



Selfies at Funerals: Mourning and Presencing on Social Media Platforms

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Introduction

In late 2013, the journalist and social commentator Jason Feifer created an Internet sensation when his Tumblr blog *Selfies at Funerals* went viral (Feifer, 2013a). On October 29, Feifer posted 20 images selected from Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, the result of “social media curiosity” and a search of the terms “#selfie” and “#funeral” on these platforms. The images all featured young people “turning their cellphone cameras on themselves during one of life’s most solemn moments” (Clark-Flory, 2013, para. 1). Condemnation of these photographs quickly flooded online discussions and mass media outlets, and the debate was typical of wider discourses around the selfie at the time (as noted in the introduction to this issue). However, the funeral selfie was taken as one of the most debased forms, alongside other so-called inappropriate selfies documented by Feifer, such as “selfies at serious places” and “selfies with homeless people.” For many public commentators these images typified the superficial nature of young digital media users and epitomized their vanity, conceit, and lack of respect (Jolivet, 2013; Moss, 2013; Wells, 2013). Others suggested that social media had emptied death of meaning, solemnity, and gravitas—with one prominent online publication running the doomsday banner headline “Funeral Selfies Are The Latest Evidence Apocalypse Can’t Come Soon Enough” (*The Huffington Post*, 2013).

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Eventually a number of comparatively measured assessments emerged, which either redirected blame away from social media or tried to defend the practice in response to the outcry. One commentator argued that the blog was a “scathing cultural commentary [on] our tragic disengagement with the reality of death” suggesting that the problem lay with the funeral industry and contemporary social values rather than social media (Doughty, 2013, para. 6). Others sought to reframe the practice, claiming that these photographs were legitimate, natural, and poignant (if callow) responses to grief (Clark-Flory, 2013; Vogt, 2013). For these writers, the funeral selfie was an expression of life and vitality—and as a means of reassurance when faced with the profound reality of death, similar to “so many funeral clichés, like drinking too much or falling into bed with a fellow griever,” (Clark-Flory, 2013, para. 2). Indeed, one of the more reflective accounts noted it should not be surprising that social media was used for mourning because social media is “increasingly where we go to process our inner thoughts and feelings about pretty much everything,” (Waldman, 2013, para. 4).

This heightened public discourse is unsurprising as it fits into a long-standing narrative circulating around young people and their use of digital media. An extensive body of research has outlined how moral panics have helped to discursively regulate young people and the ways they engage with new technologies (see Buckingham & Strandgaard Jensen, 2012; Ito et al., 2010). As a counterpoint, these researchers offer detailed analyses that explore how young people’s “contexts for communication, friendship, play and self-expression are being reconfigured through their engagement with new media,” (Ito et al., 2010, p. 1). In our following analysis of the funeral selfie, we take a similar critical stance but explore the ideas that circulate around this cultural practice through an alternative conceptual lens.

In this article we consider the practice of taking selfies at funerals in relation to Instagram’s “platform vernacular” (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2014), a term we use to explore and analyze genres of social media communication, and in particular visual communication on photo-sharing services. We have suggested that once the conventions, grammars, and logics of specific social media platforms are acknowledged, Instagram use around funerals can be considered as a subtle form of “presencing” occurring within a wider visual turn (Gibbs et al., 2014). Through presencing, the funeral selfie can position a subject in the context of a funeral, and then immediately bring that position to a wider social network. In this paper, an analysis of selfies as a platform-specific photographic genre further develops and supports this conceptual approach. We examine selfies posted on Instagram and tagged with the hashtag #funeral and then go on to consider funeral selfies in relation to a wider set of media and memorial practices, and to explore the specificities of these photos and their cultural production on Instagram. While the notion of a platform vernacular can be applied across multiple social media platforms, in this article we focus on Instagram—as it is widely recognized as one of the most popular social networking services (Gibbs, 2014), and is primarily focused on the sharing of images and videos.

Platform Vernacular and Instagram

A functionalist view of Instagram would simply consider the service to be a photo-sharing application that allows users to upload and share photos with a social network. However, social media platforms have their own conventions, grammars, and logics, which are developed in co-constitutive engagements between the affordances of social media architectures and their appropriation by users. Social media platforms are structured in a particular fashion, with “invocations to participation” prioritizing

particular forms of participation linked to accompanying commercial goals (Burgess, 2014; also see Gillespie, 2010). The vernacular of a platform is also shaped by the particular practices of its users. For example, the Twitter hashtag, now a common feature of Twitter's vernacular (and many other social media platforms), was imported to Twitter by users from IRC channels and then established "through widespread community use and adaptation" rather than top-down implementation (Bruns & Burgess, 2011, p. 3).

The use of hashtags has now become common and incorporated into the architecture of Twitter for linking, searching, tracking trends, and so on. Gillespie (2014) notes that in algorithmic culture, users orient themselves towards the algorithm of the hashtag—habituating to its structuring force, yet also creatively engaging with its operation not just as functional sorting mechanism but as rhetorical device, or as way to generate likes or followers. These concurrent trajectories subsequently help to define and give shape to the vernacular, or modes of expression and interaction, native to different platforms. While vernaculars are not necessarily specific to a platform, as seen by the use of the hashtag on various online platforms, every platform has a vernacular *specific to it* that has developed over time through design, appropriation, and use (Gibbs et al., 2014).

The notion of vernacular expression has a long history in communication theory and has regularly been posited as being entirely distinct from institutional discourses. However, as Howard (2008) has argued, the participatory web is best considered as a hybrid formation of the institutional and the vernacular. This approach acknowledges the significant role that users have played in the development of both the software and discourses configuring the web, alongside its institutional foundations. From this and other work (Frow, 2005; Ito et al., 2010) we have conceptualized platform vernaculars as shared conventions and grammars of communication, emerging within platforms and populations of users through the interplay of platform affordances and their appropriations. These vernaculars are not static but change over time and can spread across multiple social media platforms.

Platform vernaculars resemble what Ito et al. (2010) describe as "genres of participation" within youth media culture. They use the notion of genres of participation to categorize young people's different modes and intensities of media engagement, such as friendship-driven or interest-driven modes, rather than structuring taxonomies of engagement according to platform, frequency of use, and so on. This approach emphasizes the social dimensions of participation, with genres classified according to the social relationships, networks, and motivations of participation. In contrast, the concept of platform vernacular highlights the material and structural dimensions of platforms in shaping modes of engagement, alongside the stylistic conventions (or genres) of communication that inhabit specific platforms but are also habituated and spread across wider ecologies of media. From the platform vernacular perspective, genre is not simply a classification schema, but "a relationship between textual structures and the situations that occasion them," (Frow, 2005, p. 13). That is, a genre is a "text" structured by a number of identifiable conventions, but it is only in relation to the context and process of "reading" that registers of meaning and affect are produced.

The selfie, then, can be considered a kind of *genre*. It is a formalized category of media image and production, which is structured by a number of stylistic conventions. These include the conflation of photographer and subject, a framing in which the subject dominates the foreground of the image, a

subject typically looking directly into the lens, and a perspective that is generally front-view from above. In addition to such stylistic devices, the selfie genre is dependent upon a technological context involving mobile phones and cameras to capture the image, and social media platforms for distribution of the images. However, in addition to being considered as a genre of visual communication, the selfie can be understood as a communicative act, which is embedded in and defined by the establishment and habituation of discursive conventions, found on specific social media platforms. These generic, social, contextual, and technological elements are constitutive of the selfie, yet if we are to consider particular variants such as the funeral selfie, then the concept of platform vernacular is helpful for situating these elements in relation to their sites of cultural production and consumption. Platform vernacular assists in accounting for the ways these images are made present in social networks, and for the ways they produce regimes of meaning and registers of affect (Gibbs et al., 2014).

The importance of platform vernacular as a concept is also made evident once we consider existing scholarship conducted around online memorialization. As Mori and some of the authors of this paper have shown, affordances of the digital social media platforms used in mourning practices influence the style and content of material people post and share (Mori, Gibbs, Arnold, & Nansen, 2012). For example, Instagram is structurally different than other digital platforms that have previously been the dominant focus for thanatological research in digital domains (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Carroll & Landry, 2010; Kohn, Gibbs, Arnold, & Nansen, 2012; Leaver, 2013). Social networking services, such as Myspace and Facebook, allow the profiles of the deceased and/or specific RIP profiles created by other people to become a locus for networked publics (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). Instagram has no spaces where people can converge for mourning. Instead, users are restricted to posting content on their own personal and public spaces—spaces that cannot be posted to by others. People connect with other users through #hashtags and @user connections. Therefore, the funeral selfie both draws on, and is constrained by, the architecture and rhetorical style of the Instagram platform.

#funeral and the Funeral Selfie

Using the iPad application for Instagram, *Padgram*, we manually downloaded all #funeral images and associated user data and comments posted to Instagram over two separate 24-hour periods on February 9 and 15, 2014. We took screenshots of each image, which captured the image and associated metadata (such as comments, hashtags, and so forth).² We identified a 24-hour time period through the use of Instagram's dynamic time stamp (see Hochman & Manovich, 2013), and we bounded the 24 hours in relation to Australian Eastern Standard Time.³ These images were captured between 48 and 72 hours

² We note that this process did not capture some forms of metadata that would have been captured through an API request such as metadata about location or the types of filters used. However, this data was not directly relevant to this initial inquiry into the phenomenon of selfies taken at or around funerals.

³ Nadav Hochman and Lev Manovic (2013) outline the features of the dynamic timestamp as follows:

For example, if I currently see a photo that was taken by a friend "4 days ago," when I open the application tomorrow the time indication will be "5 days ago." In this way, the representation of time in relation to each image becomes elusive and remains in flux as time passes, changing from 53 seconds to 5 days, to 12 weeks, and one year ago.

after they were initially posted. We note that this time period is close to the time of initial posting and will have affected the number of likes and comments received. This process resulted in a data set of 525 images. Drawing on a constructivist grounded-theory methodology (Charmaz, 2000), these images were analyzed through open and axial coding. Codes emerged through inductive analysis, and we quickly reached data saturation, with each category having multiple examples and no new categories emerging.

The use of the hashtag on Instagram had implications for our data collection and analysis. The hashtag is a word preceded by a hash symbol (#), a form of metadata that allows messages to be grouped and searched. Originating from Twitter, hashtags are commonly conceptualized as a way of creating "hashtag conversations" among ad-hoc publics (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). However Instagram's "like economy" (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013) has resulted in hashtags being used #like #this #as #tropes, #or #linguistic #style, #rather #than #as #a #way #to #organize #and #manage #conversations. This meant that we needed to filter out a number of images utilizing #funeral that were not relevant to our analysis of the #funeral selfie. These discarded images included the commemoration of dead animals (6), the "death" of inanimate objects (such as a spilt ice cream) (10), pop culture (47), or death-themed artwork (5). Another forty-seven images were meme-like re-shares, such as the phrase "*I wear black when I exercise, it's like a funeral for my fat.*" These were also eliminated.

Our review identified a complicated ecology of commemorative and grieving practices occurring around the funeral hashtag on Instagram. Of those that related explicitly to the passing of a person, common photographs were of groups of family and friends featuring multiple people (46), funeral flowers (31), old photos of the deceased (12), and the funeral service (43). There were also numerous photos of landscapes, buildings, or even weather forecasts (25) that the associated text indicated were meant as a sharing of their personal situation, such as being on the way to a funeral service or the weather at a funeral's location. There were a number of photos of text documents (6) of information about a funeral time and location, or messages from the deceased's family. Only three images were clearly religious, although religious icons and locations featured in the background of many other images. There were two photos of open caskets.

However, eclipsing the frequency of any of these categories were selfies (photographic self-portraits) in the context of attending a funeral (135). Similarly, there were also thirty photos of individuals, often uploaded by the person in the photo, but not taken by them. Based on the text and associated hashtags, we felt these were very similar to those images categorized as selfies. We also categorized selfies with multiple people (27), a category with substantial thematic overlap with family and friend photos. The majority (70) of #funeral photographs we categorized as selfies used somewhat insensitive hash-tags such as "#likeforlike," "#sexy," "#fashion" or "#follow me" (See figure 2). While the photos did presencing work—situating the person at the funeral and making the occasion known to others—there was little acknowledgment of the occasion, and comments generally focused on the poster's appearance. These responses were consistent with the conventions of the selfie genre. However, a significant minority (65) of selfies approached the genre from a more reflective standpoint (Figure 1). Hashtags such as "#rip," "#friends," "#family" or "#sadday" and "sad" or "crying" emoticons were used to provide affective context for the selfie. The text placed next to the Instagram image was also used to reflect or engage substantially with the memory of the deceased. Selfie takers noted that it had "*been a*

hard day" or that they "*hated days like this,*" and the subsequent comments echoed this contextual framing (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Example of a "reflective" text and hashtags next to a selfie.

Individual selfies were also taken in a variety of locations. Much of the media discourse and indeed the title of Feifer's (2013a) blog suggested that vacuous teens were actually taking selfies *at* funerals instead of listening to a heartfelt eulogy or paying their respects. Our dataset of individual selfies showed that people were, by and large, not being disrespectful. Individual selfies were taken in numerous domestic locations, such as bedrooms (22), cars (19), bathrooms (13), or in an identifiable domestic setting (potentially the home of a relative or friend) (39). There were a small number of selfies taken in church (2) or at a gravesite (1), but it appeared from the photos that they were not taken during the service (e.g., the subject was standing in front of empty pews). Due to the physical act of taking a selfie, which can often frame an individual's face awkwardly, the location of a number of photos could not be identified (39). However, other contextual cues helped to temporally locate some of these selfies (e.g., photos subtitled "*Going to a funeral*" or hashtags "*#funeral #this #morning*"), leaving us convinced that the media panic around teenagers being disrespectful *during* funeral services was a distortion of actual *#funeral* practices as found on Instagram.

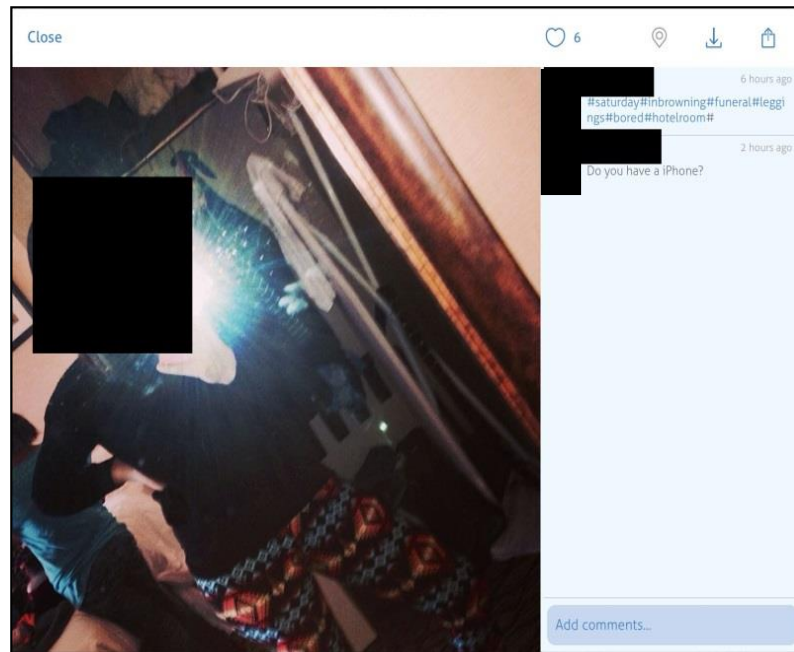


Figure 2. Example of an "insensitive" hashtags next to a selfie.

Discussion: Presence, (Digital) Photography and Platform Vernacular

The specificities of Instagram's platform vernacular emerge from a careful consideration of the above photos. The predominance of the selfie genre in relation to other memorialization practices shows that the selfie is an established vernacular practice on this platform. The platform vernacular of Instagram can be further understood and contextualized through broader trends in digital photography and social media use. In the following section, we consider the selfie in relation to extant scholarship that repositions the digital photo as a form of communication rather than representation (van Dijck, 2008). We also argue for the funeral selfie to be understood as a form of "presencing" (Richardson & Wilken, 2012) and an attempt to communicate grief to a wider social network. We then discuss contemporary practices around mourning. Noting that that public and individualistic mourning is now quite common, particularly online (Walter, 2008), we suggest that the funeral selfie can be seen as just another iteration of these broader changes around death and memorialization.

Funeral selfies echo a wider shift in how people engage with photographic images. The emergence of digital photography has led to the reshaping of the social and cultural position of the photograph, with digital cameras favoring the "functions of communication and identity formation at the expense of photography's use as a tool for remembering" (Van Dijck, 2008, p. 58). No longer central to practices of memory, photographs are increasingly "used to convey a brief message ... or merely to show affect" (ibid. p. 61). Therefore, while a large number of funeral selfies in our dataset appear to have

narcissistic overtones, it is worth remembering that these photos are not intended as commemorative acts or formal attempts at memorialization. Instead, selfies often function as *communication* and are in fact communicating important affective information about a person's emotional circumstances, or signaling contextual cues about their current situation (also see Gibbs et al., 2014).

Therefore, it is important not to place too much significance on the selfies, and assume that they are a summation of an individual's feelings and general approach towards the ritual event. Selfies are intended to be an ephemeral and creative form of "live communication" that are part of the ongoing streams of social intercourse in the lives of the people depicted. They are not attempts at storing or preserving "life" (Van Dijck, 2008). Traditionally, a camera would be used for special excursions and events, noteworthy moments bracketed off from the mundane. Nowadays, most of the images taken by camera-phone are short-lived, mundane, and ephemeral, used for a more personal and less objectified viewpoint. Consequently, selfies need to be understood as being part of an ongoing conversation occurring around the funeral itself, expressed through the particular rhetorical style of the Instagram platform. A selfie taken around the time of a funeral, even if it has no attendant emotional content, must still necessarily form part of the wider and heterogeneous array of online and offline practices circulating around and through the funeral event (Gibbs et al., 2014).

The *Selfies at Funerals* blog performs a kind of representational violence by completely changing the intended audience of the photographs it uses and abstracting them from their social and communicative contexts. By presenting these photos to new and foreign publics, the blog assists in enacting a type of "context-collapse" (Marwick & boyd, 2011), distributing previously contextualized forms of communication to unexpected or unintended audiences. The selfies were clearly taken with a particular audience in mind, which despite the accounts being public did not necessarily include an audience beyond the social network of Instagram. We suggest that some of the selfies—for example young people expressing boredom about activities related to the funeral (like travelling to a service or waiting in a hotel room, see Fig. 2)—stood as examples of these contextual and ephemeral forms of communication, directed specifically to an implied and nominally bounded audience.

These new publics also largely ignored the attempts at negotiation that occurred in some selfies. We found that many selfie-takers engaged in a reflexive form of practice, attempting to negotiate the tensions between the vernacular use of Instagram and expectations about affect or conduct at funeral. There was often a lack of consistency—particularly in the "reflective selfies"—between the image and the associated comments and captions. The Instagram platform encourages a photo-sharing vernacular that is normatively self-centered and ubiquitous. However, this vernacular directly challenges established expectations around personal conduct during a ritual that focuses on the deceased. Participants were often attentive to these tensions and sought to manage a set of circumstances that had them dressed up and looking good but feeling terrible. Importantly, the various social media publics of these selfie-takers were often open to negotiating these tensions (see Fig. 3). The subsequent media storm around the *Selfies at Funerals* blog tended to ignore these careful attempts at incorporating social media usage in and around these key social events.

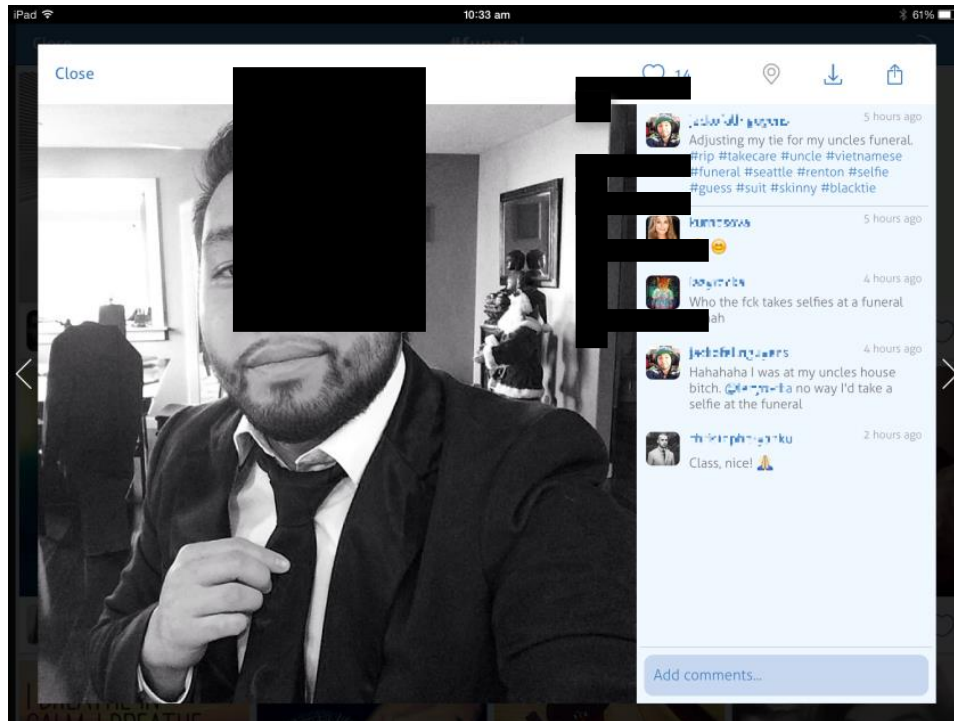


Figure 3. An example of negotiating Instagram use in the comments.

This notion of context is important as we suggest one key communicative aim of the funeral selfie is to signify presence, in order to provide vital context to one's wider social network. Esther Milne (2004, also see 2010) defines presence as "the degree to which geographically dispersed agents experience a sense of physical and/or psychological proximity through the use of particular communication technologies," (p. 165). Despite long-standing links to religious institutions, contemporary funerals are quintessentially social occasions. Therefore it makes sense that selfie-takers would look to engender a sense of proximity with their wider social network through Instagram. The ability of the camera-phone to enable a form of intimate co-presence amongst friends has been acknowledged in the literature (see Hjorth, Wilken, & Gu, 2012) and the particular affordances of the Instagram platform simply make this form of presencing more effective. By taking a selfie one can easily position and presence oneself in a particular context, and "mobilize that presence ... across time and space through social media networks" (Gibbs et al., 2014, p. 10).

Acknowledging the wider social and cultural context of a particular funeral is also central to any understanding of the funeral selfie as a form of presencing. Attending a funeral is important for individual selves (e.g., for ritual closure) as well as for people to locate themselves within different familial and other social networks. Therefore one takes note (in any number of different ways) of one's *presence* at a funeral because one's presence at a funeral is noteworthy. Traditional methods of materializing the social

significance of presence include signing the condolence book or receiving a program as a memento. Indeed, there are long histories of media and memorial photography, extending back to post-mortem photography following the invention of the daguerreotype in the late nineteenth century (Hallam & Hockey, 2001). The funeral selfie can be seen as continuing and reshaping this tradition as a method of communicating attendance and presence, not just to the family of the deceased, but to one's wider social network. These practices allow for "ambient intimacy," through which one can maintain presence within social networks beyond the limitations of time and space (Hjorth, Wilken, & Gu, 2012; Reichelt, 2007).

The funeral selfie can also stand as an affective representation of grief and mourning, an attempt to communicate emotional circumstances with a wider social network. Selfies at funerals are about everyday people articulating their feelings towards deceased friends and relatives through a combination of portraiture and textual reflection, often sparking further discussions around loss and grief. These practices correspond with a wider shift in memorialization on social networks, which has led to increasingly public expressions of grief (Walter, 2008). As Walter, Hourizi, Moncur and Pitsillides (2011) explain, mourning for someone you have never met "has become common practice and ... messages of condolence and support" have become increasingly "(but not always ...) appreciated by the intimately bereaved" (p. 288). They suggest that the structure of social network sites allows for this type of communal bereavement, with mourning now re-emerging "as a group experience" (p. 289).

In light of these changes, the funeral selfie is more accurately positioned as part of a lineage of emergent online practices that situate a recent bereavement within the public setting of a social network (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013). Furthermore, funeral selfies are also aligned and contiguous with other forms of funerary photography that are currently occurring. In conducting a broader investigation into the types of photography occurring on #funeral, we found that a range of different photos were being shared. In addition to posting selfies on Instagram, people also shared personal photos of funeral services and group photographs of friends and families (Gibbs et al., 2014). The difference is often solely one of tactical enactment. Therefore, we also contend that funeral selfies are quite similar to other existing online memorialization practices standing as subjective, affective, and deeply social responses to grief.

Furthermore, as the brief discussion of funerary photography suggests, cultural practices around the funeral itself have become increasingly individualistic with people turning away from institutionally supported forms of ritual. This is partly driven by the funeral industry, which has begun to treat the contemporary funeral as an "event" (Sanders, 2009). The funeral selfie fits somewhat within this trajectory of individualism; however there is still an element of formality around contemporary funeral services. The scale of funerary events is also driven by the positions of the deceased and bereaved in a larger social universe. The widely circulated image of U.S. President Obama posing for a funeral selfie with Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt took place in a full South African stadium during a joyful four-hour memorial celebration after the death of Nelson Mandela (Feifer, 2013b). The selfie in this context was not about expressing grief and communicating with those not present but rather about capturing the flamboyant and internationally gazed-upon memorial event and filling time with others physically present. However, most online memorialization offers a dynamic space for people to engage in highly personal responses to loss and grief that socially extend beyond the still semi-formal funeral service or wake (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Carroll & Landry, 2010). Funeral selfies draw this social dynamism into the ritual space: they facilitate an affective and personal response to mourning in the context of a funeral

service. Once we acknowledge the changing cultural position of the photograph as a more or less instant form of communication (Van Dijck, 2008), the selfie can be reinscribed within this vernacular (and ongoing) tradition of online memorialization.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that the selfie can be repositioned as a way to subtly engage with the emotional content of a funeral and signal one's presence and emotional circumstances to a wider social network. We have demonstrated how the selfie stands as a common vernacular on Instagram, and how it is therefore understandable that it has become a common form for expressing presence or emotion. Furthermore, "visual images function as ... affective tools for the production and circulation of affect" (McCosker, 2013, p. 392), which makes the selfie a suitable genre for underlining emotional states. Instagram's platform vernacular directly embraces the cultural shift of the photograph, treating images as an immediate form of communication over representation. When understood in its proper context as a platform-specific vernacular, we have found the funeral selfie to be a legible and legitimate cultural practice of presencing, a practice that is directly embedded in wider rituals of mourning and memorialization.

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