Reasons why we read blogs and memorial pages of people who lost a child. Life motives of emotional rubbernecks

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Reasons why we read blogs and memorial pages of people who lost a child. Life motives of emotional rubberneckers

Agata Chudzicka-Czupala and Agata Basek

ABSTRACT
Researchers have been interested in the subject of accompanying individuals who experienced a child’s terminal illness and death, sharing their grief online. Using The Reiss Motivation Profile and qualitative methods, the authors identified the life motives of emotional rubberneckers—grief blog and memorial page readers.

Key reasons for the regular behavior of this kind are found: interest in the protagonist’s health, compassion, will to help, and sense of bonding. Such activity provides support to the respondents. Readers’ important life motives include the substantial need to care for their loved ones, to be needed, emotional stability, and a low need for power.

Introduction
As a result of the development of digital culture, people increasingly often seek to fulfill their social needs online (Chih-Huei, 2013; Karapanos, Teixeira, & Madeira, 2016). Many of them participate in various kinds of online communities, creating their image there, sharing their observations, communicating with others, or commenting on other people’s behavior. This rapid and increasingly popular form of sharing information enabled by the Internet provides an opportunity to seek knowledge and acquire various experiences, to communicate with people who are in a similar situation, and it furthermore facilitates access to social support, also in difficult circumstances such as the death of a close person (Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2011–2012). This article aims to explore and identify the fundamental reasons and life motives guiding individuals being regular readers of blogs—online accounts by people with children suffering from terminal illnesses, or memorial pages written by parents whose child had died. Based on analyses of data from the study, we highlight the sources of such Internet activity.

The growing number of web pages dedicated to death is probably related to the fact that the traditional, customary sharing of culturally-determined behaviors aimed at expressing and soothing despair within a group is gradually becoming less and less practiced (Sumiala & Hakola, 2013). Less tight social ties, isolation, anonymity, and the increasing lack of intimacy with people in one’s closest social surroundings result in the loss of the possibility of sharing the experience related to the death of their nearest and dearest, and of accompanying them in grief and mourning. The individualization process leads to some people becoming deprived of social support when encountering death. Mourning is experienced at most with one’s closest family members, provided that we are still in close touch with our relatives, which is not always obvious at this day and age of globalization and migrations (Sumiala & Hakola, 2013; Walter, 2015).

The review of the literature has shown that researchers’ interest in the role of online forms of experiencing mourning has been growing over the recent years (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013; Haeverinen, 2014; Sofka, NoppeCupit, & Gilbert, 2012; Stroebe & Schut, 2008; Walter et al., 2011–2012; Williams & Merten, 2009). In one study, 65% of respondents who were in mourning admitted using the Internet to relieve and mitigate the feeling of grief after the death of a close person (Massimi & Baecker, 2010). Educational and therapeutic web pages contain useful information and offer potential online support, whose purpose is to help mourning individuals to

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cope with the difficult situation they experience, the accompanying trauma and the strong emotions (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008; Dyer & Thompson, 2000; van der Houwen, Schut, van den Bout, Stroebe, & Stroebe, 2010; Wagner, Knaevelsrud, & Maercker, 2005). As Falconer, Sachsenweger, Gibson, and Norman (2011) point out, the studies confirmed the benefits of being members of an online support group among respondents who had lost a child in the perinatal period (Capitulo, 2004), as well as those whose child or another close person had committed suicide (Feigelman, Gorman, Beal, & Jordan, 2008; Hollander, 2001).

The virtual world has also become a space making it possible to express sadness during the terminal illness of a close person and grief after they pass away (Jones, 2004; Nager & de Vries, 2004; Roberts, 2004; Tolstikova & Chartier, 2009–2010; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). This is also a place where the deceased can be freely remembered, without fearing a negative reaction of other people, which in real life often forces one to end the mourning process quickly. Moreover, Mitchell, Stephenson, Cadell, & Macdonald (2012) underline that deceased children represented through virtual memorials still exist in some way and “live on through social networks of bereaved parents” (pp. 427–428).

These feelings are expressed in various forms (discussion groups, Facebook web-memorials, memorial pages, and blogs). A number of analyses have already been performed concerning the reasons for which individuals in mourning resort to such forms of expression, showing that people are guided, for instance, by the need to find information about experiencing mourning and grief after their loved ones’ death and about how to cope with that, the wish to get in touch with a more extensive group of people who found themselves in a similar situation and might help, and the need to honor their loved one and to share memories with others (Clark, Burgess, Laven, Bull, Marker, & Browne, 2004; Roberts, 2004; Stroebe & Schut, 2008), but research is still lacking concerning motivation of the readers of such web pages. The aim of our research was to fill this gap at least in part.

It is intriguing that people reading those blogs and commenting on pages of that kind are often individuals who are totally unknown to the authors of the posts or the people they respectively mourn for. The readers often declare that they are moved by other people’s loss (Mitchell, Stephenson, Cadell, & Macdonald, 2012). Such individuals, who regularly visit “memorials of strangers or distant acquaintances to read what others write and to post their own messages of grief” (DeGroot, 2014, p.79) and whom the author describes as “emotional rubbernecker” continue to be an unexplored group, and its specificity may be based on some particular psychological traits or on earlier experiences. The analyses of their statements performed by DeGroot (2014) point to a substantial need to express one’s emotions in relation to someone else’s illness and death, and prove the existence of a mechanism of identification with the deceased person, also if the latter was unknown to them earlier. Their behavior may also be a form of marking the fact of belonging to a community, centered around the loss. This sort of activity may result from identification with the deceased person or with the latter’s family members, or it may be based exclusively on curiosity and a certain kind of voyeurism. It is possible that it actually constitutes a source of a specific entertainment, a very controversial one in fact, as some authors suggest (DeGroot, 2012). This behavior may be dictated by a need to reflect, to show empathetic care to others or it may result from the primal human need to experience mourning collectively, a need which can no longer be fulfilled offline.

McQuail (2007) and other authors (Mrozowski, 2001; Rowiński & Głuskowska, 2014; Winterhoff-Spurk, 2007), list four main groups of needs fulfilled by mass media and web pages, which may explain why people search for content related to illness, dying, and mourning. They mention the following needs related to:

1. the acquisition of information, seeking guidelines, advice and support;
2. the confirmation and reinforcement for one’s conduct, the feeling that one’s individual system of values and a behavior model are right;
3. seeking to socialize and to interact with others, ensured by obtaining an insight into other people’s way of life, the sense of helping others;
4. seeking thrills and entertainment, as well as the need to fill one’s free time and feel emotional relief.

In order to find out more about the motivations guiding the readers of blogs dealing with the death of children and memorial pages on the same topic, reference was made to the motivation theory by Reiss (2004, 2008), supported by many years of research conducted by its author and his collaborators (Reiss, 2008; 2015; Reiss & Havercamp 1998). The theory describes individual differences in life motivation and
identifies the key drivers of human behavior. The research suggests that different values or factors, which Reiss (2000) calls life motives, have varying importance for different individuals. Some of them strengthen a specific individual’s behavior more efficiently, making that individual more persistent in pursuing them (Reiss & Havercamp, 1997). According to Reiss (2000), in order to understand a specific individual and what is important for them in their everyday actions, one should also take into account the desires and motives which are of very little importance for them.

The paper presents the results of one of the first studies among individuals who read blogs and memorial pages of people who lost their child. Although the needs which are satisfied by reading online posts about death have recently become a subject of interest on the part of researchers, still little continues to be known about the sources of such behavior and about the psychological characteristics of the individuals who do this. Due to the fact that very little literature regarding motivation for such activity exists, this is an exploratory study whose basic aim was to identify reasons for reading blogs and memorial web pages dedicated to children and to explore the life motives of their readers. As there are no studies regarding the concept of child death-related voyeurism and the motivation for it, we did not have any preliminary assumptions.

The following research questions were put forward:

1. What are the reasons for which people regularly read blogs dedicated to the illness and death of a child, or memorial pages run by parents whose children have passed away?
2. What are the life motives that guide the behavior of individuals reading such pages?

Method

Design of the study

As the study was exploratory in its nature, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. To respond to the first question about the variable reasons for the reading of blogs dedicated to the illness and death of a child and memorial web pages, both types of methods were used. Using qualitative methods let us gather some more in-depth answers from the respondents. We could find out why they started reading and why they regularly read blogs dealing with the death of children and memorial pages, without using any predetermined categories. To respond to the second research question and to find out more about the variable life motives guiding the respondents, a quantitative method was used.

Participants

The sample was composed of 32 regular readers of a selected blog—the online account of a parent with a terminally ill child, or a selected page run by parents grieving over the loss of their child. The respondents’ indications concerning the frequency of visiting such pages ranged from 1—“several times a month” to 5—“every day”. Only women signed up for the study. The average age of the study subjects was 38.5 (SD = 8.07, the age range was 21–56 years). Table 1 shows the main facts about the sample.

Measures

To gather data concerning the reasons for the regular reading of blogs dedicated to the illness and death of a child and memorial web pages by parents whose children have passed away, the authors used two open-ended questions (“Why did you start reading memorial pages or blogs?” and “What are the reasons for which you keep reading the blog or page?”), which allowed the respondents to answer in as much detail and to express what they think in their own words.

Moreover, a few close-ended questions and single item scales were used, concerning the reasons for which the respondents would read online posts of the nature discussed in the study and visit pages dealing with death. The questions focused on the potential

<table>
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<th>Table 1. Profile of the sample, N = 32.</th>
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<td><strong>Main characteristics</strong></td>
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<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Respondents’ type of online activity</td>
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experience of the respondents’ own child dying, or on similar experiences among relatives or other people close to the respondent. The individuals were also asked whether they had known the author or the protagonists of the respective blog or memorial page before and after reading it, about the assessment of their own health and whether they received support from the activity provided to the study subjects. The respondents’ task here was to respond “Yes” or “No.” The scales measured the potential sense of bonding with the author of the posts or the protagonist of the blog/memorial page and the assessment of the intensity of fear of falling ill and fear of the potential illness of a close person. The members of the sample were asked to indicate the intensity of the emotions or states experienced, by rating them on a Likert scale starting from 1 (“Not at all”) to 5 (“Very strongly”).

Profil Motywacyjni Reissa, a Polish language version of The Reiss Motivation Profile (RMP) (Reiss & Havercamp, 1998), in adaptation by Translation Aces, Inc. (New York) and Instytut Durkalskiego RMP Polska Sp. z o.o., was used to measure life motivation. The Reiss Motivation Profile is a self-assessment standardized metric developed in order to quantify individual differences between the 16 empirically derived fundamental lifelong motives (human needs, basic desires, different universal drivers of human actions), suggested by Reiss and Havercamp (1997, 1998), such as:

1. Power, the desire for influence, it drives people to express determination and leadership.
2. Independence, the desire for self-reliance.
3. Curiosity, the desire for understanding, universal desire for intellectual activity, determining the potential to enjoy intellectual aspects of life, such as acquiring a new knowledge.
4. Acceptance, the desire for positive self-regard, universal desire for avoiding criticism and rejection.
5. Order, the desire for to be organized and clean, favoring attitudes for organizing and planning activities.
6. Saving, the desire to collect e.g. objects, influences attitudes to financial expenses
7. Honor, the desire for upright character, associated to behave morally, in the loyal and responsible way.
8. Idealism, the desire for social justice, universal desire for improving society, motivating the individual to get involved in humanitarian efforts.
9. Social contact, the desire for peer companionship, which creates the psychological necessity for friends.
10. Family, the desire to raise children and spend time with siblings.
11. Status, the desire for respect based on social standing (may be connected with wealth, title, social class or belonging to some elite group).
12. Vengeance, the desire to confront those who offend, desire to get even with people who frustrate or offend others.
13. Romance, the desire for beauty and sex, significance of esthetics and sensuality.
14. Eating, the desire for food, for consuming.
15. Physical activity, the desire for muscle exercise, it motivates people towards physically vigorous activities.
16. Tranquility, the desire to be free of anxiety and pain, influencing the attitudes toward safety.

The questionnaire is composed of 128 statements concerning the extent to which the respondents like or dislike certain activities, or to which they accept or not accept specific cases. The respondents were asked to take a position on each of the statements by choosing an answer on a Likert scale from −3 (“I definitely agree”), through 0 (“I neither agree nor disagree”) to +3 (“I definitely disagree”).

The RMP was empirically derived based on a series of six factor studies with participants from different walks in life and living in diverse geographical locations (N = 2.032). Reiss and Havercamp explored the factor structure of their measure and established the 16 factors measured by the Reiss Motivation Profile, with the Cronbach’s alpha ranging from 0.74 to 0.92 (Reiss & Havercamp, 1998). The Reiss Motivation Profile has undergone four “exploratory” factor analyses, two assessments of internal reliability and an assessment of concurrent validity, two test-retest reliability studies, all of which support the reliability and validity of the Reiss Motivation Profile are valid (Havercamp & Reiss, 2003).

The Polish version of the method was prepared using the standard back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1986). This tool is highly reliable, with Cronbach’s alpha for the individual scales ranging from 0.76 to 0.93, just like in the research by the authors of the RMP where the original version of the questionnaire was used (Havercamp & Reiss, 2003).

To obtain information about the sociodemographic profile of the study sample the respondents were asked to provide data such as gender, age, education, work, family, life partner, marital status, number of children, as well as religious faith, the nature and frequency of the respondents’ activity on death-themed pages.
**Procedure**

Purposive sampling was used. Respondents were invited to participate in the study through the respective authors of blogs and memorial pages, met by the researchers in Social Association Cordis Hospice in Katowice in Poland. They were asked to publish the researchers’ request on their blog/memorial page, explaining the aim of the study and providing the contact details. To individuals who responded to that invitation the link to the questionnaire was sent. Respondents who declared that they did not read the pages regularly, which meant at least “several times a month”, were not included in the sample.

The respondents did not receive any remuneration for their participation in the survey and filled out a set of questionnaires using the online method. The study was carried out in compliance with ethical standards and was conducted in accordance with a procedure approved by the Research Ethics Committee at one of the universities in southern Poland. The respondents agreed to participate voluntarily, they were informed about its purpose, assured about its complete anonymity, and obtained information about the possibility of withdrawing from it at any time.

**Data analysis**

To obtain the main categories of responses about reasons for reading blogs and memorial pages first the qualitative data were analyzed. The answers for two open-ended questions were put into categories by coding (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000; Smith, 1992). When coding participants’ responses to questions, the two coders independently examined each response to determine what category/theme the response best represented (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When there was a disagreement, the coders discussed their decisions and arrived at a consensus category. An open coding procedure was used, consisting in labeling parts of the text being the transcript of the respondents’ statements, with inductive approach, following the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This made it possible to identify the indicators of the isolated categories of the respondents’ answers, which can constitute the basis for further explorations into the reasons for reading blogs and websites about children’s death. Finally, the percentage of answers was calculated for each individual category, for both the open-ended and close-ended questions, and for the scale responses.

The standards developed by the Reiss Motivation Profile’s authors assume, on the basis of research carried out among several dozen thousand respondents from all corners of the world, including Poland, that scores between +0.8 and +2 mean a high motivator value, scores between −0.8 and +0.8 mean an average motivator value, while scores between −2 and −0.80 mean a low motivator value (Havercamp & Reiss, 2003). To obtain the results of the readers of blogs about death and memorial pages the life motivator profile (average values for the individual scales of the profile) for the group of respondents was created.

**Results**

**Reasons for reading memorial pages and blogs**

Results of the study are presented in Tables 2 and 3. The percentage share of the answers given by the respondents in the individual categories, based on the analysis of the answers to the open-ended questions, is shown in Table 2.

The results indicate that many respondents declared that they visited the memorial page or blog by coincidence, most often coming from a different page dealing with a similar topic. The other reasons were that they had known the author or protagonist of the page/blog or their respective families and that they were interested in the topic of tumors. The most frequent reasons for which they kept reading the blog or page included interest in the protagonist’s health, compassion and the will to help, as well as the illness of their own child or of a close person’s child.

Results of the analysis of the answers for close-ended questions and single item scales results (percentage share of the answers given by the respondents in each subcategory) are shown in Table 3.

Most of the sample members were individuals who had not experienced the loss of their own child. However, a large part of the sample was individuals who knew well someone who had lost a child, personally or via Internet.

The vast majority of the respondents in the sample were individuals who had not known the author of the blog or page before they started reading it and none of them met the author personally after having started to read the blog/page, but a large part of the sample declared feeling a strong bond with that person. Similarly, a strong bond with the blog/page protagonist, a child who had passed away, was felt by most of the respondents.

Although nearly the whole group of study subjects responded positively when asked if they were healthy,
A. CHUDZICKA-CZUPA

The reasons why the respondents started reading the blog or memorial page

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subcategories and examples of the answers</th>
<th>% of the answers</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondents who declared they visited the memorial page by coincidence</td>
<td>59.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’ve reached this website by accident, reading other blogs. I don’t even</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>remember exactly how. I know there was a link from some other page”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I found it on the net by accident, I read the first few entries, and then I</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>cheered on Philip”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents who declared that they had known the author or/and protagonist of</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the page/blog or their respective families</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“Julia was attending primary school and some activities after school with my</td>
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<td>daughter. They lived on the same housing estate. They were friends. I know</td>
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<tr>
<td>her parents well”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I worked with Philip’s father. I wanted to know how they were managing”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“We were with Philip’s mother on the forum where we shared the joys and</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>worries of motherhood until he suddenly got ill”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents who were interested in the topic of tumors</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m interested in the topic of cancer, especially sick children and their</td>
<td></td>
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<td>families”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“A lot of people that were dear to me died because of cancer, I’m interested in</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>this disease”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondents who did not know why they started reading the blog or page</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in the protagonist’s health</td>
<td>21.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Suddenly Philip felt ill, and all this time I was hoping that he would</td>
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<tr>
<td>manage and that finally I would read that he was better, that it was all</td>
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<tr>
<td>good… unfortunately I didn’t :-(“</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The illness of the respondents own child</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I have a child with cancer and I regularly read blogs of parents that I met at</td>
<td></td>
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<td>the clinic”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I read it because my 5-year-old son has had chemotherapy, and I can relate”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The illness of a close person’s child or a child of someone we know</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My friend’s son also had cancer treatment”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“A son of young people, who are my neighbors, from the area, got leukemia. An</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>action to register potential bone marrow donors was organized and we</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>registered. When Tobias’ father started writing a blog so that everyone could</td>
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<tr>
<td>find out about the boy’s health, I began to read it regularly (although I had</td>
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<tr>
<td>never read any blogs before, even the idea of writing in this way seemed</td>
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<td>strange to me)”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondents who did not know the reasons for which they kept reading the blog</td>
<td>40.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>or page</td>
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</table>

Table 2. Reasons of reading blogs and memorial pages of people who lost a child.

Categories and percentage of the answers for each category (responses to open-ended questions).

many of the respondents in the sample declared strong or moderate fear of falling ill. And similarly, a strong or moderate fear of the potential illness of a close person was felt by most of them. Additionally, over half of the survey respondents declared that reading memorial pages/blogs was a source of support for them.

Life motivation of memorial page/blog readers

Table 4 contains descriptive statistics of the scores obtained by the studied group in the Reiss Motivation Profile Assessment Questionnaire. According to the model developed by Reiss (2008), particularly high and low results may have significant implications for the way in which people behave in the actual environment.

The life motivator profile (average values for the individual scales of the profile) for the studied group is presented in Figure 1.

The results presented here make it possible to conclude that readers of memorial blogs/pages are characterized by high motivation (compared to the standards) related to caring about their loved ones, a strong need to be needed (family: $M = 1.00$) and a high need for emotional stability, and a sense of security (tranquility: $M = 0.86$). The respondents are also characterized by a lower-than-standard need for power and leadership (power: $M = -0.83$). In the case of the remaining motivators, an average need for satisfying them was observed. The respondents’ motivation related to the need for status and prestige, as well as their needs related to physical activity, are average, but closer to lower-than-standard figures.

Discussion

The results of the presented exploratory study whose aim was to identify the essential reasons for reading pages dealing with death and grief and the life motives of the bloggers indicate that the motivation to read online posts about death and to follow the trauma after a loss experienced and described by another person, may have many different sources.
Intensity of the support which respondents received from the activity provided to them. The most common reasons for continuing to read the memorial blog/page were interest, often based on a friendly attitude towards the author of the memorial blog/page, or the wish to see how people cope in the difficult situation, rather than curiosity related to the strong need to satisfy their need to feel needed, related to earlier life experiences or fear related to their own families.

The majority of the respondents felt very strong or strong fear of the potential illness of a person close to them and death might help them to reduce the fear. Considering the need for tranquility among the subjects, reading about dealing with serious diseases and death might help them gain emotional stability facing unpredictable life events. It is compatible with the findings of Furer and Walker (2008), who believe that...
exposure to feared themes related to death may be very useful in treating death anxiety.

The vast majority of the sample in percentage terms were people who had not experienced the loss of their own child, but a large group of respondents were women who had encountered such loss or illness of a child in their social setting or online. It may explain why a significant majority of the women surveyed claimed to have felt a bond with both the author of the blog/page, and with the protagonist of the memorial page/blog. Some of the readers were interested in illnesses, tumors and the protagonist’s health. This confirms the observations made by DeGroot (2014), who also noticed a potential identification mechanism that could be present here. While there was a certain similarity in terms of age and place of residence among her study subjects and the deceased person described online, in our study the identification may perhaps concern more the authors of blogs who are in the process of losing or who have lost their child—they are the ones the study subjects could identify with and with whom they could feel similarity. Empathy and compassion of the subjects may have played a meaningful role here.

The results of the study may be described in terms of the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), which provides an explanation for the general and common human need to form strong affecional bonds with other people. It may be useful to illustrate the mechanisms not only for coping with bereavement itself (Field, Gao, & Padera, 2005), but also for coping with being a witness of other people’s pain and loss. According to the aforementioned theory, the attachment may be defined as “an organized set of biologically based behaviors that is activated at times of threat, leading the individual to maintain or re-establish proximity” (p. 278). Such activities as reading memorial pages or trying to verbally support a mother who had lost her child may help to fulfill a human need to give others assistance or to feel relief. Even if Internet-mediated, they may be a result of adult–adult attachment bonds (Karapanos et al., 2016). The study results are also in line with the observations made by Lin, Levordashka, and Utz (2016) and Meyrowitz (1994), indicating that the media make it possible to feel greater intimacy with people whom one would otherwise consider strangers. A large part of the respondents comment the blog posts, allowing themselves to openly express their thoughts and feelings, to reveal them to other people, by communicating with the author of the memorial blog/page. In this manner, they provide support to the authors of the pages, at the same time marking their presence in a specific community.

Only women signed up for the study, mainly ones who had a family, a partner and children. The results confirmed that readers of memorial blogs/pages were characterized by a higher-than-average level of care.
for their nearest and dearest, including family members. They also display a very high need for tranquility and emotional stability. Perhaps reading online posts about illness and death helps them to calm down emotions which they experience or to alleviate the fear for their own family, and the knowledge thus acquired constitutes a strategy of sorts of counteracting potential difficult situations related to illness and death, allowing them to prepare for the potential difficulties by observing normative behaviors? The findings of studies by other authors confirm that such activity may contribute to the identification of one’s own or of other people’s emotions experienced in relation to death (DeGroot, 2014). If we do not experience the loss of a close person directly, we may be subconsciously looking for difficult content in the media so as to satisfy our hidden needs, compare ourselves to others, and see how they are doing with the tough situation. According to Clarke (2005–2006) “in the absence of a personal experience with death people rely on media, among other things, for information, attitudes, beliefs and feelings about death and its meanings” (p. 154). Death, when its story is told by someone else on the Internet, may arouse curiosity and provide the possibility of reflecting on one’s own life and death and on the death of one’s nearest and dearest (Basek and Chudzicka-Czupala, 2016). Hospice volunteers point out that spending time with dying people helps them to see what is really important in life (Wiensak, 2014).

Accompanying others in pain and grief, which takes place by way of media communication, may be an expression of the human need to ritualize dying (Haverinen, 2015; Sumiala, 2013). The arrival of the industrial era gave rise to a number of cultural changes, causing the extinction of traditional forms of behavior related to death and mourning. This was emphasized particularly strongly by Ariès (1974, 1981), who pointed out in his works that death used to a moment that brought the members of the community together in the past. In today’s world, grieving for the dead, which is also manifested in the expression of compassion towards the friends and relatives of the deceased person as a sign of solidarity on the part of the whole community, and certain rituals accompanying that in particular, have become archaic by now. However, according to some authors, the phenomenon of blogging may be considered as a manifestation of postmodern tribalism, and the authors and readers of blogs may be considered as postmodern tribes people (Olcoń-Kubicka, 2006; cf. Maffesoli, 2000; Wheeler, 2009). The blog community forms an open and dynamic community of people who create their own ideology, customs and rituals, a certain lifestyle, identifying with the authors whose experiences and reflections become close to them, and with whom the commenters develop intimate emotional ties (Haverinen, 2015).

Although from the anthropological point of view, death is not a private event in many communities, it should rather be studied as an event with an important social dimension (Di Nola, 2006). Ariès (1981) reminded readers that “Death is not a purely individual act, any more than life is. Like every great milestone in life, death is celebrated by a ceremony that is always more or less solemn and whose purpose is to express the individual’s solidarity with his family and community” (p. 603). In today’s world, this ceremony tends to be transferred to the virtual sphere, in a certain sense making it possible again to grieve as a community, which can be valuable for all of its members.

It also turned out that the respondents had a lower-than-average need for power. Their motivation related to the need for status and prestige was average, but close to low. This means that they are not dominant individuals who seek to take over leadership of others, but people who are motivated by other values, like tranquility or safety. Their needs related to physical activity are also average, but close to low, which may explain their inclination to spend their free time with their computer.

Just like in the case of other research dedicated to memorial pages, but conducted among respondents who had lost a loved one, rather than among people following their posts (Musambira, Hastings, & Hoover, 2006/2007; Stroebe, Stroebe, & Schut, 2003), all of the respondents were women, because only they had declared their willingness to participate in the research. The age of the respondents ranged from 21 to 56, with the mean age being 38.5. This is in line with the observations made by Stroebe and Schut (2008) as well as Tolstikova and Chartier (2009–2010), who emphasize, on the basis of their meta-analysis, that mostly women and mostly people aged around 40 are the demographic that is more inclined to accept an invitation to participate in research dedicated to experiences related to loss and bereavement following someone’s death.

Limitations of the study, the future research directions and implications

The study presented in the paper had its limitations. The sample was relatively small, but this resulted
from its specificity, unique nature of the sample (a small number of readers of death-themed pages, a small percentage of people responding positively to the invitation to participate in the research) and from the method of its selection. Considering the fact that the research was of a pilot and exploratory nature, in order to verify the initial observations made here, we plan to continue the investigations with a much larger sample. Studying a larger group of readers of memorial blogs or pages would make it possible to verify the results obtained and to find out about other aspects of the phenomena studied herein. It would be advisable to encourage individuals of various ages to participate in the research as well as male respondents, which would make it possible to confirm whether women aged 40 or so really prevail among readers of death-themed and memorial pages, or they are simply more willing to participate in research, which is possible.

The findings of our study have some implications for subsequent research and for practice. Research methodology could be further improved by adding some more qualitative methods, for instance interviews and analyses based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This would give a deeper insight into the readers of the web pages’ feelings and definitely could expand knowledge about their motivation. Further research covering blog readers should also focus attention on the level of primal fear and the fear of illness or death, and compare it to the standards in the entire population. It is also worth checking the level of selected psychological traits, such as the empathy of readers of blogs and memorial pages about death, as well as examining the traits related to morality, as they may be significant and also distinguish that group of people. It would be valuable to explore the sources of the emotional rubbernecks’ need to be needed and to seek support.

Grief connected with the bereavement is accompanied by symptoms of distress and trauma. There is evidence that parents of children and adolescents who die or died benefit from a range of intervention services (Christ, Bonanno, Malkinson, & Rubin, 2003). As death of children is not common in the general population, parents usually do not know anyone else in their immediate social network who has experienced that kind of loss. The connections afforded by the virtual memorials and the presence of other people, not necessarily parents who have lost a child, but other accompanying persons who try to help, want to listen and understand, may be extremely important. Perhaps some memorial hosting sites could be created for grief resources and informal help groups, where emotional rubbernecks could work e.g. as on-line or on-call supporters?

Conclusions

The study of the motivations guiding emotional rubberneckers, readers of memorial blogs and pages dedicated to the death of children, makes it possible to define them as individuals who are compassionate, concerned about others and about their own families, and ready to help by publishing one’s own posts and comments or exchanging e-mails with the respective blog’s author. They fear illness and death and probably seek inner emotional tranquility in such activity. Contact with content of this kind also makes it possible to obtain support and to reduce fear. Such activity provides a sense of bonding with others who feel solidarity with people losing their children. From the anthropological point of view, this is an important value.

Nager and Vries (2004) point out that the Internet “offers a window onto the grief and the nature of the ties between the bereaved and the deceased” (p. 52). The results of the study presented in this paper prove that this window is even wider, as various phenomena of social, psychological, and morality-related nature appear in it, which may potentially become the subject of further studies that would facilitate to discover other motives of human behavior when facing death.

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