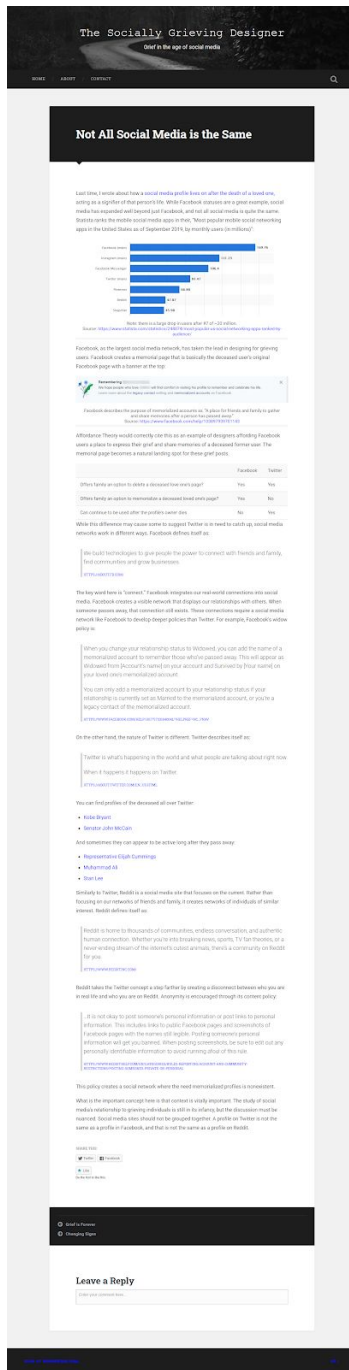


Figure 5 - Not All Social Media are the Same

Grief is Forever

Last post I wrote, "When someone passes away, that connection still exists." I wanted to build on that a little bit. In Ann Patchett's book called "State of Wonder," she writes:

There was no one clear point of loss. It happened over and over again in a thousand small ways and the only truth there was to learn was that there was no getting used to it.

ANN PATCHETT IS STATE OF WONDER

This idea of a permanent grief, one you don't just get over, may sound overwhelming, but it is a reality for many.

This reality doesn't need to be depressing, it can be beautiful. There is a Snopes article on The Bicycle Tree, a tree with a bicycle inside:



Source: <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/bicycle-tree/>

The bicycle represents grief. It is now a permanent part of the tree, but it hasn't stopped that tree from growing. The tree has gone on to inspire many to visit and a book, *Red Ranger Came Calling* by Berkeley Breathed. Our lives envelope the loved ones we lose, taking their impact on us along for the ride.

Social media provides those grieving a very similar opportunity. Unlike the metaphor, our loved one's thoughts, experiences, travels, pictures, and relationships continue to exist within memorialized profiles. We can send them private messages, we can share memories, and we can network with others who have similar connections and/or experiences.

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- True Reflections
- Not All Social Media is the Same

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Figure 6 - Grief is Forever

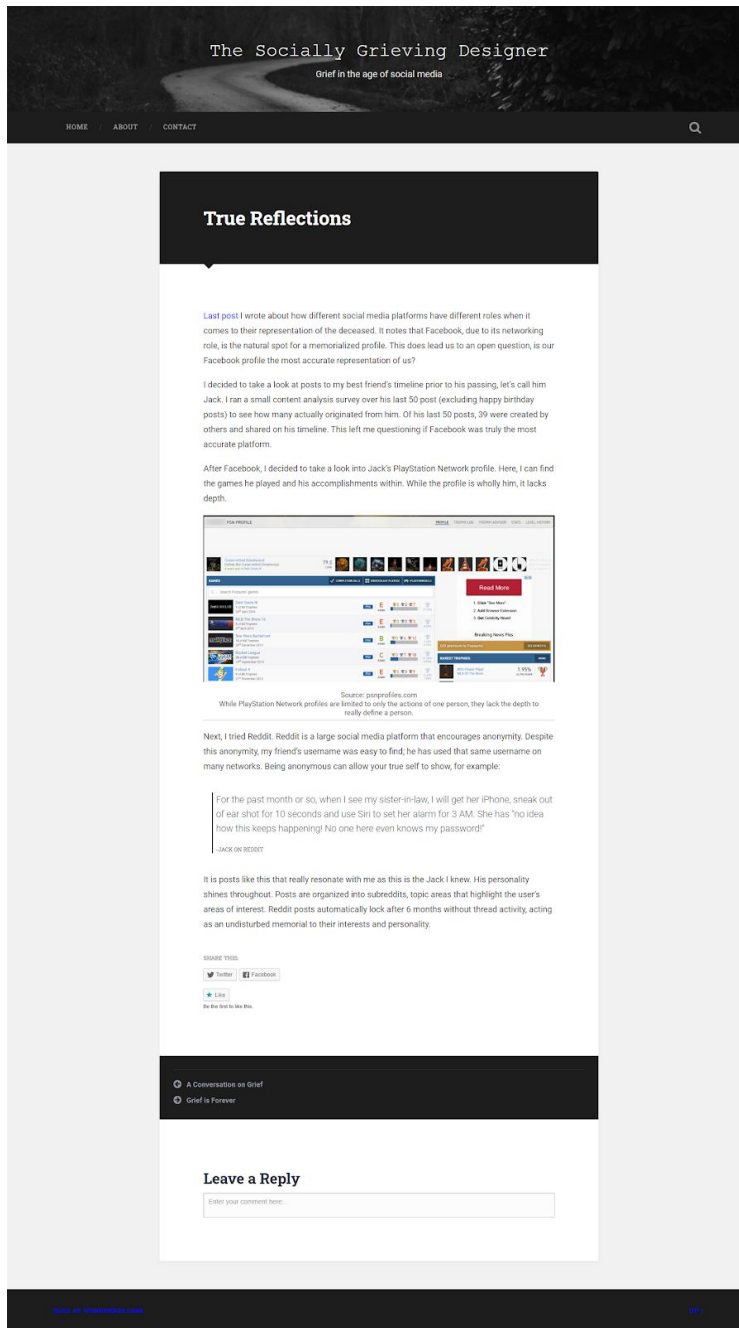


Figure 7 - True Reflections

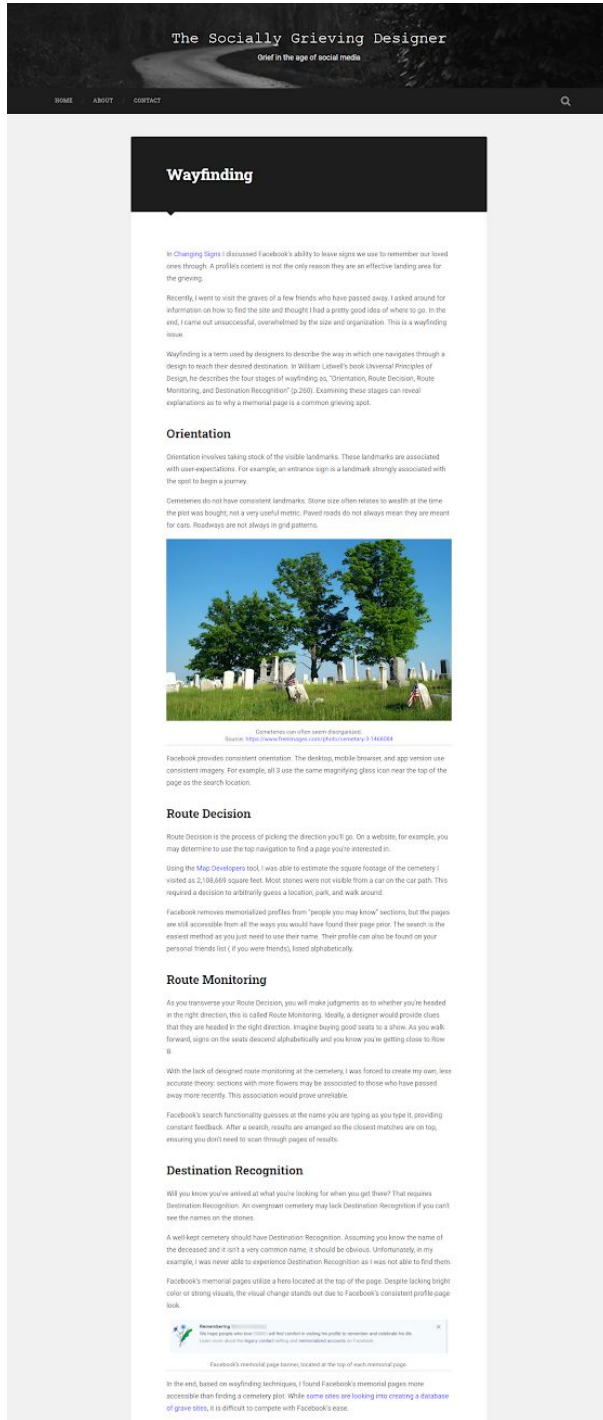


Figure 8 - Wayfinding (cropped for space)

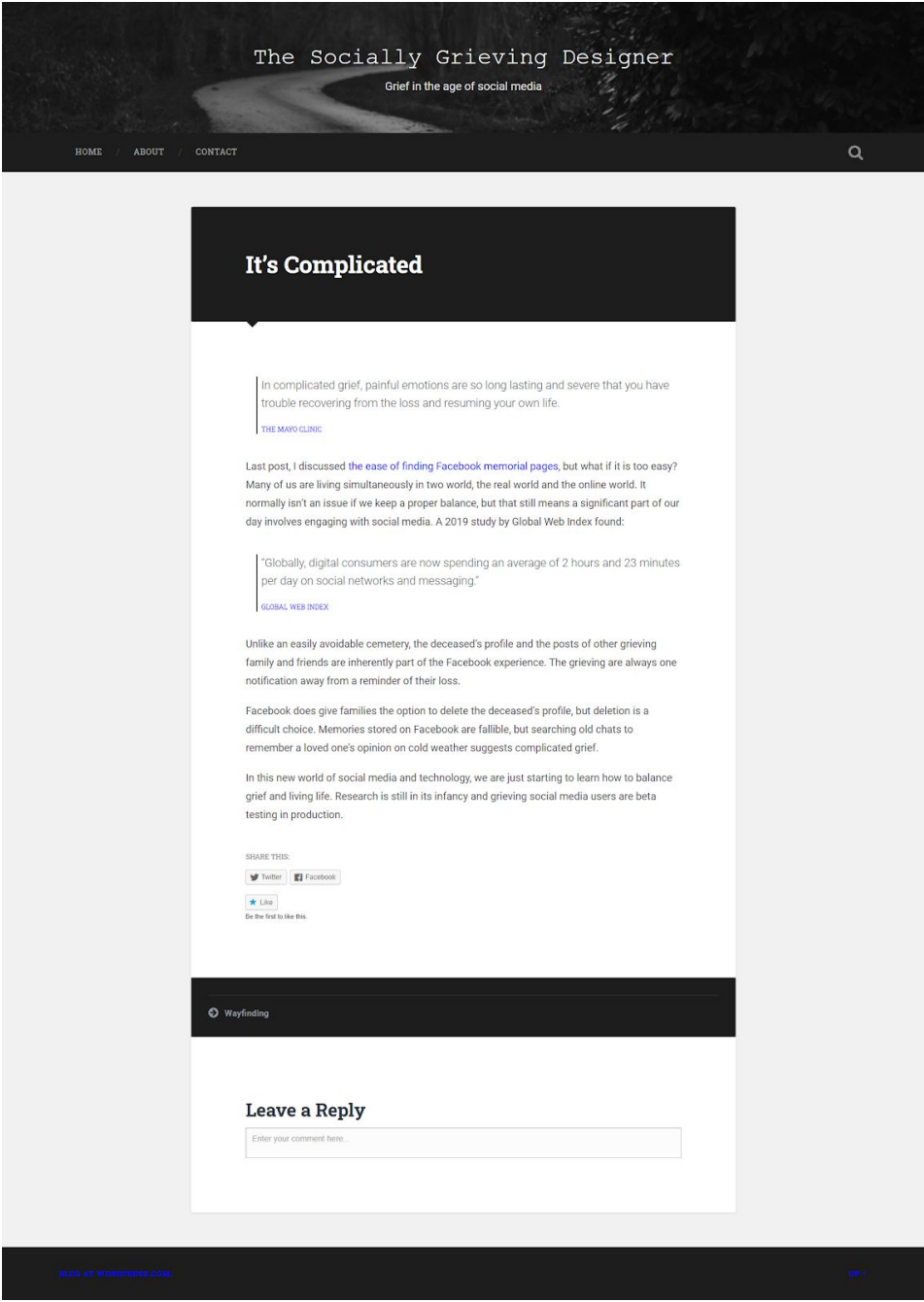


Figure 9 - It's Complicated

A Conversation on Grief

I took an opportunity to have a conversation with a friend of mind who has experienced similar but different grief. We both lost brothers. My experience took place during in 2018 with social media having a huge reach; her's took place while those technologies were in their infancy. Today's Facebook status was yesterday's AOL Instant Messenger away message. Today's WordPress blog was yesterday's GeoCities site. It was some of the earliest experiences with those grieving and social networking technologies.

Lory lost her brother in 2001. One way her family attempted to hold onto his memory was through the creation of a website. It initially served to hold pictures and memories, but they added to it annually as a way of remembrance. She described it as, "A nice stop and reflect place."

Unlike a social media profile, the family was able to keep the site more private, "No one would have found it unless they were looking." This kept the circle small to family and close friends.

Lory noted the same balance today's socially networked world struggles with, that balance between public and private. She explained, "My family tends to be more private and I felt like sometimes people pushed to know more then we wanted to share at any given time." The experienced exposed her to the type of person that is all too familiar in online worlds, those who insert themselves into grief, "Like hopping on a bandwagon."

I'll always assume grief experiences differ, but what caught me about the conversation were some of the similarities. While her emotional challenges differed, it was possible to find running themes I could relate to. In the end, I don't think technology is changing grief, just providing a new and changing medium for its expression.

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- Wayfinding
- True Reflections

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Figure 10 - A Conversation on Grief

```

h1.site-title a,
p.site-title a {
    font-family: Courier New;
    font-weight: 800;
}

p.site-description {
    color: #eaeaea;
}

time.updated {
    display: none;
}

article header.post-header {
    background-color: #1d1d1d;
}

div.post-container article.format-quote .post-content {
    background-color: #333;
}

figcaption {
    font-size: .85em;
    padding: 6px 19px;
    border-bottom: 2px solid #e3e3e3;
}

article header.post-header h1.post-title a {
    color: #ffffff;
}

div .post .post-header::after {
    border-top-color: #1d1d1d;
}

article .post-meta.clear {
    background: #1d1d1d;
    background-color: #1d1d1d;
}

.home h1.entry-title a:before {
    content: "\f001";
    font-family: "FontAwesome";
    font-weight: normal;
    font-size: .8em;
    padding-right: 6px;
}

article .post-header .post-title a:hover,
article .post-header .post-title a:focus {
    color: #72abff;
}

div .site-title a:hover,
div .site-title a:focus {
    color: #72abff;
}

#content .posts .post-meta a:hover,
#content .posts .post-meta a:focus {
    color: #72abff;
}

blockquote.wp-block-quote {
    margin-left: 19px;
    padding-left: 6px;
    border-left: 2px solid;
}

body.single .clear p a,
figcaption a,
blockquote a,
li a {
    color: blue;
}

body.single .format-quote .post-content blockquote {
    font-size: 1.1em;
}

```

Figure 11 - Custom Styles

Social Media Use by Age

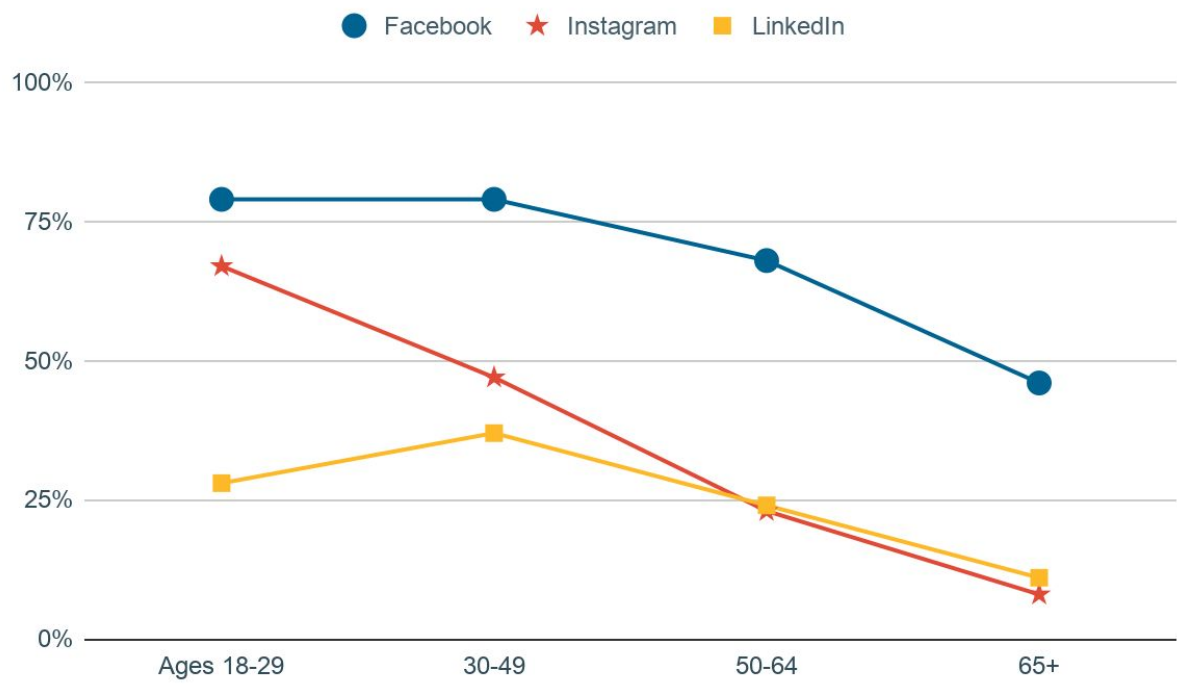


Figure 12 - Social Media Use by Age

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