

Social Media Grieving: How to Find Support in a Digital Era

Colleen Keefe

In this article, Keefe explores the role that social media plays while mourning the loss of a friend or loved one. She uses her own experience of losing her friend, Gabby Ives, to explore the benefits of social media during the grieving process. Keefe explores these ideas by applying cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to them, and she argues that mourning online allows for a strong community to form.

Bright-eyed, inspiring, positive, smart, loyal, determined, lighthearted, and fun describe a few of the many amazing qualities of my sweet friend Gabby Ives. Gabby always appeared to be like any other teenage girl. She was very involved in high school, had many friends, was accepted to the University of Illinois, and joined the Alpha Phi sorority there her freshman year. Gabby worked her hardest to maintain an ordinary life, but she did so in extraordinary ways. She had to work extremely hard in order to maintain her health to do all of the things that she loved because Gabby battled cystic fibrosis (CF), “a progressive, genetic disease that causes persistent lung infections and limits the ability to breathe over time” (Cystic Fibrosis Foundation). Gabby worked so diligently to protect her health that many people were never aware that she was battling this disease. In fact, I didn’t know that Gabby had CF for more than a year after meeting her. Here she



Artist: Lisa Frost, Rockford, IL

was, on a daily basis, battling a disease that constantly led to her discomfort, and I never knew because of the ever-present smile on her face and her relentless desire to make everyone around her happy.

Gabby passed away suddenly on June 21, 2017, and her positive nature left an eternal impression on anyone who was fortunate enough to cross paths with her. Because of how extraordinary she was, her death has been extremely difficult for me and many others to understand. While coping with Gabby's loss this past summer, I made an interesting observation about the ways people were choosing to cope and find support during this difficult time. I found that myself and many others turned to social media platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, for support. Tributes to Gabby were constantly posted on these different platforms days, weeks, and even months after she passed, and these posts all looked very different. Depending on the site they were posted on, some had pictures, while others were strictly words. Some people chose to use multiple pictures of Gabby, while others chose just one. And some people spoke *to* Gabby in the posts and some spoke *about* her, her character, and the vast impact that her life had on the world. I found all of these differences interesting, and I found myself wondering why so many differences existed among the same platforms.

These questions I asked led me to examine the production of these texts, or social media posts. The production of a text is an extremely difficult and complex process. These specific posts in question were written during mourning, which is also an extremely difficult process. I wasn't finding any answers on how to understand the loss of Gabby, but I knew I had one tool to be able to break down and begin to understand the writing processes of these grieving social media posts. This tool is **CHAT, or cultural-historical activity theory**, which, when applied to **literate activity**, becomes a "set of theories about how people act and communicate in the world through a production of text" (Walker 72). I knew this theory would allow me to think critically about this writing practice and help me understand the how/why/what of these posts in order to begin to find a way for me to receive support.

What Does the Internet Have to Say About Mourning on Social Media?

Before even touching on the conversations found on the Internet that suggest ways to handle death on social media, I think it is important to discuss where people post and what these posts look like. ISU's version of CHAT, which focuses on literate activity, identifies terms that help us define and understand some of the writing practices that we use across many genres and settings.

The first of these terms that is directly related to these social media posts is **production**, which deals with the means through which a text is created. There is a vast difference between posts on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. I observed that Facebook posts for Gabby seemed to be much longer and usually had a focus on words rather than pictures, while Instagram posts tended to have multiple pictures with somewhat shorter captions. Twitter has a 140-character maximum in a post, and this limitation greatly influences the types of tributes that are posted because they have to be much shorter. I noticed that many of the tweets for Gabby usually just said some rendition of “breathe easy” or “miss you.”

While these are all very different means of production, I did see a lot of overlap because of the collaboration between these websites. It’s probably safe to say that most people around my age (20) have a social media account, and many have more than one. These social media platforms have many agreements with each other and let users connect their accounts to help them find friends to follow and to post all at once across different sites. Because many of my friends have linked accounts like this, I noticed quite an overlap between platforms as I made my observations. While this overlap slightly changed the nature of the posts I saw on Facebook, these duplicated posts still noted that they were from Instagram, for example, keeping each post native to its original platform.

The constantly changing social media platforms and the constant release of new technology makes it difficult to define any sense of public grieving on the Internet. While I understand that there are no formal rules to guide users when creating and publishing online memorials, I still wanted to know what, if any, conversations exist about the etiquette of posting an online tribute. A simple Google search—“social media coping with death”—led to many articles and informal blog posts about suggested etiquette when choosing to post. Some of the articles and blogs discussed negative experiences with social media postings pertaining to death, while others detailed positive experiences. Three articles in particular stood out to me. These articles were *Dealing with Death on Social Media: 11 Etiquette Tips*, *A Guide to Facebook Etiquette after Someone Has Died*, and *10 Rules for Grieving on Twitter*. From these three articles, I comprised a list of the top five etiquette tips that I personally found to be most important. I kept my personal experience with social media grieving in mind while deciding which of these tips appeared to be the most important.

1. *Follow the lead of the family. There is no need to rush to post your farewell message (Thompson; Hiss).*

Almost every article I read had this as a common tip. If you hear about a death of a loved one, you should not be posting about it before the family

or inner circle of friends do. The family, or those that are closest to being family, should be the ones that start the social media tributes. Once they do, that means they are ready for everyone to know, and they are more willing to talk about it. If the family isn't ready for that yet, and someone not close to the family posts, it could result in a lot of people contacting the family and asking what happened, which would be the last thing they need in that tough time.

2. *"Don't 'showboat'" (Thompson).*

It's unnecessary to make a post if the tone of it is simply trying to prove how well you knew the deceased. In a tough time of mourning, there is no place for messages that are boisterous. Make sure that when you are posting, the intentions are centered around the deceased and making a positive tribute to them and not centered around your own intentions of proving that you knew the person.

3. *You do not have to post (Wickman).*

Posting a tribute is in no way a necessity. Posting for me was a way of grieving and was beneficial. Everyone handles the grieving process very differently, so, for some people, posting may not be the best option.

4. *"Keep your questions offline" (Thompson).*

Many of us have probably seen comments on these types of posts that ask, "what happened?" or "how did s/he die?" These questions are inappropriate to post in a public forum and are inappropriate to ask a person who is clearly grieving. It is best to wait until an obituary is published or more information is revealed somewhere else.

5. *Consider privacy settings and carefully decide if you want to tag the deceased (Hiss; Thompson).*

When you make a post, make sure you check your privacy settings to ensure they are what you want them to be. It may not always be necessary for anyone in the world to see your post, but, on occasion, this may be exactly the kind of tribute a person deserves. Remember that when you tag the person that has passed, your post may come up on many other people's timelines, especially when they are not expecting it, so beware of these effects and be considerate.

Many of these etiquette tips appear just to be common knowledge. I, for one, did not research this idea until I started writing this article. I created my post without knowing these specific tips. When I made a post to tribute Gabby, I followed the lead of others who were posting, and my number one concern was to be as considerate as possible to Gabby's family and her

closest circle of friends. This relates to **socialization**, which describes the interactions of people as they produce, distribute, and use texts. An important component of socialization is that the *conscious* and *unconscious* engagements when representing different social and cultural practices are both considered. While I can now reflect on knowing that I consciously followed some of these tips, I certainly followed many of them unconsciously as well. While Gabby is the closest person to me that has passed so young, she unfortunately is not the only one in my community that passed away too soon. Observing the trends from previous situations is another way that people form schemas about “proper” ways of grieving on social media. Every time you see a post online, you are interacting with it, whether this is on purpose or not. The observations you make when using these texts all contribute to your knowledge of what you think is possible in the creation of these grieving posts.

These etiquette tips directly relate to another CHAT term, **reception**, which deals with how a text is taken up and used by others. Reception is not just about who will read a text; it also takes into account the ways the audience uses the text that the author may not have anticipated or intended. If someone posts before a family member is ready, it may elicit phone calls or messages that the family is not ready for. An early post may also end up being the way that someone finds out that a loved one has passed. An author may not have this intention either, but someone may end up seeing a post in a setting where he or she is not prepared, such as work or school. Producing your post with these etiquette rules in mind, both consciously or unconsciously, allows for positive, meaningful interactions to occur and allows for a supportive community to form.

Why Did I Post?

After thinking about it, I realized that there were a couple of reasons that I chose to make a post after Gabby’s death. The first of these reasons was to make a tribute to Gabby, her amazing heart, and the great life that she had. I went to a different high school and college than Gabby did, so, while we had some similar followers, I have many followers that never met Gabby. I wanted to post about the ways that Gabby touched my life so that those who were never fortunate enough to meet her could still learn about the strength and positivity she endlessly portrayed.

Another reason that I wanted to post was that social media can serve as a platform for support. When I made my post, I received an outpouring of support from many people—some who knew Gabby and some who didn’t.

Every post for Gabby had a comment section filled with positive words and emoji hearts (specifically purple ones, since purple is the color for Cystic Fibrosis). After I made my post, I received countless texts from people who had never met Gabby and wanted to let me know that they were here for me because they saw what I was going through. Making a post meant that I was part of a special type of community—a community that was in mourning and a community that realized that we all needed to lean on each other for support.

Posting after Gabby's passing also helped raise a lot of awareness for cystic fibrosis. A lot of people don't know anyone who is affected by CF, so I received a lot of questions from friends and family who had never heard of it. I made my initial remembrance post within a week of Gabby's passing, but I also made a special post about a month later. During school breaks and summers at home, I work as a server at an Italian pizzeria. I decided that one day I wanted to share Gabby's story with all my customers and donate every penny that I made to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation in Gabby's name. I made a write up to put in each checkbook and took a picture of them once they were printed out. I explained the fundraiser that I was doing in the following Facebook post seen below.

There was a lot that I thought about as I produced this post. The term **activity** is most relevant to use when exploring what I went through as I made this post. Activity encompasses the actual practices that people engage in as they create a text. The most notable component of my activity of creating this text was that I made quite a few drafts before I was happy with how I posted. I struggled with creating the tone of this post; I wanted it

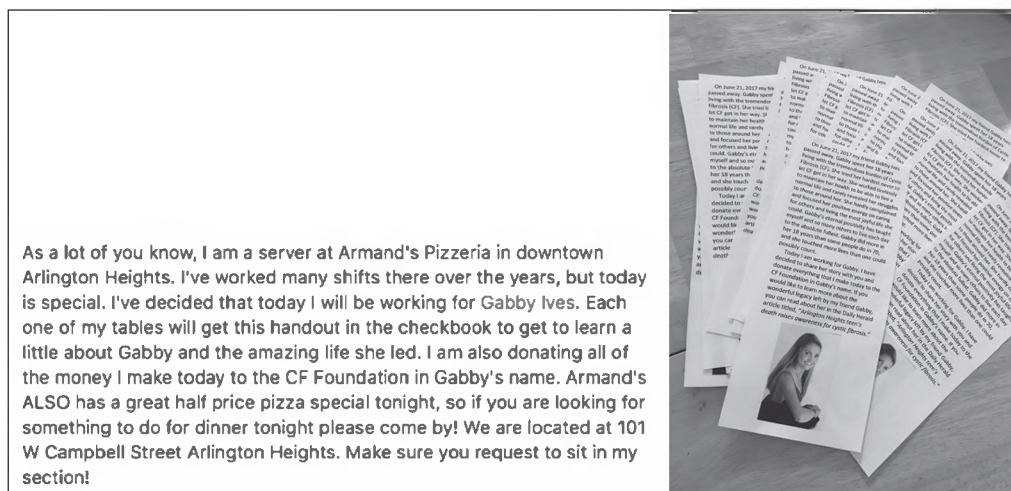


Figure 1: The Facebook post I made for my fundraiser.

to sound positive and fun because I wanted people to come and celebrate Gabby's life and support CF research, but I also wanted to keep a solemn tone because each person who knew Gabby is reminded every day about how much they miss her. The activity of creating the handouts pictured above was also a very difficult one. I know it is hard to read from this picture, but each handout basically just gives some background on Gabby and how positive she was. I, once again, wrote many drafts before I was happy with what I had created. And I still feel like there is no way to capture how great Gabby truly was. I remember sitting on my bed fighting tears while reading obituaries to find the most relevant information about her and searching her Facebook for pictures or any other ideas on what to include. Writing this also helped me have time to sit and remember Gabby because I dedicated time just to think about her while creating these. In addition to the great emotions I felt during this process, I also felt some pressure while writing this handout because I knew it was somewhat high-stakes. I wanted this fundraiser to be successful, and I wanted Gabby to be remembered in incredible ways. I also created the handout before getting the fundraising idea approved by my managers and owners of the pizzeria. After typing up a draft, I nervously brought it to my superiors who approved and supported the idea in a heartbeat.

When I published the actual post, I had to think about what I needed to do to ensure that as many people as possible would see it. This directly relates to the CHAT term **distribution**, which involves the consideration of who a text is given to, for what purposes, using what kinds of distribution tools. I changed my privacy settings on that post from "only my friends" to "public" because I wanted people to be able to share the post, and I wanted their friends, who I may not know, to be able to see it. I also chose to tag Gabby's profile in the post. Facebook links posts that friends are tagged in on your timeline or home screen, and I wanted any of Gabby's friends to be able to see this post to read about what I was doing.

In addition to my Facebook post, the write-up that was put in each checkbook during the fundraiser that night sparked a lot of conversation about Gabby and about cystic fibrosis, which again relates to reception. By the end of the night, I was taking more tables than were even in my section that were all filled by people who had seen my post and decided to come for the event. Before my section got super busy, I had a few tables of regular patrons who had no clue this fundraiser was occurring. One table in specific spent a lot of time talking to me about Gabby's life. They asked me a bunch of questions about CF and about what Gabby was involved in, and it gave me an opportunity to share her amazing life with people who did not have the chance to know her themselves. Due to the generosity of all of the customers that night and the great turnout from the purposeful distribution

of my Facebook post, I was able to donate over \$600 to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation in Gabby Ives's name.

What Are the Benefits of Social Media After a Loved One Passes Away?

From my experience, I saw nothing but positivity stem from these grieving posts. A study conducted in 2014 found that “web-based memorials and social media use can enable meaningful grieving rituals, promote connection between grieving individuals, and facilitate community-building practices” (Rossetto et al. 975). Posting enabled me to link with other individuals that were mourning and helped me find a support system of people who were going through the same thing as me. To once again relate to activity, writing never stands alone or in a bubble. No matter what, we are always affected by the conversation that we are contributing to. My post helped me realize that I was positively contributing to a conversation that already existed, and it showed me that I was not alone.

Just like with the Facebook post for my fundraiser, activity is important to explore when discussing my initial tribute to Gabby that I posted within about a week of her passing. I put a lot of thought into creating my post. I, again, created a countless number of drafts because I kept thinking that no matter what I said, it still wouldn't capture how amazing Gabby Ives truly was. It was especially hard to hit the “publish” button because posting would mean that I was another step closer to accepting and admitting that she was really gone. The outpouring of support that I received following the publication of my post helped me realize that the activity of creating this post was worth it.

Social media is also a way for the deceased to have a continued identity. When a loved one passes, they may lose their physical identity, but their social media identity remains. This helps the deceased maintain a legacy in a way that was not possible before the era of social media. This can be understood in relation to the term **trajectory**, which helps us understand what texts do and how they move around in the world. It's important to consider how a genre shifts or changes over time. Someone who is living and is actively posting is interacting with social media while thinking about the present. Over time, specifically when a loved one passes away, his or her Facebook page endures a shift and now becomes a way to memorialize that person. In addition to memorializing the identity of the deceased, social media works to comfort those who are living. This existing profile of the deceased functions almost like a scrapbook of the events of their life. Many people may find comfort in this because whenever they miss their loved ones, they can look at online profiles and use that platform as a way to connect again and revisit memories.

To Sum It All Up

People have always built monuments and cemeteries to mourn and remember those we've lost. Now, in our culture, these traditional ways of remembrance remain but have an added digital level of remembrance. Monuments and tributes are no longer limited to cemeteries, but are also now in the palms of our hands. Through different means of production, socialization, careful distribution, reception, and activity (creating the post), I was able to find support for myself and make a tribute to a beautiful friend. The same study mentioned earlier said, "these benefits of online memorializing may stem from the inexpensive, accessible, and anonymous nature of social networking sites, which provide instant and unlimited access to others, allowing people to express grief, overcome distance to form community, and give/receive support" (Rosetto et al. 975). The accessibility of social media platforms provides users an inexpensive way to distribute information about funeral arrangements, to post tributes, and to remember loved ones.

Works Cited

- "Cystic Fibrosis Foundation." *About Cystic Fibrosis | CF Foundation*, www.cff.org/What-is-CF/About-Cystic-Fibrosis/. Accessed 25 Sept. 2017.
- Frost, Lisa. 2017, Rockford, IL.
- Hiss, Kimberly. "Dealing with Death on Social Media: 11 Etiquette Tips." *Reader's Digest*, www.rd.com/advice/relationships/death-on-social-media/.
- Rossetto, Kelly R., et al. "Death on Facebook: Examining the Roles of Social Media Communication for the Bereaved." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, vol. 32, no. 7, 2014, pp. 974–94, doi:10.1177/0265407514555272.
- Thompson, Rachel. "A guide to Facebook etiquette after someone has died." *Mashable*, 8 Apr. 2017, mashable.com/2017/04/08/facebook-etiquette-grief/#2coVpmV3MPqH.
- Walker, Joyce. "Just CHATting." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, vol. 1, 2010, pp. 71–80.
- Wickman, Forrest. "10 Rules for Grieving on Twitter." *Slate Magazine*, 12 Aug. 2014, www.slate.com/articles/life/culturebox/2014/08/mourning_on_social_media_10_rules_of_twitter_grief.html.



Colleen Keefe is a junior at Illinois State University pursuing a BA in English education. She has a passion for education and is excited to get to share her love for English with high school students. She is endlessly inspired by her amazing friend Gabby Ives, who passed away last year. She aims to raise awareness for cystic fibrosis and encourages anyone to consider donating to the CF Foundation in order to advance medicine and find a cure for CF.