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Enfranchising Pandemic Grief: Stories of Local Responses and the Reinvention of Ritual Amid COVID-19 Deaths

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ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic claimed thousands of lives in the Philippines in 2020. Due to the extended lockdowns, COVID-19 health protocols, and social restrictions, Filipinos were prevented from engaging in prepandemic mourning practices and rituals, leading to the disenfranchisement and compounding of their grief. This paper examines the stories of grief and mourning of Filipinos during the first eight months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through online storytelling sessions, it presents and chronicles the ways that Filipinos have inventively and bravely adapted to the restrictions and the lack of opportunities to come together and mourn. These include the use of various technologies to come up with modified versions of traditional rituals, and the appropriation of Facebook and its affordances, turning it into a site of mourning, commemoration, and remembrance. These attempts by bereaved Filipinos to reinvent prepandemic mourning practices and develop digital mourning practices on Facebook may be seen as their effort to “enfranchise” their grief amid a highly constricting climate.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, death, grief, digital mourning, Facebook

Introduction

The world has been in grief ever since the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic started claiming millions of lives in 2020. However, owing to health protocols and restrictions on mobility, the bereaved have not been able to mourn in ways that are culturally acceptable. In the Philippines, the stringent rules on physical distancing have also made it increasingly difficult for the living to pay respects to their dead. In turn, these disruptions have created a “tsunami” of anguish and mourning, leading individuals to feel a lingering sense of loss. Responding to this challenge, Filipinos found different venues to express these strong and compounded emotions. A significant number have turned to digital and social media sites like Facebook. While grief and mourning were already actively mediated on social media networks like Facebook and Instagram prior to the pandemic, the use of social network sites to express grief and mourning, also known as “digital mourning” (Babis 2020), became more pronounced during the COVID-19 lockdown in the Philippines. Amid the pandemic, many bereaved Filipinos posted expressions of grief and mourning on their Facebook profiles, causing other Filipino Facebook users to describe their timelines as seeming “obituaries” (Cruz 2021).

Current global and Philippine realities demand urgent attention to this phenomenon. Recent data states that 6 out of 10 people worldwide now use the internet, with 332 million people coming online for the first time in 2020 (Kemp 2021). Meanwhile, in the Philippines, Kemp (2021) found that the number of internet users from the country increased by 4.2 million just between 2020 and 2021, bringing the total number of active social media users to 89 million. Significant factors identified for this spike are the pandemic lockdowns, stay-at-home policies, and mobility restrictions (Lalu 2020). The same report revealed that Filipinos spend an average of almost 11 hours per day on the internet, making the Philippines the “Social Media Capital of the World” for the sixth year in a row.

While the use of online platforms by Filipinos has been largely documented, especially in the context of migrant workers and their Philippine-based families (Ariate et al. 2015; Cabalquinto 2018), less attention has been paid to the use of these platforms for grief work or mourning. Death and mourning rituals are essential to managing loss and bereavement. They temper the cultural and social consequences brought by an unpredictable natural phenomenon (Robben 2004; Sumiala 2013). Through highly ordered procedures, rituals allow the bereaved to get through the uncertainties, disorder, and anxieties that come with the event of death (Myerhoff 1984). Hence, an examination of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on these rituals and practices is an important task. There is, however, a continuing dearth of research on this. This paper seeks to fill the gap by providing a qualitative account of the effects of the global pandemic on the death-, grief-, and mourning-related practices and rituals and the creative responses of Filipinos. Through online storytelling sessions, it describes how Filipinos experienced and responded to their

losses during the first eight months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also outlines how they attempted to “enfranchise” their grief through the deliberate modification of pre-pandemic mourning rituals, using various technologies and engaging in digital mourning. This paper frames grief not as a psychological state or condition that merely impacts the body. Rather, grief is constructed as “performed or enacted by the embodied bereaved person” (Pearce and Komaromy 2020, 2); hence, it is a cultural practice, a practical engagement with the world (Scheer 2012).

This study is limited in that the findings discuss only Catholic and Christian experiences of death and mourning amid the pandemic. A further area of study not included in the present paper are the experiences of Filipinos who have no access to digital technologies with which to mourn.

The first part of this paper discusses Filipino notions of death and the cultural practices tied to grief and mourning. In this section, I emphasize how death and mourning practices enliven and create community among Filipinos. The second part is a quick discussion of pandemic grief, or grief in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The third section discusses recent scholarship on digital mourning as an emerging practice to cope with loss. The fourth part presents the narratives of death, grief, and mourning based on online storytelling sessions. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary and some recommendations pertinent to the topic.

Death, Grief, and Mourning in the Philippines

Death, no matter how somber a topic, animates and creates community among Filipinos. Isidro (1978), for example, keenly observed how the event of death in the small town of Baras, Rizal instantly makes the house of the bereaved family the center of focus and activity. Death mobilizes the entire community, as close relatives and town members join the immediate family in the various preparations. Isidro noted that at the time of death, the head of the Tagalog family or an elder usually went “to the church to have the news announced to the town by the ringing of the church bells in a particular way known as the *dubla*” while “others attend to the sponging and dressing of the corpse” (363) and the preparation of the coffin and grave. Isidro remarked that deaths usually bring people together through several circumstances. The *lamayan* or *lamay* (wake) instantly becomes a reunion of relatives and friends: “In fact, a death in the family is a more compelling reason for a homecoming than a fiesta or other festive gatherings, such as a baptism or marriage. It is an event where they are expected, where “they will be missed if they do not come” (371).

Meanwhile, Bateson (1968), in her fieldwork in Marikina City, found that there was a stark cultural contrast between Americans and Filipinos when it comes to death. Whereas Filipinos can be “brutally frank” in expressing their emotions, Americans are “euphemistic and indirect,” often avoiding being too emotional (612). Bateson also observed the degree of sociality of Filipinos during wakes or *paglalamay*, when she notes how “the relatives gathered, people coming and going,

expressing condolences and offering money and then standing and gossiping, the young boys and girls playing word games and flirting at the door, the gambling tables and barbecues set up around the outside of the house,” and that all these were happening “in the room where the body was laid out, overlapping and intermingling” (610).

Abuloy (monetary contributions and donations) is an essential part of a *lamay*, especially for poor Filipino families. Isidro (1978), for example, states that Baras townfolk usually contribute *abuloy* to enable families to hold a decent burial without incurring debts. Given the high costs of funeral services in the Philippines, where families are expected to pay around Php 35,000 at minimum (Rivas 2019), giving *abuloy* has become an enduring practice during wakes.

In the Philippines, deep sorrow and grief is loosely translated into the word *dalamhati*. It is a word supposedly borrowed from Malay where *dalam* means inside/within, while *hati* means liver (Santiago 1993). *Dalamhati*, then, is an emotion of intense sorrow “felt in the inner recesses of one’s being, the liver” (Paz 2008, xii). According to Mojares (1997), precolonial Filipinos, much like their Southeast Asian neighbors, believed that the *atay* is “the bodily center of a person’s being, the source of power, courage, and strength” (138).

Akin to the five-stage grief model of Kübler-Ross (1969), Filipino psychiatrist and historian Luciano P.R. Santiago (1993) attempted to understand the stages of mourning of Filipinos through analyzing the Tagalog words that were most used by his patients to describe their experiences of loss. He posits that the mourning process of Filipinos is comprised of three stages. The first is *salaghati*, or the predepression stage, where one attempts to ward off (*salag*) a heart-rending feeling. The second stage is the *dalamhati*, or the depression stage, characterized by “a heart-rending (or liver-splitting) emotion” (281). Finally, one gets to the *luwalhati*, or the postdepression stage, where the heart-rending burden is “extruded” out of the body and is replaced by feelings of relief and joy.

Mourning and grief work among Philippine ethnolinguistic communities also appear to be a communal activity. For example, Del Rosario (1998) studied grief and sorrow through the songs of the Ifugao, an ethnolinguistic community in the northern part of the country. She states that, although the Ifugao seldom express grief to others in ordinary conversations, they deeply feel grief and sorrow. She observed that sorrow and sadness were usually expressed in community songs that make use of the themes of separation, forgetting, and remembering. The songs also indicate that, for the Ifugao, well-being is achieved if one remains “in the company of kin, friends, neighbors, spouses, and children” (168). Through the act of remembering, the Ifugao maintain a connection with members of their community who depart or die. The theme of shared grief is also present in Rosaldo’s work in northern Philippines. In his fieldwork in the northeast of Luzon, Rosaldo (1993) learned that grief, triggered by the painful loss of close family members, or by turbulent life transitions (especially among young Ilongot men),

produces extreme rage among the Ilongot. This rage compels the men to behead a fellow human being as a means to “carry his anger” (1). According to Rosaldo, severing and tossing away the victim’s head enables the Ilongot men “to vent and throw away the anger of their bereavement” (1). After taking a head, the mourning prohibitions are lifted. Headhunting, then, was the Ilongot’s collective expression of and reaction to grief, rage, and loss; it was a ritual that provided them cleansing and catharsis.

Pandemic Grief

What then happens when preexisting rituals and practices of mourning are severely disrupted? The COVID-19 global pandemic has had exceptionally profound effects on all aspects of life and living across the globe (Walsh 2020). Not only has it created “global geographies of death,” it has also cascaded multiple and “varying degrees of personal, economic, social, and political losses” (Maddrell 2020, 107). This widespread phenomenon of bereavement has resulted in what Holinger (2020) terms “pandemic grief.” She explains this type of grief as something felt by entire nations, in relation to both the prepandemic lives that we have all “lost” and the lives that the pandemic has claimed and continue to claim:

It’s not depression, which includes a loss of self-esteem or an inability to experience pleasure. It’s a pervasive feeling that is unique to this time in history. This is a new form of grief that has affected us all, in some way. Our national grief is new. It’s called pandemic grief.

Complicating COVID-19-related grief further is Carr et al.’s (2020) assertion that COVID-19 fatalities exemplify “bad deaths.” In general, poor or bad deaths are characterized “by physical discomfort, difficulty in breathing, social isolation, psychological distress, lack of preparation, being treated without respect or dignity, and the receipt of unwanted medical interventions or being deprived of treatments one desires” (Krikorian et al. 2020 as cited in Carr et al. 2020, 426). Carr and her colleagues remarked that certain aspects of COVID-19 deaths—namely, dying in isolation or in overcrowded and overwhelmed healthcare facilities, overreliance on mechanical ventilation for breathing, difficulty in breathing—amplify the pain of loss amid the pandemic. Their characterization of bad deaths amid the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be pertinent and widespread (see Hamid and Jahangir 2020; Walsh 2020), and it bears close resemblance to the Philippine case.

On March 2020, the Philippine Department of Health issued Memorandum No. 2020-0158, otherwise known as “Proper Handling of the Remains of Suspect, Probable and Confirmed COVID-19 Cases.” The memo states, among other things, that wakes or any form of mass gatherings and assemblies are prohibited; the procedures and cremation must be done within 12 hours of death; and, in case the family would like to organize a funeral, only adult members of the family may be allowed to attend. Burial is permissible, especially to accommodate Islamic

funeral laws, but is less preferred. Complementing this memo, the Department of the Interior and Local Government of the Philippines issued Memorandum Circular No. 2020-063 on March 27, 2020. Titled “Interim Guidelines on the Management of Human Remains for Patient under Investigation (PUI) and Confirmed Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Cases,” the memo strictly prohibits direct contact with the bodies of the deceased tagged as COVID-19. The memo also disallows the viewing of remains in funeral parlors and during hygienic preparations of the body (e.g., cleaning and embalming of the remains). While both guidelines underscore the importance of applying the principles of cultural sensitivity to the handling and disposal of the remains of confirmed COVID-19 cases, reports on the ground indicate that most families are forced to agree to the rapid, impersonal disposal and forced cremation of bodies (Albina 2020). Cremation, while having been a culturally acceptable disposal option for Filipino families prior to the pandemic, was done hurriedly and in an impersonal manner during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is deemed a problem since it disrupts both the intimate rituals surrounding death and the long-held traditions of whole-body burials in the country (Cannell 1999; Go and Docot 2021). In effect, bereaved families described their experience of loss amid the pandemic to be “painful” and “disorienting” (Albina 2020), especially since they could not be given a chance to say their final goodbyes and tend to the corpse of their loved one. Albina (2020) argues that the dead in the country were deprived of a dignified death due to the Philippine government’s restrictions and protocols on visits and isolation, and hasty disposal for COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 cases alike.

Further worsening the loss were the social restrictions of the first months of the pandemic (Sta. Ana III 2020). These stringent control measures to prevent the spread of the virus significantly reduced the agency of the bereaved to engage in both the conduct of pre-pandemic mourning rituals and practices and the everyday interactions and support that are deemed important for their well-being (Neimeyer 2011; Walter 1996). Research on bereavement emphasize that funeral rites and mourning rituals provide grieving adults and children support in their meaning-making process following the death of a loved one (Davies 2017; Loewenthal 2006; Walter 1996). Rituals are a means for the bereaved to express strong emotions, and their repetitive nature reduces feelings of anxiety (Myerhoff 1984). Thus, the lack of opportunities to engage in preexisting mourning practices and rituals adversely affects one’s psychological state (Loewenthal 2006; O’Rourke et al. 2011), makes the grieving process more challenging (Giamattey et al. 2022) and possibly disenfranchises one’s grief (Doka 1999). But this in no way implies that the bereaved are completely incapacitated in dealing with their loss. In fact, despite being confronted with mounting challenges and restrictions, bereaved individuals have usually been found to engage in “creative and highly idiosyncratic” ways to process death (Bradbury 2011, 221). For instance, creative interventions—such as writing prose and music, and other forms of expressive therapies to process loss—

were found to be successful in resolving traumatic grief in adults and adolescents (Edgar-Bailey and Kress 2010).

Digital Mourning

One alternative mode of mourning that emerged in recent years is what scholars refer to as “digital mourning” (Babis 2020), or the use of online platforms to mourn. Brubaker and Hayes (2011) note that various social networking sites have incorporated features that let people grieve and mourn the dead, and these have changed traditional norms on emotional expression, particularly in relation to death and mourning (Nansen et al. 2017). Examples of the ways that people grieve and mourn online include the act of sharing memories with or about the deceased through textual or audiovisual content (such as Facebook statuses and posts), creating virtual memorial sites using blogs or Facebook pages (among others), and communicating with the deceased or his or her bereaved friends and relatives (Wagner 2018). Facebook, in particular, has significantly revised its policy regarding the profiles of the deceased in the past years (Lingel 2013) by adding more features for the deceased and their bereaved families and friends. This is due to Facebook realizing that as it increases its membership, it is almost inevitable that dead profiles may soon outnumber the living (Kohn et al. 2012). In 2012 alone, for example, Facebook had an estimated 30 million dead former users, with around 19,000 Facebook users dying daily (Kaleem 2012). Previously, Facebook offered only two options for the deceased’s profile: leave it as it is, as though the user was still alive, or request for the account’s deletion; the latter would require a family member to provide a death certificate or any legal document as justification (Nansen et al. 2017). In 2015, Facebook introduced a new policy regarding the memorialization of Facebook profiles/accounts, where they allow the next of kin to “memorialize” the profile. This means that the word “Remembering” will be added before the deceased’s name on the profile, while existing friends may continue to post in accordance with the deceased’s privacy settings. Church (2013) suggests that, in a way, memorializing the dead on social network sites such as Facebook allows communities to “type the deceased back into being” (184).

While similarly using digital technologies to facilitate mourning, digital mourning is still quite different from what Filipinos have come to know as *e-buro* or online wake viewing. Previous to the pandemic and as early as 2007, bereaved Filipinos have been presented the option to attend *e-buro* (Lagura 2008). Pioneered by St. Peter Life Plan Inc. (Olandres 2008), *e-buro* is an innovation that allows relatives from abroad and far-flung provinces to pay their final respects to their dead by logging into an online account that allows them to access a view of the coffin and funeral room. However, since funeral services in the country are generally expensive—amounting to a minimum of Php 35,000 (Rivas 2019)—Filipinos might not have enough to afford these advanced add-on funeral services from big mortuary companies such as St. Peter.

Method

This study is based on the narratives of grief and digital mourning of eight Filipinos who lost loved ones from March to December 2020. It employed a mix of crowdsourcing and snowball and criterion sampling to recruit potential interviewees. According to Salmons (2014), criterion sampling is highly encouraged for online interviews since it allows the researcher to be specific about the characteristics that serve as the basis for selection of research participants. By overtly stating the criteria for recruitment, “the researcher also creates additional factors that can be independently verified from sources other than the research participant’s own statements” (Salmons 2010, 106). Meanwhile, snowball sampling, one of the most popular methods of sampling in qualitative research, is a method of survey sample selection that is commonly used to locate rare or difficult-to-find populations and relies on referrals from initial respondents or personal contacts believed to have or know someone with the characteristics pertinent to the study (Johnson 2014). Using the principles of these sampling methods, I made a two-page digital infographic poster that gave a summary of the research. It detailed that I was looking for potential interviewees who were 18 years old and above and who had lost loved ones in 2020, the first year of the pandemic. The poster also included details about the schedule, duration and mode of interview, as well as the contact details of the researcher. It also featured a question asking readers if they knew someone who fit the criteria for interviewees. I posted the infographic on my Instagram account and circulated it to my personal contacts on Facebook.

After four days, a total of nine participants signified interest to be interviewed. Two of them were my personal friends, while seven were contacts and acquaintances of my friends. One contact withdrew from being interviewed because of conflicting schedule. The other participants got in touch with me through Facebook Messenger or via text message (in some instances, I got in touch with them after they declared their interest in joining the study through our common friends). Upon establishing communication, I discussed more details of the research with them and asked them again if they had further clarifications or questions. I also emphasized that joining the research was entirely optional and that, if they agree, I was very much willing to help arrange for a debriefing with a counsellor, if the need arises. When they reiterated their agreement to participate, I sent them the informed consent form, which contained the research and interview details. Table 1 summarizes the profile of the interview participants.

They were interviewed one to three times each, with written and informed consent, from April to May 2021 through a Zoom call or Facebook Messenger chat and video. The online storytelling sessions were recorded and manually transcribed. Thematic analysis was applied to the data, initially using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software program. The storytelling interviews focused on

the interviewees' experiences of mourning as well as the ways they responded to the social restrictions, especially during the first eight months, of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Profile of interview participants

Interviewee (code name)	Sex	Age	Relationship to the deceased	Cause of death	Date of passing of the deceased
Jonathan	M	24	(Estranged) Son	COVID-19	March 2020
Marc	M	30	Son	COVID-19	March 2020
Risa	F	28	Cousin	COVID-19	April 2020
Carlo	M	44	Son	COVID-19	April 2020
Aldrin	M	33	Grandson	COVID-19	June 2020
Ella	F	39	Daughter	COVID-19	July 2020
Anna	F	27	Niece (two uncles passed away)	COVID-19; stroke	September 2020
Vicky	F	34	Granddaughter and grandniece (grandfather and grand aunt passed away)	COVID-19	December 2020

Researching about Death and Mourning

This paper is the result of scholarly curiosity as much as it is a very personal journey of coping with loss. In 2020, the year the pandemic started spreading across the world, I, like many other Filipinos, lost precious friends and colleagues. With no opportunities to send them off “properly,” there was this feeling of being suspended in mid-air, unable to move, mourn, or process the loss. There were days I found myself “visiting” them by clicking on their Facebook profiles, reading the messages and tributes of their other friends, and often fighting the urge to send them a private message myself. I messaged them, nonetheless, thinking that maybe messaging the dead on Facebook is just another iteration of speaking to the dead. There were many times in 2020 when I forgot that they were dead, and it got to a point when I needed to create a “ritual,” wherein I routinely visited their profiles and viewed photos or read messages from their relatives on their timelines to remind myself that they were indeed gone. It was this experience of losing loved ones that pushed me to research about death and mourning during the pandemic. Being acquainted with loss proved to be useful in practicing empathetic understanding (Geertz 1973) during my interviews with bereaved Filipinos. One important “emotional safety protocol” that I developed during the research process was regularly checking in on my and my interviewees’ emotions by providing a venue (Facebook Messenger) for post-interview conversations. When interviewees started asking me about my grief, I extended the same trust they gave to me and told them about my own experiences of loss. The mutual sharing and acknowledgment of emotions helped build a relationship of trust and care between me and my interviewees.

Narratives of Pandemic Grief and Mourning

The stories of loss and bereavement that were gathered for this study focus only on Roman Catholic and Christian experiences. The narratives suggest that grief amid the pandemic can be characterized as disenfranchised and compounded. Disenfranchised grief is described as “grief that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported” (Doka 1999, 37). Meanwhile, compounded grief is grief that is aggravated by a multitude of events and circumstances. Several factors contributed to the disenfranchisement and compounding of grief of Filipinos during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic. These will be presented below.

“We were all unready”

A constant theme and factor that emerged from the stories is that of being unready for the death of their loved ones. All interviewees described how their family members’ symptoms progressed very quickly, and that the sudden onset gave them little opportunity to prepare for the worst. Marc, 30, for instance, lost his mother in March 2020. A day after arriving in the Philippines from London, his mother started exhibiting mild symptoms: a slight headache, cough, and a fever. They assumed it was just the flu. A day passed and his mother was rushed to the hospital due to difficulty in breathing. Little did he know that the entrance of the hospital’s intensive care unit would be the last place he would see his mother. Marc commented that he sometimes catches himself recounting the entire experience of losing his mother, however painful, if only to impress on his mind that it really did happen, and that he really lost her to COVID-19.

Apart from the suddenness and the quick progression of symptoms, other interviewees commented on how the unreadiness of the Philippine healthcare system further compounded their grief. Many observers have described the Philippine public health system as weak and fragmented even before the onset of the pandemic (Council for Health and Development 2020; The Lancet 2021). This fragmentation was greatly magnified during the COVID-19 lockdown, as seen in the overwhelmed healthcare system and critical care capacity of the country (Amit et al. 2021) and as evidenced by the experience of some interviewees. Risa, 28, for example, lost her favorite cousin to COVID-19. He was a director at a major television network and was only 32 when he died. He caught the virus in March 2020, the first month of the world’s longest lockdown (Balagtas 2021). After being in a coma for two weeks, he suffered from multiple organ failure and passed away. He was Patient 33. Risa shared that she often wonders what could have happened if her cousin had caught the virus at a later date, a time when medical knowledge about COVID-19 had developed enough to respond adequately to or manage severe cases:

Ang nakakalungkot, hindi pa tayo aware tungkol sa virus [nung na-COVID ang pinsan ko]. Hindi pa nila alam kung paano gamutin ‘yung COVID. So minsan

naiisip ko, kung nagkasakit ba siya ng later date, nasalba kaya siya? Bakit siya naging Patient 33? Bakit hindi na lang siya nagkasakit ng later date? Kasi mas naiintindihan na 'yung COVID after some time diba. For me it's a bad death kasi it's sudden. It's so sudden.

(What's sad about it is that we were not knowledgeable about the virus when my cousin contracted it. They did not know how to treat COVID. What if my cousin caught the virus at a later date? Would he still be alive? Why did he become Patient 33? Why couldn't he have gotten sick at a later time? Since we understood COVID-19 better after some time. His was a bad death; it was very sudden.)

Equally painful was remembering how her cousin died alone, without family members by his side. Further complicating her family's grief was when her cousin's mother, who was sent home by the hospital as soon as they confirmed the virus had indeed infected him, was prevented by their local government unit (LGU) from entering their municipality over fears that she may have also contracted COVID-19. Information about the virus and how it spreads was still rather scant during this time, thereby affecting local government policies regarding quarantine. Thus, she went back and forth from the hospital, and it took two days for the LGU to finally decide to send her to an isolation facility for 14 days. After the ordeal, it was found that she was negative for the virus all along. Unfortunately, she could not do anything about the death of her son while she was in quarantine.

Meanwhile, Aldrin, 33, a Cebuano public school teacher, lost his grandmother in June 2020. This was around the same time Cebu was reported as the “second major battleground” (Tomacruz 2020) in the country's fight against the virus. When his grandmother started to exhibit symptoms in early June, they immediately rushed her to the nearest hospital. Regrettably, they were turned away due to overcapacity. It took them three more trips to three different healthcare facilities before she was finally admitted. Aldrin recalled how agonizing it was to be rejected by hospitals and described the experience as “harrowing” and “painful.”

Vicky, 34, had a similar experience. In December 2020, her 96-year-old grandfather, who was based in a rural barangay in Marihatag City, Surigao del Sur, needed to be rushed to a hospital because he was having difficulty breathing. When the family tried to take him to a hospital in Butuan, two hours away from Marihatag, they were redirected again and told to go to a facility in Tandag City instead, an additional hour away, where the hospitals had more “sophisticated equipment.” It took them three days to get the swab test results and learn that he was indeed positive for the virus:

'Yung nearest na hospital na equipped supposedly with an ICU ay two hours away pa. Ang layo talaga ng binyahe niya. Given the age of my grandparents, tanggap naman namin if they pass. Pero syempre ang lungkot-lungkot pa rin kasi andaming nangyari, ang dami nilang pinagdaanan. Ang bagal pa ng lahat ng proseso.

(The nearest hospital equipped with an ICU was two hours away. They traveled very far. Given the age of my grandparents, we would have accepted their passing. But we are really sad about what they needed to go through. The process was so slow.)

As Risa, Aldrin, and Vicky's experiences show, the context in which death happens greatly impacts and compounds grief. The sudden onset and irreversibility of COVID-19 symptoms bring along a sense of unreality and trauma. Additionally, in times of death, bereaved family members experience more distress when they do not have opportunities to bid goodbye, when they think the death could have been prevented, or when the death was very sudden, causing them to become disoriented and hampering their ability to cope with the loss (Carr 2003; Sanders 1983; Wright et al. 2010).

Treatment and Condition of the Body During Confinement and After Death

Another factor that greatly compounded the grief of the bereaved was the way the bodies of the deceased have been treated during their confinement and after their death. Some interviewees painfully witnessed how their loved ones' conditions worsened. Aldrin, for instance, was doubly upset to see his grandmother, whom he initially described as dignified, very strong, and stern, in excruciating pain during her confinement in the hospital. She gasped and struggled hard to breathe. To help her, doctors recommended intubation, which Aldrin resignedly agreed to, not knowing he was entirely unprepared to witness his grandmother's pain:

Lumabas ako ng room kasi parang baboy 'yung grandmother ko. Kasi may force talaga, they try to open her mouth tapos may material na mahaba na pinapasok sa kanya. Hindi ko kinaya. Lumabas ako and umiyak ako. Never ko 'to inimagina after all these years, hahantong sa ganitong set-up 'yung buhay niya.

(I went out of her hospital room; my grandmother was like a pig. They were trying to open her mouth with force to insert something inside her. I couldn't handle it. I went out of the room and cried. I never imagined that after all these years, she would end up like this.)

After being intubated, Aldrin's grandmother had to be operated on so that a catheter could be installed near her shoulder blade. The veins on his grandmother's hands and arms were deemed too weak to respond to intravenous treatment and medicine, so a catheter was seen as the only way she could receive the medication. Aldrin quipped, "binutasan na naman 'yung grandmother ko" (they made another hole in my grandmother). Aldrin's grief was compounded by witnessing how his grandmother's health deteriorated and how her body responded during treatment.

Apart from the anguish resulting from the condition of the deceased's body during COVID-19 treatment, equally traumatizing for the bereaved is the way the dead body is treated. Verdery (2000) argues that the handling of dead bodies is often

most distressing in cases when they are considered not to happen properly. In the Philippines, where holding wakes and burials seem to be the normative practice, cremation was made mandatory by the government during the first wave of the pandemic. Many bereaved families whose loved ones did not die from COVID-19 were also subjected to the same policy. Anna, 27, lost two uncles in September 2020, one to stroke and another to COVID-19. Anna's Uncle Bill, 72 years old, suffered from a stroke while resting in bed. He was brought to a hospital in Manila one evening but passed away immediately. Since he was not a COVID-19 case, the family, who all lived in one compound in Quezon City, looked forward to holding a family-only wake in their housing complex. But when they asked for text updates from the funeral parlor, they were appalled at the reply. They were told that their uncle's body had already started decomposing. Due allegedly to overcapacity, the funeral parlor could not administer formalin and freeze the body, which led to its rapid decomposition. Anna shared that she could not forget how they treated her uncle's corpse, saying, "*hindi na ginalang 'yung katawan ng tito ko*" (they did not respect my uncle's body). Anna felt that circumstances forced them to cremate her uncle. The mistreatment of the corpse and the forced cremation were incredibly painful for her family, that they could not talk about it even up to now:

Hindi ko po sure kung anong tinag sa death certificate niya. Pero ang sure po ako, pinipilit kami na i-cremate 'yung bangkay. At dahil doon, hindi natuloy 'yung pinaplanong lamay. Ang sama ng loob ng mga kapatid nung nalaman nilang 'yung bangkay ng kapatid nilang pumanaw, inuod na daw. Sobrang galit na galit yung family. Kahit hanggang ngayon, hindi pa rin ma-bring up 'yung nangyari eh.

(I'm not sure what they stated in his death certificate. What I'm sure about is that we were forced to cremate him. Because of that, we were not able to push through with the planned wake. The siblings of my uncle really felt bad when they learned that the body of their brother was already infested with maggots. They were furious. Up until now, they cannot bring it up in conversations.)

Anna also commented on the steep price of cremation. Her family had to shell out Php 65,000 to cremate her uncle's remains, an amount that she described was far more expensive than what the family was expecting to pay.

Lack of Social Support

One other factor that compounded the grief of the bereaved during the pandemic was the general lack of social support. Marc asserted that losing a loved one amid a pandemic was exceptionally difficult because the familiar mourning rituals and practices that constituted a "template" for processing loss could not be performed presently due to existing health protocols and restrictions:

Parang bago mag-pandemya, may set of expectations ka, may template, may routine, kapag may namamatay. May steps na na-fo-foresee mo, klaro 'yung mga

kailangan gawin. Alam mo kung ano ang gagawin mo: Iiyak ka dito sa part na ito, magdadasal ka sa part na ito. Ngayon kasing may pandemic, hindi klaro. Hindi natin alam kung paano mag-process and mag-proceed after mama's death.

(Before the pandemic, you had a set of expectations, a template and routine, upon someone's death. You can foresee the steps, and the tasks are clear. You know which part of the rituals requires introspection or prayer. But now, amid the pandemic, it is not clear. We do not know how to process and proceed after my mother's death.)

He also stated that the strict protocols on mass gatherings made it difficult for bereaved families to receive support from their friends. Additionally, Marc commented that while the Duterte administration, which he described as lacking in compassion, could not give bereaved families the sympathy and assurance they wanted to hear, it should still provide some form of support. At the very least, the government should shoulder the expenses of families who lost loved ones to COVID-19. He also believed that families should not be forced to cremate the bodies of their departed loved ones and that, with the proper coordination and observance of protocols, they should be allowed to gather and grieve.

“Tempering” and “Suspending” Grief

When his father passed, Jonathan immediately felt the usual assortment of emotions that come with a loved one's demise. But because so many things were happening at the start of the lockdown, he also felt an urge to manage these emotions by attempting to be detached and unfeeling. His family members, knowing that they would be locked down in their small condominium unit for a long while, surmised that they needed to temper their strong emotions—even their anger at the government—if they wanted to survive:

Nag-agree kami na ite-temper namin 'yung mga emotions namin since we know na mahirap mag-process ng ganung emotions at a time when everything else is suspended. Parang naaalala ko na stoic lang ako that time. Pati galit ko sa gobyerno, nag-fade. I felt na kailangan ko siyang gawin to survive.

(We all agreed to temper our emotions because we know how difficult it is to process them at a time when everything else is suspended. I remember how stoic I was then. Even my anger at the government faded. I felt I needed to do that to survive.)

Aldrin felt a similar urge to remain detached about his grandmother's death—especially when, on the same day of her passing, a test confirmed that he was also positive for COVID-19. He deliberately tried to suspend his grief so he could prioritize getting better:

I think, nung nalaman kong wala na si mama, sinuspend ko 'yung grief process ko because I needed to be strong for the rest of my family. Buti na lang din I was able to hold and suspend my emotions. I promised myself iiyak ako, maitawid lang itong lahat.

(I think, when I learned that my grandmother was gone, I suspended my grieving because I needed to be strong for the rest of my family. Fortunately, I was able to hold and suspend my emotions. I promised myself that I will cry, once I get through all this.)

While Jonathan and Aldrin consciously “tempered” their grief, there were other interviewees who decidedly “suspended” their bereavement due to more pressing factors. Ella, 39, who lost her father to COVID-19 in July 2020, tested positive for the virus at the same time as him. Her entire family caught the virus and was confined in Laguna. Much like Aldrin, who battled the virus in the face of a loved one’s death, she felt that she had no time to mourn. Since the health protocols required that bodies of COVID-positive patients be cremated within 24 hours, Ella felt like she needed to put her emotions “on hold” and facilitate the cremation remotely and as soon as possible.

Carlo, 44, who lost his mother to COVID-19 in April 2020, also expressed the same compulsion to suspend his grief. His mother had been living in the United States since 2009 and was planning finally to come home to the Philippines in October 2020. Unfortunately, she caught the virus in April of the same year and did not recover. They received her urn the same month she had planned to come home. When asked about his family’s grief, Carlo said they still refuse to talk about losing their mother amongst themselves, believing that it was not the right time to mourn yet. He explained that he consciously “suspended” his mourning because “*meron pang laban*” (the fight against COVID-19 is not over yet).

Lack of Closure: The Centrality of the Body and Rituals Involving the Body

Intercorporeal forms of human sociality, especially that of touching, have always been crucial to our well-being and health (Montagu 1996). The importance of touch extends to the event of death; touching a loved ones’ body brings home the reality of the irreversibility of death (Chapple and Ziebland 2010). During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, restrictions and health protocols prevented families from viewing and touching their loved ones’ bodies.

Aldrin and Ella had been tested as COVID-positive and confined in a hospital when their loved ones passed away. For both, not having the opportunity to say goodbye and see and touch the lifeless bodies of their loved ones before these were cremated severely strained their grieving process. Ella shared:

Sabi ko pa nga kay Mama, baka hindi totoong patay na siya. Maybe it’s a big conspiracy. Kung ano-ano na yung iniisip mo kasi wala tayong proof eh. We never got a chance to properly say goodbye, we never saw him, hindi namin nayakap. Wala kang vision o image na may coffin, na nandun siya sa coffin. So ang hirap tanggapin.

(I told my mother, maybe it isn’t true that he is dead. Maybe it’s a big conspiracy. I thought of so many things because we don’t have proof. We never got a chance

to properly say goodbye, we never saw him, we were not able to hug him. We don't have a vision or image of a coffin, or that he is inside the coffin. It's hard to accept.)

Unable to view the body, Ella commented that her ability to achieve closure and to move on from the experience was severely impeded. She shared that, after her father's passing, she often caught herself thinking that her father had just gone to the United States for a vacation and that he would be coming home soon, leaving her with doubt and a profound sense of ambiguity.

Aldrin also had a similar take, emphasizing the need for a visual confirmation that the deceased was indeed already gone:

We need a mental image of the deceased. It helps us find our closure. Kapag nakita mo kasi na namatay na, 'pag nahawakan mo siya at nakita mo na may kabaong at na-expose ka doon for many days, bumabalik at tumatatak 'yun eh. I think, kapag hindi mo nakikita ang namatay, nagiging imagination mo na lang. So hindi ka makakamove-on ng bwelta kasi wala kang paghuhugutan na imahe na wala na siya.

(We need a mental image of the deceased. It helps us find closure. When you see your loved one, when you touch them and see them inside a coffin, and you are exposed to the coffin for many days, it gets imprinted in your mind. I think, when you don't see the deceased, their death becomes imagined. You won't be able to move on because you don't have an image of them being lifeless.)

Here, we see the centrality of the body of the deceased in the bereaved's process of grieving and seeking closure after their loved one's death. The act of sensing—viewing and touching the body, in particular—confirms the event of death and allows the bereaved to accept it as a fact. Conversely, not being able to view and touch the lifeless body of the dead or not having a mental image of the deceased leaves the bereaved with doubt and skepticism about the event of death, leaving them to wonder if their loved one has indeed passed on.

The Enduring Importance of Memorial Services and *Paglilibing* (Burying the Dead)

Apart from seeing the body, the traditional funeral or mortuary rituals involving the body were found by the interviewees to be central to processing death. Funerals provide a venue for the culturally-specific expression of loss (Fulton 1995). It also marks a transition, in which death's irreversibility is emphasized (Irion 1991). Hence, the lack of opportunity to organize memorial services to remember the deceased as a community greatly compounded their grief.

Some interviewees, however, insisted on organizing a memorial service, even after several months since the passing of their loved ones. Ella's family, for example, pushed through with holding a memorial service for her father three months after his passing. They waited on the easing of lockdown restrictions and organized a

face-to-face service in their church in October 2020. They limited the number of attendees and made sure to adhere to health protocols. Looking back, Ella believed the memorial was a turning point in their grieving process:

Alam mo, after nung service, may feeling of relief. Na-validate 'yung feeling namin, na-recognize ang mourning namin, that we lost him—that it happened and it's true. Na-acknowledge whatever we were feeling. Hindi lang siya na brush aside.

(After the service, we felt relief. Our feelings were validated, our mourning, and the fact that we lost him—that it happened and it's true—were recognized. Whatever we were feeling was acknowledged. It wasn't just brushed aside.)

The memorial service allowed her family's grief and loss to be openly recognized and acknowledged by their friends and loved ones, as well as people who were close to their father.

Meanwhile, Risa and her family have been planning to organize a face-to-face memorial service for her cousin. They initially planned to hold it in April 2021, in time for the first anniversary of her cousin's death. However, the surge in COVID-19 cases prevented them from pushing through with their plans. After her cousin's passing, she shared that the family deliberately refused to do an online memorial service. Her family prefers to stick to the traditional rituals of mourning, owing to the belief that her cousin deserves a full memorial service in honor and celebration of his life.

While most of the interviewees emphasized the significance of wakes and memorial services in alleviating their grief, some insisted on the importance of respecting the dead's wishes so that they may rest in peace ("*para matahimik na sila*"). For instance, after their loved ones were cremated, Vicky and Aldrin's respective families decided to bury the urn in the plots their grandparents had bought a long time ago. It was crucial for Vicky's family to grant her grandfather's last wishes and bury him according to their religion's burial practices. This meant that they had to bury his urn beside her grandmother's resting place, following his request. Meanwhile, for Aldrin, not burying his grandmother's urn would have been an insult to her memory and her wishes. He shared that his grandmother bought a plot of land in a cemetery almost twenty years ago, which signified that she wanted to be buried after her death.

Meanwhile, for Ella, burying her father's urn in a cemetery provided closure to her family:

Kung andyan lang ang urn sa sala, parang naging palamuti na lang siya. We don't want the time to come na dadaan daanan na lang [si Papa]. He belongs sa sementeryo, where we would always have this sacred time and space for him. He can't just be an ornament sa bahay.

(If the urn was left in the living room, my father would become merely an ornament. We don't want the time to come when we would just casually pass by our father. He belongs in the cemetery, where we would always have this sacred time and space for him. He can't just be an ornament in our house.)

Burying her father in a specific place also allowed them to have a “sacred space” they can visit from time to time, instead of just keeping the urn at home—which could make them forget its importance. Taken together, these examples suggest that it is incredibly essential for bereaved families to be able to “honor” their dead, as well as the dead’s last wishes, to avoid feeling guilt and to be able to get closure. In a way, these efforts also make evident the desire of the bereaved to carry out or make a “good death” despite challenges so that they can properly send off the deceased.

Altars and Other Alternatives

In place of the body and with the lack of opportunity to engage in rituals involving the body, the bereaved also tried to build in their homes an altar or shrine for their dead. To them, the altar provided the deceased with a symbolic existence and a means for communication. While earlier research cautioned against maintaining a relationship with the deceased (see Field et al. 1999; Jackson 1957), it has since been established that having “continuing bonds” with the dead is a natural and adaptive experience following a loss (Klass et al. 1996). Gorospe (2018) emphasizes that symbolic representations of the dead positively aid the bereaved in maintaining a connection with the former. Indeed, for the interviewees of this research, the creation of an altar and the act of communicating with their dead allowed them to maintain a bond with their deceased loved one while also permitting them to cope with their loss and adjust to life without them.

Upon her grandfather’s passing, Vicky’s relatives, who were based in Marihatag in Surigao del Sur, built a makeshift “memorial shrine” inside their home. The shrine, which made use of her grandfather’s bedside table, contained a small photo of him, a vase filled with flowers, and a white candle. A tarpaulin banner plastered on the wall at the back of the shrine contained another photo of her grandfather, a bible verse, and the date of his birth and passing. Family friends also sent flower arrangements, which they placed around the shrine. Vicky commented that it was just like the usual wake, except that there was no coffin. When the urn was finally taken home, it was put in the middle of the shrine. For Vicky, the shrine was a way to give honor to her grandfather, but it also symbolized her grandfather in itself:

The shrine gives honor. Ngayon kasi, wala kaming katawan. Kasi ‘di ba usually, kapag lamay, may katawan na malalapitan at makikita. Ngayon, walang body to visit and look at. Kung andyan kasi ‘yung katawan meron ka pang time to say goodbye, to talk to him.

(The shrine gives honor. We don’t have a body. Usually, when we hold wakes, there is a body we can look at or view. Nowadays, we do not have a body to visit and look at. If we had that, we could have had time to say goodbye, to talk to him.)

Anna's family also made an altar for her late Uncle Bill. They set up a table in their compound's garage, put the urn on it, and embellished it with flowers and a photo of her uncle. Like Vicky, Anna believed that the altar symbolized her uncle:

Mahalaga 'yung altar at urn... Dahil pag-sy-syoblize siguro na siya 'yun. Siya 'yung pinag-aalayan ng bulaklak. Kakausapin mo siya eh. Parang, "Uncle Bill... o ito yosi mo." "O, alak, Uncle Bill." Mag-iwan kami ng yosi at alak sa altar. Lalagyan ng kandila at bulaklak. Tapos dadasalan siya. "O uncle, pwede ka na magpahinga."

(The altar and urn are important. They symbolize our uncle—that he is the one we offer flowers to. We talk to him, "Uncle Bill, here is your cigarette." "Uncle Bill, here is your beer." We leave a cigarette and beer on the altar. We put candles and flowers. We pray for him. "Uncle, you can rest now.")

The altar functioned as a way for Anna and her family to speak to their beloved uncle and tell him that he can finally rest in peace. Her family offered gifts and spoke to the urn frequently, in the belief that their Uncle Bill was listening. In this regard, speaking to the deceased had a therapeutic function for the bereaved; it also appeared to ease them into accepting that he has passed on.

The Increasing Use of Technology to Facilitate Mourning Rituals Amid the Pandemic

Data shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, technology fostered individual and social well-being (Canale et al. 2021). In the case of the interviewees, they utilized different forms of technology to hold, facilitate, or organize activities related to death and mourning. They used video calls and phone calls to stay updated, console each other, and hold novenas or *padasal*. They also did frequent electronic fund transfers via bank applications in their smartphones or e-wallets like Gcash to send *abuloy* (financial assistance). Although these technology-mediated death- and mourning-related practices were already around before the COVID-19 pandemic, they received more significant attention during the pandemic.

When Vicky's grandfather was still confined in a hospital in Tandag City, their family was able to talk with him through video call. They used these calls, which she termed as a "ritual," to encourage him to fight and stay strong:

Kakausapin lang namin nang kakausapin, "papa, grandfather, laban ka lang." Encouraging words, so that he doesn't feel alone. Kasi sanay na sanay siyang forever merong kasama. Lagi eh, the konsepto of the ICU and the isolation is so different. Kaya kailangan meron ding ganung ritual. Para ma-feel niya na meron siyang kasama.

(We just talk to him consistently, "Papa, grandfather, keep fighting!" We encourage him so that he doesn't feel alone. He's used to having a companion all the time. The concept of the ICU and isolation is so different, and that's why we need to have that ritual of talking to him while he was confined. So he can feel that we're with him.)

When her grandfather passed, Vicky's family continued to do Zoom video calls for their novenas, which lasted nine days.

Aldrin and his family also held a *padasal* (prayer/novena), but instead of doing it via video call, which would require a strong internet connection, they did it through a three-way phone call. They asked a distant relative based in Cagayan de Oro to lead the *padasal* every 3 p.m. for nine consecutive days. The other connection was his aunt, who lived in another part of Cebu City.

Despite initially feeling ambivalent towards the use of technology to do the ritual, according to Aldrin, technology helped them fulfill the customary nine days of prayer, which was the most essential death-related ritual to his family:

Importante ang padasal, kasi parang there's a higher being in between. It's not just you and the person who died. That there's a divine intervention present in the process of grieving. Somehow it consoles you, by thinking na she is in better hands.

(The novena is important, since it makes me feel that there's a higher being in between; it's not just you and the person who died. That there's a divine intervention present in the process of grieving. Somehow it consoles you, by thinking that she is in better hands.)

Meanwhile, others like Risa and Ella generally used technology to update their respective families and/or console them. Risa shared that as soon as her cousin was admitted to a hospital, their cousins made a group chat exclusively for sharing updates about his condition. Meanwhile, Ella mentioned that the video calls and chat messages from their relatives abroad provided them the comfort and support they needed during the early moments of losing their father.

Another technological affordance that was frequently used by the bereaved were electronic fund transfers. They did this through enrolled bank applications on their smartphones or e-wallets like GCash. In Ella's case, when her entire family was confined in a hospital during her father's passing, all transactions to process her father's cremation were settled through online bank transfers. The crematorium just provided her updates about the status of her father's body.

Abuloy were also sent via bank transfers or GCash. For example, when news of Carlo's mom's passing reached some of her former American patients, whom she took care of as a caregiver, they immediately asked for Carlo's bank account and sent some funds. Vicky's family also received *abuloy* via bank transfers and GCash. Her family developed a system regarding the *abuloy*. Some family members were designated as the point persons or people in charge of the *abuloy*, and they usually had bank accounts or GCash accounts that were set up and ready to receive or do transactions, and thus could collect the *abuloy* more efficiently. The people in charge would then report the amount they had received through their group chat before transferring it to the "head" of the *abuloy* (their aunt), who manages and pays the bills related to their father's passing.

Despite the initial awkwardness and ambivalence (in the case of Aldrin) that came with using different technologies to facilitate death and mourning-related

practices, most of the participants appreciated the role of these technologies in “closing the distance” between bereaved family members. The technological affordances offered by basic cellphones, smartphones, and laptops enabled them to “be together” during difficult moments. Carlo was particularly grateful since he thinks that, if the same pandemic had struck us in the 1990s, his family would not have had the chance to say goodbye to their mother as smartphones did not exist then.

Digital Mourning Practices on Facebook

Responding to the challenges brought on by the social restrictions, all research participants found an alternative platform to channel their grief. They utilized Facebook to mourn and post about the deceased after their passing. It has been observed that this practice, tagged as digital mourning, has become a prevalent phenomenon in recent years (Babis 2020). The interviewees in particular engaged in digital mourning practices that were combinations of the following practices: they used the platform to announce the death of or to eulogize their loved one; they showed their mourning status through changing their profile pictures; and they remembered and/or memorialized and archived their memories with/of the dead by occasionally posting about them (often prompted by the Facebook Memories feature).

Announcing the Death of a Loved One on Facebook

A few days after Vicky’s grandfather passed away, her family decided to post a centralized “official announcement” on Facebook:

The family had to craft an entire post that everyone can share. ‘Yung mga uncles and aunties ko yung nag-craft. Tapos, isa from the siblings nila ‘yung nag-post. And everybody else shall share the post. Hindi ka gagawa ng sarili mong post kasi ‘yun lang dapat ‘yung official announcement.

(The family had to craft an entire post that everyone can share. My uncles and aunts crafted it. Then one of their siblings posted it on Facebook. You shouldn’t make your own post, because there was an official announcement.)

The Facebook announcement included a poster that contained her grandfather’s photo and a caption with an invitation for friends and relatives to join the Zoom novena. Vicky thinks the act of crafting the announcement as a family allowed her dad, aunts, and uncles to work through their grief together; it also helped them to decide as a group which information about his passing could be shared with the public. Vicky also expressed that having an official post about her grandfather provided her a feeling of comfort since she did not need to write a post herself. In turn, she was able to avoid confronting her grief head-on, especially during the early days of his passing when she was still slowly trying to process her feelings.

Aldrin, on the other hand, had to post his own announcement on Facebook. He shared that the process of drafting the announcement was extremely difficult for him since he felt that posting it made his grandmother's passing "so official." Another way that he announced the passing of his grandmother was through changing his Facebook profile picture. On the day she passed away, Aldrin immediately changed his profile picture to a lit candle with a black background to signify his grief. He also changed his cover photo to a picture of the night sky peppered with stars. He shared that he wanted to think that his grandmother was there in the heavens, looking down on him.

Meanwhile, Ella shared that it took her a whole week before she could post about her father's passing, but she felt relief as soon as she did. Posting about the passing of a loved one on Facebook is helpful, according to her, since it meant that she would need to tell the story of her loss only once, thus preventing a traumatic recounting of the experience:

On Facebook, you can reach a lot of people. Dahil sa Facebook, napaalam ko sa mga kamag-anak na malayo. It saves you from the emotional trauma of recounting the same painful story every time.

(On Facebook, you can reach a lot of people. Because of Facebook, I was able to inform my distant relatives of my father's passing. It saves you from the emotional trauma of recounting the same painful story every time.)

Vicky, Ella, and Carlo also commented about how they felt consolation from the Facebook reactions they received when they posted about the passing of their loved ones since so many of their Facebook friends expressed their commiseration and extended their condolences. They observed that their Facebook friends used the "love" and "care" reactions the most. Ella, in particular, appreciates the "care" reactions she received when she posted about her father:

Nata-touch ako kapag care reaction ang ginagamit ng Facebook friends ko, feel na feel ko ang concern. I feel like naiintindihan nila ako. If I put myself in the shoes of these people, I wouldn't know what to say to a grieving person. Hindi ko pwedeng sabihin na, "okay lang 'yan may dahilan ang Diyos." That would make the person feel worse. Buti na lang may care button.

(I am touched when Facebook friends use the care reaction, I really feel their concern. I feel that they understand me. If I put myself in the shoes of these people, I wouldn't know what to say to a grieving person. I can't say "it's okay, God has a reason." That would make the person feel worse. Fortunately, Facebook has a care button.)

Meanwhile, Vicky shares that the heart and care reactions from friends all over the world provided her some small comfort, pointing out that while physical hugs would have been better, the heart and care reactions she received on Facebook were "good enough" alternatives for now. Aside from Facebook reactions, Carlo, Risa, and Ella also observed that their Facebook friends usually commented with

the words “condolences” or “*pakikiramay*” on their announcement posts, as well as comments that included the word “prayers.”

In this regard, Facebook became an alternate platform to receive support from others. The open and two-way communication of Facebook meant that everyone could participate in grief work and sympathize with the bereaved. It then facilitated the expansion of support from “offline” life to cyberspace, regardless of geographical boundaries and physical restrictions. Online social support, hence, was a crucial form of social support for the bereaved during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, there remains an uneven distribution of experience when it comes to technology and death (Kohn et al. 2018). Ella, for example, also shared her thoughts on the downside of using Facebook to announce the deaths of loved ones. She suggested that Facebook posts containing news of death may be seen by “non-intended recipients,” or Facebook contacts one is not necessarily close with, who may gossip about it or use it for financial scams. Indeed, this phenomenon, referred to by Marwick and Boyd (2011) as “context collapse,” is a contemporary issue in our experience of cyberspace, with “social media technologies collapsing multiple contexts and bring[ing] together commonly distinct audiences” (Marwick and Boyd 2011, 115). These collapsing contexts and audiences are especially disturbing in the event of death, when the atmosphere is expected to be solemn and intimate, and grief is expected to not be revealed quickly, especially in online platforms (Kohn et al. 2018).

Digital Eulogies and Occasionally Posting about the Deceased

As death manifests itself publicly in mediated social spaces (Hanusch 2010), so do the practices that are related to it. For instance, eulogies, memorials and communicating with the dead via online platforms have been the subject of recent works (see Church 2013; Frost 2014). Online platforms such as Facebook, then, become a peculiar space for mourning, and a medium for the “continuing bonds” of the bereaved and the deceased (Kasket 2012).

In describing their digital mourning practices on Facebook, several participants used the term “eulogy” to refer to their occasional posts on the platform that commemorate the deceased. Risa, for example, referred to her post about her late cousin as a “digital eulogy.” She shared that it was vital for her to commemorate her cousin on the platform because she wanted her Facebook friends to know what a good person he was. Aldrin, meanwhile, tended to post funny dialogues with his grandmother on his Facebook profile. He does this especially when he misses her. He also shares prayer chains, a Facebook post requesting people to join him in prayer and pass the post along. He usually tags his Facebook friends in the prayer chain posts, and he asks them to pray for his grandmother. Additionally, Aldrin sometimes addresses and talks to his grandmother in his Facebook status; he says this practice consoles him because it allows him to express what he wants to say to her.

Vicky believes that digital eulogies are highly important, especially when it comes to COVID-19 deaths. In place of physical memorial shrines, she describes Facebook as an alternative shrine for the deceased, where digital eulogies or commemorative posts serve as “offerings” of Facebook users who knew them. Ella also uses the word “shrine” to describe her Facebook page after her father’s passing. The good thing about digital shrines, she says, is the convenience of having access to the photos, videos, and other multimedia posts related to the deceased, wherever you are and whenever you need them. By sharing multimedia posts about the dead, Vicky and Ella transform their Facebook accounts into a site of mourning, commemoration, and remembrance.

Facebook Memories as Prompts for Commemoration

One Facebook feature that facilitates and aids in the commemoration of the deceased is Facebook Memories. Facebook Memories was initially intended to be a feature that lets platform users reflect on moments—as captured in posts, photos, or videos—they have shared or figured in together with other Facebook users. However, bereaved Facebook users found a new use for it; they appropriated Facebook Memories and used it as a prompt to remember the deceased and post about them.

Vicky is particularly grateful for the feature. She enjoys seeing her old photos and posts with her grandfather through her Facebook Memories. It allows her to repost the memory or have a “quiet moment” to remember her grandfather.

Risa, however, deliberately posts about her cousin on Facebook knowing that she will see the post in her Facebook Memories a few years from now:

Another reason why I’m doing it is because I want to remember it in the future. Na para siyang diary entry, tapos around five years from now, maga-appear siya [sa Facebook] as a memory. Gusto ko siyang isulat ngayon. Para i-remind din ‘yung sarili ko sa future na, “uy, nangyari ‘to”.

(Another reason why I’m doing it is because I want to remember it in the future. It’s like a diary entry, and around five years from now, it will appear on my Facebook feed as a memory. I want to write it [on Facebook] now. To remind my future self that “hey, this happened.”)

Referring to her Facebook profile as her “digital diary,” her Facebook posts commemorating her cousin serve as a “time capsule,” or a cache or archive of information and multimedia posts that would allow her to recall her memories with her cousin in the future. Additionally, she commented that reading her other relatives’ posts and digital eulogies about her late cousin gave her the chance to know him from a different vantage point. It comforted her when she learned that other peoples’ recollection of him was that he was a very kind soul.

Ella also expressed that Facebook Memories became one of her most appreciated features ever since her father passed:

Ang pinakagusto kong part sa paggamit ng FB ay meron kang “throwback” dahil sa Memories. Maaalala mo ang nangyari months or years ago. So in a way makikita mo ‘yung journey mo, from the time na unang months na nagluksa ka, and how you are doing. At least makikita mo how far you’ve gone emotionally.

(For me, the best part of using Facebook is that you have a throwback because of Memories. You can remember what happened months or years ago. In a way you can see your journey, from the first few months of mourning, and you can compare it to how you are doing now. You can see how far you’ve gone emotionally.)

Like Risa, she deliberately shared status updates and posts about her father to document her emotional state.

In these illustrations, Facebook’s affordances and features were appropriated by the interviewees, thereby extending traditional mourning practices to online platforms and consequently aiding them in their bereavement through the mediation of their grief. The platform also became a way for them to maintain and nurture a connection with the deceased, by either keeping their memories alive by sharing them with Facebook friends, or by speaking to them directly in their Facebook posts. Their digital mourning practices on Facebook also ushered in changes to some traditional practices and rituals. The practice of eulogizing the dead on Facebook, for example, points to a change in the way we do eulogies: compared to traditional, in-person eulogies that tend to speak to an audience of bereaved individuals, digital eulogies on Facebook allow mourners to directly address the deceased (Sapalo 2021). Additionally, the act of speaking to or addressing the dead on Facebook posts suggests that Facebook users have generated unique ways of posting about their deceased loved ones, thereby contributing to the shaping of the platform vernacular of online memorialization (Gibbs et al. 2015).

Hence, Facebook’s affordances, which the interviewees deliberately utilized in various ways to mourn, proved useful in processing their otherwise disenfranchised and compounded grief. Although not without its own issues, such as that of context collapse or being deemed an “impersonal” site for grief, Facebook was nevertheless considered useful by the interviewees especially at a time when mobility and transport were paralyzed.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in an extremely high death count. However, and as a consequence of travel and mobility restrictions, grieving and mourning amid the COVID-19 pandemic became extremely difficult for bereaved families. This paper illustrates the stories of mourning, as well as the compounding factors, stressors, and challenges, that bereaved Filipinos have experienced during this turbulent time. It also presents the ways Filipinos have innovatively and bravely adapted to the restrictions and the lack of opportunities to engage in traditional mourning practices.

The varied attempts of the interviewees to modify prepandemic mourning rituals or come up with newer forms of digital mourning practices may be seen as their way of “enfranchising” and “uncompounding” their grief, which was characterized earlier as “disenfranchised,” unrecognized, and not socially supported (Doka 1999). According to Doka (2018), disenfranchised grievers need strong support, open recognition, empathy, and the opportunity to engage in ritual—prerequisites that were difficult to achieve during the COVID-19 lockdown. Hence, the interviewees took it upon themselves to find and create opportunities to make their grief seen and recognized by utilizing the resources available to them. Amid the restrictions and constricting climate, they expressed and processed their grief by resuming and modifying prepandemic rituals, often through various technologies such as basic cellphones, smartphones, and computers. They also utilized Facebook and its affordances to make their grief visible, thereby unburdening themselves and signaling that they are ready to receive (virtual) support from their Facebook friends. The use of these technologies to grieve and mourn and the extending of traditional practices to online platforms like Facebook demonstrate that the “online” and “offline” spheres are porous and intertwined, and not mutually distinct. With the COVID-19 pandemic still raging on in the Philippines, we can expect the epidemic of disenfranchised and compounded grief to keep going. We may also assume that digital mourning practices will continue to develop and evolve in the following months, possibly making digital mourning a permanent fixture in the expanding set of Filipino mourning rituals and practices in the years to come.

Moving forward, certain aspects of grieving on online platforms may be explored further. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, internet scholars have already pointed out that there has been an uneven distribution of experiences about technology and death—whereas the younger generation, or those most experienced with using technology, are the least experienced in death, the older generation, or those most experienced in death, are the least experienced in using technology (Kohn et al. 2018). While the fear or anxiety among older people toward using various kinds of technology is palpable in the Philippine context, the cultural tensions that technologies bring can be further explored, especially in the context of the pandemic. Additionally, researchers can do well to explore how these emerging phenomena might bridge or deepen the “digital divide” between the younger and older generations. It may also be interesting to examine the difference in mourning practices between those who have access to technologies and devices to mourn and those who do not or cannot use devices to express or signify their losses and bereavement.

Lastly, like the interviewees of this study, other Filipinos might still continue to feel that they have not been able to grieve or mourn enough, or that grief and mourning have been suspended indefinitely. We must make space for our grief. As Durkheim (1912) observed, the dead wish to be lamented. Thus, the refusal to grieve them is a violation of the dead’s right to a tribute of sorrow. We must be given opportunities to properly grieve for our loved ones, we must mourn for them and, ultimately, we must make sure their deaths were not in vain.

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