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How people express grief by sharing photographs on social networks: A comparative study between Italy and the United States of America

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Abstract: As innovative way to express grief, social media posts about the deceased have become fairly common. However, few studies examined grief photos commonly posted. The purpose of the present study was to examine such pictures, as well as the motivation and reactions of those who posted, among Italians and Americans. Surveys were sent to both Italian and U.S. participants. The U.S. group yielded 262 responses (Mean age = 22 years; 81% female), the Italian yielded 51 (Mean age = 32. Several key issues emerged, such as the need to receive empathic support from other users, the desire to maintain continuing bonds, the wish to remember the deceased, and the desire to share beauty and symbolic pictures. The images were analyzed using content analysis. Both samples posted photos to remember and to enhance their posts. A strong preference for pictures with a positive emotional connotation appeared, depicting the deceased in a conjoint appearance with the participant. Results suggest that imagery used for the expression of grief in social media sites, an "iconography of grief," is a popular means of expression for grievers.

Keywords: death; grief; Internet; photograph; comparative study; social network sites

1. Introduction

Expressions of online grief is becoming increasingly common [1]. The first Web memorial ("Web cemetery") was open in the early 1995 [2] and developed a continuity between emotions, reminiscences and the establishment of communities to commemorate the deceased [3,4]. These digital cemeteries were joined by sites, blogs and forums for the manifestation and processing of mourning in public spaces. In the 21st century, the birth of social network sites (SNSs) [5] has enabled grief to become more communal and has brought death back into everyday life [6]. The collective funeral celebrations of public personalities [7] and the individual commemoration of deceased loved ones on specific support online groups [8-10] has increased considerably and has been extensively studied. Looking at Facebook in particular, it is possible to ascertain how the two-way communication typical of new media has allowed anyone to participate in someone's grief, normalizing what would once have been regarded as a rude invasion of immediate family mourning [11].

Before the Internet era, ceremonies such as funerals provided family members with specific spaces of solitude and privacy, but, in the "social media age", SNSs provide a public venue for co-constructing biographies of the deceased and fostering a continuation of the relationship with the deceased [12-15]. Indeed, the death of a significant other is not the end of the relationship; rather the relationship persists, not frozen in time, but evolving

with modifications of biographies of the mourner and of the deceased [16] thanks to the fundamental fact that the media can go beyond time and space and ultimately, beyond life and death. In fact, due to the mass of today's information, the SNSs play a fundamental role in defining how we understand death and how we face it, presenting themselves as the tools with which new funeral rituals gain popularity. The expression of mourning via SNS provides a manifestation of one's feelings of grief, empathy and condolence in new multimedia ways which are no longer limited to speech or to text on paper. Furthermore, since the digital dimension does not force people into 'face-to-face' interactions it removes many of the main interpersonal risks that accompany this type of communication. It follows that suffering a loss online is usually "safer" from an interpersonal point of view   and allows not only family but also friends and acquaintances [3,17], to discuss the deceased's life with less inhibition and to choose what kind of words to use to avoid embarrassment or emotional tension [13]. The connection between grief and Internet is becoming so strong that some authors have begun to speak about "social media mourners" to refer to those people who, having lost someone, make use of social networks to face the loss through one-way communication (to express mourning), two-way communication (to dialogue on death with others) or immortal communication (to communicate with the deceased him/herself) [18].

In Western societies, which are increasingly individualistic and disconnected from traditional forms of death celebration and religious perspectives [19], the process of a deceased's biographical reconstruction, may result in a number of roadblocks [20] that SNS seems to solve. The digital landscape offers valuable solutions through a greater connection between people, as well as new traditions within the framework of traditional and non-traditional religions [21-25,7]. SNS may serve to reintroduce death into the world of the living (26) by sharing stories with others in order to cope with the loss [33]. [26]. The majority of research in this field has focused mainly on the verbal content observed or reported by the bereaved However SNSs, offer the possibility of visual manifestation of grief by publishing photographs or images related to the deceased, as photography is one of the simplest ways to remember [27-29]. From a historical perspective, the use of postmortem photography, also called *memento mori* photography, was widespread in the United States during the 19th century[30]. This practice, particularly with regard to parents posting pictures of their deceased children, is an online manifestation of this earlier behavior [10]. The few studies published on this "iconography of grief" have indicated that the photographs are useful for coping with grief over missing persons presumed dead, and the intense grief over deceased children(31, 32). to create and Overall, grief photography is considered an ''evolving practice,'' both in the online and offline world.

Based on the literature which makes use of visual material as a valid source of information [34-37,10,3], an analysis of the visual content for coping with the death of another that was shared online, comparing Italian and U.S. users of social media became the focus of the present study. Postings from both Italian and U.S. users of social media helped to further understanding of the cultural context of this grief iconography.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Aims of the study

The study focused on Italian and U.S. mourners' reasons for posting pictures of their deceased loved ones on social media. Also considered were differences in the types of images published and in the rationales behind such postings. Possible differences between family and religious representations were also considered. The research followed APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct and the principles of the

Declaration of Helsinki, so participants were explained in detail all the objectives of the research and the methodology of analysis used. They were asked permission to use their data, to transcribe their answers and to analyze their content. Anonymization of the content of the obtained texts was assured and only those who gave written and signed consent have participated in the research. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Experimentation of the University of Padua (n. F3AF42BC04992E7B78CE369D49BAF14D) and by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

2.2 The research

The study belongs to the area of qualitative research in psychology and the social sciences, in particular in the area of thematic analysis, a method for identifying and analyzing recurring patterns or themes within the data. This procedure requires the researcher to become familiar with the data through multiple readings, so as to achieve a detailed, rich and complex reorganization and description of the content[34,38].

2.3 Instrument and participants

A survey of 25 queries (in English and Italian languages), including 2 questions on gender and age, 8 open-ended questions, 14 closed-ended and 1 asking to submit the photo previously shared on SNS, was shared in Italy and the United States on Facebook. The Qualtrics survey inquired about intents, expectations and reactions of others behind posting on this platform. Questions about the nature of the participants' relationship with the deceased also were included. Participants were explicitly invited to submit and answer questions about the photos they posted on Facebook, Twitter and/or Instagram, which was the main focus of this investigation.

Data from the U.S. and Italian samples are presented in Table 1. Thirty-seven percent of Italian participants agreed to submit an image of a deceased loved one published on social media for a total of 19 images. For the US sample, 21% provided an image, for a total of 54 pictures.

Table 1. Participants

Samples	Total	Female	Male	Other	Mean age	Standard deviation
U.S.	262	81%	17%	2%	22.09	6.2
Italy	51	82%	16%	2%	32.178	12.439

All the statistical analysis were performed with the IBM SPSS Statistics software package.

2.4 Method

2.4.1 The analysis of the open-ended questions

Thematic analyses were conducted following the consolidated six-phase ladder [38] and using a recursive logic to provide a representation as detailed as possible of the responses. The present thematic analysis captured a reported experience, meaning, event or description, taking into account the research questions regarding bereavement and mourning. Thus, the frequency of appearance of a theme was not adopted as a defining criterion. Rather, whether the theme itself answered the research questions was the defining criterion. From the data, semantic codes were generated. Through this procedure more than one theme from a single response of a participant was coded. Coder consensus

of the meaning of each theme was derived through discussion and elaboration. Before coding the entire data set the reliability of the coding was performed via independent codings between two of the authors on the responses of 14 randomly selected partici-pants. Based on the total of matches and non-matches, the final coding reliability equaled 68%. Considering that in most of the non-matches the two raters coded the same way and differed only in the number of codes used, the interrater reliability was considered ac-ceptable for further analysis.

2.4.2 The analysis of the images

The photographs were subjected to content analysis based on a top-down approach driven by the research questions. Thirteen analytical categories focused on the content and stylistic structure of each image from the Italian and U.S. samples. Furthermore, the respondents were asked to describe the image in words. Together with the image, the verbiage was used as additional support to better understand what was depicted in the image. In order to maintain the cultural integrity of the coded meanings of each image, different authors analyzed the images of their respective culture.

3. Results

Table 2 presents the most used SNS for bereavement purposes, the deceased most commemorated online and the comparison between actual age of death and age of the deceased in the shared image.

Table 2. Percentages of different uses of SNS in the Italian and in the US group

		Italian group		US group	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
SNS used for	Facebook	42	74	150	51
bereavement purposes	Instagram	15	26	115	39
	Twitter	0	0	32	11
Kind of deceased	Grandmother	10	22	13	23
honored via SNS	Grandfather	3	7	9	16
	Mother	7	15	1	2
	Father	6	13	3	5
	Friend (M)	5	11	12	21
	Friend (F)	3	7	0	0
	Other	13	25	19	33
Made use of more than one SNS for bereavement purposes		11	19	82	28
Published a picture of deceased on more than one SNS		12	22	33	22
Actual age at time of death	*Age range (years)*				
	0-20	2	5	20	19
	21-30	4	10	5	5
	31-40	1	2	4	4
	41-50	5	12	7	7
	51-60	10	24	10	9

	61-70	5	12	12	11
	71-80	7	17	22	21
	81+	7	17	26	25
Age of deceased in the shared image	*Age range (years)*				
	0-20	4	14	16	20
	21-30	3	10	4	5
	31-40	3	10	8	10
	41-50	4	14	6	8
	51-60	4	14	12	15
	61-70	7	24	8	10
	71-80	2	7	15	19
	81+	2	7	11	14

Thematic analysis on the texts obtained from the participants' answers resulted in a total of 73 themes (see Table 3 for the dominant themes that emerged from each question). Table 3 also describes the operational definition of each theme and their percentages for the Italian and for the US samples.

Table 3. Percentage of the main themes found in response to the open ended questions

Question	(Y/N)	Developed theme	Operational definition	Percentage in Italian sample	Percentage in US sample
Have you ever posted to cope with death, dying, and grief without a photo? Why or why not?	YES	To remember	The participant found commemorating and honoring the person who passed away on anniversaries by sharing a post without a picture.	11	30
		To convey the essential	The participant shared a post without a picture as they found a picture to be excessive, unnecessary, morally wrong or generally violating his/her own privacy or the privacy of the deceased.	33	26
	NO	To avoid it being made public	The participant did not share any kind of post regarding the deceased, death, dying or mourning as they considered doing so morally wrong, meaningless, harmful and/or inappropriate for intimacy and privacy.	42	66
If you have never posted a photo on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter to help		Because it is considered futile	The participant did not share a picture to deal with death, dying and mourning as they considered doing so useless, unnecessary and unsatisfying.	40	28

cope with death, dying, or grief, why not?	In the interest of intimacy	The participant did not share a picture to deal with death, dying and mourning as they considered it an invasion of their privacy and intimacy and/or because it was a topic which they consider too personal to discuss publicly.	33	34
Did you write anything about the photo?	Expressing emotions	The participant recounted the emotions provoked by their loss to vent and/or express frustration, sorrow and the fact that they missed the deceased. The participant may also recount positive emotions.	13	36
	To remember	The participant recounted one or more memories that have to do with the deceased, the person, what they have done and overall their place in society. They did so in order to honour and commemorate the person (this was why the participant often shared this kind of content on anniversaries).	13	18
	To pay their respects	The participant sent their regards, their best wishes, an inscription or a promise to the deceased.	13	5
What were your reasons for posting this photo on that particular day?	To remember	The participant shared the picture on that specific day to recount one or more memory which has to do with the deceased, the person and overall their place in society. They did so in order to honor and commemorate the person. This was why the participant often shares this kind of content on anniversaries.	37	47
	To express emotion	The participant shared the picture on that specific day to freely express their pain, sorrow, anger, frustration, the fact that they missed the deceased or any other emotion.	10	19
	To inform	The participant shared the picture on that specific day in order to inform everyone about the deceased's identity and their death, how it occurred, the funeral rites schedule, society's reaction and other information regarding that person's passing.	13	16
Out of all the photos that you	Beauty of the	The participant had chosen to share this specific picture as	15	25

could have chosen, why did you pick this particular photo?	picture	they found it adequately portrays the deceased's appearance (good-looking, photogenic, nice smile…) or because it was considered a nice picture.		
	Emblematic picture	The participant had chosen to share this specific picture as they found it to be emblematic and strongly representative of a certain experience, emotion, cognition or moment.	28	21
What reactions or comments were you hoping to receive by posting this photo?	No expectations	The participant had no expectations concerning reactions or comments referring to the picture.	30	32
	Empathic support	The participant expected to receive reactions and comments of a supportive and helpful nature and/or empathy, humanity or comprehension.	23	22
What reactions or comments did you actually receive regarding posting this photo?	Condolences	The participant had received condolences.	7	21
	Empathic support	The participant had received reactions and comments of a supportive and helpful nature and/or empathy, humanity or comprehension.	23	18
What were your thoughts and feelings about the reactions that you received (e.g. likes, comments) from posting this photo?	Positive outcome	The participant experienced positive thoughts and feelings that could lead to wellbeing, satisfaction, appreciation and enjoyment and was overall satisfied with the feedback.	33	43
	Negative outcome	The participant experienced negative thoughts and feelings that could lead to uneasiness, disappointment and melancholy and was overall unsatisfied by the lack of support.	13	7
	Human warmth	The participant experienced thoughts and feelings that made them feel emphatically supported, understood, loved and not alone when dealing with pain.	20	30

The remaining themes developed are organized in five prevalent thematic areas. At times, participants' responses did not lead to the development of any theme due to the idiosyncratic nature of their comments.

3.1 First thematic area: The reasons for showing or not showing the photos

The first thematic area is inherent to the reason for showing or not showing photos. When participants shared a bereavement post without a photo, it was because they wanted "to feel part of the community" (It 11%; US 12%) calling for empathy and hu-

manity from those who are part of virtual community and, eventually to receive and give support to those who are grieving . Other reasons given were "to think about death" and to express beliefs regarding death, mourning and/or the deceased (It 17%; US 0%). Participants also desired "to inform everyone" about the deceased's identity and their death, the funeral rites schedule and other information regarding that person's passing (It 6%; US 11%). Some of the respondents wanted "to express emotion" related to the loss (It 17%; US 16%). Adele noted:

> *'I do not believe a photo is necessary to post during the down times. I made posts and comments without photos to use words to express my grief'.*

When participants posted a photo, some mentioned it was because they wanted to commemorate the deceased on anniversaries and "to remember" (It 16%; US 12%). In other cases, was due to the belief that simply writing a post wasn't enough and so the picture helped "to convey the essential" (It 17%; US 4%). Other times, participants wanted to call for empathy from users that are part of the virtual community, give support to other grievers and so "feel part of the community" (It 0%; US 1%). Participants also wanted "to inform everyone" (It 0%; US 7%) or "to express emotion" related to mourning (It 8%; US 5%). For example, Julia expressed her desire to remember her deceased loved one:

> *'After I write my feelings down and describe everything good about him I would post a picture of him to make sure everyone who read will remember him as a good person so he won't die in our memories'.*

Several participants never posted a to photo cope with death or grief believing that was the way "to convey the essential" (It 7%; US 17%) or because they were "unfamiliar with the SNS" (It 7%; US 9%). Others have never posted a picture because they judged such practices to be "inappropriate" and exploiting a tragic event (It 13%; US 11%). The choice to publish the photo on a particular day was due to "receive support and lessen the pain" (It 8%; US 6%), "to express the void has been left" (It 6%; US 6%), conveying nostalgia and melancholy, or "to bequeath" (It 4%; US 0%) teachings, life experiences and quotes that have been learned from the deceased or from their passing. Other times the choice was dictated by a "coincidence" (It 2%; US 2%), in so far as participants associated an event with the deceased, by the desire to "to think about death" (It 13%; US 4%) or by expressing thoughts or beliefs regarding death and/or the deceased. Finally, little evidence of "continuing bonds" (It 4%; US 1%) were highlighted by the participants who wanted to continue the relationship with the deceased by sharing a picture on that particular day.

3.2 Second thematic area: The main comments on photographs

The second thematic area refers to what participants wrote on SNS about the photo they shared. Participants' responses demonstrated evidence of "continuing bonds" (It 11%; 15%). Additionally, participants wrote comments to "refer to eternity" (It 10%; US 1%) and to a timeless dimension where the deceased will never be forgotten. Others used SNS "to think about death" (It 7%; US 15%) or "to quote something" (It 10%; US 3%) such as a song, a poem, or a movie. Some participants addressed the deceased with a "intimate nickname" (It 8%; US 2%) that defined the kind of relationship they once had (e.g. "my beloved", "mentor", "angel"…); "expressed disbelief" in accepting the reality of the death (It 3%; US 0%), or "regret" (It 3%; US 2%) over missed opportunities with the deceased and/or how the death occurred. Participants expressed their felt pain over the

death as   "the void which has been left" (It 7%; US 3%). A few tried "to make the community aware" (It 2%; US 1%) by inviting users of the virtual community to act in a specific way and/or to be empathetic. Maria offers a typical example wherein she quoted:

> *'I wrote the whole St. Augustine's poem 'death is nothing''.*

3.3 Third thematic area: The choice of photography

The third thematic area refers to the reasons behind the choice to share specific photos online. Participants chose photos they found to be particularly important, representative of the deceased and suitable for an "important statement" (It 15%; US 7%).

Enrico states:

> *'Because it is a very representative photo of her, she is smiling and looks like she is dancing on the beach, which she particularly loved to do'.*

Furthermore, participants chose photos depicting "special occasions" (It 7%; US 4%), such as a party or celebration related to the deceased (e.g. a marriage, a graduation day), or photos of the "first picture (or one of the first)" (It 2%; US 1%) or the "last picture (or one of the last)" (It 9%; US 5%) of the deceased. Participants also chose photos because of their specific characteristics, because of their depiction of an unknown, unique side of the deceased (It 11; US 13%); or because of their depiction of both the participant and the deceased in a "conjoint appearance" (It 9%; US 21%). Surprisingly, there was little evidence of "continuing bonds" (It 2%; US 1%).

3.4 Fourth thematic area: Comments expected and actually received

The fourth thematic area refers to the comments participants anticipated and actually received from other SNS users. This thematic area also refers to participants' thoughts and feelings about received reactions. Comments expected by participants were related to the hope to be welcomed and receive "appreciations" (It 2%; US 3%), to gather memories and thoughts of the deceased or "commemorations" (It 16%; US 16%). Comments about the "emotional experiences of others" (It 16%; US 11%) were seen as well. Participants hoped to receive "condolences" (It 10%; US 14%) and wanted to maintain relationship with the deceased through a "continuing bond" (It 5%; US 2%). For example, Patricia reported her hope to gather commemorations of her loved one:

> *'I wanted my family to be able to react to the photo and remember him in a positive way. Also, I wanted family to share comments about their good memories'.*

Comments and reactions actually received were very heterogeneous: many participants had gotten "likes" (It 23%; US 18%), "heart reactions" (It 14%; US 8%), or comments welcoming and "appreciating" the picture shared (It 2%; US 6%). Other comments received pertained to memories paying homage to and "commemorating" the deceased (It 11%; US 9%), or to the "emotional experiences of others" (It 19%; US 18%) relative to someone passing. As few comments received were judged by participants as "inappropriate reactions" (It 2%; US 2%) as they were rude, offensive or inauthentic, as in the case of Eliza:

> *'People he wasn't even close with started commenting like 'I'm gonna miss you so much' and 'you were like a brother to me' when in reality they barely talked'.*

Participants' thoughts and feelings about received reactions involved not just "positive outcome", "negative outcome" or "human warmth" (see Table 3) but also "moral considerations" (It 5%; US 2%) judging comments as right or wrong, or "appreciations for the commemoration" (It 13%; US 9%). The latter case was positively received because the memory of the deceased was maintained and/or collectively reviewed.

3.5 Fifth thematic area: the subject of the shared images

The fifth thematic area focused on the analysis of bereavement pictures shared on SNS through the use of 13 analytical categories. All bereavement images were distinguished as photographs and thus labeled "picture" (It 96%; US 93%) or as a drawing or illustration and labeled as "image" (It 4%; US 7%). The percentages of the other 11 categories were calculated separately as they specifically related to shared representations of "persons" (It 27%; US 35%), "objects" (It 4%; US 4%) or "settings" (It 6%; US 6%). Some cases were coded as "refined" (It 6%; US 1%) as a result of modifications made with the use of programs (e.g. cutouts, filters, overlaid images, added text, or special effects). Shared images frequently depicted the participants in their "early youth" (It 4%; US 3%), people in "acts of kindness and care" (It 10%; US 4%) such as kissing and hugging each other, staring into each other's eyes or acting in a nurturing manner. Other photos showed the participant and the deceased together through a "conjoint appearance" (It 16%; US 19%). The last three categories referred to the emotional connotation (when clearly understandable) of the shared images: "positive" (It 15%; US 17%), "neutral" (It 3%; US 1%) and "negative" (It 0%; US 0.5%). In the supplementary material there are some sample images that participants sent us and authorized to use for scientific purposes. For both samples close-up pictures of the participant's hand intertwined with that of the deceased were frequently seen. Online mourners may have used such pictures as a symbolic display of affection for the deceased.

4. Discussion

Social media sites such as Facebook have many pictorial postings that reflect grief and loss. Frequently these are accompanied with verbal content by the author as well as viewers of the photos. Yet, few studies have been conducted that include this iconography associated with postings about death. The present study makes a threefold contribution to understandings of the iconography of grief by 1) examining pictures and verbal content of grief-related postings on Facebook, 2) querying the authors about their motivations behind the selection of their pictures and 3) examining the differences and similarities between Italians and Americans regarding this online expression of mourning.

Starting from the first thematic area (reasons for showing or not showing pictures), both samples showed a strong tendency not to share anything concerning a deceased loved one, to protect their privacy, and because this practice was perceived as intrusive and excessively public [35,37,41]. Furthermore, Americans seemed to make greater use of the communicative potential of social media and the "collapse of the context" [42] to report deaths [18].

For those participants who did post on SNS, the evidence spoke to the tendency, typical of mourning posts, to speak *to* the deceased instead *of* the deceased [43] (the second thematic area). Many Italian participants, in fact, addressed the deceased directly by expressing a greeting, a wish, a dedication or a promise to the deceased   (coded as "to pay their respects"). Similar to the US participants, Italians used SNS communication mostly to express emotions and to remember. Some participants from both samples addressed

the deceased love ones with intimate nicknames (coded as "intimate nickname"), which in 50% of these cases referred to the deceased as an "angel" [24,25].

Findings in the literature attest that the main motivations to share negative emotions are to support one's coping skills and to reduce one's emotional load [44]; the reported choices to publish the photo on a particular day seemed to corroborate the second motivation rather than the first. The findings of the third thematic area (choice of photography) corroborated   the results of Keskinen and collaborators [10], by indicating   that the photographs were posted to preserve the emotional-relational bond with the deceased (coded as "continuing bond"). The majority of the participants in both samples had "no expectations" for the responses they anticipated receiving about their postings. Perhaps this signifies that the mourners used the SNSs as a free space to share their emotions without expecting anything in return. They did, however, receive high rates of empathic support [18].

Themes emerging from reactions that participants actually received, like "empathic support" and "emotional experiences of others" reflected the exchange of hope found to be typical of users engaged in grief online [45]. Furthermore, both samples scored high percentages for the "likes" received and very low percentages for "inappropriate reactions." These participants, therefore, benefitted from addressing the issue of death on the web, a finding supported by the research of De Vries and Rutherford [17].
Themes emerging from participants' thoughts and feelings (the fourth thematic area)about received reactions led to important insights about the perceptions and emotions surrounding sharing posts related to deceased loved ones. Consideration of the low percentage of "negative outcome" together with the high percentages of "positive outcome", "human warmth" and "appreciations for the commemoration," suggests that bereavement posts are, in most cases, well received by virtual bystanders. Both samples have benefited from the communication of mourning via SNS but Americans derived greater benefits and suffered fewer negative consequences from sharing than did Italians.

It should be noted that although the use of Twitter is increasing in Italy, it seems that the use of Italian users of this social medium is not extended to the manifestation of mourning and the celebration of the dead. The primacy of this practice, unquestionably, was Facebook dominant. The disparity between the age at death and the inferred age of the deceased in the photographs that were shared online seemed to highlight a certain "rejuvenating effect" of the deceased. Both U.S. and Italian samples tended to portray the dead as younger. However, further studies in the future will need to investigate this rejuvenating effect of photographs of the   deceased that was observed on SNS.

Italy is experiencing a phenomenon known as "famiglia lunga" or "long family" [48,49], characterized by the tendency of young adults to live at home with their parents between the ages of 18 and 35 or even later. This demographic trend may have implications for the manifestation of grief online. When the deceased was a parent (mother or father) the coding percentage of the category "conjoint appearance" was 54% for the Italian sample and 0% for the US sample. Regarding grandparents and great-grandparents, the percentage was equal to 60% and 58% respectively in the Italian and US sample, while as for friends (male, female or other) the percentage is 43% in the Italian and 60% in US one. Finally, the second thematic area also suggested that Italian people attested higher percentages in themes which can be considered religious or spiritual, such as "refer to eternity", "expressed disbelief", "regretted" and "the void which has been left".

5. Conclusions

Stroebe and Schut (1999) [51]proposed a dual process model of grief wherein mourners oscillate between emotion focused coping (that which was lost) and restorative focused coping (adapted to a new life without the physical presence of the loved one.) Both of these processes were evident in how Italians and those in the U.S. relied on social

media to post pictures of the deceased. In this new iconography of grief, the photographs and images often were accompanied by emotional language, and the postings themselves served a restorative function in their attempt to learn to live in a new assumptive world

For both in the Italian and in the U.S. sample, Facebook was the most used SNS for mourning expression. Italians paid more homage to parents on SNSs than Americans, but and in both cultures the deceased most commemorated was the grandmother. In the Italian sample, the choice to publish an emblematic image of a certain experience was most evident, whereas the U.S. sample showed a greater preference for a beautiful and harmonious representation of the deceased. In both the Italian and the US samples most expressed few expectations from others from their posts relating of their deceased loved ones. Overall, there was a remarkable similarity between Italians and Americans: they both preferred to share emotionally positive pictures depicting the deceased, occasionally appearing in the pictures as well.

The findings of this study were limited by the selection of convenience samples from both cultures; the participants were not necessarily representative of their relative reference countries. As this was a first attempt in the research literature to study the photos and images on Facebook postings of the deceased, the research used a grounded theory approach as opposed to hypothesis testing.   Certainly further research should be conducted to validate the themes discerned from the present data and to further test hypotheses drawn from dual-process theory. Comparing two cultures on social media and grief presented a unique opportunity to study online grief from a global perspective. It is hoped that this research inspires others to look at how SNS are used in different countries to cope with grief and mourning. Finally, the current study suggests that follow-up research should pursue how religiosity and spirituality of the participants play into the iconography of online grief postings, particularly with regard to beliefs about the after-life [50], coping strategies, empathy, moral judgments and religious proselytism [7].

Supplementary Materials: The following are 6 images sent by participants and coded by authors.

Figure 1. This representation has been coded as "image" and "object".

Figure 2. This representation has been coded as "picture", "person", "conjoint appearance" (father and daughter are depicted) and "special occasion" (a wedding is depicted).

Figure 3. This representation has been coded as "picture", "object" and "refined representation".

Figure 4. This representation has been coded as "image", "person" and "object" (we used both categories because both mourners and the car receive some consideration).

Figure 5. This representation has been coded as "picture", "person", "conjoint appearance", "positive emotional connotation", "youth of the participant" and "act of kindness and caring".

Figure 6. This representation has been coded as "picture" and "setting".

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