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## Identification and Validation of Grief in Facebook Groups on Mourning

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### Abstract

*This research aims to analyze the interactions related to the identification and validation of grief in Facebook groups whose purpose is to give support to those who are grieving. A qualitative content analysis of 1,816 comments in three Facebook groups on mourning, published between February 23 and March 23, 2020, was conducted. The comments were grouped into 456 digital interactions between group members, from which the analytic categories "identification with other's grief" and "validation of other's grief" were constructed. Among the results of the research, it was found that identification with grief among users of the social network is a recurrent type of emotional support. Identification generates the perception that one's own emotional experiences related to grief are shared with others. Validation of grief is another form of support, as it invites users to express their emotions and recognize the grief involved in the mourning process. These two processes, identification and validation, are at the core of the guidance that users are offered to mitigate their grief. Online groups provide an opportunity for people going through similar experiences of grief to find shared expressions of identification with and validation of their grief, which are fundamental processes of social support.*

**Keywords:** grief; identification; validation; mourning; Facebook

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## Introduction

Grief has a dual nature. On the one hand, grief is the response of sorrow, discomfort and sadness associated with the loss of a loved one, an object or an idea in which affection is placed; on the other hand, it is the process through which humans deal with such loss (Yi Yi & Barreto, 2015). Grief includes the emotional state generated by the loss as well as the process of coping with the change, distress and, sadness that are addressed through various cultural acts of mourning (Shear et al., 2013). Grief involves a complex and multidimensional process that includes physical, psychological, and cultural factors that can be grouped into multiple emotional and behavioral manifestations that determine its development, severity, and treatment (Shear, 2015).

Grieving involves the readjustment and adaptation to the experience of losing a loved one (Worden, 2013). It also implies re-signifying the bond with the deceased. Besides, those who are grieving may experience the sensation that their life lacks meaning due to the loss of physical and emotional connection to the person who has died. For this reason, the grieving process implies the reconstruction of the meaning of life and the bond with the loved one (Freitas, 2013).

According to Topa et al. (2010), identification with the other and emotional validation are psychosocial processes involved in social interactions related to grieving for the loss of a loved one. Identification with others as a form of

social support is grounded in the theory of social identity. This theory suggests that people support others insofar as they belong to certain groups. Social support has positive effects on health and subjective well-being due to the identification that is given as part of belonging to a group.

Identification is a psychological state that implies an assessment of oneself based on the attributes of the group to which one belongs. This process facilitates the establishment of support networks and the ability to engage in work with others. Identification reduces the negative consequences of stressful events by giving people a sense of acceptance and belonging, as well as providing specific help and the feeling that they are in control of their environment (Espinosa et al., 2016). When individuals perceive themselves as part of a group they find the motivation to establish agreements and coordinate their behavior with activities relevant to group membership. Thus, identification with a group is the basis for various forms of social interaction, such as communication, cooperation, and building trust (Topa et al., 2010).

Identification with the group impacts both individual psychology and the organization of social interactions. This process is central to explaining effective coping strategies and social support dynamics. In sum, identification is predictive of individual and group well-being in clinical, educational, or institutional contexts (Topa et al., 2010).

For its part, emotional validation is a positive response to a person's feelings (Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2011). The characteristics of such responses are that they are offered without judgment towards the emotions that the other person expresses (Lambie & Lindberg, 2016; Lambie et al., 2020). Emotional validation is a communicative action that promotes the understanding, legitimacy, and acceptance of the other's personal experiences (Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2011).

Emotional validation makes it easier for the other person to accept and experience their emotions (Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2011). Because of this, bereaved people often seek online support to validate their experience of grief (Varga & Paulus, 2014). Sometimes people seek out these spaces because they experience conflicts with family members or friends, or they feel that they do not receive sufficient support from them (Jakoby, 2012). Some research has pointed out the importance of emotional validation in online support groups. One of the reasons for this is that validation responses do not aim to change or challenge a person's emotional experience but to provide a space where the grieving person can offload their feelings (Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2011; Varga & Paulus, 2014).

Facebook groups for those who are grieving generate the perception that users are not alone in their experience. Likes, comments, and chats that share loss stories promote identification among members. Participation in these groups can be important for the grieving process, especially when people do not have an extensive social support network. Online groups allow the exchange of experiences and the expression of emotions, generating the perception of mutual understanding and support (Perluso & Francisco, 2018).

Oliver et al. (2015) point out that people accept the support offered to them through Facebook groups aimed at addressing the grieving process. Users of these groups value the intimacy generated by sharing with other bereaved people. Furthermore, one of the useful elements of these online groups is the ability to express oneself through posts, comments, or likes. Besides, users report that Facebook offers possibilities to interact at any time with other people's posts, which contrasts with the limitations of face-to-face support groups. Posts related to special events such as vacations, or significant dates experienced with loved ones, lead other people to identify with such content.

Those who are grieving value social networks when they have positive interaction experiences and find support from others. Social networks facilitate the use of photos and videos, which are useful tools for helping the bereaved to express themselves. This helps the bereaved feel accompanied and connected to others during their grieving process. Also, people manage to build relationships with other users who have gone through similar disturbing situations. In general, those who are grieving recognize that they find support and understanding in social networks that they do not find in other social spaces (Marín-Cortés et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2019).

According to Hartig and Viola (2016), sharing experiences of loss in an online community makes grieving less severe. This makes it easier for them to lessen the distress associated with grief. Furthermore, the more time users spend in online communities, the more social support they receive, and the less psychological distress they experience (Hartig & Viola, 2016). Facebook is also used to notify those close to the deceased about ways to honour their memory. A recurring practice of those grieving is to post on the loved one's Facebook wall to keep their presence and the relationships they had with others alive. Also, posting about the deceased on social networks allows individuals who previously had no contact with each other to exchange emotions and opinions about their experience, also to the sense of closeness that is generated among them (Willis & Ferrucci, 2017).

People who frequently use Facebook find it a useful tool in difficult moments, while people who use it little in their daily lives find it harmful to use this social network during their grieving process. Those who used Facebook most frequently before grieving were more familiar with its rules and regulations. In contrast, those who had not used Facebook before their loss understand that some interactions can affect the grieving process (Pennington, 2017).

Previous research was conducted in various places and multiple participants. 11 women, between 48 and 66 years, from Portugal (Perluxo & Francisco, 2018); 16 men and women, between 22 and 82 years, from United States (mainly women  $n = 11$ ; Oliver et al., 2015); 24 participants (16 females and 8 males), aged 22 to 60 years, from United States (Moore et al., 2019); 185 participants from United States (Hartig & Viola, 2016); 122 Facebook comments from 30 deceased Facebook users' pages, this study was conducted by University of Colorado in United States (Willis & Ferrucci, 2017); finally, the study of Pennington (2017) was conducted with 157 participants (65 male and 92 female), ranged in age from 18–41 years, from United States. We found no studies conducted in Colombia or Spanish-speaking countries in South America.

The main difference of this research with respect to previous studies is its interest in specific content posted by people of Latin America on Facebook groups about death and grief related to social, funeral, and religious practices associated with the loss of a loved one. Besides, previous studies are interested in three main topics: 1) mutual understanding among members of Facebook groups, 2) the possibility to interact with others at any time, and 3) exchange emotions and opinions about their experience. This research contributes to the field by focusing on two psychosocial processes (identification and validation), transversal to the three phenomena reported by the scientific literature: understanding, interaction, and emotions. In this case, identification and validation are processes that articulate other kinds of phenomena in grief experience.

We found no research in Latin America on using social networks to offer grief support. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by analyzing how Facebook users from countries in the region express their grief through these technologies. Specifically, this research aims to understand the interactions of Facebook groups (comprised principally of Spanish speakers) which offer support to those who are grieving.

Traditionally, support groups have been a therapeutic tool used to offer emotional support to people who have gone through disturbing experiences, including grieving for the loss of a loved one. In face-to-face support groups interactions among members are usually regulated by a coordinator who, in many cases, is a mental health professional. The number of people in the group is limited and their admission is filtered by the group coordinator, who authorizes the affiliation of a new participant. Also, communication between group members is often through face-to-face conversations.

What happens, therefore, when social networking platforms allow the creation of groups where people find support from others who have lived similar experiences? Facebook groups on grief often involve thousands of people and in many cases, they are public groups without membership restrictions. Besides, they do not have the guidance of psychologists or psychiatrists who direct communications between users. Moreover, the interactions in the online groups are diverse in nature, making use of written comments, photographs, images, gifs, memes, emojis, etc.

The reason for carrying out this study is that much of our life has moved online, including the expression of grief over the death of a loved one. This research is relevant in terms of deepening our understanding of human behavior today considering new forms of online communication. Given that emotional support for those who are grieving has extended to online social networks, it is necessary for psychology and the social sciences to analyze how such support is presented, its nature, and implications.

Hence this research aims to analyze the interactions related to the identification and validation of the emotional experiences of participants in Facebook groups aimed at offering support to those who are grieving.

## Methods

### Research Design

We conducted a content analysis based on a qualitative design. The content analysis consists of interpreting communicative products generated in specific communication contexts. This methodology guided the selection of the communications, the units of analysis, the categories, and the measurement system (relational analysis<sup>1</sup>; Piñuel, 2002).

The content analysis approach adopted in this research was *Content analysis according to the selection of categories*. The selection of the communication allows to frame of the material object of analysis (Facebook post in comment format), but the selection of categories builds the focus on the object (messages on identification and validation related to mourning; Piñuel, 2002). The analysis was performed on manifest content posted by users of Facebook groups that were selected.

## Sample

The study sample consisted of 1,816 Facebook postings in written comment format. The publications were grouped into 454 interactions between Facebook users. The communications were taken from three online groups on grief: 1) *Era en abril* (It was in April; 24,000 members); 2) *Dolor y crecimiento postraumático* (Grieving and post-traumatic growth; 47,000 members) and 3) *Un ángel más al cielo* (One more angel to heaven; 30,000 members). These three groups were selected because they were the Spanish-speaking Facebook groups with an open access policy with the largest number of members at the time the study was conducted. The selected groups are open. Under Facebook's usage policies, open posts can be used by any user for a variety of purposes. The units of analysis selected were comments published in written text format, as these enable the interpretation of the interactions of validation and identification of the emotional experiences of users. For this reason, images, photographs, videos, emojis, and gifs were excluded.

## Procedure

Three Facebook groups on mourning were selected. For one month (February 23 to March 23, 2020) the comments published in written text format were identified and selected. Data gathering coincided with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the comments analyzed in this research found no messages related to the death of people from this cause. This could be because in Latin America the severe impact of the pandemic began by the end of March 2020. For example, in Colombia, confinement began on March 25 and in Argentina it began on March 20.

Screenshots of the comments were then taken and stored in .jpg image format in an online database with a password and SSL certificate. The screenshots were then anonymized using free image editing software. The software was used to delete all the identification data of the participants, including usernames and profile photos. The edited images were included in an encoding matrix visible to the entire research team.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried out through a process of induction. To select the categories and the measurement system the following procedure was followed: first, the images with the interactions between users were segmented and coded. The 1,816 post were labelled in 454 codes. It is important to note that several of the posts were labelled with the same codes, since they referred to the same phenomenon. The process of coding in qualitative research, also called the data reduction process, consists of employing inductive reasoning to name similar phenomena in the same way. Second, according to Monge Acuña's (2015) criteria of conceptual density, the categories "identification with other's grief" and "validation of other's grief" were constructed. These two categories emerged through data analysis.

The coding and categorization processes were carried out individually by five researchers. Each researcher coded the data individually, and subsequently, the quality of the coding was evaluated by the entire research team. The final codes were not chosen by frequency agreement rates but based on the presentation and argument about their choice, which were to be approved by the group of researchers unanimously. This was done to ensure rigor in the analysis process. After the codes were refined the categories were constructed. These were reviewed by the research team and finally by the research director. The research followed the quality criteria proposed by Moral Santaella (2006) to guarantee the validity of the analysis of the qualitative data. These criteria are openness, impartiality, and critical intelligence. Data were processed using excel software, as it allows you to create categories using its filter function. In each cell codes were written for the screenshots with the messages selected. Then, the codes were grouped into categories according to conceptual proximity criteria.

## Ethical Considerations

The project was reviewed by the Bioethics Committee of University of San Buenaventura. After analysing the project, the Committee approved the research, which was considered a low-risk study. Although the Facebook groups that were accessed are open and public, the research team decided to protect the identity of the users, avoiding revealing the online profile of the group members. Finally, the legal framework for this study is Colombian Law 1090 of 2006 that regulates research in psychology.

## Results

### Identification With Other's Grief

Facebook group members express identification with the emotional grief of other users. The process of identification produces mutual recognition among people who understand what others are feeling. This process implies the recognition of similar emotions caused by the loss of a loved one.

The process of identification with the other's grief is reinforced when grievors perceive that their emotions are not validated by family or friends with whom they interact in face-to-face settings. Identification is generated because users perceive themselves as individuals who share an experience. This similarity creates an affective bond that manifests itself when they share their personal history of grief. Also, the virtual space of social networks allows the expression of solidarity between people who do not meet in person. It should be noted that, in many cases, the members of these groups do not interact outside of Facebook. In this sense, the identification between users is based on their experience of grief rather than on roles, identities, political affinities, or other social characteristics that usually generate cohesion and identification between people: "I wish you much strength, my friend. I also lost my son 2 months and 2 days ago. Only God and we know what we are going through. I send you a hug." <sup>2,3</sup>

Identification with others enables people to develop a social support network that accompanies the grieving process. Being part of a group where there is identification among its members allows users to validate their emotions and recognize aspects of their grief. In this context, advice related to mental health care is common in the comments of Facebook groups. Likewise, users guide each other about the emotional reactions experienced during grief and about the actions one can take to work through the emotions associated with the loss. Identification with others' grief, and in general of all the emotions experienced, also serves to provide mutual emotional support. What people in online groups look for is to naturalize the grief, confusion, anxiety, and sadness that are part of the process.

Comment A: "Sweetheart, it's happened to all of us at some point. It happened in my case, and I was diagnosed with severe depression. Get some help. We are all here to read you and support you. I hug you because we have been through it."

Comment B: "We have all walked the thin line between madness and reality."

Comment C: "Psychological therapy is the only way, but in person."

Facebook group users share their stories and recognize similarities in their experiences of loss. These experiences also enable the expression of emotions such as helplessness and guilt. Powerlessness relates to actions that they perceive that they or others (e.g., doctors or nurses) might have taken to prevent the death of their loved ones, but which, for some reason, were not carried out. The expression of powerlessness is a natural reaction to the grieving process; it represents the need to attribute responsibility in the face of loss. On the other hand, guilt is another direct consequence of the grieving process, which makes it a common emotion among those who are grieving. In the online comments we find frequent expressions of guilt; for example, the questioning of decisions before the death of a loved one. Some users refer to their lack of proactivity in the crucial moments, believing that had they been proactive they might have prevented the death of their loved one. Guilt is evidenced by questions about what could have been done to prevent a person's death.

"How I understand your story. On December 31, 2014, I started to feel ill. I trusted the doctor because he was a professional. On January 5, 2015, my daughter was born, and at 2:00 a.m. she died. Here I am with the guilt of why I listened to the doctor and asking myself why I didn't go and get help on December 31."

The analyzed comments show that mutual recognition of grief enables Facebook users to connect with their own emotions. Besides, identification with others allows them to find comfort in the fact that other people feel the same way. This process also allows the other person to be encouraged, not to avoid grief, but to have the strength to face the experience. The arguments used by those grieving to accept the experience of grief are mainly the passage of time and God. People who are grieving understand that the grieving process requires time and understanding on the part of the family and friends of the deceased. It is not a quick and easy experience to deal with, quite the contrary. On the other hand, messages indicate that God is recognized as the only being capable of mitigating grief that will eventually ease. This is part of the religious beliefs of many people, which in regions like Latin America are still very influential among the population. Thus, when users express how they feel, Facebook becomes a space where people seek to reassure each other.

Comment A: "I know how you feel. Nothing will take away that grief. Only God. I send you a hug and pray that God will continue to give us strength."

Comment B: "Sweetheart, you will feel a terrible sense of helplessness and will be in a state of conflicting feelings because you wanted to do things but did not do them. You will feel guilty for not having taken advantage of the time."

The identification expressed in Facebook groups also operates as an emotional regulator, since it allows people to diminish the anguish produced by grief. Also, identification is used as a means for dealing with grief, both for the person to whom the support is directed and for the person who expresses it. Identifying with others enables Facebook users to share their feelings, meanings, emotions, and interpretations of their grief. Besides, people comment that the decrease in suffering from loss is not due to them forgetting their loved ones. Rather, it is a process of cultivating the memory of their loved ones, accepting their grief, and growing through it. Thus, personal growth experiences are used by Facebook users to help other group members diminish their grief.

"On April 18, 2018, when my 82-year-old mother died, I was left with a burning sensation in my chest. I asked other people what that meant. Someone told me that my heart was broken and that's why I was burning. I didn't even know what to do with myself. Then the burning came back, but only for a while. Then I understood that I will never forget my mom, that I will remember her and miss her for the rest of my life. I think that's what they mean when they talk about learning to live with grief."

In the process of identifying with others' grief, the expression of empathy for the loss is evident. Those grieving express their understanding of the experience of other members of the group since they have lived through something similar. Empathy is related to offering emotional support in the grieving process. Users recognize the feelings generated by the loss and emphasize the importance of maintaining the bond with the loved one who died. Finally, empathy makes it easier for Facebook users to reinforce the idea that emotional support is more easily achieved among people who have lost a loved one, compared to the support they receive from someone who has not gone through the grieving process.

Comment A: "I accompany you in your sorrow because I know how it feels to lose those whom one loves so much and that is indispensable in one's life."

Comment B: "I understand you very well because nothing cures this grief and only the people who have gone through it understand each other. I send you a hug and much sympathy my friend. "

## **Validation of Other's Grief**

Validation of grief is understood as the set of actions aimed at recognizing, authorizing, facilitating, enabling, and encouraging the emotional expression of another person. Expressions of validation of grief based on personal experiences and religious discourses can be found in Facebook groups dedicated to grieving for the loss of a loved one. Users validate the other's grief by expressing that they too have experienced grief and, for this reason, can understand what others are experiencing. Grieving people recognize in others the emotional states generated by the loss since they too have gone through that experience. This identification process authorizes users of online groups to warn others about possible emotional experiences they will have during the grieving process.

Comment A: "My angel is one year old. Four months without him. I miss him more and more every day."

Comment B: "I feel for you, sweetheart, you still have so much to go through. Since my little girl left, nothing is celebrated here in the house: Christmas, New Year, Mother's Day, Independence Day, nothing. My life has become empty."

In Facebook groups dedicated to grieving the loss of a loved one, people validate the grief of other members, even when they recognize that they have not gone through the same kind of loss. This research found that the main form of validation is by commenting on group wall postings. Facebook comments can be classified into three types: to acknowledge the feeling caused by the loss, to express admiration for those who have moved on with their lives, and to encourage those who are beginning their grieving process. One of the recurring recommendations they make is to invite other mourners to join mutual aid groups, where they can identify with and feel supported by others. Also, social networks recognize the importance of grief validation, as this broadens the understanding of the grieving experience.

"That's the most disturbing loss, but I don't know, I can't imagine. I try to put myself in your place and my soul goes cold. But I can tell you that my aunts lost their young children and my cousin too. They moved on with their lives. I admire them a lot. Did you try self-help groups with other parents? I think that only those who have suffered something like this can understand you."

In Facebook groups, validation seems intended to mitigate others' grief. Likewise, online interactions seek to reduce discomfort and offer help. The main forms of help are personal accompaniment and comfort based on religious discourses. The first form of help begins with the recognition of grief as part of the experience of loss. This is followed by offering personal accompaniment to the grieving person. An important finding is that validation does not deny the grief of the other. On the contrary, the person is encouraged to live it and express it. Grief is considered part of the grieving process. Concerning the second form of help, based on religious discourses, users of online groups include in their comments messages that allude to the belief in a superior power that can alleviate grief and guarantee a state of transcendence that ensures the well-being of the deceased in the beyond: "I accompany you in your grief. You cannot fight against it. Just ask God to take your dear little angel to eternal rest."

Participants in Facebook groups validate their experiences of grief with each other. According to users of these groups, the grief produced by the loss is a permanent emotion that will accompany the person throughout his or her life, especially in the case of the death of a son or daughter. Because grief is something that will never go away, those grieving learn to live with that emotion. Besides, users express that only those who have suffered a loss of this nature can understand what other people who participate in these online groups have experienced. Even though the participants of the groups do not know each other in person, the comments they publish report processes of validation and mutual support.

Comment A: "It is something you never overcome; you just learn to live with the grief."

Comment B: "Nothing mitigates this grief, I tell you by experience, one learns to live with it, but every day the sense of emptiness grows."

Comment C: "It is so disturbing, impossible for people [who have not experienced the loss of a child] to understand. This grief never disappears; one learns to live with it. Be strong."

People who have lost a son or daughter recognize that the intensity of grief varies over time. That is, this emotion may be felt less strongly during certain moments in life. Some people report that the grief of losing a child has stayed with them for years or even decades. The communication of this experience operates as a gesture of mutual validation between parents who participate in these online groups. In this case, it is a particular loss that only those who have lived it can understand. This means that among the members of the Facebook groups there are subgroups of parents who consider that their grief cannot be completely understood by the members of the group who have experienced a different kind of loss.

Comment A: "So, there are horrible days."

Comment B: "There are days when the grief comes, you don't expect it but it happens."

Comment C: "[referring to his son] I have carried him in my heart for 25 years. Mommy's baby."

Comment D: "It's true, it's not easy. I went through it 29 years ago. My daughter is etched on my mind."

The death of a child is a disruptive experience that can lead to a loss of meaning in life. The grief that this experience generates is immeasurable and incomparable with other types of loss. The validation of grief offered

by the members of online groups is manifested in the shared idea that there is no other grief as profound. It is grieving parents who validate others' grief. Also, people who have lost other family members or friends validate the grief of the parents by telling them that they will never feel that emotion and can only imagine it. These two ideas, the disruption caused by the death of a child and the assumption that there is no greater grief, are linked to the social representation that sons and daughters are the people for whom one can feel the most love, which is why their death constitutes profound grief.

Comment A: "That's right, I lost the will to live."

Comment B: "No dreams, no desire to continue in life."

Comment C: "You lose the will to carry on."

Comment D: "My friend, I know it hurts and that there is nothing worse than that."

Comment E: "Losing what you love the most is disturbing."

Another form of grief validation is to invite the bereaved to express all the emotions they experience. This type of validation encourages participants to live their emotions while offering accompaniment and support. The invitation to cry is the most suggested form of emotional expression among members of these online groups. Expressions of validation and emotional support are accompanied by manifestations of closeness such as hugging. Besides the above, religious messages are recurrent as a way of comforting people in mourning. In summary, people are invited to express their emotions, but they are not left alone in the process of grieving.

"Live your grief, cry, scream, get angry, but know that God is with you. I send you a very strong hug, may God give you strength. I embrace you. Cry sister, cry. You are strong, you are brave, you are not alone. We are here with you."

When it comes to grieving for the death of a child, emotional expression is differentiated according to gender. According to members of Facebook groups, men rarely express their feelings. In online groups the differences between men and women are marked, so women wonder if their male partners and relatives feel grief for the loss. Because men tend not to express their emotions, women often question whether they are experiencing grief. However, when men do express their emotions in online groups, other men express their support and admiration, as these expressions seem to go against traditional notions of masculinity.

Comment A: "I say this with all respect, but fathers rarely express their grief. My respect to you and your wife."

Comment B: "It is not common for men to express their grief. Sometimes, we are mothers who have lost a child wonder if you are in grief or how you are coping with your grief. It's good that you are the strength your wife needs."

## Discussion

The objective of this research was to analyze the interactions related to the identification and validation of grief in three Facebook groups dedicated to grieving for the loss of loved ones. The results of this study concur with Perluxo and Francisco (2018), who indicate that users of online groups contact people who have also gone through the grieving process because they perceive that they are the only ones who can understand their experience. The creation of these types of groups brings people together who do not know each other, enabling them to share their interests and experiences. This way of encountering people who are similar is easier than in face-to-face scenarios because you only need a social network account and to click a button. The other reason people prefer online support groups is that many face-to-face support groups are not easy for people to get to because they are located too far from where they live. The present study found an issue that differentiates it from Perluxo and Francisco's research, specifically, the grievors perceive that the identification process is not only rational but emotional. Individuals can understand rationally that other people are going through a grieving process, but the real identification process occurs when a mourner recognizes his or her own sorrow in the sorrow of others.

This study only found positive interactions between users of Facebook groups on mourning. Users' responses to posts expressed support and accompaniment in grief. In no case were derogatory, denigrating, or aggressive comments identified. All interactions analyzed focused on emotional validation, empathy, and understanding. This corresponds with the findings of Moore et al. (2019), who point out that interactions in social networks, as tools



for emotional expression, have a positive impact on grieving people, due to the perception that group members are experiencing shared grief. This identification with others brings emotional comfort to people grieving the death of a loved one.

The search for people who have had similar grief experiences not only happens on Facebook. Instagram is also a social network used for this purpose. Thimm and Nehls (2017) report that posting memories on this social network help those grieving to mitigate the grief of loss. Online environments have become new settings for ritualization. Thus, paying respects, offering condolences, and accompaniment that traditionally was limited to the chapel of rest or religious site have been transferred to social networks. This research found that Facebook is used as a social setting in which the "netiquette" of grieving is evident. That is, the communicative relations between people to express understanding, support, and emotional validation have adapted to the online world. Social networks are not only technologies for entertainment such as looking at photos or memes, but they are also spaces for the creation of social bonds and the display of social norms in emotionally sensitive situations. Unlike Thimm and Nehls's research, the present study found that Facebook groups on mourning not only help people to help these Facebook group members to process and move forward with their grief but also are useful for finding recommendations related to strategies for achieving psychological and emotional well-being. Since this is research conducted in a group whose participants are mainly from Latin America, many of the recommendations include a religious component, particularly Christianity.

The identification and emotional validation in Facebook groups on mourning reaffirm the idea that grief is part of the mourning process. Users comment that this emotion should not be rejected. On the contrary, in Facebook those grieving invite others to accept grief as part of the bond with the deceased loved one. Furthermore, they suggest that one way to deal with grief is by expressing all the emotions experienced during the grieving process. In this sense, the findings of this research coincide with Robinson and Pond (2019), who show that there are positive aspects to participating in online bereavement groups, based mainly on finding a community that understands the experience, offers support, shares information related to self-care and builds a sense of personal fulfillment.

In particular, parents who lost their children find special communities on Facebook for people who are grieving. The research findings show some expressions about recognizing other people who experience particularly acute grief that even other griever in the group cannot fully understand. In effect, there are subgroups of people who understand each other in a particular way. This study agrees with Christensen et al. (2017), who found that online forums of grieving parents favor the formation of mourning "ghettos", which are used to keep alive the bond with their children and to fight the taboo associated with death. However, this research is far from using the term "ghetto", as it refers to a group of people in a state of marginality, and not to a group of people who have a specific common interest. The case of this study was a Facebook group of parents who lost their children. They are not marginalized people but are summoned by an experience that differentiates them from other suffering people's grief.

One of the limitations of this study is that it deals only with online interactions in written comment format, leaving aside other forms of recurrent interaction in Facebook groups on mourning. These other forms of interaction also provide important information about the expressions of support among their members, such as gifs, images, emojis, and videos. All of them constitute communicative codes of online social networks, and for this reason, they need to be interpreted within the framework of these online groups. Another limitation of the research is that because of the short period of selection of the publications (one month), we were not able to analyze the trajectories of the interactions between users, to observe how they change over time. Finally, because Facebook algorithms limit the publications to which a user can have access, it is not known with certainty if the number of publications analyzed was the total number of publications made in the group, or if it was a partial selection made by the social network from among the researchers' profiles.

The identification and validation of grief in Facebook groups on mourning are manifested in supportive interactions and the expression of empathy among users. Aspects such as the understanding of the other's grief, the admiration for moving forward despite the loss, and the construction of group identity are characteristic of the use of online social networks in which the grieving experience is shared. Also, expressions of affection, invitations to continue living, and recommendations to give a place to grief are recurrent in these online groups. Although these groups cannot be considered strictly support groups, they are spaces of online interaction where ongoing support is offered and received. Additionally, people who participate in these Facebook groups express that they are genuinely understood by others because these others have also experienced loss. This means that

the identification and validation of grief, which is fundamental for perceived social support, is related to finding people with similar experiences. On the other hand, the grieving experience shared by others allows users to identify their own emotions. This enables those who are experiencing grief for the first time to go through their process accompanied by people who have lived similar experiences.

The social norms of grief-related behaviour in the Latin American context changed using Facebook. For example, In Colombia, communication about the loss used to be done through a sign that was located at the entrance of the doors of the houses, so that the neighbours would know about the fact. Palacio Valencia and Bernal Orozco (2019) point out that in Chile and Colombia mortuary rituals are burial, commemoration, and remembrance. This study found that commemoration and remembrance are practices that occur in digital environments. That means that expressions of mourning unfold simultaneously in presential and online interactions.

There are no significant differences between grief behaviour in Facebook of people from other countries where the topic has been investigated and Facebook groups from Latin American countries. This happens because, with the extensive use of social media, the practices and interactions in social networks are very similar (likes, posts, comments, etc.). It is true that the content of that interactions is different but is non-idiosyncratic cause people who use Facebook are mostly from Western culture. In the same way, as other studies carried out in contexts different from Latin America, the present research found that Facebook is used by mourners to express their emotions, seek support, and reduce their distress.

The results of this research can be useful for people who are beginning a grieving process and require the accompaniment of others who have already gone through such an experience. Furthermore, grief is a disruptive experience in which social support is a protective factor that can insure against future psychological problems; Facebook groups are spaces where such support is offered permanently. On the other hand, this study may be useful for clinical psychologists who accompany grieving processes, as it offers them alternatives for the management of self-help groups in online environments. Likewise, the results presented here are useful for social psychologists who are interested in understanding how group dynamics operate in social networks. Finally, this work contributes to the field of cyberpsychology with its understanding of how digital technology such as Facebook, which was not originally designed for the creation of this type of group process, ends up being appropriated by people according to their psychological and social needs.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> This type of analysis seeks the establishment of structures of logical relationships between categories, to determine the difference or coherence of one over another (Piñuel, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> The segments were edited to facilitate their reading. However, the texts were treated with special care so that the users' message was not altered.

<sup>3</sup> The data was originally written in Spanish. These were translated into English for publication purposes.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

## Authors' Contribution

**Andrés Marín-Cortés:** investigation, data curation, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing. **Sebastián Acosta:** investigation, data curation, writing—original draft. **Andrés García:** investigation, data curation, writing—original draft. **Fredy Gómez:** investigation, data curation, writing—original draft. **Sandra Quintero:** investigation, data curation, writing—original draft.

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