

## **Bereavement and coping following the death of a personally significant popular musician**

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### **Abstract**

The current study explores the bereavement and coping of fans following the death of a personally significant popular musician. Nine participants completed individual interviews and the data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Three superordinate themes were identified: a meaningful relationship, disenfranchisement of grief, and social recognition of grief. The findings highlight that the impact of a musician's death is deeply personal yet socially underrecognized. The loss of the parasocial relationship with the musician is comparable to losing a close social contact. Future research should investigate the roles of culture and social media in bereavement following a musician's death.

Keywords: bereavement; coping; disenfranchised grief; popular musician, parasocial relationship

## **Introduction**

An individual's relationship with the deceased plays a vital role in how they experience grief. Society creates expectations of bereavement for certain relationships (Harris, 2016). In contemporary societies, it is expected that the closer people are to the deceased, the more intensely they grieve the loss (Robson & Walter, 2013). The deaths of close friends or family are grieved more profoundly than those of acquaintances.

Human relationships do not exist merely socially but also parasocially. A parasocial relationship is formed between the audience or individual and the real-life or fictitious character portrayed in media (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial relationships enable people to incorporate the celebrity into their social circle and even see them as friends (Giles, 2002; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Boon and Lomore (2001) found that young adults who gained inspiration from celebrities would initiate changes in various life domains if they identified more strongly with them.

Popular musicians are highly influential to their fans and often idolized by them (Hoffner & Cohen, 2018; Radford & Bloch, 2012). The admiration of musicians extends beyond physical attraction and develops into parasocial interactions with fans (Courbet & Fourquet-Courbet, 2014; Giles, 2002). Fans may become absorbed into popular musicians' work by consuming media related to their artistic output and personal lives. As a result, people identify with aspects of the musicians' lives and values (Cohen et al., 2019; Courbet & Fourquet-Courbet, 2014). The personal significance of musicians also increases when their work is used to mark the celebration of milestone events, such as weddings and birthdays.

The advent of social media has allowed fans to actively communicate with their admired musicians and other fans on an increased level of intimacy and invest further into their parasocial relationships (Radford & Bloch, 2012; Sherlock, 2013; Sofka, 2012).

Moreover, fans contribute to a popular musician's public identity by continuing the celebrity's legacy posthumously (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010).

### *Loss of a parasocial relationship*

Both parasocial and social relationships are developed and experienced in similar ways (Cohen et al., 2019; Stever, 2011). Therefore, the loss of a parasocial relationship elicits intense negative emotions and psychological processes typically experienced after losing a close loved one (Cohen et al., 2019; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). Like the death of a social contact, fans gather at physical memorial services to pay their respects to deceased celebrities (Gibson, 2007). The grieving following the loss of a parasocial connection may be qualitatively different for every individual.

As popular musicians' presence becomes increasingly prominent in the lives of fans, their deaths garner a growing amount of attention on social media. The mediated coverage of Michael Jackson's death was explored by Sanderson and Cheong (2010), who suggested that social media operate as platforms of grieving, mourning, and remembrance for bereaved fans. Social media overcome geographical and physical boundaries, enabling the reconstruction of the way fans grieve and mourn. Bereaved fans use social media to connect with the broader community of fans and dedicate virtual memorabilia to the deceased (Courbet & Fourquet-Courbet, 2014; Gil-Egui et al., 2017). That over 4.3 million tweets used #RIPDavidBowie on the day of David Bowie's death, peaking at 20 thousand tweets per minute, reflects the impact of the celebrity's death and immediacy of coverage on social media (Twitter UK, 2016). The cause of death appears to influence fans' activity on social media. Niederkrötenhaller et al. (2019) noted that the discussion on social media was longer when Avicii's (Tim Bergling) death was classified as suicide than when his death was first announced.

Psychological connection with a celebrity predicts fans' likelihood to adopt the celebrity's attitudes and beliefs. Brown and colleagues (2003) found that the perceived relationship with Princess Diana predicted fans' media consumption and attitudes toward the press following her death. Grief following the death of Carrie Fisher fully mediated the relationship between their parasocial relationship with the celebrity and sharing information about mental health on social media (Hoffner, 2019). Fans with a stronger parasocial relationship with the deceased and those with more intense grief shared more mental-health related content. Similarly, fans of Robin Williams who found positive outcomes that had resulted from the actor's loss were more motivated to disseminate health information on social media (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016). The strength of the parasocial relationship with Robin Williams was negatively correlated with avoidance of people with depression and positively correlated with help-seeking behavior and the provision of support related to depression (Hoffner & Cohen, 2018).

Focusing on the psychological responses of grieving fans on social media following Michael Jackson's death, Courbet and Fourquet-Courbet (2014) argued that parasocial interactions form part of the fan's identity. Many fans felt a need to communicate with the deceased celebrity. "Grief policing" practices by fans of deceased artists on Facebook are influenced by external norms due to the transiency of online platforms (Gach et al., 2017). Fans tend to undervalue their relationship with the deceased and consequent grief based on the fact that they had not met in person, and are subject to ridicule due to perceived problems with their identity or network of social support (Courbet & Fourquet-Courbet, 2014). Therefore, a considerable amount of a fan's grieving following the death of a musician occurs privately, even though they may publicly express some aspects of their grief. The public mourning and condolences expressed by popular and influential people on social media help

validate grief. Likewise, the increased use of #RIP and #funeral on social media normalizes and broadens the scope of collective mourning (Gibbs et al., 2015).

### ***The present study***

The primary focus of the existing body of research is on social media users' behavior following the death of a celebrity and observable patterns of social media activity. Although social media have facilitated the recognition of disenfranchised grief, fans' personal coping and experience of the loss have received limited attention. The nuances of the impact of grief on fans and meanings associated with bereavement remain largely underexplored (Gibson, 2007; Gil-Egui et al., 2017; Radford & Bloch, 2012). As grief is a highly individualized response to loss, it is crucial to allow grieving fans to freely express their thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences. Therefore, the present study aims to answer two exploratory questions: (1) What is the bereavement experience of fans who lost a personally significant popular musician? (2) How do fans cope after the death of a popular musician?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participants were recruited through advertisements on Facebook music fan pages. Attached to the description of the Facebook posts was a link to the explanatory statement that reiterated the eligibility criteria, potential risks and benefits, and confidentiality. It also included avenues for counseling support in case participants experienced discomfort resulting from the data collection. The explanatory statement allowed individuals to express interest in participating in the project by entering their email address.

Nine participants were recruited, including eight women and one man (age  $M = 35.27$  years). All participants had experienced the death of a personally significant popular musician they had never met in person. Participants' identifiable information was removed from the present paper, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identity. Each participant grieved the death of one of the following musicians that had occurred at least three months before the data collection: Michael Jackson, George Michael, David Bowie, and Avicii (Tim Bergling).

### ***Materials***

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews consisting of two topics: (1) the bereavement experience of losing a personally significant popular musician; and (2) coping with the loss. The interviews ( $M = 31$  min) were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first topic was explored with the question "What has the experience of losing this musician been like for you?" and the second topic with the questions "How did you cope with the loss?" and "What things were helpful and unhelpful in your dealing with the loss?" Prompts and probes were used to obtain comprehensive accounts of participants' experiences.

### ***Procedure***

Ethical approval was obtained from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. The interviewer (DW) contacted individuals who expressed interest in the study to confirm their eligibility for participation. Subsequently, the participants and interviewer arranged a time for the interview. Eight of the nine interviews were conducted over the phone, and one in person, as the interview mode was not expected to influence the quality of data (Jenner & Myers, 2019; Nandi & Platt, 2017). Participants were assured they could pause or stop the interview if they felt uncomfortable. The recruitment concluded when the

ninth participant was interviewed as sufficient data were collected for the development of meaningful similarities and divergences between participants that addressed the research questions comprehensively (Smith et al., 2009).

### *Data analysis*

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009) was employed for the data analysis to explore the subtleties of participants' experiences and ways in which they made sense of their grief. IPA is theoretically based on idiography, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. IPA is idiographic in that it bases data on individual case studies rather than groups or populations. As a phenomenological methodology, IPA focuses on the individual's perceptions and experiences rather than producing an objective statement of individual events. Through double hermeneutics, participants communicate their experiences to the researchers, who then attempt to make sense of them.

The analysis adhered to the step-by-step process outlined by Smith and colleagues (2009) to ensure methodological rigor. Interview transcripts were read several times with descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments made about participants' accounts. From these observations, themes were identified for every participant, compared to each other, and clustered together according to their similarities. Finally, the themes were compiled into superordinate and subordinate themes that reflected participants' experiences.

To minimize researcher bias, the steps of analysis were initially completed by the interviewer and then audited by the second author (LP). Both authors collaboratively developed the final structure of superordinate and subordinate themes. The purpose of the collaboration between the authors was to increase the transparency, depth, and credibility of the analytic process (Smith et al., 2009). A reflective journal aided the bracketing of personal values, emotions, thoughts, and potential bias.

## Results

Three superordinate themes were shared amongst all participants and comprised a variable number of subordinate themes. The following is a description of the themes with representative extracts from the interview transcripts.

### *A meaningful relationship*

#### *Personal connection*

All participants expressed admiration for the deceased musicians. Kit and Kim referred to Michael Jackson as a “beautiful person” and “a legend” respectively. For example, Mel noted that she was “proud” to be a fan of George Michael despite his flaws because “he was generous”. Similarly, Nelly’s deep admiration for Michael Jackson meant that she dismissed his controversial image as “not even close to what Michael was” and instead emphasized his “compassionate” nature. Nelly’s emphasis on Michael Jackson’s personal attributes indicated that she developed some familiarity with the artist through his music and public life.

Most participants noted a meaningful personal connection to the musicians. Sam described George Michael as a “best friend; caring person”. Sam also saw George Michael’s work as a substitute for the deceased musician, in an attempt to humanize the parasocial relationship. Sam remarked, “George Michael knew how I was feeling” when talking about his music. Similarly, Trish claimed that Michael Jackson was “like a friend” during her childhood years and later in adulthood “the support person” during difficult times.

Participants compared losing their favorite musician to losing a close family member. Mel described her shock from the announcement of George Michael’s death as akin to “a family member [...] die in horrific circumstances, and that’s on the news”. Kit noted that losing Michael Jackson was like losing a “friend or family”.



*Influence in personal life*

Participants associated significant personal life events, such as weddings and first dates, to the musicians' work. In particular, Mel was fond of the time she attended George Michael's concert with her boyfriend and considered herself rather lucky because she "felt like [she] had the two men that matter the most that night". Jan mainly identified Avicii with "good vibes" and a time of positive life transition.

Participants viewed the deceased musicians as part of their identities as fans and had been inspired by them in their personal lives. In particular, participants considered the musicians as role models. Sam commented that she "based [her] life on George Michael". Similarly, Trish felt "inspired" to be a "very generous person" and perceived Michael Jackson as teaching her that it was "okay to [be] different". Molly found David Bowie "pretty inspirational". Nelly and Joan noted that Michael Jackson and George Michael were "part of [them]", respectively.

*Intense grief responses*

All participants experienced emotional discomfort during their bereavement and shock upon the announcement of the musicians' deaths. Joan "[felt] like crying as soon as [she started] talking about it". Hearing about Michael Jackson's death made Nelly feel "devastated, and [her] world completely shattered". Nelly's tearful presentation during the interview reflected the emotional impact of Michael Jackson's death. When Kit thought about Michael Jackson's death, she "just want[ed] to start crying again". Mel remarked, "I'm never going to be over it. You learn to deal with it but doesn't mean you don't have bad days".

Participants showed signs of adaptations to the loss, such as decreased reliance on the music of the deceased and willingness to listen to their music after a period of abstinence. Mel was ambivalent in that she "could now listen to [George Michael's] songs quite happily,

but then if I am in a low mood it can still bring me to tears after 18 months”. Kim controlled external factors that affected him by “prolonging [not watching] a lot of the new stuff”, including Michael Jackson’s biopic due to his concern it might intensify his grief.

### *Continuing bonds with the deceased*

Material possessions aided participants’ coping with the loss. Sam renewed her collection of DVDs of the deceased musician while Mel and Joan had “shrines” of memorabilia dedicated to their favorite musicians. Kit’s locket around her neck immortalized her bond with Michael Jackson, who was “not going anywhere; he’s still 100% in [her] heart”. Participants’ tattoos facilitated the maintenance of their bonds with the deceased musicians. Although some tattoos were acquired before the musicians’ deaths, they became poignant symbols of participants’ relationships with the musicians.

The artists’ music served as an additional form of continuing bonds with the deceased. However, participants’ need to maintain these meaningful bonds with the musicians dissipated over time. As Joan became progressively accepting of her loss, she grew less reliant on the deceased’s music. Through figurative comments such as “I imagine he would be looking down from heaven”, Sam indicated that George Michael was part of her life even posthumously. Some participants also defended the posthumous mediated coverage of the musicians’ legacies. For instance, Nelly attempted to mitigate the controversy surrounding Michael Jackson’s personal life by disputing relevant reports.

### *Disenfranchisement of grief*

#### *Imposed societal expectations*

Participants received comments that discounted the value of their parasocial relationship. For Sam, a lot of the disenfranchisement arose from others’ misunderstanding of the significance

of the parasocial relationship. Sam stated that “people don’t understand [...] saying ‘He’s just a musician, he wouldn’t know who you were’.” Jan regarded her colleagues’ dismissive comments about her parasocial relationship with Avicii as “a slap in the face”.

There was a consensus among participants’ accounts that society sets the standards for their grief. When comparing the loss of a friend to Michael Jackson, Kit stated that grieving for her friend was easier as it felt more “straightforward and people don’t judge you”. Although some participants initially found emotional support and understanding, that support dissipated sooner than they had expected. Joan was told to “get over it” after some time despite having previously received emotional support.

### *Self-disenfranchisement*

Grieving standards were not only established by society but also internalized by participants. Joan remarked that “life goes on” and that she had suffered no physical loss from George Michael’s death. Kim further disenfranchised his experience by undervaluing grief in general. Kim remarked, “I just don’t understand [...] They shouldn’t be showing themselves crying for other people to see.” Kim contradicted himself by claiming he “couldn’t say [he] grieved”, but also that the death of Michael Jackson “hit quite hard”. This contradiction signified Kim’s conflict between his attitude about grief and personal experience of grief. Molly declared that “it’s probably not healthy [to grieve] especially if it’s somebody you don’t even know.”

Some participants were unsure as to why they were grieving and were unfamiliar with the concept of disenfranchisement. Hence, participants experienced difficulties in making sense of their grief. In particular, Trish noted that the death of Michael Jackson had “hit her harder” than that of her close friend but found it “strange for someone [she] didn’t actually meet”. Participants undervalued their relationships with the musicians to normalize their grief

and justify the societal and internalized beliefs that contributed to their disenfranchisement. Molly claimed she “wouldn’t say that [she] knew [David Bowie] well” despite claiming his music was “the soundtrack of [her] life” and his death meant she “lost somebody”. Joan felt embarrassed talking about her grief with others and considered it irrational to let her grief “interfere” with her life.

### *Protection from stigma*

Participants avoided ridicule, as they found it challenging to deal with disenfranchisement and grief simultaneously. Mel found that the stigma attached to George Michael’s death complicated her grief, noting, “I was ridiculed; I couldn’t cope with the grief and that as well”. Although Joan and Kim preferred to mourn privately, Mel felt lonesome and resorted to social media to avoid personal encounters with people. Similarly, Nelly retained her grief undisclosed to prevent disenfranchisement, so much so that she “had to pretend that [she] was okay [...] even if [she] wasn’t”.

Disregarding social expectations and the stigma associated with grief for people they had not met allowed participants to validate their grief. For instance, Trish avoided unfavorable comments on social media. Kit accepted that others’ negative comments would continue to exist, and there was no point feeling upset about them. Although Joan’s children were not fans of George Michael’s music, she listened to his music while driving since it was “her car”.

Participants claimed that others did not appreciate the significance of their relationships with the deceased musicians. According to Kit, people underestimated his relationship with Michael Jackson as not “everybody has a connection with a musician”. Jan sought enfranchisement of her grief as she wanted to “feel less stupid being sad about it”.

### *Social recognition of grief*

#### *Connecting with the community of fans*

Participants considered it important to connect with people with similar experiences who were more likely to understand their grief. Kit made several close friends through the community of Michael Jackson fans after his death. Similarly, Trish recalled talking to her friend, who was also a fan of Michael Jackson because they understood each other's grief and the importance of their parasocial relationships. Furthermore, Jan found that talking about her grief to fans helped her feel "less stupid" about it. Although Kim preferred to grieve privately, he found solace in watching and listening to Michael Jackson's music with his father, who was also a fan.

#### *Support from non-fans*

Participants received recognition from people closest to them even though they were not fans of the deceased musicians. Mel's close friend recognized how important George Michael was in her life and supported her during her bereavement. Sam's father also recognized Michael Jackson's influence on her. Although Kit saw no point in expressing her grief, she found it helpful "just knowing that there's someone there who is there for you". Kit's partner's attempt to understand her grief during Michael Jackson's death anniversaries were unhelpful; however, "developing a relationship with [her partner], having that really solid foundation helped [her] through the grieving process even if it wasn't explicit". Participants valued the – albeit limited – recognition of their parasocial relationships and support they received from loved ones as they contributed to the enfranchisement of their grief.

## **Discussion**

Participants considered that their parasocial relationships with the deceased musicians had some significance in their lives. Although the significance of a musician in the individual's life was manifested in different ways, most participants integrated aspects of their favorite musicians into their identities (Boon & Lomore, 2001). Participants developed their parasocial relationships in either of two ways. The first way relates to Stever's (2011) suggestion that parasocial relationships form during critical life transitions or difficult life periods. For instance, some participants in the present study recalled a challenging life period or positive transition (such as late adolescence) during which they began their parasocial relationships with the musicians. Others admired the musicians simply by appreciating their work. Fans experienced more intense grief than anticipated, as they had previously underestimated the significance of their parasocial relationships.

The present study findings support the dual-process model of coping with bereavement in that participants showed moments of grief (loss orientation) followed by avoidance of reminders of the deceased where the grief was relieved (restoration orientation; McManus et al., 2018; Stroebe & Schut, 2010). The oscillations between loss- and restoration-oriented processes allowed grieving fans to adjust to the loss. Grieving might not have resolved entirely as it constituted a continuous adaptation to a loss. Participants' adaptation to the grief allowed them to attribute new meaning to their parasocial relationships (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). For instance, participants' desire to honor the deceased was replaced by a general admiration of their music and influence on popular culture.

Participants' relationships with the deceased musician were highly personal, carried significant meaning, and were experienced as real and intimate. However, society dictated that their loss was unworthy of grief or less impactful than the loss of close kin (Robson &

Walter, 2013). Participants' grief acquired a disenfranchised character when society disregarded the importance of the lost relationship with the musician, or their emotional display was considered excessive (Attig, 2004; Doka, 2002).

The present findings build on Courbet and Fourquet-Courbet's (2014) research by providing evidence of coping with disenfranchised grief outside of social media. The current study also expands Harju's (2015) research by exploring the mourners' seeking of enfranchisement through social gatherings with like-minded fans and comfort from close friends and family. Despite the comforting from loved ones being undermined by their limited understanding of participants' parasocial relationships, the griever regarded their empathy particularly helpful. The present study lends support to Attig's (2004) research suggesting that disenfranchisement occurs not merely due to lack of empathy, but also due to perceived and internalized social norms around hierarchies of grief that place social relationships above parasocial relationships. Thus, the disenfranchisement of grief may be unintentional and stem from broader societal beliefs and values (Lang et al., 2011).

One common consequence of disenfranchisement is the feeling of isolation (Doka, 2002; Dominguez, 2018). Participants' sense of isolation ceased progressively throughout their bereavement by receiving acknowledgment for their grief. Continuing bonds were prominent in participants' grieving, as they found comfort through material possessions and listening to the musician's music. This is in line with Field and colleagues' (2005) suggestion that the continued bonds allow mourners to maintain a psychological relationship to the deceased and uphold their legacy. Participants also continued the legacy of the deceased by publicly defending their controversial reputation. As Brown and colleagues (2003) noted, the more an individual invests in the parasocial relationship, the more they follow the celebrity and advocate for their ideology.

The community of fans and close contacts contributed to the enfranchisement of participants' grief. As Harju (2015) argued, the use of social media, facilitated the acknowledgment of disenfranchised grief. Pentaris (2014) argued that with the rise of social media, death and grieving no longer have to remain a private affair. Social media provided participants a sense of control in the level of media consumption and immersion into the life and death of a popular musician (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). The convenience of social media enabled participants to connect with the online community of fans and design and share individualized content that depicted their grief experience (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). However, the increased use of social media may extend the mourning process (Courbet & Fourquet-Courbet, 2014).

Participants' efforts to acquire recognition of their loss from people with limited understanding of their grief further suggest they sought validation of their parasocial relationships and acknowledgment of the grief. Participants sought emotional support during bereavement, which assisted their acceptance of their losses and facilitated their grief (Degroot & Vik, 2017). Some grieving fans attempted to review their parasocial relationships by lowering their importance to adjust their grief to societal expectations and legitimize it (Kamerman, 1993).

Some fans found it more challenging to cope with the loss of the musician than a close friend or family. Participants were grateful for the opportunity to express their grief by participating in the current study, emphasizing the need to recognize the experiences of grieving fans by society. Where disenfranchised grief and parasocial relationships are not included in the core curriculum of mental health training courses, practitioners may gain expertise in these topics by completing further professional development. Specialized grief training can also be integrated into the education of professionals dealing with bereaved fans, including psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, psychotherapists, and social workers.



The present study highlights the significance of parasocial relationships for bereaved fans. Despite the wealth of literature on the topic and prevalence of media in society, there is limited public knowledge of the importance of parasocial relationships as they are generally considered inferior or even abnormal compared to social relationships (Giles, 2002). A fan's parasocial relationship can be equivalent to a close social relationship and an integral part of their identity, and the associated grief is often experienced intensely.

### ***Limitations and suggestions for future research***

It is important to acknowledge some limitations in the interpretation of the findings. First, there were variations in the amount of time available to participants to process and reflect on their grief, as the four musicians died years or months apart from each other. Consequently, the homogeneity of the reported experiences upon which the findings were based was partially restricted. Further, the self-selection aspect of the recruitment may have impacted the data by allowing for biased accounts. Only fans who considered their experiences worthy of sharing and were comfortable discussing them chose to participate in the study. The findings disproportionately reflect women's experiences of losing a male musician. Lastly, the length of the interviews may be limited; however, the focus of the research questions was specific, and participants' accounts allowed in-depth exploration of their experiences.

Due to the strong social element of disenfranchised grief, future research would benefit from exploring the loss of other musicians and public figures in various cultures to identify potential differences in bereavement and parasocial loss. Stroebe and Schut (2005) suggested that attachment styles impact the bereavement processes in different ways, such as anxious-ambivalent styles prolonging the loss-oriented process. Future research may integrate attachment theory in its conceptual framework to predict the impact of the death of a celebrity on individuals with particular attachment styles. Future studies may benefit from

broader gender diversity and exploring grief due to the loss of less controversial celebrities. Finally, the role of social media and online technology on grief following the death of a musician warrant further investigation.

### ***Conclusion***

This study explored the bereavement and coping of individuals following the death of a personally significant popular musician. With the rise of social media, popular musicians have become more personable and parasocial relationships more intimate than ever. Although the grief related to the death of a musician may be intensely experienced, it often becomes disenfranchised due to societal underacknowledgment or dismissal of the mourner's relationship with the deceased. Further research should focus on expanding the findings of the current study by exploring the experiences of bereaved male fans and the impact of social media, attachment, and culture on grief and bereavement.

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