Organizational Social Media Mourning: Toward a Framework for Organizations Wishing to Empathize with Publics During Tragedies

Jensen Moore, Ph.D.
University of Oklahoma
jensenmoore@ou.edu

Robert "Pritch" Pritchard
University of Oklahoma
rpritchard@ou.edu

Vincent F. Filak, Ph.D.
University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
vffilak@gmail.com

Abstract

Increasingly, organizations are taking part in social media mourning with publics grieving deaths due to natural or man-made disasters. Many organizations question taking part in social media mourning during public tragedies and desire posting suggestions should they decide to partake. This study examines these issues utilizing in-depth interviews and focus groups with social media mourners and uses this data to provide suggestions for those organizations that decide to use social media to mourn with their publics.

Keywords: social media mourning, organizational social media mourning, crisis communication, public tragedy, discourse of renewal

Executive Summary

This study addresses the lack of research regarding organizational social media mourning during public tragedies. Recent discussions surrounding the role of organizations in helping publics move forward, make sense, and heal following public tragedies such as man-made (e.g., shootings, bombings, riots, etc.) or natural (e.g., Covid, tornados, floods, etc.) disasters have provided little insight into *how* publics would like organizations to respond. Understandably, organizations would like to appear empathetic to the issues their publics face, but fear having their motives for taking part in social media mourning questioned. The purpose of this study was to discover what types of social media mourning messages publics feel are appropriate for organizations to use during public tragedies and create some best practice suggestions based on participant responses.

Competing philosophies exist regarding whether an organization should take part in social media mourning during public tragedies. Professional advice is strategic silence, or to "go dark...so your organization doesn't appear insensitive" (Baer, 2016; Winchel, 2019, p.1). If an organization went further than indicating "thoughts and prayers" and included messages that promoted the organization, encouraged a return to spending, or were seen as a way of taking advantage of the tragedy, organizational image suffers (Baer, 2016). In a study by Moore & Stevens (2017) social media mourning messages where organizations indicated commercial intent, patriotic appeals, or political leanings were viewed negatively, and as the organization being self-centered, opportunistic, and uncaring. Furthermore, participants suggested negative effects (boycotts, online protests, negative reviews) for organizations using these strategies in their social media mourning posts.

In contrast to professional advice, academics suggest "organizations...have a major stake in the nation's ability to rebound" (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; p. 362) from public tragedies. Similarly, Hayes, Waddell, and Smudde (2017) posited organizations have a "moral or professional obligation to respond to events by which they are not directly impacted" (p. 254) as their various stakeholder publics are likely under duress and experiencing various trauma-related emotions. Research by Moore, Pritchard and Filak (2019) regarding the differences in remembrance messages used by organizations on social media indicates messages that helped the public "move forward" following the tragedy such as those encouraging public participation, promoting sponsorship of organizations helping with efforts (e.g., FEMA, United Way, Red Cross, etc.), and supporting recovery efforts were received favorably.

Thus, it is important for organizations to understand how to use social media to communicate feelings of empathy, community, and support to those experiencing public tragedy. One focus of discourse of renewal is on moving forward, healing, and focusing on community (Xu, 2018). As noted by Hayes, Waddell, and Smudde (2017) "social media have provided an easy, public, and immediate outlet for people and third-party organizations to communally express their emotions, support and grief over tragic events, thereby contributing well to collective healing" (p. 269).

Impact to the Public Relations Profession

Public tragedies are unique crises situations where organizations are "morally obligated to participate in this process of collective mourning" (Hayes, Waddell, & Smudde, 2017, p. 259). Public relations professionals are able to utilize the distinct characteristics of social media platforms that are not geographically or temporally bound to participate in the mourning process

thereby helping their stakeholder publics move forward and heal. However, social media mourning missteps can leave an organization with a crisis of its own. For example, during a 9/11 memorial in 2016 Miracle Mattress promoted "all mattresses at twin prices" on their social media platforms with the hashtags "#miraclemattress," "#worldtradecenter," "#twinsale," "#sale," "#america," and "#neverforget." Negative public response to their posts led to the Texas store closing indefinitely (BBC News, 2016).

Thus, this research provides practical advice to organizations that wish to empathize with stakeholders during public tragedies. Specifically, what types of organizational social media mourning messages do publics feel are most acceptable? During times of public tragedy, can organizations effectively use social media mourning messages to show support, build community, and help the public recover? What are the effects on publics if they fail to appropriately convey empathy on social media platforms?

Key Findings and Implications

Following in-depth interviews and focus groups, we were able to identify the types of social media mourning messages publics did and did not want from organizations during public tragedies. Results indicated publics wanted organizations to go beyond "thoughts and prayers" and use social media mourning posts to: 1) connect with mourners within a larger mourning community by using things such as #RIP hashtags and empathetic images, 2) show how the organization is helping communities deal with grief with donations, sponsorships, or volunteer efforts, and 3) continue remembering the tragedy and honoring victims years later. Most importantly, organization social media mourning posts should show genuine empathy for those grieving. Our findings echoed that of Moore & Stevens (2017), Moore, Pritchard and Filak (2019), and Moore (in press) which found that many social media mourning messages posted by organizations are political, patriotic, or commercial in nature - and publics did not appreciate these messages encroaching on their grief.

Individuals who indicated skepticism of the organization's social media mourning posts were likely to suggest punitive behaviors such as boycotts. Content such as images of death, those promoting the organization or its products, and those that try to mislead the public by attempting to positively affect the organization's image were among those that irritated participants and led them to attack the offending organization.

Thus, this study takes important steps in providing a normative framework for organizations that wish to provide empathetic responses to publics who take part in social media mourning during a public tragedy. Additionally, the study revealed ways in which organizations could be negatively affected should they improperly engage grief-stricken publics via social media mourning posts.

Social media have changed how we communicate about death and the grieving process following death (Hollander, 2001; Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, Pitsillides, 2012; Willis & Ferrucci, 2014). Studies show during public tragedies such as natural disasters (e.g., tornado, earthquake, flood, hurricane, etc.) or man-made disasters (e.g., terrorism, shooting, riot, engineering failure, etc.) individuals use social media to seek information, share information, collaborate recovery efforts, or share emotion or opinions (Heverin & Zach, 2010; Heverin & Zach, 2012). Additionally, following public tragedies, mourners often become part of online networks or mourning communities to work through their respective tragedy-related traumas (Vicary & Fraley, 2010: Hayes, Waddell, & Smudde, 2017). The Social Media Mourning Model (SM3) posits mourners use social media for one-way communication (i.e., controlling the narrative,

permission to engage in dialogue, evade or acknowledge grief), two-way communication (i.e., community sharing, relationship formation, collective grieving), and immortality communication (i.e., continued social actors, eternal remembrance, habitual communication) (Moore, Magee, Gamreklidze & Kowalewski, 2019). Thus, while previous research in social media mourning primarily examined individual use (i.e., knew the deceased person) when a loved one passes, the current study examines how the public perceives organizational social media mourning responses to public tragedies.

Social media have been used by organizations during crises situations. Research shows social media platforms allow organizations to repair their reputations following crisis (Chung & Lee, 2016) as well as provide updated information to their publics during the crisis and during recovery (Hayes, Waddell, & Smudde, 2017). Social media allow for organizations to tell everything, tell the truth, tell it quickly -- all key tenets of crisis communication. In addition, social media allow for two-way communication with publics during crisis wherein they can ask timely questions and receive immediate answers (Freberg, 2018). Of course, as noted by Bratu (2016), it is essential that organizations keep their social media up to date with relevant, information prior to crises so they are seen as credible channels during a crisis. This study, however, is concerned with organization social media use during public tragedy -- where they are a "third-party" not directly involved in the crisis events.

Organizations not directly involved in public tragedies have increasingly taken part in the social media discourse and mourning surrounding them as ways to show sympathy, support, and commiseration. Not only are organization's various stakeholder publics online during public tragedies, but the media are there monitoring reactions as well. Frost (2014) posited "media outlets are accessing social media to gauge the response of those grieving and to obtain the most recent updates of information" (p. 261). Understanding what an organization's stakeholders are feeling and responding accordingly thus becomes an important first step before message creation. Toward this end, Frost (2014) went on to suggest organizations develop social media plans that include monitoring "death pages" (i.e., memorial pages) on social media. Similarly, Hayes, Waddell, and Smudde (2017) suggested organizations build social media mourning monitoring and messaging into their crisis communication plans.

Failures in understanding what publics need in organizational social media mourning messages can lead to backlash. From the permanent closing of Miracle Mattress that promoted sales "at twin prices" in a 9/11 social media memorial message (BBC News, 2016) to more recently Third Watch Protection Services tweeting "enough is enough" following the Uvalde Robb Elementary shooting (Third Watch Protection Services, 2022), to Blackfire Portable Power Stations tweeting "thoughts and prayers to those affected by Hurricane Ian…Our 1500W and 500W Portable Power Stations are solutions for anyone dealing with the loss of power or in unsafe situations…#preppergear" (Blackfire, 2022). Following the death of Queen Elizabeth II that affected people all over the world, many UK organizations posted that they would be silent and suspend all social media activity but would remain open to the public (Rogers, 2022). In comparison, many organizations posted simple black and white mourning messages that noted "honor" and "respect" for the Queen. But notably, some UK companies used the Queen's death to promote their organization. Ann Summers, a sex-toy and lingerie retailer, posted a "thank you your majesty" RIP tribute to the Queen that was linked to sales on their website for erotica, lubes, and sex toys (Ann Summers, 2022) while Dale Vince, CEO of Ecotricity, a green energy company, posted "Thanks Liz" with an image of the Queen with the company's logo and name

Photoshopped onto her suit and hat (Vince, 2022). Messages that focus away from the tragedy and promote social change (i.e., Third Watch), promote the goods/services of the organization (i.e., Blackfire Portable Power Stations and Ann Summers), or do not show respect and sympathy (i.e., Ecotricity) are met online with hostility, criticism, and condemnation that damages reputation as well as threats to organizational survival (e.g., boycott, protest, etc.).

To gain insights into how mourning publics perceive organizations that take part in public tragedy mourning via social media, how publics may react to organizations that do not successfully show sympathy and compassion, and use this data to create a list of best practices for organizations wishing to take part in social media mourning, this research consists of two qualitative methods: in-depth interviews and a series of focus groups. Overall, results indicate social media mourners welcome organizational shows of support and empathy during public tragedies as these help unify the mourning community and honor the victims. Similar to Hayes, Waddell, and Smudde (2017), we suggest organization crisis responses include monitoring (at the very least) of posts/memorial pages for public tragedies to determine how the organization should take part in the dialogue as well as address the needs of publics impacted. However, we go further than their research to suggest ways organizations should take part in social media mourning such as changing profile pictures, using hashtags, promoting charitable efforts, and not posting or sharing misleading or "old" posts or photos as displays of empathy.

Literature Review

Crisis, Public Tragedy, and Discourse of Renewal

Research on crisis communication has traditionally put public tragedy into the same category as faux pas, something external to the organization and unintended (Coombs, 1995). Crisis definitions differ greatly among scholars, but most crisis theories show they: 1) disrupt normal business operations, and 2) threaten organizational reputation (Coombs, 2002). Public tragedies, however large, may not do either of these things to an organization, but may "have considerably greater and singular impact than a traditional industry crisis" (Hayes, Waddell, & Smudde, 2017, p. 253). Hayes, Waddell, and Smudde (2017) defined public tragedy as "disruptive, catastrophic events that cause physical or psychological trauma for individuals, communities, organizations, and social support networks regardless of where they are directly or indirectly impacted by the circumstances" (p. 255). Thus, an organization's stakeholders (e.g., employees, stockholders, customers, producers, etc.) may be severely affected by a public tragedy while the defining traits of a crisis - the organization's business operations and reputation – remain unaffected.

Ulmer and Sellnow (2002) describe public tragedies as "all-consuming crisis that causes fear and overwhelming uncertainty for an entire population" (p. 362). Their research suggests organization renewal efforts during this time must be stepped up as organizations "have a major stake in the nation's ability to rebound from the crisis" (p. 362). Similarly, Hayes, Waddell and Smudde (2017) noted organizations are "morally obligated to participate in this process of collective mourning" (p. 259). Their conceptual research suggested organizations take part social media mourning to show support and help their publics move forward from the tragedy in two ways: 1) use environmental scanning processes to identify online spaces where their publics are grieving (i.e., Facebook memorial pages) during public tragedies, and 2) build sympathetic social media mourning messages into the organization's crisis communication plan.

During such times of crisis, Seeger et al. (2005) posit "organizational members, crisis stakeholders and the public often experience intense emotional arousal, stress, fear, anxiety and apprehension that they seek to resolve" (p. 80). Public tragedies require change (Seeger et al., 2005), cooperation (Seeger et al., 2005), rebuilding of public confidence (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002), sense-making (Seeger et al., 2005), and support (Seeger et al., 2005). The type of "planned, strategic change" noted by Seeger et al. (2005) is often not possible during public crises as organizations must react quickly and focus on ways to respond empathetically to both victim and non-victim publics. Thus, a focus on cooperation, sense-making, and support emerges where the organization looks for ways to help publics deal with negative emotions and consequences resulting from the public tragedy, often by allocating organization resources and communication efforts (Seeger et al., 2005). In some cases, a readjustment of previously held organization norms (and in cases of public tragedy, cultural norms), helps publics feel comfortable and begin moving forward from the crisis (Seeger et al., 2005).

In discourse of renewal, Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) suggest organizations help publics move forward from the crisis by: 1) serving stakeholders, 2) correcting issues, and 3) focusing on public values (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). Overall, discourse of renewal focuses on learning, positive portrayals, and opportunities instead of negatives (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; "Introduction," para. 5). Within this theory, Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow (2007) provide a post-crisis communication framework focusing on: 1) community interests, (p. 133), 2) moving forward (p. 133), 3) post-event opportunities (p. 134), and 4) strong, reputable, formal leadership (p. 134). In doing these things, Ulmer and Sellnow (2002) feel the organization can help publics focus on healing, rebuilding, learning, and "moving beyond the crisis" (p.362). Xu (2018) takes this a step further, suggesting that by focusing on community values the organization can help publics make sense of the crisis.

Unlike most crisis communication theories, discourse of renewal does not focus on blame and reputation repair (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002), but on "cooperation and healing" (Seeger et al., 2005, p. 82) and provisional (e.g., emotional, heartfelt) rather than strategic discourse, making it an ideal lens to view public tragedy responses through. Hayes, Waddell, and Smudde (2017) posit that stakeholder relationships, digital relationships, and organizational relationships are all affected by taking part in social media mourning. In attempting establishment of best practices for organizational social media mourning, they suggest posting messages of unity, empathy, and encouragement. They further suggest organizations aid in recovery efforts by helping with sense-making as well as action (i.e., assistance, donations, sponsorships, volunteerism, etc.).

Thus, as noted by Ulmer and Sellnow (2002), organizations must have concerted activities (such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), philanthropy, sponsorships, etc.) in place before the crisis occurs. These CSR efforts serve as established "reservoirs of good will with stakeholders" before any crises occur (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002, pg. 365). Similarly, Hayes, Waddell, and Smudde (2017) posited taking part social media mourning could help organizations generate "credibility," "goodwill," "social capital," and "trust" (p. 269). Though they caution against appearing self-serving, noting "an organization must take care to not appear to and actually be benefiting from the tragedy" (p. 263). However, taking part in CSR efforts while a crisis unfolds can be easily misconstrued by publics as an attempt to repair reputation by "buying" it. Organizations may appear self-serving or capitalistic if they try to improve their image by taking part in public tragedy mourning or memorialization (Moore, Pritchard, Nicolini & Meux, 2020).

Organization Mourning and Memorialization

It is important to differentiate between mourning and memorial. Mourning takes place during the initial stages of the public tragedy (i.e., impact, initial recovery, recovery) when sympathy and support for those mourning deaths needed (Hayes, Waddell, & Smudde, 2017). During the final stage, return to normalcy, memorial takes place. This final stage is usually removed in time from the impact of the tragedy sometimes by months, or even years depending on the impact of the tragedy. For example, 9/11 memorial/commemoration messages have taken place yearly on the same date, while memorial for Uvalde victims will likely begin taking place at the one-year mark.

Thus, though scarce, what literature could be found on organization mourning and memorial messaging research has focused on: 1) mourning messages immediately following a public tragedy (Kinnick, 2003), 2) memorial messages for the anniversary of a public tragedy (McMellon & Long, 2004; McMellon & Long, 2006), and 3) messages following a corporate death (Bell & Taylor, 2016). Additionally, research on organizations using social media to mourn is lacking. After a thorough literature search, only two studies were found regarding all three core concepts of our research: social media, organization mourning, and tragedy/disaster. Thus, it is important to examine the components of organization's using traditional media to mourn during public tragedies to use of social media to mourn, and identify where concepts differ and converge.

Early work by Kinnick (2003) examined advertisements placed in newspapers immediately following the 9/11 attacks. Her study found these ads contributed to positive perceptions of organization image and served to establish " the organization as a good corporate citizen" (Kinnick, 2003, p. 445). Additionally, ads that paired cause-related messages (e.g., supported causes tied to the tragedy) with the mourning message were able to enhance organization reputation. Likewise, McMellon and Long (2004) studied newspaper advertisements posted as anniversary or commemorative messages to the 9/11 attacks. Their study found organization messaging fell into four main categories: 1) commercial (i.e., traditional product ad with mention of tragedy), 2) condolence (i.e., messages of prayers, sadness, sympathy, etc.), 3) informational (i.e., helpful information for publics), and 4) inspirational/patriotic (i.e., American images/colors and messages of pride and overcoming). They then tested each category of messages finding positive participant reactions to informational and patriotic messages, and negative reactions to commercial messages. Their suggestion was organizations should avoid commercial messages tied to commemorating a tragedy. Instead, organization memorial messages should focus on what the organization is doing or what publics should do in response to the tragedy or focus on how we came together as Americans to overcome the tragedy.

In a later study, McMellon and Long (2006) modified these categories to: 1) commercial (i.e., message containing sales/discounts), 2) image (i.e., corporate logo/image with message of sadness loss), 3) participation (i.e., message urged public to volunteer/donate in memory of tragedy), 4) patriotic (i.e., message contained eagle/flag image and/or text about American courage, resilience, etc.), and 5) public interest (i.e., message regarding what the corporation was doing to remember). Previously the category of information had combined both information regarding what the organization was doing (now public interest) and information regarding what the public should do (now participation). Additionally, the category of condolence was re-categorized as image messaging as the goal was to further the organization's reputation by

displays of empathy. However, they did not test the effectiveness of each of these new categories as their previous study had.

Finally, Bell and Taylor (2016) examined Apple's messaging in response to the death of Steve Jobs. Apple used several tactics including a corporate memorial service, a virtual condolence book, and video messaging. Their study noted that public messages regarding Jobs' death were not only posted online via social media, but that their content focused more on his image as world-changing and irreplaceable. Conversely, the content of Apple's messages focused more on Apple moving forward from Jobs' image. Bell and Taylor (2016) argued this dichotomy served to frame Apple as a corporation that "transcends individual death…suggesting that the organization could continue to survive and flourish without him" (p. 127).

Strongman's (2017) examination of organization response to the murder of Jo Cox, a member of Parliament, found that social media could be used as a way for organizations to customize expressions of grief to personally express condolences, indicate organizational response to tragedy/disaster, and provide leadership responses. The second study was a conceptual article written by Hayes, Waddell, and Smudde (2017) which posited that public tragedies should be part of organization crisis plans, and specifically under the purview of public relations professionals. They went on to suggest when, specifically, an organization's should take place: 1) impact (when public tragedy occurs), 2) initial recovery (public tragedy is being dealt with), 3) recovery (publics are focused on efforts to return to normal), and 4) return to normalcy (rebuilding and restoring are complete) (p. 267). They further suggested "express[ing] solidarity with stakeholders" (p. 268) along with types of involvement such as "making a statement or sharing a link through social media, or…facilitating a public memorial" (p. 267).

Taken together, the research using traditional media for organizational mourning and using social media for the same purposes had several similarities and showed linkages to discourse of renewal. First, organizational mourning messages can not only show condolences, support and that organizations are "good citizens" but indicate organization leadership, cooperation and goodwill actions, and how the organization will help with recovery. Second, there are ways organization mourning messages can help publics move forward from and make sense of the tragedy. Third, organization mourning message content can range greatly – from commercial to image, participation, patriotic, or public interest – and can have deeply positive or negative emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral effects on publics. Fourth, different phases of the crisis require different organizational mourning responses, though there is no evidence for what types of mourning messages organizations can use to help publics overcome negative emotions, heal traumas, or rebound from the tragedy. Thus, the primary research question guiding this study was: How should organizations take part in social media mourning during public tragedies?

Methods

A combination of in-depth interviews and focus groups was used to gather first-hand accounts from individuals who had used social media to grieve/mourn following a natural or man-made disaster in the years 2005-2015. These qualitative methods help in accessing attitudes and experiences regarding sensitive and complex concepts such a death and mourning (Byrne, 2004). Focus groups allowed researchers to fully explore real-life experiences with social media mourning that were not anticipated prior to the interviews (Babbie, 2001). Thus, the addition of

focus groups helped researchers understand the socially created attitudes and opinions about organizations using social media to mourn (Tonkiss, 2004) that emerged in the interviews -- with the added use of examples to help clarify some of the concepts that emerged. These examples included several different organization messages surrounding the shooting at Parkland Elementary School and former Navy Seal Chris Kyle (man-made disasters) in addition to Hurricane Katrina and the Moore, OK tornado (natural disasters).

As noted in the literature review, previous methods of investigating organizations and public tragedy mourning/memorial focused on traditional media and used quantitative methods such as surveys, and experiments. As a result, the findings of these studies are limited to the topics, concepts, or public tragedies introduced to participants (e.g., patriotic messages, commercial messages, informational messages, etc.). Since this is the first study specifically examining social media mourning we wanted to ensure that concepts beyond previous studies and the understanding of the researchers were gathered. Qualitative methods allow for participants to present ideas and themes beyond previous literature and researcher preconceptions, and will help provide concepts for future quantitative study.

Method 1

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with open-ended questions were used, which allowed researchers to get detailed information in the interviewee's own words regarding how participants felt about organizations that took part in social media mourning (Byrne, 2004; Schutt, 2004). A dialogic relationship was pursued between the interviewer and interviewees to create a conversation-like atmosphere (Babbie, 2001; Schutt, 2004). Each interview took place at a public location chosen by the interviewee, took between 30-60 minutes, and was audio recorded. All interviews were conducted in person. Participants were given a $25 Walmart gift card for their participation. Following the interviews, each audio file was transcribed by a student worker.

Design

Several "grand tour" questions were asked at the beginning of each interview to let the interviewees develop rapport and garner detailed narratives of the interviewees' own social media use for mourning (Schutt, 2004). Interviewers then explored how the interviewees felt about "non-mourning" publics (defined during this process as those who do not personally know anyone who died, but still used social media to mourn) taking part in . The interviews were then directly asked how they felt about organizations that joined into . Questions in this section asked, 1) what types of organization posts they had seen (natural or man-made disaster, and commercial, image, participation, patriotic, public interest, etc.), 2) how they felt about the different types of organization social media mourning posts they had seen, 3) what they thought of the organizations that had placed social media mourning posts, 4) how seeing organizations placing social media mourning posts influenced their perceptions of the organization, and 5) how they would react toward organizations that had placed social media mourning posts.

Graduate students (3) were trained in the interview and focus group methods and were given a protocol to follow for each method. The protocol consisted of instructions to the interviewers including complete information on consent, opening statements, warm-up questions, grand-tour questions, sample probes to follow key questions, transitions between each interview theme section, and an interview closing statement (focus groups also included a demographic form for participants to complete). This same question format (described above) and protocol was used in the focus groups (method 2 below) as well.

Participants

Researchers were specifically interested in those who had personally experienced the death of a loved one during public tragedy (i.e., either a man-made or natural disaster) and used social media for mourning that individual in the last 10 years. It was determined that personal experience would provide more rich information than non-mourning publics. In addition, the 10-year timeframe meant mourners would still be able to remember their experiences. A volunteer sampling method was used to recruit participants, wherein social media posts explicitly asked for individuals to take part. This was the same population, sampling method, and recruitment strategy for the focus groups (below).

A total of 16 individuals took part in the interviews. They had used social media to grieve/mourn following a natural (n=7, i.e., hurricanes Katrina or Isaac, Illinois snowstorm, South Carolina, or Mississippi floods,) or man-made (n=9, i.e., Mississippi shooting, Colorado shooting, Paris attacks, Louisiana shooting) disaster participated in the interviews. Of these, 37.5% were male and 62.5% were female, 25% were Black, and 75% Caucasian. Ages ranged from 20-49. The majority were college students (50%) from the south (94%).

Method 2

Focus groups were conducted on a different sample of participants than the interviews, though with the same sample characteristics (i.e., social media mourner, last 10 years, public tragedy). Group dynamics allow for participants to "feed off" one another in discussions that add to findings. The same five questions from the interviews were used, but this time with examples showing different types of organization responses ranging from those focusing on prayer/unity, charitable donation requests, patriotism, and support through a hashtag.

One graduate student served as the moderator for all four focus groups, with the additional graduate students serving as a greeter/note taker and video recorder. Each of the focus groups was held in the same classroom on a large southern campus, within a one-week period. Focus groups took between 60-90 minutes each. Participants were given a $25 Walmart gift card for their participation. Following the focus groups, each video file was transcribed by a student worker.

Participants

A total of 52 individuals took part in four focus groups (6-15 participants per focus group). These participants had used social media to mourn following a natural (n=32, i.e., hurricanes Katrina, Isaac or Patricia, Philippine typhoon) or man-made (n=20, Louisiana shooting, Colorado shooting, Paris attacks, Sandra Bland death, Florida shooting, Chinese explosion, West (TX) explosion, Canadian train explosion, Sandy Hook shooting, Fort Hood shooting, Fukushima power plant, Deepwater Horizon) disaster in the last 10 years. Of these, 40% were male and 60% were female, while 29% were Black, 2% were Asian, and 69% were Caucasian. Ages ranged from 18-63. The majority were college students (52%) from the south (86%).

Results

Data Analysis

Following data analysis procedures outlined by Creswell (2003) each set of transcripts was read through multiple times to make sure all information regarding organization social media mourning was found. The researchers read through for general ideas, tone of comments, and the language used by interviewees. Memos regarding what was said in each part directly

referring to organization social media mourning were written, and passages were highlighted by the lead researcher. The researchers then identified categories/themes that emerged in the memos and went back to the highlighted transcript portions to find *in vivo* terms as well as direct quotes that helped solidify the themes.

Findings

Connecting to the Tragedy

Participants noted seeing organization mourning posts for both man-made and natural disasters, predominantly on Twitter and Facebook. They noted seeing many different types of organization mourning posts, stating the first type they usually encountered was an organization using the same hashtag as the mourners (e.g., #prayforparis and #parisattacks). Others noted some organizations would change their profile picture on their social media pages and replace it with hashtags. "They [organizations] connect to the tragedy with hashtags," said one participant, "so they can show support, which is cool." Hashtags served to unify the global community of mourners and in most cases, this type of mourning was not seen as intrusive, but as sparking togetherness and comfort. Most participants said they "were good with organizations connecting their story to the disaster." One participant noted, however, that some organizations try to "hijack" the hashtag and begin "over talking" about the organization's story instead of the tragedy.

Participants also noted consistently seeing organizations posting images with mourning messages such as "our thoughts and prayers are with you" with an organization logo or picture of the tragedy. Many participants mentioned organization messages paired with images from Hurricane Katrina such as flooded streets, people rescued by boats, or people trapped on top of houses. A few participants said they had seen images of dead bodies tied to organization messages and felt this was unacceptable. "They [organizations] should never use images of death," stated one participant, "they can take part in grief without those types of photos."

Community Support vs. Capitalism

Participants stated they felt organizations were expressing "togetherness" and "comfort" with the mourning community through organization mourning posts. "I feel like organizations need to mourn too," stated one participant, "and it's okay for them to use their social media pages to connect to us." Posts indicating empathy, compassion, and support were very favorably viewed by participants. "It's like they [organizations] can see we need to hear they feel loss too," said another participant. "It's nice to know they care," said another, "and makes you feel more relatable." Some participants noted they saw a lot of donation and volunteering posts associated with tragedies and saw these as ways organizations were encouraging communities to come together. "It's good to see organizations mention things like drop off locations, or where we can help," said one participant, "those messages show they care about getting us through the tragedy." "Volunteering posts helped connect us," said one participant, "they showed how we all needed each other." Additionally, participants looked favorably on organizations promoting recovery efforts within their mourning posts. For example, organizations that mentioned how they were contributing to helping the communities affected through monetary or product donations. "Those companies show they care about the community," said one participant, "not just their company."

Conversely, posts that focused on promoting the organization were viewed very unfavorably. "I saw some posts talking about sales during the hurricane and that was tasteless," said one participant. Another participant noted that "these organizations that advertise like percent off or 'stock up now' are horrible. Like who is shopping at a time like this?" Even messages that did not directly mention sales or shopping, but simply promoted the organization were considered negative. "You can't just have a message that shows how great you are when people are grieving," said one participant, "companies have to focus on the tragedy, not themselves."

Misleading the Public

Participants noted that some organizations used mourning posts to distort their image to the public. One example noted multiple times was organizations like BP placing social media posts suggesting empathy and caring following disasters such the Deepwater Horizon. "They [BP] were at fault and they're like 'we are sorry for your loss,'' said one participant, "it was bullshit and they expected us to play along. They were just sad their name was attached." Other participants noted that organizations such as the NRA shouldn't offer thought and prayers following gun deaths as this was seen as "fake" and "tacky." "You can't have an organization like the NRA posting about gun deaths when they're the ones supporting gun owners," said another participant. Alternatively, participants noted they felt disturbed by organization mourning posts that called for gun control as noted by one participant, "I guess sometimes [I felt uncomfortable] for shootings whenever companies just started talking about gun control instead of the actual disaster." "You can let people know you're sorry or thinking about them and avoid politics," said one participant, "Avoid bringing up issues at least for a while."

Additionally, participants noted that organizations should not use "old posts" or photos of things they had done in the past in their social media mourning posts. One participant said they didn't like how companies like Dawn always seemed to have the same oil-covered birds in all their oil spill messages. Another participant shared that an organization posted a picture of the Eiffel Tower lit up red, white, and blue following the Paris attacks and stated it was a sign of support for those mourning. "I saw the post and was like, No that picture was from years ago, it wasn't actually from that night. So I feel like the organization's intention was good, but it was definitely not accurate or time relevant," said the participant. "I thought, 'Eh, your intentions were good, but your execution was bad.' It was just misleading."

Speak Out and/or Boycott

In response to what they viewed as negative or unacceptable organization mourning posts, participants noted they felt it was acceptable to "call out" or reprimand organizations. "If I see a company posting a sales ad while they also say 'thoughts and prayers' I think it's gross," said one participant, "and I have no problem calling them out on Twitter." Other participants said they would not only boycott the organization themselves, but make sure to post to others in their networks to do the same. "It's easy on social media to share a post and say 'this company did such and such you should boycott them'," said another participant.

Continuing Remembrance

Several participants noted they still saw organization mourning posts years after the tragedy took place. For example, many noted they saw anniversary posts regarding Hurricane Katrina and the Moore Oklahoma tornadoes. "It was such a dramatic event [Moore tornado] that it makes you want to recognize and give recognition to the people we lost," said one participant, "It's nice to see companies continue to show support." Others, however, noted anniversary

mourning posts keep the tragedy going. "I think that sometimes they [anniversary posts] do extend it longer than it would have been if it weren't posted on social media."

Discussion and Conclusion

During times of public tragedy organizations often want to feel connected to publics, show support, and help communities recover, but fear being perceived as self-serving, focused on image, or capitalistic (Hayes, Waddell, & Smudde, 2017). Highly publicized social media mourning failures may also deter some organizations taking part in public displays of mourning and memorialization. Thus, lack of pre-established norms for organizational participation in social media mourning often creates uncertainty as to how best to interact with mourning publics. These concerns lead organizations to question whether they should take part in social media mourning, thus the current professional advice is to remain silent. However, this stance may indicate to mourning publics that the organization simply does not care about their trauma and grief. As noted throughout this study, public tragedy and resulting online mourning leads to heightened emotional states, upon which even seemingly benign efforts "third-party" organizations can evoke negative reactions such as boycotts and protests. Hence, the overall question guiding this study was, how should organizations take part in social media mourning during public tragedies?

This study used participant data from in-depth interviews and focus groups to identify concepts relating to organizational social media mourning as well as use participant responses to begin identifying best practices for organizations wishing to appropriately participating in the online mourning process (Strongman, 2017). Guided by components of discourse of renewal, we see that it is possible for organizations to use social media to mourn with publics in ways that help them heal, make sense of the public tragedy, and move forward.

First, discourse of renewal suggests there are highly emotional states publics experience that organization responses can share in (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Seeger et al., 2005). Additionally, Hayes, Waddell, and Smudde (2017) posit using social media for "collective mourning" during public tragedy is an organization's "moral obligation" (p. 259). Overall, the results indicated that participants appreciated organizational shows of support that demonstrated unadulterated empathy, unifying efforts, and honorific messages. These efforts provided a clear opportunity for an emotional connection between the mourners and the organizations, especially when those organizations provided specific and relevant tributes to the fallen.

Second, discourse of renewal suggests organizations use responses to help publics make sense of the tragedy and move forward (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Seeger et al., 2005; Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007). Thus, efforts that address public emotions and provide messages of healing and recovery help in these efforts (Bell & Taylor, 2016), and our participants noted images contained in social media mourning messages were a large source of information regarding how the organization felt about the tragedy. Participants indicated social media mourning messages that relied on reused images and generic messages reflected a lack of true empathy by the organization. These attempts failed to demonstrate an honest desire to connect with mourning publics and instead reflected a "bandwagon" approach to trending topics or popular hashtags. Additionally, use of death imagery was deeply frowned upon such as images of people falling from the Twin Towers during 9/11 or drowned bodies following Hurricane Katrina.

Third, discourse of renewal suggests organizations use responses to indicate how they are supporting recovery efforts, not using messages to build up their reputation or return to "business as usual" (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Xu, 2018). Organizations that espoused community values or "put their money where their mouth is" and donated, sponsored efforts, or had employees volunteer to help within the "thoughts and prayers" posts were positively perceived by participants (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Xu, 2018). When organizations appeared to capitalize on the disaster for financial or promotional gains, participants suggested these social media efforts did more harm than good in terms of organizational image. Similar to Moore and colleagues (Moore & Stevens, 2017; Moore, Pritchard & Filak, 2019, Moore, in press) and McMellon and Long (2004) participants in our study noted a clear disdain for any "capitalistic" efforts in the wake of public tragedy and noted a strong sense of being used.

Third, discourse of renewal suggests organization have a "major stake in the nation's ability to rebound from the crisis" (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002, p. 362). This ability hinges on whether the organization connects with mourners, has a clear vision of mourner needs, and understands community interests (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007; Strongman, 2017). One of the key elements underlying the responses noted in this study was the concept of "why" regarding the struggle associated with mourning. Individuals who suffer losses often seek an answer as to why tragedies befell their loved ones (Moore, Magee, Gamreklidze, & Kowalewski, 2019, Moore, 2022, Moore, in press). Along parallel lines, participants in this study who most vehemently questioned the efforts of organizations participating in social media mourning indicated a similar struggle with the "why" element of these engagements. In other words, those messages that had the most positive influence were those that came from organizations that had a clear rationale behind their participation and that offered messages that demonstrated a congruence of grief. Participants suggest negative effects or backlash - such as calls to boycott – toward those organizations whose social media mourning posts lacked a clear "why" answer or offered messages that demonstrated an emotional or logical discordance for the grief-stricken (e.g., commercial messages or messages from organizations some feel had contributed to the tragedy). As noted by Kinnick (2003),

> "it is the job of public relations practitioners to constantly monitor the mood and mindsets of important publics. Before any response to tragedy is formulated, PR practitioners should be consulted for their insights about likely public reaction to proposed messages or silence" (p. 457).

To avoid awkward or obtrusive social media efforts in the wake of public tragedy, we suggest that organizations establish, in advance, a policy to address participation in social media mourning. The policy should discuss how and when (Hayes, Waddell, & Smudde, 2017) the organization will create and disseminate social media mourning messages. Additionally, the policy should address which types of content the organization should not use (i.e., old visuals, disturbing images) as well as the types of proactive messages that can augment its status as a genuine and empathetic participant. At the heart of this policy should be an answer to the "why" question, in which the organization challenges its members to develop a clear rationale for its participation in specific social media mourning efforts, as opposed to a merely offering blanket "thoughts and prayers" when a hashtag associated with grief reaches a critical mass of users. This should mitigate problematic social media efforts, with the obvious hope that the policy will provide positive social connections between the organizations and the mourners.

Overall, our qualitative exploration of what participants want and need from organizations that take part in social media mourning following public tragedies provided several key insights. Future empirical study should examine the concepts discussed in this study and identify which ones stakeholder publics feel are most important in organizational social media mourning messaging, as well as what public responses are likely to be regarding different types of messages. Furthermore, Hayes, Waddell, and Smudde (2017) suggest different phases of the public tragedy (i.e., impact, initial recovery, recovery, return to normalcy), may require different types of mourning messages. This assertion deserves quantitative data support as well.

Taken together, our results led us to propose the following "best practices" for organizations that wish to take part in social media mourning during a public tragedy.

1. Establish an organization policy regarding *how* and *when* to take part in public tragedy social media mourning.
2. Listen to your stakeholders and connect to the tragedy in ways that they can connect with. Identify how they are mourning and what methods they are using (e.g., hashtags, word choices, colors, images, etc.) and match their tone.
3. Use your posts to reflect sympathy, compassion, and support for what your stakeholders are going through. If your organization is doing something (e.g., donating, volunteering, sponsoring recovery efforts) show how you are contributing to recovery.
4. Focus on the loss, do not make the mourning messages about your organization. No commercial messages, mentions or images of your goods/services, stories about your organization linked to the public tragedy, or large, bold placement of your organization's logo. On social media platforms it is enough that your organization's name appears as the source of the post.
5. Create images (e.g., profile picture, mourning graphic, etc.) that are timely and honor those lost. Do not use stock images or ones that signify a previous public tragedy. Do not use images that suggest death (e.g., bodies, caskets, tombs, headstones).
6. Unless you are prepared to face backlash from stakeholders, do not use organizational social media mourning posts to connect the public tragedy to political or social issues (e.g., during a shooting do not talk about gun control).
7. If your organization is somehow connected to the public tragedy do not post, instead practice strategic silence (e.g., NRA posting sympathies following mass shooting).
8. If your organization was connected to the public tragedy (e.g., geographically, economically, socially, or by employees affected) continuing remembering the event using memorial posts in the months or years following (e.g., Southwest Airlines continues remembering the Pulse Nightclub shooting as several of their employees were victims).

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