Namibian and American Social Media Perspectives on Death

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Abstract
The findings of a cross-cultural study investigating American and Namibian Facebook usage and privacy perceptions are discussed. Differences in expressions and privacy concerns of death are elaborated upon as well as differences observed in younger Namibian Facebook users’ expressions of death.

Author Keywords
Death; Social Media; Facebook; Culture

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction
Facebook introduced memorial walls in 2009 after users complained of being reminded to reconnect with dead friends [2]. Since then, memorial walls have become popular on Facebook and other social media sites and an entire session was dedicated at CHI2011.

During a study on Facebook usage and privacy considerations among ten Americans, ten Namibians residing in their country and ten expatriate Namibians who were pursuing graduate studies or living abroad, a section of the study was devoted to privacy views with respect to death [5]. The three groups were more or
less comparable as far as education, field of study and careers were concerned. There was however, a difference in average age (Americans = 28 years, Namibians = 32 years, Expat Namibians = 35 years). The American sample had 60% White, 30% African-American and 10% Hispanic representation. The Namibian samples had multiple indigenous ethnicities/tribes represented, but no white Namibians participated in the study. Research methods comprised a preliminary Facebook content analysis of wall posts, pictures and profiles, followed by interviews (Americans) and online surveys (Namibians).

**Expressions of death on Facebook**

90% of Namibians, 70% of expatriate Namibians and only 10% of Americans indicated that they have never seen a memorial wall on Facebook. However, most Namibians indicated that they would not write on memorial walls, as they prefer writing on the walls of the living family members to console them in their grief. Namibians do however share about death on their Facebook walls, e.g. notify about a death, post wake and funeral arrangements, express sympathy and express their feelings about someone’s death. The Namibians indicated that Facebook has become a cheap and fast way to notify about a death, whereas traditional broadcast methods are by word-of-mouth, radio and newspaper notices.

American participants on the other hand have seen memorial walls, but the sample indicated that they do not share about death on their Facebook walls, because showing grief is considered a private matter. Furthermore, Facebook was a “happy space” and sad news does not belong on Facebook, only happy and positive news. 20% of the participants also indicated that sharing about death on Facebook is like seeking for emotional support and they do not want people to feel sorry for them. Death would rather be communicated only to very close friends via telephone or in person. One American participant related that she did post that her mother had passed away that day, but it was rather like a notice just like the notice she posted about a house that was for sale.

However, one American participant observed that he had seen a memorial wall for a football player who had passed away, but found it strange that 60% of the messages were addressed to the player himself and only 40% addressed to the family members.

The latter experience is similar to previous work on the topic of Facebook and death suggesting that memorial walls are becoming popular and a virtual presence of the deceased is maintained via messages addressed to the deceased directly [3].

While most of the American participants did not encounter death in their family or friendship circles, the Namibians encountered death more regularly due to high numbers of HIV-Aids related deaths since the pandemic is rife in Namibia [4]. Frequent deadly traffic accidents also contribute to high untimely death tolls.

Death is a lengthy communal activity in non-white Namibian cultures with wakes, community cooking activities and spiritual support extending over a week, ending with a lengthy funeral service on Saturdays. Non-white communities in Namibia hardly ever cremate their dead. Grieving is a very open process.
However, despite the similarities in dealing with death across non-white Namibians, expressions of death on media, in particular social media seems to differ across age groups. This can be seen in the following experiences of the author (Namibian).

When a close relative in her mid-30s passed away a few months ago, a few friends posted messages to the Facebook wall of the deceased and in the process, some of the deceased’s friends learned of her passing. The deceased maintained two walls, one for family and close friends only and another for general friendships. However, no other messages were posted in the months following her death, except for one close friend who posted frequently to the deceased’s private wall for close family. Very few of the messages were directed to the deceased, rather to the family except for the above-mentioned friend who wrote personal messages directed to the deceased. The existence of a Facebook wall presented the family and friends with a new dilemma: whether to close the Facebook accounts permanently or place it in memorium. The argument against opening a memorial wall is that it will keep the deceased alive forever, albeit in cyberspace, and no-one will ever say good-bye to her and let her rest in peace.

In stark contrast to this, when a 16-year old family member of the same researcher passed away three years ago, his friends immediately created a memorial wall and all messages were directed to the deceased. The memorial wall is maintained and members post regularly to the wall, thus maintaining a cyber presence for the deceased and keeping him updated of life events as described in a previous study [3]. It must also be mentioned that this younger Namibian demographic also wrote similar messages directed to the deceased in the memorial book and wore T-shirts imprinted with his face and slogans. These new practices were frowned upon by older Namibians in the particular community, because it contradicted Christian beliefs of separation between the dead and the living.

It must be noted however that these examples are limited to one particular ethnic group, where ancestral worship and communication with the dead ancestors is not practiced. One has to further investigate how other Namibian indigenous ethnic groups/tribes would consider memorial walls and messages directed to the deceased, because although Namibians are 85% Christian, traditional beliefs/practices co-exist [1].

However, based on the study’s results and the author’s experiences, these examples might indicate a trend that younger Namibians are more susceptible to changing existing cultures in order to emulate the western social media expressions. This change is not only confined to social media, but also permeates traditional practices and beliefs.

This begs the question whether older Namibians will also still catch up to the phenomena of Memorial walls after more exposure to Facebook? Does the occurrences of such new phenomena present a dilemma to Namibians, whereby they should either adopt the new practices and beliefs or whether they should still hold on to their traditional beliefs.

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References


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