iGrieve: Re-Examining Public Mourning Over the Death of Steve Jobs

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Abstract
This study explores how social media transformed public mourning and eulogistic practices after the death of Apple CEO Steve Jobs in October 2011. While global tributes from leaders and media highlighted his legacy, social media uniquely enabled spontaneous, collective expressions of grief, admiration, and identification from ordinary users. Using concepts of parasocial interaction and hyperpersonal communication, the research reveals how brief, user-generated posts coalesced into a communal eulogy-like narrative, incorporating classical rhetorical strategies such as praise, emotional disclosure, references to the afterlife, and maintenance of interactive bonds. Applying Kunkel and Dennis' (2003) eulogy framework, the study finds that these elements were reinterpreted in a digital context, democratizing participation and expanding the spatial and temporal boundaries of mourning. Social media allowed individuals worldwide to share personal feelings, redefine traditional eulogistic roles, and contribute to collective memory. Despite diminished emphasis on personal credibility or direct acquaintance, the essential purpose of eulogies—offering solace, preserving memory, and fostering communal identity—remained intact. The findings underscore the resilience of epideictic rhetoric as it adapts to interactive, user-driven platforms, illustrating how digital technologies reshape conventional mourning practices and create enduring archives of communal grief and admiration.
Keywords: Social Media Mourning, Parasocial Interaction, Digital Eulogies, Collective Memory, Epideictic Rhetoric, Hyperpersonal Communication

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The death of Apple CEO Steve Jobs on October 5, 2011, illustrates how social media has become a central space for public mourning and collective remembrance. While traditional media and world leaders offered tributes, it was social media platforms—particularly Facebook and Twitter—that gave rise to widespread, personalized expressions of grief. These digital platforms enabled spontaneous, global participation in mourning rituals once limited to physical gatherings, reflecting a shift in how grief is experienced and shared in the digital age. Social media fosters parasocial relationships, where individuals feel personally connected to public figures despite no direct interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956). When a celebrity dies, users often express authentic sorrow and share memories online, co-constructing brief messages that resemble eulogies. In doing so, they form virtual communities of mourners, creating a shared narrative across cultural and national boundaries.

Steve Jobs' death exemplifies these dynamics. Celebrated as a visionary who transformed personal computing, music, mobile technology, and media consumption, Jobs became a symbol of innovation and identity. His legacy, tightly woven with Apple's products and branding, made him a parasocial figure in the lives of millions. As tributes from public figures like Bill Gates circulated, ordinary users joined the collective

grieving process, turning social media into a space for participatory eulogizing.

Jobs' journey—from Apple's founding in 1976 to his return in 1996 and the subsequent release of the iPod, iPhone, and iPad—positioned him as both a tech icon and cultural figure. His death marked the end of an era and prompted a surge of online mourning that blended emotional disclosure with public memory.

This study analyzes these digital expressions of grief, exploring how online tributes both reflect and reshape traditional eulogistic rhetoric. By examining Facebook comments following Jobs' death, this research reveals how classical rhetorical strategies persist in new media environments, offering insight into the evolving nature of communal mourning and collective memory in the digital age.

Literature Review

This literature review explores how traditional rhetorical concepts, particularly epideictic rhetoric, inform our understanding of eulogies as communal responses to loss. It considers the evolution of eulogistic practices from classical orations to modern, media-saturated contexts, highlighting how collective memory and parasocial interactions shape online mourning rituals. By examining these theoretical frameworks and their interplay with hyperpersonal communication, this review provides insight into the ways communities grieve, remember, and transform their identities in digital environments.

Epideictic Rhetoric & Eulogy
Epideictic rhetoric, one of Aristotle's three rhetorical genres, emphasizes praise and shared values rather than persuasion (Aristotle, trans. McKeon, 1941). It serves a civic role by reinforcing communal identity and affirming collective ethos (Danisch, 2006; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969), uniting communities through the celebration of ideals (Vickers, 1988; Ochs, 1993). Common in ceremonial discourse—such as commencement speeches, public apologies, and media texts—epideictic rhetoric fosters cohesion during pivotal moments (Burke, 1951; Blakely, 2011; Villadsen, 2008; Vivian, 2006).

Eulogies exemplify epideictic rhetoric's communal function. Traditionally influenced by Greek and Roman customs that praised virtue and deeds (Aristotle, trans. McKeon, 1941; Ziolkowski, 1981), eulogies have evolved to address emotional and spiritual needs, affirming the deceased's value and helping communities reorient after loss (Jamieson, 1978; Jamieson & Campbell, 1982; Kent, 2007; Peterson, 1983; Ochs, 1993; Kunkel & Dennis, 2003).

The emergence of mass media expanded eulogistic expression into public spheres. Radio and television introduced "intimacy at a distance," allowing collective grieving for figures like Princess Diana or Ronald Reagan (Horton & Wohl, 1965; Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Goldzwig & Sullivan, 1995; Montgomery, 1999).

Digital platforms further transform these practices. Social media accelerates and democratizes mourning, allowing personal grief to blend with public commemoration in real time. Virtual memorials retain traditional eulogistic functions—such as offering comfort and preserving memory—while enabling broader participation (Roberts & Vidal, 2000; de Vries & Rutherford, 2004; Sanderson & Cheong, 2007).

Despite changing technologies, the core principles of epideictic rhetoric remain intact. Whether expressed in ancient or digital forums, eulogies continue to guide communal reflection, foster unity, and help individuals and societies find meaning in shared experiences of loss.

Collective Memory
Bereavement unfolds within the framework of collective memory, where eulogistic rhetoric helps shape how communities remember the deceased (Weiss, 1997). Collective memory emerges through shared stories, traditions, and images that connect past and present, fostering communal identity (Hudson, 2012). The Internet amplifies these narratives, transcending geographic boundaries and democratizing access to mourning practices (Halbwachs, 1995).

Cultural identity is reinforced through commemorative spaces like memorials and museums (Brown, 2009; Dickinson, 1997; Prosise, 1998; Wilson, 2005). However, these sites also mediate memory, often privileging dominant narratives while marginalizing others (Brown, 2010; Dickinson et al., 2005). Concepts such as counter-memory (Brown, 2010) and vernacular memorials (Lewis & Fraser, 1996), like the AIDS Memorial Quilt, offer alternative representations and challenge institutionalized accounts of history.

Social media accelerates and personalizes these memory-making processes. The shift from static Web 1.0 to interactive Web 2.0 enables users to shape memory as both content producers and consumers, fostering dynamic, real-time participation (Hudson, 2012). While some critique social media for commercializing memory (Garde-Hansen, 2009), others view it as an evolving archive of personal and communal history (Zimmermann, 2009).

This digital transformation also intensifies parasocial relationships—one-sided emotional

bonds between audiences and public figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These connections are deepened online through direct interaction and immediacy, collapsing perceived distance (Giles, 2002; Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). Upon a public figure's death, parasocial grief manifests in online mourning, shaping communal narratives through user-generated eulogies (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010).

The convergence of collective memory, parasocial interaction, and eulogistic rhetoric within social media provides key insight into evolving mourning rituals. While digital mourning research is still emerging, these intersections reveal how technology reshapes commemoration, identity, and shared emotional experience in contemporary culture.

Parasocial Interaction & Social Media
Parasocial interaction (PSI) describes the one-sided relationships that audiences form with media figures, who are largely unaware of individual viewers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Initially observed in early radio and television, PSI is marked by a perceived sense of familiarity and interpersonal closeness. Though asymmetrical, these relationships often evoke emotional responses comparable to face-to-face connections (Giles, 2002). Early PSI research focused on television personalities and characters, identifying audience motivations such as admiration, idolization, and even romantic attraction (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Stever, 2009). Viewers developed parasocial bonds with newscasters, soap opera characters, and athletes (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin et al., 1985; Kassing & Sanderson, 2009), with evidence showing children and adolescents are also especially susceptible (Hoffner, 1996).

Though one-sided, PSI can result in real-world consequences. Audiences identify with media figures through shared interests or psychological engagement, often empathizing deeply with their dilemmas (Burke, 1950; Cohan, 2003). This can lead to imitation or modeling behaviors, as fans adopt the attitudes, values, or habits of their parasocial partners (Cohan & Perse, 2003; Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). These relationships may influence purchasing habits, health decisions, and broader behavioral patterns.

Before the advent of the Internet, PSI was largely passive. Fan engagement occurred through controlled channels like letters or fan events, offering limited opportunities for direct interaction. The rise of the Internet transformed this dynamic. Social media allows fans to comment, respond, and engage directly with content, creating the illusion of mutual connection and intensifying relational closeness (Brown et al., 2003).

Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram support collaborative, user-driven dialogue—what Chandler and Munday (2016) call a "virtual meeting place." These spaces allow fans to form "imagined communities" (Williams, 2007), where shared admiration fosters communal bonds. While PSI was once studied mainly in journalism and marketing (Lazaroiu, 2011; Verdegem, 2011), scholars now recognize social media's role in reshaping the depth and immediacy of these connections (Klimmt et al., 2007).

Crucially, PSI now extends beyond traditional celebrities. Online content creators and business leaders can accrue devoted followers. Steve Jobs, for example, became a parasocial figure for millions through his public persona, brand vision, and product influence. After his death, social media facilitated an outpouring of admiration and mourning, demonstrating how digital environments host parasocial expressions of grief.

The death of a parasocial partner has become a growing area of research. Sanderson and Cheong (2010) analyzed social media reactions to Michael Jackson's death, finding that platforms helped fans process loss, validate emotions, and build communal grieving spaces. These online memorials parallel traditional practices like shrines or grave visits, but offer global accessibility and digital permanence. Social media enables fans to post condolences, share stories, and even message the deceased's account. These messages often function as digital eulogies, mirroring epideictic rhetoric's role in praising the deceased and reaffirming community values (Aristotle, trans. McKeon, 1941; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). Eulogies, as a subset of this rhetorical genre, traditionally help communities acknowledge loss, celebrate virtues, and restore collective cohesion (Jamieson, 1978; Jamieson & Campbell, 1982).

As media technologies evolve, so do commemorative practices. Online tributes blend classical rhetorical forms with modern connectivity, allowing widespread, asynchronous participation. Once curated through newspapers or broadcast memorials, today's mourning is fragmented, spontaneous, and participatory—yet still rooted in the desire to honor and remember.

Parasocial connections also shape how communities mourn. When a public figure dies, fans often articulate their grief through social media, using praise, storytelling, and symbolic references to form a communal eulogy. These tributes help mourners affirm their identification with the deceased and with one another, constructing a shared narrative of loss

and meaning. In Jobs' case, messages praised his innovation, mourned his absence, and reflected on his influence on users' identities and lifestyles. Scholarship on digital mourning is still emerging, yet the intersection of PSI, epideictic rhetoric, and collective memory offers rich insight. Social media platforms function as living archives where users continuously contribute to memorial narratives. Through comments, hashtags, and digital artifacts, individuals and communities co-create lasting, accessible tributes.

Ultimately, PSI is no longer confined to entertainment or marketing spheres. It now plays a central role in how individuals grieve, build identity, and preserve memory in online environments. As users mourn parasocial figures, they enact familiar rhetorical functions in new digital spaces—blurring lines between personal loss and public commemoration.

Hyperpersonal Communication
Hyperpersonal communication refers to the phenomenon where computer-mediated communication (CMC) generates more intimate and intense relationships than face-to-face (FtF) interactions (Walther, 1996). This occurs through selective self-presentation, asynchronous messaging, and idealization of the communication partner. The lack of visual cues allows users to ask deeper questions earlier and refine their messages, creating idealized impressions and strengthening perceived closeness (Walther, 1996).

Social media platforms intensify these effects by enabling constant surveillance and interaction. Users can monitor posts, comments, and updates in real time, blurring the line between private and public life (Trottier, 2012). Smartphones and other mobile devices facilitate continuous access, fostering a sense of perpetual connectivity that enhances feelings of intimacy (Turkle, 2008). These environments often magnify similarities, minimize differences, and create perceptions of stability and emotional depth.

Although initially focused on interpersonal relationships, the hyperpersonal model also applies to celebrity-fan dynamics (Taylor & Barton, 2011). While hyperpersonal communication typically involves two-way interaction, fans may feel connected to celebrities through carefully curated content on social media. This one-sided intimacy, built on idealized and selective portrayals, fosters deep identification even in the absence of direct engagement.

Fans interpret social media posts as authentic glimpses into celebrities' lives, strengthening emotional bonds. The immediacy and frequency of content updates sustain a sense of closeness, reinforcing the illusion of personal connection.

Though parasocial in nature, these interactions often mirror hyperpersonal dynamics.

As digital communication continues to evolve, hyperpersonal effects are likely to shape how individuals understand connection and intimacy—not only in private relationships but also in public interactions with media figures. The convergence of CMC, parasocial interaction, and hyperpersonal dynamics highlights the growing emotional significance of online relationships in contemporary culture.

Research Questions

Parasocial interaction and hyperpersonal communication offer compelling frameworks for understanding how social media has transformed the public's expression of grief, particularly through online eulogies. The widespread admiration for Steve Jobs, the almost cult-like devotion of his followers, and his direct association with the very technologies used to express mourning present a uniquely rich setting for exploring this phenomenon. Accordingly, the following research questions guide this inquiry:

RQ1: How, and to what extent, do online posts expressing grief over Steve Jobs' death reflect traditional elements of the eulogy?
RQ2: What new eulogistic themes or categories emerge in online posts that differ from traditional eulogy forms?

Method

This study employs rhetorical analysis to examine how Facebook users expressed grief following the death of Steve Jobs and how these expressions reflect traditional eulogistic structures adapted for digital platforms. Unlike surveys or experimental designs common in parasocial interaction research (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000), rhetorical analysis allows for interpretation of organic discourse and identification of patterns that reveal how online mourning contributes to collective memory.

Given the breadth of content surrounding Jobs' death, the study focused exclusively on social media platforms—specifically Facebook—rather than traditional news outlets, which tend to reflect curated or professional commentary. Facebook was chosen for its global user base, diverse demographics, and "timeline" structure, which made retrieving historical posts more feasible (Facebook, 2011). Although Twitter featured extensive reactions, archival limitations precluded its use.

Data collection centered on Facebook comments posted during the two weeks following Jobs' death in October 2011. From October 5–11,

researchers analyzed 50 comments per day. From October 12–18, all relevant comments were included as post volume declined. While the sample is not exhaustive, it is representative and manageable for identifying rhetorical trends. Following Walther's (2007) guidance, all content was treated as publicly accessible communication.

Kunkel and Dennis' (2003) Integrative Framework for eulogies guided the analysis. The framework includes seven categories: (1) establishing credibility, (2) praising the deceased, (3) self-disclosing emotion, (4) problem-focused coping, (5) emotion-focused coping (e.g., references to the afterlife or a well-lived life), (6) affirming vivid past relationships (e.g., personal insights, acknowledgment of flaws), and (7) continuing interactive bonds (e.g., direct address, present-tense references).

Coding was conducted independently by the primary researcher and a research assistant. Facebook comments—often informal and brief, using emoticons, SMS abbreviations, and nonstandard grammar—required interpretive judgment. Many posts combined multiple rhetorical strategies (e.g., praise and emotional disclosure). After multiple reviews, the team reached consensus, ensuring consistency and reliability in coding.

To contextualize digital responses, traditional eulogies served as interpretive benchmarks. For instance, establishing credibility—a feature of formal eulogies like Earl Spencer's (1997) address for Princess Diana—was rare among Facebook users, who typically lacked direct ties to Jobs. However, praise, emotional expression, and coping strategies were widely observed and paralleled rhetorical moves found in conventional oratory (e.g., Simpson's [2011] eulogy for Jobs or Thatcher's [2004] remarks for Reagan).

This analysis reveals that digital mourners adopted traditional eulogistic structures while reshaping them to suit social media's affordances. The findings underscore how classical rhetorical forms persist—even in fragmented, user-generated content—and how digital mourning continues to fulfill longstanding human needs for remembrance, solace, and communal identity.

Results

A total of 506 Facebook comments posted during the two weeks following Steve Jobs' death were analyzed. These posts were typically brief, informal, and featured a mixture of texting and social media language, as well as non-standard grammar and punctuation. Despite this informality, the comments generally align with Kunkel and Dennis' (2003) integrative framework categories for eulogies. Each category is illustrated

below with representative examples. Dates follow each quote to indicate when it was posted.

Continuation of Interactive Bonds: Addressing the Deceased
Addressing the deceased directly was the most prevalent strategy observed. Users frequently spoke to Jobs as if he could hear them, often overlapping with other categories. For example, they praised him ("you are a legend" [Oct. 5]; "you are genius" [Oct. 11]) or disclosed personal emotions ("steve jobs we miss u too much" [Oct. 13]). They shared intentions ("R.I.P im gonna buy the iphone 4s in memory L" [Oct. 12]) and referenced his afterlife ("I wish Lord Buddha keep you well!" [Oct. 14]). Some expressed appreciation for time spent in his era ("I'm so glad I once lived in this era with you" [Oct. 6]) and thanked him for his contributions ("thanks steve…thanks for the talent that you shared" [Oct. 16]). They also spoke intimately, using terms like "my friend" (Oct. 7) or "i love you from my heart" (Oct. 9).

"RIP" or "rest in peace" appeared frequently. Though originally referencing the afterlife, here it often functioned as a phatic expression signaling respect and farewell. The abundance of "RIP" and other direct addresses suggests the online environment fosters a sense of ongoing connection, preserving the deceased's virtual presence and enabling mourners to speak as if Jobs were still accessible.

Self-Disclosure of Emotion
Self-disclosure of emotion was also common, revealing a wide range of grief expressions. Users conveyed sadness through punctuation, capitalization, emoticons, and texting slang: "RIP Steve…!!!" (Oct. 5), "OMG R.I.P. L" (Oct. 5), "im crying .. LLLLL .." (Oct. 6), and "Sad :s" (Oct. 7). Many incorporated Apple's distinctive branding, placing a lowercase "i" before words to show personal loss: "iMiss u" (Oct. 5), "iSad" (Oct. 6).

Disbelief was also evident: "I don't believe his death…… :(((((((((((" (Oct. 5); "wahhht? L, how he die?" (Oct. 5). Some expressed personal closeness ("we will miss u" [Oct. 5]) or deep admiration ("My Brother Forever…" [Oct. 14]; "i love you for ever" [Oct. 8]). Others offered lengthy, heartfelt tributes describing their emotional state, such as one person who struggled to accept the loss and wept continuously after hearing the news (Oct. 6).

Some tied their emotions to Apple's future, revealing anxiety about life without Jobs' guidance: "watz gonna happen nw wid launch of iphone 5…?" (Oct. 8) and "am worry that the new CEO of APPLE will let JOBS down!!" (Oct. 16). Typically, these emotional disclosures

underscored how personally invested people felt in Jobs' work and his significance in their lives.

Praise for the Deceased

Praise was another central strategy. Many users offered simple accolades: "Legend" (Oct. 5), "A genius. A visionary" (Oct. 6), "god" (Oct. 11), "once king, always king." (Oct. 8). Others were more detailed: "1997 – The King of Rock 'n' roll Elvis Presley, 2009 – The King of Pop Michael Jackson, 2011 – The King of Technology Steve Jobs" (Oct. 6).

Some comments referenced how Jobs' life and innovations affected the commenter personally: "you changed the world, included me" (Oct. 8); "my god . my hero . my ironman" (Oct. 10). Others linked praise to Apple products: "He was a mentor, an inventor, wanted to change the world and he succeeded" (Oct. 6). This theme demonstrates that users readily praised Jobs' character, accomplishments, and the global influence of his work.

Positive Reappraisal: Appreciation of Lessons and Traits Learned from the Deceased

Users sometimes acknowledged lessons learned from Jobs. Comments included: "He tells us how to be creative as a human being" (Oct. 5), "A real monthor [mentor] on how to get things done and never give up" (Oct. 6). Many connected these lessons to Apple's products and Jobs' work ethic, often blending appreciation for his traits with praise for his innovations.

This category expanded to include expressing gratitude for Apple products—an extension of "lessons learned" to encompass what Jobs had taught the world technologically. "you made the best technology ive used" (Oct. 5), "I luv all ur gadgetS Stevie…they were crafted to perfection.." (Oct. 9). Users coined words like "iSad" and "iMiss" to identify with Apple's brand, showing how closely they linked Jobs' legacy with their own experiences. Thanking Jobs frequently emerged: "Thanks for everything!" (Oct. 6). Through these tributes, users indicated that Jobs' lessons, embodied in Apple products, had enriched their lives.

Positive Reappraisal: Appreciation of the Deceased's Good Life

While less common than other strategies, some users emphasized that Jobs lived a remarkable, fulfilling life. "What an amazing life and legacy" (Oct. 7), "My respect to the man who dare to think different" (Oct. 7). Others noted his worldwide impact: "He is an example for those who are not afraid to pursue their dreams" (Oct. 15), "Steve jobs was the most heroic and selfless human being who has ever walked this earth" (Oct. 18). Such comments show that users perceived Jobs' life as meaningful and inspiring,

encouraging a perspective that focused not solely on loss but also on achievements and enduring influence.

Affirmation of Past Relationships: Revelation of Private Insights and Unique Relationships

This category was rarely used, but when it occurred, commenters hinted at personal or emotional closeness: "he rescued me 4m bordm n stress by rockn ma world wt hc invent i lv hm" (Oct. 5), "I feel the pain of your family as your departure was due to the 'cinderella cancer' which my mother died from" (Oct. 6).

Some people framed Jobs as a personal influence or even friend: "you changed my life...my great inventor" (Oct. 6), "Rest in paradise my friend!" (Oct. 7), "you were my inspiration;(" (Oct. 8). Another comment described discovering Jobs and being profoundly changed by his words, though never knowing him personally (Oct. 11). These rare but intimate acknowledgments illustrate that some users felt a bond akin to a personal relationship, reinforcing the parasocial nature of these mourning practices.

Positive Reappraisal: Reference to the Afterlife

Though not widely employed, some commenters referenced the afterlife. Often it was broad: "take a bite out of the big apple in the sky" (Oct. 6), "Heaven will enjoy his company…" (Oct. 7), "i wonder if they have ipods in heaven" (Oct. 11). Others introduced religion: "May Allah have mercy on his soul" (Oct. 10), "I wish Lord Buddha keep you well…" (Oct. 14).

While many "RIP" comments did not explicitly invoke an afterlife, some did: "May his soul rest in peace…" (Oct. 5), "I truly from the bottom of my heart wish you rest in peace" (Oct. 6). Some cleverly integrated Apple's brand into afterlife references: "Rest in peace in the 'iCloud' Steve Jobs" (Oct. 16). Users occasionally suggested Jobs would continue to "live on" through his products or in people's hearts (Oct. 5, Oct. 10). Although less prevalent, these references show that afterlife imagery still serves as a comforting rhetorical tool in online mourning.

Continuation of Interactive Bonds: Referring to the Deceased in the Present Tense

While addressing the deceased was common, referring to Jobs as if still alive was less so. Examples include: "I love steve" (Oct. 12), "he is my man" (Oct. 7), "he's amazing" (Oct. 9). These present-tense references implied that Jobs' influence remained ongoing, blurring the distinction between past and present. Although scarce, this strategy maintained an image of Jobs as actively contributing to people's lives.

Problem-Focused Coping: Suggestions for Action

Suggestions for action were rare, but three

patterns emerged. First, a direct call for action related to cancer research: "hope that research and funding may happen in the future to help battle the cancer you have fought so bravely" (Oct. 6). Second, implicit suggestions to keep Apple alive: "Keep Apple Alive!" (Oct. 6), "Stop making excuses and work to bring positive change to the world!!!" (Oct. 7). Third, personal vows to honor Jobs by purchasing Apple products: "i'll continue to buy apple products as my own way of paying tributes to you…" (Oct. 6), "im gonna buy the iphone 4s in memory J" (Oct. 12). These actions did not necessarily align with Jobs' stated goals or values, but they represent attempts to respond constructively to the loss, maintaining his legacy through tangible acts.

Positive Reappraisal: Appreciation of Time Spent with the Deceased

A few comments expressed gratitude for the "time" spent with Jobs, whether literal or symbolic. Some wrote as if they had lived alongside him: "I'm so glad I once lived in this area with you" (Oct. 6), "Because of him I had a respectable career" (Oct. 10). One particularly detailed comment described discovering Jobs' Stanford speech, feeling changed by his words, and imagining a friendship through his influence (Oct. 11). Such expressions highlight the parasocial dimension of their relationship with Jobs, as people claim and cherish experiences mediated through technology and media coverage.

Establishing Credibility

Only two attempts explicitly established credibility by referencing personal circumstances that paralleled Jobs' experiences. One wrote: "Thank you for reminding me to live each day as if it were my last and each day at it's fullest with the cancer I've had" (Oct. 5). Another empathized with the family's grief due to losing a loved one to the same "cinderella cancer" as Jobs (Oct. 6). Unlike traditional eulogies delivered by close associates, most online commenters had no tangible connection to Jobs. Thus, establishing credibility rarely appeared.

Affirmation of Vivid Past Relationships: Notation of Flaws

Few comments acknowledged flaws or difficulties in Jobs' life. Two examples: "using some of the tech he had no clue how to develop himself but he understood profoundly how to connect the dots to a new future" (Oct. 6), and "an illegitimate child, sent out for adoption, a college dropout… and he changed the world" (Oct. 7). These references suggest that even shortcomings or humble beginnings enhance the deceased's enduring legacy and relatability.

Discussion

This research demonstrates how social media platforms, like Facebook, serve as dynamic spaces for collective mourning and parasocial interaction, allowing users to vocalize eulogies and express emotions publicly. Applying Kunkel and Dennis' (2003) framework to Facebook comments about Steve Jobs revealed that users employ traditional eulogistic strategies—such as praise, emotional disclosure, and references to an afterlife—while also engaging in new post-death practices characteristic of digital environments. Self-disclosure of emotion and continuation of interactive bonds (especially addressing the deceased directly) were most prominent. Rather than relying on personal acquaintance, commenters formed a parasocial bond with Jobs through shared admiration, cultural impact, and his technological legacy, thereby extending the boundaries of conventional mourning and contributing to a collective memory online.

Moreover, social media's informal and user-driven atmosphere fosters new forms of eulogistic expression that differ from traditional funeral rhetoric in style, tone, and content. The integration of emoticons, informal grammar, and brevity lend an unstructured, personal quality to these online tributes, enabling users—often strangers to the deceased or each other—to empathize and support one another's grief in ways that reflect and reshape conventional memorializing rituals. Consequently, these digital expressions highlight both the continuity of age-old eulogistic functions and the transformative influence of social media on mourning practices.

The first research question examined whether online eulogies reflect traditional forms of eulogizing. In many respects, they do. Each category from the framework appeared in the online eulogies, with certain strategies being expanded, and the overall practices still offering a place for individuals to share grief, condolences, and emotional responses in the face of death. These findings support Jamieson's (1978) notion that instinctive adaptations guide eulogizing behavior without the need for formal training. As people joined the digital conversation about Jobs' death, the core structure and function of the eulogy persisted.

Additionally, the results show that social media provided a meaningful forum for vocalizing personal eulogies and expressing emotion through collective grieving. The data suggest that social media served as a viable gathering place for those mourning Steve Jobs, with comments tending toward eulogistic strategies that do not require direct personal contact. In

other words, while certain categories within the framework were less prominent due to the lack of physical familiarity, the essential purpose and integrity of the eulogy tradition remained intact in this online environment.

Continuation of Interactive Bonds

A central theme in the findings was the perceived ongoing existence of the deceased. Referring to Steve Jobs in the present tense or addressing him directly allowed eulogizers to maintain a sense of connection. This was the most prevalent strategy observed, mirroring de Vries and Rutherford's (2004) findings that over half of mourners wrote directly to the deceased rather than about them. Silverman and Klass (1996) suggest that letters to the deceased are key to maintaining bonds unavailable elsewhere, and social media extends this opportunity by enabling public yet personal eulogies to be addressed straight to the deceased. This approach preserved Jobs' presence not only for individual mourners, but for the community as well.

The frequency of this strategy also created overlapping themes. Instead of stating, "He was a genius," commenters would say, "You are a genius," and rather than describing his accomplishments, they told him directly, "You changed the way people see the world." The Internet intensified this effect since Jobs' virtual identity persisted online. His Public Figure page gave users a space where he seemed continually present, enabling them to feel he was not entirely gone. Thus, online platforms supported an active, ongoing bond that transcended his physical absence.

Self-Disclosure of Emotion

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) did not inhibit emotional expression. Instead, it allowed individuals to share their grief and join a collective remembrance. Research suggests that social media can facilitate "mediated death" (Gibson, 2007), letting mourners articulate their sorrow. When people face a loss, turning to CMC can provide an immediate outlet, as noted by Sanderson and Cheong (2010). Early reactions often revealed disbelief and shock— some admitted they were crying or "unable to stop weeping." Over time, as acceptance grew, expressions shifted to acknowledging that Jobs would be missed.

The platform's adaptability let users express emotions uniquely through punctuation, texting language, emoticons, and iconic Apple references (e.g., placing "i" before words). These became natural, effective ways to convey parasocial or hyperpersonal grief. The hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1996) posits that intimacy can be constructed online. Here, mourners communicated complex emotions through unconventional textual cues, showing that online environments can foster genuine empathetic exchanges.

Praise for the Deceased

Praise emerged as a prominent category, reflecting a traditional eulogistic function. Users posted short exclamations like "legendary," "genius," and "awesome," as well as more detailed tributes. Many credited Jobs with changing the world, indicating deep admiration. Facebook's format enabled both brief, powerful words of praise and longer, more nuanced expressions. People's praise—whether concise or elaborate—demonstrated their appreciation for Jobs' contributions and legacy.

Appreciation of Products, Lessons, and Traits Learned from the Deceased

This category expanded to include acknowledgment of the Apple products through which many knew Jobs. Parasocial relationships commonly develop via media exposure to a celebrity, but in this case, the relationship also formed through daily interactions with Apple's technology. Jobs' identity was inseparable from his brand and products; thus, users often thanked him for the innovations that touched their lives.

The extensive references to Apple products— expressed through phrases like "You made the best technology" and personalized coinages like "iCry" or "iSad"—suggest the close integration of Jobs' creations with mourners' own identities. This practice mirrors how fans might quote song lyrics to honor a musician, except here the tribute came through iconic branding. Thanking Jobs or referencing his devices served as a tangible bridge connecting mourners to his legacy, reinforcing their parasocial bond.

Appreciation of the Deceased's Good Life

Some comments emphasized that Jobs lived a remarkable, though shortened, life. Mourners suggested that he served as an example for those unafraid to follow their dreams. In traditional eulogies, acknowledging the deceased's good life helps frame their passing in a constructive light. Online, people repeated this practice, aligning his achievements with broader inspirational themes. Even without direct personal ties, users recognized and affirmed his accomplishments as evidence of a life well lived.

Affirmation of Vivid Past Relationships

Traditionally, affirming vivid past relationships involves personal anecdotes that add depth to the deceased's image. Because most commenters lacked personal contact with Jobs, few could offer unique insights. While "notation of flaws" surfaced only twice, it served the same purpose as in traditional eulogies—humanizing Jobs. For example, mentioning that he did not develop all

his tech himself but was helped by others, and that he turned this reliance into a virtue, gave a more nuanced view of his character.

Likewise, "revelation of private insights and unique relationships" was rare but significant. Individuals who said things like "he rescued me from boredom" or referenced personal struggles mirrored traditional approaches where personal stories highlight the deceased's impact. Using intimate language—"my friend," "my dear"—suggested that some felt a genuinely close parasocial bond. Although most mourners could not offer unique anecdotes, a few expressed the belief they knew him personally, thus internalizing their parasocial connection more deeply.

Reference to an Afterlife

References to the afterlife were less common. Broad statements like "Heaven will enjoy his company" or "Rest in peace in the 'iCloud' Steve Jobs" emerged, but religious discourse remained minimal. Unlike traditional funerals, where a known religious context may guide afterlife references, here Jobs' spiritual affiliation was unclear. Without a shared religious frame, commenters either avoided specifying beliefs or preferred universal, non-religious expressions of continuity.

Cultural and global diversity among his mourners may have also discouraged overt religious references. Users might have hesitated to impose specific religious views in a public online forum. Thus, while afterlife references did appear, they were not central. Some tried to maintain continuity by suggesting he lived on in his products or in people's hearts rather than focusing on a spiritual dimension.

Problem-Focused Coping: Suggestions for Actions

This category appeared infrequently. Occasionally, mourners sought tangible actions: hoping for future cancer research, encouraging others to remember him when using Apple products, or pledging to purchase a product in his memory. While less aligned with traditional eulogies, these comments suggest that some individuals sought a constructive outlet for their grief. By adopting behaviors that honored his memory, they created a sense of purpose and sustained connection.

Appreciation of Time Spent with the Deceased

Time spent with the deceased is closely tied to physical relationships. In an online context, few commenters implied they "spent time" with Jobs. Some expressed gratitude for living in his era or encountering his ideas. Others spoke of "knowing" him through media and products. Although parasocial relationships do not involve direct contact, the hyperpersonal model suggests meaningful interaction can occur virtually.

For fans who engaged deeply with Apple's ecosystem, encountering Jobs' speeches, interviews, or product launches may have felt like spending time with him. While these connections were intangible, they allowed some mourners to treat their mediated experiences as genuine interactions. Research hasn't fully explored hyperpersonal communication in parasocial contexts, but this study hints at its plausibility. The sense of having "spent time" with Jobs, even virtually, reinforced the closeness some mourners felt.

Establishing Credibility

Few tried to establish credibility to speak on Jobs' behalf. Traditional eulogists often explain their relationship with the deceased, but online commenters saw no need to justify their right to mourn publicly. One expectation was that users might cite their Apple product use as proof of connection, yet no such claims emerged. Only those who shared a cancer experience attempted this connection. Their similar illness experience gave them a perceived privilege to empathize more deeply with Jobs, thus suggesting credibility is unnecessary unless a mourner seeks a closer, more personal tie.

Conclusion

This study illustrates how social media eulogies mirror the core functions of traditional funeral orations while adapting to the affordances and constraints of digital communication. Unlike conventional eulogies—delivered by a single speaker in formal settings—online tributes to Steve Jobs consisted of brief, user-generated Facebook comments. Although each post often contained only one or two rhetorical strategies (e.g., praise, emotional disclosure, or direct address), collectively they formed a robust, participatory narrative of grief and remembrance.

Rather than diminishing their value, this fragmentation enhanced accessibility and inclusivity. Social media allowed users across the globe to join a spontaneous mourning process, transforming passive audiences into active eulogizers. The immediacy of computer-mediated communication (CMC) encouraged raw, concise expressions of sadness, disbelief, and admiration. These posts were less curated than traditional funeral rhetoric but equally powerful in capturing communal sentiment.

Two rhetorical strategies dominated: emotional disclosure and direct address to Jobs. Many users spoke to him, not just about him, signaling a desire to sustain emotional bonds after death. These expressions, while lacking formal credibility, reflected authentic parasocial identification—where users felt intimately

connected to a public figure they never met (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Their connection stemmed not from personal interaction, but from Jobs' cultural significance and the centrality of Apple products in users' lives.

This relationship exemplifies the rise of hyperpersonal parasociality, in which media figures become deeply integrated into users' routines, identities, and values (Walther, 1996). Jobs' omnipresence through media and technology fostered strong emotional ties, making his death feel personal. Social media intensified these connections by enabling public, persistent interaction with his legacy.

Digital mourning also reshapes the boundaries of grief. Unlike time- and place-bound funerals, social platforms enable asynchronous, borderless participation. While this openness invites a wider range of expressions—including occasional inappropriate responses—the overall tone remained respectful and reflective. The collective aim remained intact: to mourn together and preserve memory.

Online tributes also contribute to collective memory. Just as physical memorials serve as lasting reminders, digital posts become an enduring archive of grief, admiration, and shared experience. Themes such as innovation, inspiration, and gratitude were repeatedly voiced, solidifying Jobs' legacy as both cultural icon and personal role model.

Limitations include the exclusive focus on Facebook and the interpretive nature of coding informal, fragmented comments. Future research could examine other platforms, cross-cultural mourning practices, or how emerging technologies like virtual reality might further evolve digital memorialization. Additionally, exploring hyperpersonal parasociality may deepen our understanding of technology-mediated intimacy and community formation.

Ultimately, social media does not replace traditional mourning but expands its reach and form. By enabling widespread participation, emotional authenticity, and communal memory-making, platforms like Facebook illustrate how grief adapts in a hyperconnected world. As technology continues to evolve, so too will the ways we honor those who shape our lives—both publicly and personally.

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