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NETWORKED EMOTIONS

Online Emotion Regulation in Digitally Mediated Bereavement. Why Age and Kind of Loss Matter in Grieving Online

Katrin Döveling

The study by media psychologists of emotional communication in online bereavement still leaves many questions unanswered. Previous research has identified similarities as well as differences in emotion regulation patterns of children, adolescents, and adults (Döveling 2015a). Extending that research, this investigation of digitally mediated bereavement goes one step further by exploring additional types of mechanisms within the emotion regulatory processes of coping online. A total of 4 different bereavement platforms, used by mourners of differing ages and kinds of losses, from young children to widowers, were examined in a quantitative content analysis of online postings (N = 1036), generating insights into shared emotion regulation patterns and intimacy online. The findings highlight interpersonal empathy, irrespective of age of the bereaved or type of loss, but also disclose age-based differences in emotion regulatory processes. Implications for further media psychological analysis are laid out.

Introduction

In today's digitalized world, global online communication provides a rich source of information, opinions, and attitudes. It equally yields considerable potential for emotional exchange.

In recent years, specifically designed online bereavement networks have evolved that provide opportunities for emotional communication among like-minded, but anonymous, mourners. Media psychologists are just beginning to understand the emotion regulation patterns involved in such bereavement networks (Döveling, 2015a, 2015b; Döveling & Wasgien, 2014, 2015). The study of online bereavement in these networks still leaves many questions unanswered; there is much we do not

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know about the bereaved who go online in an effort to resolve the anguished mix of emotions caused by the loss of a loved one. A previous analysis has shown that not only do children and adolescents go online in such circumstances, but also adults (Döveling, 2015a); it also revealed age-dependent differences in coping processes and a shared emotional transformation from loss orientation to restoration orientation (p. 110). But might there be further age-dependent differences we are not yet aware of in the use of these networks? And what role does the type of loss play? Do widowers, or parents who have lost a child, disclose different emotions online than do adolescents? Or is there a common pattern in all forms of bereavement online? Media psychologists are just beginning to understand some of these questions. Clearly, it is not only young adolescent mourners, highly familiar with the many options social networking sites offer, who are using the Internet to share their emotions (cf. social sharing of emotions, Rimé, Mesquita, Boca, & Philipot, 1991). In today's digital era, all age groups participate in virtual interaction processes (Döveling, 2015a). Furthermore, bereavement is a deeply embedded social process. As noted by Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillides (2011), online bereavement in such social networks engenders communal activities and can be considered as a re-emerging, collectively shared practice in social networking platforms:

Pre-modern societies tended to produce a bereaved community, modern societies tend to produce bereaved individuals, and post-modern mutual help groups (online or offline) produce a community of the bereaved, that is, connections with previously unknown others who have suffered the same category of loss . . . [Social networking services] such as Facebook . . . can produce what pre-modernity did: a bereaved community. (p. 289)

The authors look closely at whether the virtual world provides a suitable area for the free expression of grief and whether mourners are otherwise stigmatized and note that this may well vary by site, moderator, topic, country, age, and individual participant (Walter et al., 2011, p. 288). Previous research has disclosed that within online bereavement the sharing of emotions engenders transformational emotional regulation (Döveling, 2015a; Gross, 2008; Gross & John, 2003), which incorporates empathic interactions in social networking platforms (Döveling, 2015a). An increased level of self-disclosure online in specially designed bereavement platforms has also been found (Döveling, 2015b), as well as patterns of mutual support by online group members (e.g., Roberts, 2004; Walter et al., 2011) and continuing bonds with the bereaved (Döveling, 2015a, p. 112; Döveling, 2015b; Kasket, 2012; cf. Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Klass & Walter, 2001). Furthermore, findings have shown that online emotion regulation patterns reveal similarities as well as differences between children, adolescents, and adults (Döveling, 2015a), yet, not enough is known about the different kinds of inherent emotional processes in online emotion regulation. Therefore, from 2014 to 2015, four different bereavement platforms, addressing different age groups as well as distinctive groups of mourners—widowers, parents who had lost a child, children and adolescents

who had lost a parent—were examined in order to generate insights into shared online grieving processes.

The findings reveal differences and similarities in online communication patterns. Interpersonally communicated meaning structures in online emotion regulation are unveiled. Implications and suggestions for further research in this highly relevant field of media psychology are explicated.

Emotion Regulation in Bereavement

Death as an elementary basic human fact is a central dynamic in the media (Bonanno, 2004; Neimeyer, 2006, 2016). It fills newspapers and invigorates fictional and non-fictional television series as well as international blockbusters. It would seem that death is palpable everywhere. Yet, when facing the passing of a loved one, the experience of loss can be a highly distressing situation. Habits of everyday life are abruptly interrupted by the need for review and revision (Neimeyer, 2015). Grief, a basic human emotion, can be overpowering. The distress of bereavement substantially disrupts our daily life. In search for (new) meaning, the social environment, friends, and family are essential (Jakoby, 2012).

These social ties are vital as they offer the possibility of understanding and consolation. In communication with others, the mixture of diverse emotions that the loss of a beloved person can evoke generates longer-term emotion regulatory processes in bereavement and ultimately may lead to coping efforts. As a part of this process, the ultimate goal for most is an amelioration of the enduring emotional stress as well as an end to or reduction of the intensive disruptions caused by the loss, e.g., changes in social roles, personal identity, economic situation, or familial configuration (Bonanno & Keltner, 2004; Lazarus, 1991; Neimeyer, 2006). It is here that sharing one's emotions is vital (Döveling, 2015a).

One notes that offline support groups have been a focus of research in diverse environments (c.f. Döveling, 2015a; Stylianos & Vachon, 1993) and psychologists are also beginning to understand the potential therapeutic effects of online communication in personal empowerment for people in distress (cf. Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008). Yet, online communicative support of bereaved individuals in today's social media networks still leaves many questions unanswered. At the same time, bereaved individuals are increasingly turning to specially designed social networking sites when their social surroundings impose emotion rules (Döveling, 2015a; for the concept of emotion rules, see Hochschild, 1979) leading to disenfranchised emotions (Doka, 2008). As previous research shows: "A sense of diminished understanding in the offline surrounding thus causes a retreat to online communication" (Döveling, 2015a, p. 112).

As Ellison & Boyd (2013, p. 74) define, these social networking sites are platforms, in which participants:

1. have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system provided data,
2. can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and
3. can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections of the site.

Such online sites may offer a beneficial alternative to traditional support channels, with people facing similar challenges and emotions exchanging not only information but communicating supportive messages in safe havens (Döveling, Hård af Segerstad, & Kasperowski, 2016). In light of this, this analysis provides findings into inherent interpersonal emotional exchange patterns in specifically designed bereavement platforms in Germany. Known from the field of psychoanalysis, writing about and venting individual distress aids in finding meaning by providing reciprocal compassion and engendering coping, thus successively decreasing psychological distress (cf. Pennebaker, 1997). These coping processes in bereavement are understood as:

Processes, strategies, or styles of managing (reducing, mastering, tolerating) the situation in which bereavement places the individual. Coping is assumed to impact on adaptation to bereavement. (Stroebe & Schutt, 2010, p. 274)

To manage such situations, dynamic interpersonal and intrapersonal emotion regulation processes come into play (Döveling, 2015a; Rimé, 2007). These include conscious or unconscious strategies that modify the emotional burden of bereavement. As Gross (2008, p. 500) has found, emotion regulation may not only be caused by situation selection or situation modification. In such permanently altered situations as the loss of a loved one, an “attentional deployment” is essential (Döveling 2015a, p. 110). Facilitating an attentional shift and focusing of attention can thus influence emotions. These processes are directly linked with cognitive change and response modulation.

One mechanism in emotion regulation may be to compare one’s experience and situation with those of others. Social comparison theory tells us that humans compare their feelings, values, and behaviors with the feelings, values, and behaviors of others (Festinger, 1954; Schachter, 1959; Suls & Wills, 1991; Wheeler, 1991). In the context of this study, it should be stressed that this comparison does not only refer to cognitive processes and situations, but that emotional processes are vital in social comparison (cf. Schachter, 1959; see Tesser, 2001). The central idea is that people in social interactions compare themselves with other people, mainly through:

1. Upward social comparison: This refers to comparisons with positive others, their feelings, and behaviors, which may help, as others may serve as role models. This comparison plays a central role in learning processes within human socialization.

2. Downward social comparison: Choosing persons with whom to compare ourselves who are less well-off, less successful, or unhappy (Wills, 1981) may help as a coping strategy—by empathizing with someone else's unpleasant situation and contrasting it with our own, we feel better in return; this may also lead to an improvement of one's own self-esteem.

Wills has noted that the analysis of downward comparison is quite complex and must differentiate between "fate similarity," "future similarity," and "personality similarity" (1991, p. 72). The result of the comparison process will vary, depending on how these three dimensions are assessed. In this framework, Tesser (1991, p. 141) emphasized that social comparison processes might threaten one's self-assessment, but may also prompt a boost in self-esteem, leading to positive emotions.

Sullins (1991) disclosed a link between social comparison and interpersonal communication as well as emotional contagion processes and stressed that communication is one of the most influential means for all sorts of social changes. Furthermore, Wills pointed out:

A solution to this problem is to compare oneself with another person who is worse off; the favorable comparison between the self and the less fortunate other enables a person to feel better about his or her own situation. (Wills, 1981, p. 245)

Moreover, as known from offline bereavement literature, emotion regulation in bereavement is a non-linear process. The dual process model of coping with bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010) identifies two types of stressors related to bereavement: loss-oriented stressors and restoration-oriented stressors and emphasizes an oscillation between the two poles. Loss orientation characterizes a

person's concentration on, appraising and processing of some aspect of the loss experience itself and as such, [incorporating] grief work. It involves a painful dwelling on, even searching for the lost person, a phenomenon that lies at the heart of grieving. (Stroebe & Schutt, 2010, p. 277)

The other pole of restoration orientation, is to be seen as

[t]he focus on secondary stressors that are also consequences of bereavement, reflecting a struggle to reorient oneself in a changed world without the deceased person. (Stroebe & Schutt, 2010, p. 277)

At the same time, in the context of online social support, Barak et al. (2008, p. 1869) found that classical

[o]nline support groups might be considered a possible supplement to more traditional professional treatment; their contribution lies more in affecting people's general well-being than causing therapeutic change.

Thus, this article scrutinizes the diverse restorative effects of shared-online bereavement, in fostering personal empowerment (cf. Barak et al., 2008) and engendering meaning (cf. Neimeyer, 2000, 2016; Neimeyer & Sands, 2011) in coping processes. The analysis does not neglect the constant sense of loss that is felt by the bereaved (Stroebe & Schutt, 2010); yet it shows that the bereaved can write about various feelings in a “safe room” online without fear of rejection, thus fostering emotion regulation, which engenders healing processes through situational reappraisal and acceptance enablement. Little is known, however, about the effect of age (Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011) within these communicative processes online. Therefore, a look into findings of what influences emotion regulation offline will provide insights relevant to the discussion.

Emotion Regulation Offline

In regards to the offline world, it seems there is abundant research on emotion regulation and specific variables. Owen, Fulton, and Markusen (1982) disclosed that children’s age and that of the parent, as well as the closeness of their relationship, are imperative variables influencing the coping process in bereavement. The main point here is that the stronger the bond with a parent or other loved one, the greater and more distressing the loss. Sprang and McNeal (1995) emphasized that distress in young children may be manifested in their play as well as in recurring nightmares. Balk (2009, p. 17) found that death has “cascading effects” on adolescents that may impede their entire further development. McCarthy (2009, p. 25) has stressed the importance of social bonds and the sense of reality that is at stake, and that bereavement includes psychological as well as social aspects, which frame the experience; positioning it in a context by means of the support of others is crucial. In finding a meaning for the loss, and regaining a sense of self, the social environment is essential (McCarthy, 2009).

Likewise, analysis of post-traumatism in children (Feather & Ronan, 2010) shows that the relief that is felt after communicating about a traumatic event is based on its function of allowing the child to “work through and understand what has happened to them” (Lewis, 1999, p. 53). Thus, the social environment is the essential key in supporting children and young adolescents in emotion regulation. However, what are the differences between child and adult bereavement? How does age affect online bereavement strategies?

With regard to age in offline emotion regulation, Garnefski and Kraaij (2006) found that adolescents had lower scores on cognitive emotion regulation strategies than adults, which led them to the conclusion that the extent of use for both in emotion regulation strategies shows an increase from adolescence to adulthood (p. 1667). Furthermore, studies have suggested that age differences in emotion regulation in people’s reactions to negative events disclose advantages for older adults; older adults report better control over their emotional states than do younger people (Charles & Carstensen, 2007).

Other findings have underscored distress differences in response to major life events, including coping with the loss of physical health and social ties (Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, & Novacek, 1987; Lichtenstein, Gatz, Pedersen, & Berg, 1996), showing that older adults report less negative reactivity than younger adults. In regards to spousal bereavement, older adults perceive less distress than younger, middle-aged adults when faced with the loss of their spouses (Lichtenstein et al., 1996).

This is in line with a growing body of research indicating that older individuals experience less negative emotions and demonstrate a comparable or even higher level of positive emotions. Furthermore, older persons are better able to control their emotions than younger people (Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselrode, 2000; Lawton, Kleban, Rajagopal, & Dean, 1992; Röcke, Li, & Smith, 2009). Correspondingly, Yeung, Wong, and Lok (2011) have explained age variation in positive emotions in terms of the greater use of cognitive reappraisal mechanisms among older adults compared to their younger counterparts. Likewise, Orgeta (2009) reported that older adults revealed more ability in engaging in emotionally goal-directed behavior and holding back from impulsive emotional reactions; she also found that with increasing age, greater access to emotion regulation strategies and greater clarity of emotions were generated.

Analyzing gender influences in depression, Nolen-Hoeksema and Aldao (2011) examined offline emotion regulation strategies with a focus on rumination, suppression, reappraisal, problem-solving, acceptance, and social support. Their study investigated the differences between men and women; and between young, middle, and older age adults; and the relationships between the use of these strategies and depressive symptoms. They revealed that women were more likely than men to engage in several different emotion regulation strategies. The authors indicated that most strategies lessened with age, with two exceptions: (1) use of suppression increased with age for women, but not for men, and (2) use of acceptance did not decrease with age for women. Additionally, maladaptive strategies were associated with more depressive symptoms in all age groups and both genders. Moreover, Thayer, Rossy, Ruiz-Padial, and Johnsen (2003, p. 349) emphasized that "reports of gender differences in depressive symptoms are one of the most pervasive findings in the literature." Findings have suggested that women use rumination more as a coping style and this is related to greater depressive symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema, Morrow, & Fredrickson, 1993). Prolonged strain and rumination seem to be interrelated in feedback processes. Likewise, Thayer et al. (2003) found that highly depressed women displayed more attention to emotions and reduced anti-rumination emotional repair strategies than did men with high depressive symptoms. Furthermore, various studies have emphasized that women have a greater capacity to recognize, express, and interpret emotions; have more complex emotional structures; and use subtle differences to engage in emotional judgments (e.g., Feldmann Barrett et al., 2000; Thayer et al., 2003).

In this regard, Martinez-Pons (1997) stressed that attention to one's emotions is the first stage in emotional regulation, as it enables knowledge of one's emotions and consequently the ability to moderate one's emotional responses and potentially change negative emotional states. Thayer et al. (2003) provided evidence of both

the repeatedly reported gender difference in depressive symptoms and the frequently stated greater emotional sensitivity in women and argues that the two phenomena are related (see also Martin & Doka, 2000).

Based on the above findings that highlight gender as well as age-specific emotion regulation in the offline world, the analysis laid out here scrutinizes whether age and gender-specific emotion regulation online reveals parallel differences or similarities and whether the sharing of emotions depends on the kind of loss.

Method of Study

Based on the aforementioned findings and extending the analysis, this investigation of digitally mediated grieving and memorializing scrutinizes the following questions:

1. To what extent do online emotion regulatory processes differ depending on the age of the bereaved?
2. Does the type of loss (bereaved parents grieving over the loss of their child; bereaved children and adolescents suffering the loss of a parent; widows grieving over the loss of a spouse) reveal different emotions online? If so, how?

The principle hypotheses, based on the theoretical background and findings acknowledged and laid out above, were:

H₁: Online social comparison as cognitive reappraisal in emotional regulation is used more by adults and engenders feelings of relief.

Post-traumatic children, it has been suggested, express relief after communicating about their traumatic event (Feather & Ronan, 2010; Lewis, 1999, p. 53), which leads to the second hypothesis:

H₂: Children who lost a parent disclose more despair online than bereaved of other age groups, and articulate a higher lack of support in the offline world.

In line with the principal research questions, an extensive quantitative content analysis of postings (N = 1036) shared on four large online social networking platforms for grieving in Germany from April 2015 to October 2015 was conducted. The sample consisted of a platform for widowers, Verwitwet Forum (VW), N = 208; a platform for parents who have lost a child, Maximilian Project (MP), N = 304; one for adolescents who have lost a parent, YoungWings (YW), N = 309; and one for children who have lost a parent, Elternlos (ELS), N = 215. Each posting was coded by at least two coders, in order to ensure inter-coder reliability. The social networking platforms that were examined were all specially designed online sites for mourners as laid out above. Due to their nonrestrictive visibility, compliance for scientific

Table 1
Gender in Bereavement Platforms (in %)

	YW	Els	VF	MP	Total
Female	70.2	67.4	95.7	96.4	82.4
Male	1.9	10.2	3.8	3.0	4.3
Unknown	27.8	22.3	0.5	0.7	13.2
Total	Total children & adolesc. <i>n</i> = 524, 50.6%		Total adults <i>n</i> = 512, 49.6%		

Note. YW = Youngs Wings; Els = Elternlos; VF = Verwitwet Forum; MP = Maximilian Projekt.

research was not needed. The content analysis provided a complete, unbiased sample and recorded the manifest content in a quantitative, systematic, and inter-subjective way. In accord with the theoretical background and research questions laid out above, the principal aspects of the textual material were scrutinized. The selection of these particular bereavement networks was based on the finding that they are the largest such platforms in Germany for the respective age groups of mourners. They addressed adults (widowers, VW), parents who suffered the loss of a child (MP), adolescents who lost a parent (YW), and children who lost a parent (ELS). In addition, the selected platforms revealed the most active users, which ensured topicality and correctness of data; moreover, these platforms were significantly more used especially by female bereaved (see [Table 1](#)).

The emotions were defined and operationalized. Empathy was coded as a universal feeling of understanding and experience of similarity, a feeling of community as a common ground based on emotional resemblance and compassionate concern. Despair was defined as an emotional state disclosing total hopelessness. Relief was understood as resulting from a change of emotional state from negative to positive that engenders alleviation.

Results

As [Table 2](#) reveals, the overall predominant aspect in all exchange platforms was empathy (39.0%), with the highest score in the platform for widowers (79.8% in VF). Additionally, when focusing on the individual platforms, the online social network for adolescents disclosed foremost relief (YW 14.2%) while despair was articulated in the social networking site for children (ELS 53.5%).

As the table also reveals, all platforms were used significantly more by female bereaved. Thus, online bereavement seems to be a female matter. Women and girls engage actively in all platforms and share their emotions online.

These findings highlight one central feature in all communicative patterns. Mourners share and exchange despair in grief and communicate empathy. This

Table 2
Emotions in Bereavement Platforms (in %)

	YW	Els	VF	MP	Total	CV
	12.6	53.5	31.7	34.9	31.5	0.314*
Despair	Total children & adolesc. <i>n</i> = 154, 29.4%		Total adults <i>n</i> = 172 , 33.6%			
	14.2	23.7	51.0	25.3	26.8	0.292*
Relief	Total children & adolesc. <i>n</i> = 95, 18.1%		Total adults <i>n</i> = 183 , 35.7%			
	13.3	39.1	79.8	37.2	39.0	0.473*
Empathy	Total children & adolesc. <i>n</i> = 125, 23.9%		Total adults <i>n</i> = 279 , 54.5%			

Note. YW = Youngs Wings; Els = Elternlos; VF = Verwitwet Forum; MP = Maximilian Projekt; CV = Cramer-V. * $p < 0.001$, highly significant.

result also demonstrates that platforms for children (ELS) displayed the highest scores on despair, while the platform for adolescents (YW) indicated the sharing of more relief online (14.2%). When comparing emotions by platform, it needs to be noted that the social network sites for parents who have lost a child (MP) shows an almost even share of despair, relief, and empathy, with empathy being the most frequently shared emotion (37.2%). It thus seems that adults reveal more empathy, and young children who have lost a parent more despair online (53.5% in ELS). The results reflect that the death of a parent clearly leads to enormous distress and despair. Children are found to articulate such loss-related emotions online. This finding is crucial, especially with respect to what it suggests about the role of social support, namely that children and adolescents articulate a lack of social support in the offline world (see [Table 3](#)).

Addressing the first research question, specifically the hypothesis that online social comparison as cognitive reappraisal in emotional regulation is used more by adults and engenders feelings of relief; the results show that acute despair was articulated on all platforms together with relief and empathy, which are the predominant emotions in all such social networking sites (see [Table 2](#)). The findings also reveal the acuteness of emotions caused by the loss of a loved one, an event that disrupts daily life in a dramatic way. Furthermore, the focal point is that comparing one's experience to that of the other was vital and is linked to relief. Focusing on age-dependent social comparison, the findings show that both children and adolescents (43.3% in ELS and 12.9% in YW) and adults (25.0% in VF and 45.1% in MP) use horizontal social comparison (see [Table 4](#)). Thus, the findings disclose active emotion regulation online, guided by an attentional shift: The focus of attention turning

Table 3.
Social Support in Offline World (if Mentioned; in %)

	YW	Els	VF	MP	Total
Social Support	5.2	12.1	23.1	27.6	16.8
	Total childr. & adolesc. <i>n</i> = 42, 8.0%		Total adults <i>n</i> = 132 , 25.8%		
No Social Support	11.0	22.3	8.7	12.2	13.2
	Total childr. & adolesc. <i>n</i> = 82 , 15.6%		Total adults <i>n</i> = 55, 10.7%		

Note. YW = Youngs Wings; Els = Elternlos; VF = Verwitwet Forum; MP = Maximilian Projekt. Cramer-V 0.203; $p < 0.001$, highly significant.

Table 4
Social Comparison in Bereavement Platforms (in %)

	YW	Els	VF	MP	Total	CV
Upward social comparison	3.6	11.6	3.4	7.9	6.5	0.132*
	Total children & adolesc. <i>n</i> = 36 , 6.9%		Total adults <i>n</i> = 31, 6.1%			
Downward social comparison	5.8	8.4	0.0	2.3	4.2	0.150*
	Total childr. & adolesc. <i>n</i> = 36 , 6.9%		Total adults <i>n</i> = 7, 1.4%			
Horizontal social comparison	12.9	43.3	25.0	45.1	30.9	0.307*
	Total children & adolesc. <i>n</i> = 131, 25.0%		Total adults <i>n</i> = 189 , 36.9%			

Note. YW = Youngs Wings; Els = Elternlos; VF = Verwitwet Forum; MP = Maximilian Projekt; CV = Cramer-V. * $p < 0.001$, highly significant.

toward the other in search of help was directly linked with response modulation in a process of comparison of one's own experience of loss versus that of the other as highlighted in the second hypothesis. Thus, social comparison plays a vital role in all communication patterns. In addition, horizontal comparison, understood as a non-judgmental comparison of similar experiences, is the most widely used communication pattern online in all platforms (see Table 4).

Turning to the first hypothesis, the findings reveal that for widows who compare themselves with others who also lost a spouse, relief is engendered (see [Table 5](#), 56.9%). Also, as seen in [Table 5](#) in the social network for adults, the score is higher than those for children and adolescents, with social comparison leading to relief (29.4%). Thus, the first hypothesis is confirmed: Online social comparison as cognitive reappraisal in emotional regulation is used more by adults and engenders feelings of relief.

The analysis reveals age-specific emotion regulation patterns that correspond to the body of literature pertaining to adults' more effective use of emotion regulation techniques.

Addressing the second research question, regarding potential differences depending on type of loss, the data clearly reveal that it is mostly young mourners who have lost a parent that suffer from despair and an absence of social support. The young mourners articulate the lack of social support in the offline world in their communication, whereas in both platforms for adults, mourners reveal that they receive social support (see [Table 3](#)).

The second hypothesis, which states that children who lost a parent disclose more despair online than other age groups and express a higher lack of support in the offline world, is also confirmed. Here, the data suggest that the online world is more vital in finding social support for young bereaved who disclose a lack thereof in their social surroundings. This is also relevant to findings (Owen et al., 1982) that have shown that children's age as well as the closeness of relationship to their parents are crucial variables influencing the coping process in bereavement. As shown, the younger the bereaved, the more despair is articulated. This corresponds to findings on offline emotion regulation and has to be interpreted, based on the close bonds that young children in particular feel with their parents.

Intriguingly, in contrast, on both adult social networking platforms the bereaved articulate that they receive social support offline. The bereaved who lost a spouse disclosed that the social surrounding was supportive (VF 23.1%) and parents who lost a child (MP 27.6%) stressed that they sense support offline as well. Thus, this leads to the conclusion that for adults such social networking sites are used as a complement to offline support, whereas for young mourners they are primarily used to obtain the needed support online that is lacking offline.

Summary of Findings, Discussion, Limitations, and Implications

The findings above disclose a common pattern for all bereaved. Bereaved individuals compare themselves and their experiences with others online in a horizontal, nonjudgmental way. Adults were the most active and articulate in social comparisons and displayed the greatest feeling of relief thereafter (see [Table 5](#)). Yet, the findings also disclose age-dependent differences. The older bereaved seem to use beneficial emotion regulation patterns online, comparing themselves horizontally more than younger bereaved, while at the same time obtaining more social support

Table 5
Emotions of Relief Revealed When Socially Compared to Others (in %)

Social Comparison			Total	
No Comparison	Comparison			
Total (n = 651)	Total (n = 385)	Total (n = 1036)		
YW (n = 249)	YW (n = 60)	YW (n = 309)		
Els (n = 101)	Els (n = 114)	Els (n = 215)		
ch. & ad. (n = 350)	ch. & ad. (n = 174)	ch. & ad. (n = 524)		
MP (n = 151)	MP (n = 153)	MP (n = 304)		
VF (n = 150)	VF (n = 58)	VF (n = 208)		
adults (n = 301)	adults (n = 211)	adults (n = 512)		
Emotions of Relief				CV
Total	32.5	26.8		0.098*
YW	21.7	14.2		0.104
Els	29.8	23.7		0.152*
ch. & ad.	27.0	18.1		
MP	29.4	25.3		0.095
VF	56.9	51.0		0.074
Adults	37.0	35.7		

Note. YW = Youngs Wings; Els = Elternlos; MP = Maximilian Projekt; VF = Verwitwet Forum; CV = Cramer-V; *p < 0.05, significant.

offline and articulating less despair than bereaved of a younger age. Furthermore, older adults who have lost a spouse disclose more empathy online. In light of this, the findings reveal not only a difference in emotions between adults and young mourners, depending on the type of loss, but also similarities as well as differences in patterns of coping online. The differences found are directly relevant to and confirm the literature on emotion regulation offline. Yet, a new intriguing finding is that online social comparison processes in bereavement do not vary as much as originally presumed. Contrary to findings that comparing oneself upward and downward, relieves one's burden, the findings of online emotion regulation reported in this study suggest that the bereaved compare their situations and feelings horizontally, not judgmentally upwards or downwards. The mutual ground is emphasized, not one's better or worse situation.

Furthermore, taking into account that the social networking platforms examined are mostly used by females, the phenomena seem to be gender-specific (see [Table 1](#)). Women and girls actively use specific social networking sites for help in an active emotion regulatory way. This corresponds to the literature on offline emotion regulation revealing that women are more likely than men to engage in several different emotion regulation strategies. By going online, girls and women actively manage their despair through an attentional shift and problem solving in online interaction.

The analysis scrutinizes a new topic of research in the field of communication analysis and media psychology. On one hand, the communication discloses a new finding, as well as an under researched topic of horizontal social comparison, which enables relief and support across platforms. A virtual shelter is generated within online interactions on bereavement platforms (Döveling et al., 2016). On the other hand, the communicative patterns identified revealed age-dependent specifics such as the verbalization of social support, and disclosed differences in emotion regulation depending on type of loss. Furthermore, the underlying common pattern in online interaction, irrespective of age, is the need to feel understood. Empathic reactions online thus ameliorate distressing moments of solitude. Hence, online communication relating to loss-related emotions bears the potential for restorative actions and can be a vital source for recovery in traumatic, distressing events. The study also showed that online bereavement forums in Germany are actively used predominately by female bereaved, who engage in effective patterns of emotion regulation. Some limitations of this study need to be taken into account. Methodologically, the challenge in online communication is always the fact that user participation is anonymous. Therefore, it was not possible to clearly identify each posting as originating from a female or a male writer. Nevertheless, the combination of previous qualitative results with the quantitative analysis enabled an identification of variables that disclose vital results and implications for communication studies and media psychology as well as health communication. Future research ought to scrutinize the diversity of topics of discussion within the various message threads and include their functions on the individual. By generating further insight into communicative patterns, we can better understand how online bereavement can be a beneficial and supportive resource for the bereaved. In addition,

differences and similarities between the various social networking sites need to be understood not only in regards to age, kind of loss and gender groups. Factors such as the option in bereavement platforms to use private chatrooms or closed Facebook groups (Giaxoglou, 2014; Hård af Segerstad & Kasperowski, 2015) might influence the interactive communication in open discussions and need to be equally understood. In addition, cross cultural analysis promises further insight into culturally dependent as well as independent variables. In sum, this analysis provides insightful findings into emotion regulation online, a new and promising field of research that bears fruitful potential for further investigation in a broader cross-cultural perspective.

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