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New Media Use in Mitigating Existential Fear

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Abstract

Much of the existing literature concerning death and internet technologies has focused on how Social Networking Sites (SNS hereafter) construe and cope with the “digital dead.” Both academic and popular sources have noted and discussed recent modifications on Facebook, for instance, that allow family members to memorialize deceased relatives’ profiles (Landfair 2013, 9). While at first SNS tended exclusively to immortal tenants, in that, profiles were not designed to deactivate once an individual deceased, today the human condition (life and death) is recognized and reflected in the design of these platforms.

While developments like those mentioned on Facebook further prove the relevance and timeliness of this fertile ground for death in online research, the current article intends to diverge slightly from the primary vein by attending to the ways in which the living use SNS, like Facebook, in order to cope with, and subconsciously escape, anxieties related to their own pending mortality.

By drawing from research in Terror Management Theory (TMT hereafter) and applying this to a framework adopted from literature across disciplines, this essay will outline the ways in which SNS can be seen as platforms on which the human condition is made further ambiguous and the mitigation of mortality related anxieties can ensue. By granting humans extension and disengagement with physical limitations, upon a platform that allows one to leave a clear “digital trace,” SNS foster an environment upon which one can attain a sense of meaning, perceived permanence, and move from a mere animal-like to more god-like existence. The mitigation of existential anxieties and the achievement of symbolic immortality through SNS are of primary importance in this essay.

Introduction

Much of the existing literature concerning death and internet technologies has focused on how SNS construe and cope with the “digital dead.” Both academic and popular sources have noted and discussed recent modifications on Facebook, for instance, that allow family members to memorialize deceased relatives’ profiles (Landfair 2013, 9). While at first SNS tended exclusively to immortal tenants in that profiles were not designed to deactivate once an individual deceased, today the human condition (life and death) is recognized and reflected in the design of these platforms.

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The Human Condition

Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker’s (Becker 1973, 53) fundamental claim that, “the human animal is characterized by two great fears that other animals are protected from: the fear of life and the fear of death” was originally met with criticism, but empirical data demonstrates that many behaviors are influenced by mortality salience even when they have no obvious connection to death. This suggests that death-anxiety, even if repressed, exists in our unconscious (Solomon et al. 1998, 35). Being cognizant of the impermanence of life, while also being aware of the superiority of human intellect, creates the greatest paradox of the human condition. We are perceived as intellectuals yet humbled by our confinement to a physical body that decays and defecates just as any other. We exist as animals yet have a perceived obligation due to our mental capacity to function beyond our naturally defined physical limits. We are, as Freud would assert, “psychologically living beyond our means” (Freud 1918, 71).

The uniquely human awareness of one’s inevitable death creates a great deal of discomfort in life, and this discomfort must be mitigated. The reason for this discomfort is likely due to the fact that death directly challenges any claims to ultimate meaning and, without meaning, life becomes impossible to bear (Anton 2010, 13). Fischer succinctly asserts that “death is a particular evil for humans because it deprives us of the freedom we desire to shape our own meaningful lives” (Cohen et al. 2011, 88).

To cope with the supreme awareness of our finite nature, meaning systems have been an essential and enduring part of human existence. Research shows, for instance, that when confronted with the realities of death, by exposure to a mortality salient prime, individuals react by strengthening their worldviews (their meaning frameworks) in order to maintain their livelihood (Solomon et al. 1998, 29). This suggests that by strengthening convictions (if even superficially) one can mitigate anxieties provoked by death awareness. While it may seem that the dilemma of the human condition is outside of the bounds of our control, in that we have no known control over death (similar to our lack of control over our need to breathe air), there is much to gain in understanding how humans conceptualize death and how its subsequent anxieties manifest themselves in new digital environments. There are several well-documented

modes for achieving a sense of significance, thus alleviating anxieties that arise from the mortal condition, each to be discussed in stride.

Heroism

One method for alleviating death-related anxieties is through the attainment what Becker termed heroism, essentially an individual's effort to attain significance. Heroism can be achieved in many ways (e.g. warriorism, art, creating kin) (Becker 1973, 172). Perhaps the most recognized method of achieving heroism is by creating or associating with something that will surpass the impermanence of physical life (Becker 1973). For centuries artists, writers, and scientists have sought to create great works that would make an impact on society, capture attention, and leave traces of their greatness as superior earthly individuals. Those fortunate enough to create something valued were recorded, and thereby immortalized, by historians and biographers. The average person could not accomplish this with the ease of the privileged, however, because they were more concerned with immediate needs of survival (e.g. food, shelter, health). It is by achieving a sense of heroism that the individual's mind can move into a state of ease regarding their mortality.

It is important to note that today heroism is largely the job of the individual. As communication scholar Corey Anton states, "individuals increasingly attempt to take themselves and experience themselves as if they were of their own making. Individuals increasingly feel as if they are or should be their own cause" (2010, 20). The drive for self-sufficiency in all aspects of Western culture has created a deeply embedded sense that we must take care of things on our own; buffering the anxieties that surface as a result of mortality through heroism or what we will later refer to as symbolic immortality, is no different. It seems that one must create their own trace in order to survive or, even, to exist. This would amount to a heavy burden if it were not for the multi-layered system we have developed to overcome this fear.

Terror Management Theory

Perhaps the best explication of the mitigation of death-anxiety is presented by TMT. A psychological theory based on the main claims of Becker, TMT provides a framework for understanding the uniquely human motivation to buffer death anxieties through the pursuits of meaning and self-worth (Sullivan et al. 2013, 22). A fundamental component of this theory is the recognition that humans seek to buffer anxiety, be that death or otherwise (Strachan 2007, 1138). Moving beyond Becker's heroism, TMT suggests that death anxiety is best managed through the socialization process by the development of cultural worldviews, the pursuit of personal significance, and involvement in community (Solomon et al. 1998, 13; Solomon et al. 2004, 16; Strachan et al. 2007, 1138). Research suggests that "cultural worldviews facilitate effective terror management by providing individuals with a vision of reality--in ways that imbue the universe with meaning, permanence, and stability and give hope of symbolic or literal immortality". Studies in which individuals' worldviews are threatened are in line with this conception in that individuals respond negatively to those who have different worldviews and once threatened cling more strongly to their own convictions. For example, in one such study judges were found to retaliate to worldview attack by giving individuals harsher punishment or longer sentences (Solomon et al. 1998, 13; 27). Death related anxieties (that arise due to our unique condition) can be mitigated by a variety of meaning and support systems.

Self-Esteem: Identity and Community

Along with meaning systems, a necessary component of the socialization process (developing worldviews, pursuit of personal significance etc.) is the development, and maintenance, of self-esteem. Although originally self-esteem was more readily accepted as a desired trait in Western cultures, it is currently recognized as an important component of healthy individuals in the East as well. Terror management theorists suggest that “people seek self-esteem not only to escape anxiety that they are currently experiencing but also to avoid the anxiety that is inherent in their knowledge of their mortality” (Pyszczynski et al. 2004, 437). Several studies have shown that following temporary elevations of self-esteem individuals report less unease after being exposed to depictions of death (Solomon et al. 1998, 22). These findings support the notion that self-esteem reduces anxiety in response to threatening situations and that “self-esteem is the primary psychological mechanism by which culture serves its death-denying function” (Solomon et al. 1998, 22).

Self-esteem is essentially comprised of identity and community membership. It is first important to understand the main aspects of identity and community and later we will apply them more closely to the scope of this paper. Perhaps the most recognized identity scholar, sociologist Erving Goffman, proposed that we are constantly presenting ourselves as if actors upon a stage (Goffman 1959). Thus, presenting oneself is to put oneself on display for others to evaluate and validate. In these performances, as Goffman (1959) calls them, it is not essential that the presentations are accurate, in fact, it is part of the human artifice to believe these presentations are the reality even if they are not. In addition to the need to present oneself, assessing others' identities also proves important in managing the human condition (Sullivan et al. 2013, 24). Sociologist Anthony Giddens provides a nice working definition of identity as “something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual . . . it is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography” (Giddens 1990, 52). As Giddens asserts, individuals create an identity based on the feedback they get from others about their identity. It is a natural process of exchange, understanding, and creation that we constantly partake in as we move through our daily lives. Sullivan describes that “interpreting others' identities and actions is an essential part of maintaining a stable perception of everyday reality, and thus according to TMT helps to uphold the distal defense structures which let us deny death” (Sullivan et al. 2013, 24). Distal defense structures refer to largely unconscious ways of dealing with the inevitability of death (e.g. cultural worldview, sense of self, complex meaning systems) (Pyszczynski et al. 1999, 837).

Given that identity is formed, in part, by other's perceptions, community membership is essential. There have been heart wrenching studies that have examined individuals who were deprived of human contact and found this deprivation to have had permanent consequences. The famous case of Genie, a feral child who had spent the first thirteen years of her life confined to the basement of her family home, proves the irreversibility of contact deprivation. Once Genie was discovered and removed from her parents' home she was introduced back into society and proved to be unable to live life as a normal functioning member of society (Curtiss 1977). Community, and membership, are absolutely essential to well-adjusted human life.

Research shows that heroism, cultural worldviews, self-esteem (identity and community), and other meaning systems help to successfully mitigate anxieties surrounding the human condition, at least temporarily. There are, however, seemingly overlooked platforms on which all, or many, of these components are achieved together. The remainder of this essay will draw from the aforementioned research to examine SNS as an accessible, yet overlooked, platform on which existential anxiety can be mitigated. Facebook was chosen as a point of reference in this discussion because of

its popularity and apparent inclinations towards presentation of identity, community membership and disembodiment of text. This is not to say, however, that other SNS do not possess the same affordances.

By examining the ways in which SNS, like Facebook, further confuse the human condition, that is, by granting humans god-like capabilities through extension and disengagement with physical limitations, the remainder of this essay will outline the ways in which SNS use can relieve existential fear and provide individuals with a sense of symbolic immortality. As a framework it will be best to look at the affordances of SNS as divided among two types of meaning characterized by Becker and others: 1) Everyday Meaning (which has been already well-documented above) and 2) Ultimate Meaning (Wong 1998, 405).

SNS and Components of Everyday Meaning

The components of everyday meaning that are afforded to us through SNS are overt and well-documented. Broadly speaking everyday meaning involves the cognitive “micromanaging” of the social environment (Sullivan et al. 2013, 18). This micromanaging takes several forms on SNS, namely SNS allow us to command multiple environments while developing identity and building community membership. Identity, defined as the part of the self “by which we are known to others,” (Altheide 2000, 2; Zhao et al. 2008, 1817) is easily created through redaction and experimentation on SNS personal profiles and self-affirmation can ensue (Papacharissi 2010, 207; Toma 2010, 1749).

What is particularly appealing about the process of community involvement over the internet, as in the case on SNS, is that it allows a sense of disembodiment, and saving face, as Goffman calls it, the process of managing humiliating circumstances, seems more manageable (Goffman 1967, 12). While face-to-face interactions require one to simultaneously interpret another’s reaction to comments and presentation, online there is a broader window for assessment. The asynchronous nature of Facebook allows for a management of potential vulnerabilities. In addition, the empowerment individuals acquire from presenting identity and getting feedback from online friends is a practical way to boost self-worth (Toma 2010, 1752). While identity is essential to the human condition, one would have little use for identity if they were not part of a larger community.

We have already established the importance of community in human life and managing death anxiety. Traditional communities such as religious organizations, schools, and work groups provide individuals with a sense of belonging and meaning outside of their own individual sphere. It has been noted, however, that the primary community, the local neighborhood, has become increasingly out of reach for individual support (Barney 2004, 63). Furthermore, the increase of accessibility and integration of the internet in daily life has naturally led to the desire for, and development of, a complex online social sphere. Sociologist Barry Wellman (1999, 186) notes that “companionship, emotional support, services and a sense of belonging are abundant in cyberspace”. He adds that varying degrees of activity and intimacy “provide the very communal resources and experience that local neighborhoods do not: support, sociability, information and a sense of belonging” (Wellman 1999, 16). In this vein it seems that SNS may be an adaptation in which one can build their own “local community” that is not limited in the ways previous neighborhoods were—namely spatially and temporally. This can be seen in Facebook, which was originally designed to connect an academic community, but quickly developed into a social and commercial community with members across age ranges. In addition to providing a sense of community SNS actually help restore “users’ sense of self-worth by reminding them of the important aspects of their lives: their connections with friends, their identities and group membership” (Toma, 2010, 1752).

Moreover, the accessibility and commodification of community through SNS allows us to be simultaneously part of several distinctive communities at once. In this respect, one can have several different online communities active at any moment (temporal expansion) and communicate simultaneously across all different platforms (spatial expansion). Herein lies a key point in the current discussion: as communication leads to connection and connections increase while utilizing various social platforms, so too, does the traceability of the individual communicating. Leaving behind a trail of information, or “digital traces,” seems to be a very commodious way of attaining a sense of permanence, meaning, and, thus, symbolic immortality.

The components that make everyday meaning accessible on SNS, sense of identity and community, are vital in overcoming the dilemma of the human condition. In addition, the expression and reassurance of worldviews that is common on these sites can provide a solid support system upon which other needs can be met or realized. It is, however, important to note the darker side of SNS as it is not uncommon for one to have their cultural worldviews threatened on these sites. Threat occurs in a similar way online and offline, however, the difference lies in the ease of managing these threats online. When one comes into contact with a threatening post on Facebook, for instance, they can ignore and remove that person (or post) from their feed with an ease not available in the physical environment. While identity and community membership serve to meet with our “everyday needs” in developing meaning and managing death anxiety more is required to successfully develop a buffer against death anxieties. Moving on we will look at the affordances of SNS more akin to ultimate meaning, or pursuit of immortality, symbolic or otherwise (Sullivan et al. 2013, 18). The final affordances of SNS use in alleviating existential fear are: perceived control, disembodiment/disengagement with physical, and perceived permanency.

SNS and Components of Ultimate Meaning

All cultures create ritual forms that enable members to symbolically transcend their sheer materiality and organismal being, but cultural forms not only extend organismal boundaries and amplify routes for the pursuit of self-esteem, they also whet the appetite for some kind of immortality (Anton 2010, 12).

Symbolic immortality has been discussed in various texts across disciplines. Through proper mitigation of existential anxiety by creating something eternal, one can arguably achieve this sense of immortality. Similar to Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, one must first take care of the necessities at the base, those of everyday meaning, then one can move on to the necessities that are higher in the pyramid, those that lead to ultimate meaning. Whereas the affordances that fall under everyday meaning aid in the mitigation of death anxiety the following discussion will make a case for SNS use in establishing a sense of symbolic immortality through ultimate meaning.

Ultimate meaning differs from everyday meaning in that it arises from “macromanaging” our lives in the context of the broader community and spiritual realm (Sullivan et al. 2013, 18). Ultimate meaning refers to the meaning systems we put in place to allow us to buffer anxieties in the face of pending annihilation. The ways in which SNS support ultimate meaning are more difficult to define as they are pervasive, but are also equally, if not more so, pertinent to the current, and future, discussions on death studies. These are less subject to empirical debate and are more akin to qualitative methods and cultural interpretation but remain a vital component in the explication of this mitigation process online.

Before proceeding it is important to make clear that it is not my intent to champion SNS use as a healthy or sustainable means for alleviating death anxiety. My hope is rather to explicate the ways in which SNS may be employed as a scapegoat to the real human vulnerabilities that plague our everyday life. It is through this scapegoat that the human artifice prevails. We alleviate anxieties through the affordances SNS offer— this term, borrowed from psychology, is not positivist but rather plainly literal. Social networking sites, as a practically integrated tool in society, impressively weave together many components necessary for the mitigation of the human condition. Facebook perhaps most transparently explicates this mitigation process and the sense of symbolic immortality through its structure.

Perceived Control

Social networking sites allow an individual control over personal presentation and community. There are certainly aspects of SNS that allow for little control, such as website design and structure. This is increasingly the case now that Facebook is publicly traded and a host of various personalized advertisements. What individuals do have control over, and what is most relevant for the topic at hand, is identity (including face and vulnerability management) and the presentation of one's story or "virtual autobiography". The lack of control we have over the human condition is the primary issue we face as beings, thus we strive to mask it at all costs. We do this, as already established, through developing strong cultural worldviews and ascribing to certain religious beliefs, but we can also do this by controlling other aspects of our lives. SNS offer us the ability to control our presentation in the form of a disembodied identity — which could be transcendent in a way that our body never will be because it has already been proven to decay as animals. There is little mystery left in the organismic structure of humans- our identity, however, is what has some possibility of transcendence.

In addition to the control we have over our presentation, Facebook members are allowed to block friends with whom they do not wish to receive news. This user control adds an ease to worldview maintenance on these platforms because one can both rein in exposure to, and expression of, worldviews. On Facebook one can select to have friends who prescribe to certain beliefs show up on their feed while others are, for all intensive purposes, "blocked," or to be seen only when one desires their input. This control is important in the maintenance of death anxiety as Terror Management proves worldview threat to result in conscious existential anxieties that must be mitigated (Sullivan et al. 2013, 22). This is not to say, however, that unexpected or undesirable exposure to alternative worldviews and images/text with mortality salient primes are completely avoidable. In fact, depending on one's set of friends and the feeds that one subscribes to, one might be constantly haunted by the nature of death in the human condition- though this would likely be rare as it is undesirable and quite easy to avoid at least in large quantities.

Moreover, it is important to note the perceived control we have over reach. As media scholar Marshall McLuhan noted, new technologies often extend our bodies and minds (1964, 64). By extending the human body and senses through the control and reach we have on SNS, we arguably become less embodied and more god-like. Both traits will be explored below.

Disembodiment/Disengagement

In addition to control, the nature of SNS make it easy for an individual to disengage with the physical world, and its limitations, as well as experience identity disembodiment. Both will be discussed in stride. When we are on the Internet we can consume information and exchange without concerning ourselves with the physical world in which this

information is bred and manifested. This could be seen as a complex coping mechanism that distances us from the physical world and makes us less likely to think about the fragility of our human condition. The information that we share over SNS essentially becomes a commodity in that it is routine, expected, consumed. Interestingly, Barney noted “the commodity is not so much, or not solely, an object of exchange but a quality that serves to disburden its possessor of the material difficulties of being in the world” (Barney 2004, 59). It is as if real world objects, digitized, have already undergone death-- they are no longer illuminated with the same life energy humans are and mortality is less salient.

Disembodiment refers to the way we exist on SNS as beings without physical bodies. When transferred to the digital realm we transcend corporeal limits (i.e. reach, space, depth). From a TMT perspective the human body is perhaps the biggest reminder of human mortality. The body is vulnerable, temporary, and in some ways embarrassing (Becker 1973, 51). Zhao asserts that, “as the corporeal body is detached from social encounters in the online environment it becomes possible for individuals to interact with one another on the Internet in fully disembodied text mode that reveals nothing about their physical characteristics” (Zhao et al. 2008, 1817). This disembodiment may be attractive because in the absence of our bodies we are less bothered by our condition. Many Eastern philosophies and practices such as Zen Buddhism, meditation, and yoga have also paid particular attention to the disembodied existence. It is through achievement of “nirvana” or “actualization” that we can be freed of the chains of human reality (our mortality). Sherry Turkle, MIT Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology in the Program in Science, notes this disembodiment online writing that, “when reality is too painful people may feel that they have left their bodies and are watching themselves from above. Leaving the self is a way not to feel something intolerable” (Turkle 2011, 235).

In addition to the disembodiment of persons in virtual space death, itself, is disembodied. Recent research has acknowledged the increased visibility of the dead online (Landfair 2013, 85). Facebook, for instance, immortalizes a person after death in that a person’s profile remains active until other action is taken by friends or family members. Writer Alexander Landfair suggests that, “death’s unfixeness online suggests we don’t quite yet live in an Internet culture . . . and we won’t until social media accommodates the whole of human life, of which death is a fundamental part” (2013, 83). This again is not a new phenomenon but one that should be taken into careful consideration with SNS and other new media technologies. English scholar Walter Ong wrote about the ways in which early technologies served as aids in the paradoxical nature of human existence. He wrote, “such is the virtue of texts that their ability to absorb death makes death somehow less threatening. As already noted, the text assures a kind of life after death, which can readily be disguised as life without death” (Ong 1977, 238). It is through the separation of body and identity, body and death, that we are able to feel as if our bodies-- the mortal problem-- is resolved or solvable.

Before moving on to the next section it will be useful to touch on research that has deemed the internet magical. Communication and technology scholar Darin Barney wrote, “the very appeal of network technology for most of its users is precisely that, despite the brilliance of its communication and information capacities, it still manages to leave darkened the tangible reality of just exactly how it appropriates the world” (Barney 2004, 61). Humans having created technologies that are in some ways ambiguous (or cast shadows as Barney implies) is not surprising. In fact, it is this ambiguity that requires us to have faith. The mysterious nature of internet is similar to what we find, and take comfort in, in romantic relationships, love of kin, religion, and community bonds- all of which are means to alleviate death-related anxieties. Furthermore, reality cannot be confirmed unambiguously— one must always rely on faith (Solomon 1998, 15). This faith allows us to transcend our corporeal limitations while feeling a sense of power, or superiority. The

human condition is augmented by internet technologies- both the reach and the breadth of our connections are extended on a platform that is traceable.

Perceived Permanence

The ephemeral nature of human life is disheartening. An affordance of SNS is the perceived permanence of their record or digital trace. As Turkle (2011, 260) writes, “delete” and “erase” are metaphorical online; the internet never forgets. While the main purpose of SNS may not be to create a permanent record- in fact, many members are fearful of this component- it is a current reality. On these sites one is “invited to tell stories about themselves, and the stories told are made of words digitally traceable, re-mixable, and broadly accessible” (Papacharissi 2011, 13). Of course, the ability to tell stories and explain ourselves is not unique to the internet, and has been available to us through other means since the beginnings of humanity. What is important to note, however, is the traceability of these stories and online creations. If individuals are using these stories to construct and project their own virtual identity, then is their identity, too, not traceable, re-mixable, and accessible? Leaving behind digital traces seems to reassert our livelihood in a way that postpones fear of death. In fact, one study found that members post with purpose and it is considered a “waste of time” to send private messages (Turkle 2011, 251). It is interesting to note that the importance of SNS shifts from a means to communicate “things” or to connect to people and becomes a recording technology with a means to leave behind digital traces for oneself or others.

Political theorist Hannah Arendt once said that the most important task of the human artifice “is to offer mortals a dwelling place more permanent and more stable than themselves” (Arendt 1958, 152). Pre-internet media forms were vulnerable, in some way, to destruction. Print could easily be burned, recording devices could be smashed, and even the most primitive media, our ears and eyes, decline in accuracy overtime. The internet, however, is an electrical impulse, a connection of durable networks, that requires only access to take full advantage of its unique properties. Exchanges on the internet are backed up and stored away on multiple servers. It is a network that is constantly passing information back and forth and, therefore, this information is traceable at the moment in which it is input and accessible in the future. In the Western world we rely on the internet in the same way we rely on other taken-for-granted technologies such as electricity and heat. I would argue that it is this reliance and faith in the ever-existence of the internet that, in part, subconsciously motivates us to make accounts on SNS.

God-Like Existence

The last, and perhaps the most complex, affordance of SNS, and internet-based technologies in general, is in allowing humans to move from a more animal-like to more god-like existence. The best way to explicate this position is to imagine existence along a continuum with animals on one end of the continuum and “gods” on the other. Humans would naturally be situated in the middle. I propose that SNS allow us to move along that continuum and toward the attainment of a more “god-like” status (for similar claims see e.g. Sullivan et al. 2013; Ess 2012; Turkle 2011).

In fact, Landfair states that “Facebook wasn’t designed for mortals” (Landfair 2013, 86). He goes on to explain that this is because mortality was not visible, or acknowledged, on the site until around 2007 (Landfair 2013, 86). It seems mortality was not considered in Facebook’s original design, likely because it was an online community for college students. As it grew in popularity, however, it became open to different age-groups, some of these groups being closer to death. Since expanding its demographic, the site has an even more interesting, and complex, relationship with death. It is a place where we are disembodied and immortal, yet exist in space with those who have deceased. Online

we are not mortal, alive, or dead but, perhaps, something else. It may be that SNS allow members to create a digital projection that is not vulnerable to death in the same way the body is.

Turkle writes, “..I’ve entered the web to get lost....lovely surrender, the web swallows my certitude and delivers the unknown” (Turkle 2011, 275). The idea that one can “get lost” on a SNS is not new. The fact that humans spend so many hours lost, however, is perplexing as productivity is the backbone of the Western culture. Escaping or evading the reality of death becomes an activity that we participate in, whether intentionally or not, online. Social networking sites, in particular, uniquely engage us in the creation of personalized digital traces. We are, thus, creating a text or autobiography of our life while evading the weight of the terms of human life.

In another line of research, scholars look at technology as a symptom in that it “carries knowledge that a person fears would be too much to bear. To do its job, a symptom disguises the knowledge so it doesn’t have to be faced day to day” (Turkle 2011, 283). If this is so, it seems that the symptom of the human condition is technology and technology disconnects us from our real struggle: our mortality.

As technology is increasingly integrated into daily life we are both more aware of, and become less accustomed to, being confined by our corporeal and cognitive limitations. We use paper and pencils or a computer for reminders; we rely more on technologies because our natural limits are no longer acceptable. Social networking sites serve this purpose too. People record daily activities and grand feats on SNS like Facebook in order to share with others, receive feedback, and also to record something that otherwise might be easily forgotten in the feeble minds of others. Sullivan asserts “modern technologies, as overcoming death and labor, will thus free modern humanity from these ultimate punishments and elevate humans to a God-like status” (Sullivan et al. 2013, 282).

Concluding Remarks

The connections drawn in this essay illustrate how SNS hold space for the development of both everyday and ultimate meaning. In addition they place terror management into conversation with one of the most common new media technologies. My hope was to draw these two fields together for a discussion of the possible ways in which internet death studies can be expanded. Media theorist Douglas Rushkoff notes, “The things we use do change us. —We should probably be less immediately concerned with the cause-and-effect consequences of digital activity than with the greater implications and requirements of living in the digital environment. It’s not about how digital technology changes us, but how we change ourselves and one another now that we live so digitally” (Rushkoff 2013, 73). These words, which in part inspired the preceding discussion, suggest that we might want to turn our attention to how humans, and the human condition, are changing. It is not so much about our control over technology, but rather how we adapt and evolve as a result of our creations. Turkle, for instance, writes that, “we build technologies that leave us vulnerable in new ways” (Turkle 2011, 235). Perhaps the changes we are going through and the vulnerability we now face is in realizing the human condition is simply that: a condition in which we have been taught to begin with. Whether or not the human condition is real or simply part of the spectacle – that is what we have been told to believe – is irrelevant in this argument. It may indeed be that the human condition is really just the way humans have been conditioned to think about themselves as separate existences or as beings apart from a larger whole. The truth is we have been convinced and conceive of our existence as that and so we shall assume that our anxieties about death shall be treated as anxieties that the human condition is fraught to overcome.

In conclusion, this essay suggested that SNS use could serve to alleviate existential anxieties surrounding death and mortality. By examining the ways in which SNS endow us with everyday and ultimate meaning and by granting humans god-like capabilities through extension and disengagement with physical limitations, this essay provided a review of existing literature to form a theoretical framework for viewing SNS as a means for us to achieve a sense of symbolic immortality, thus, relieve existential fear.

While further elaboration on any of these characteristics might strengthen this argument, the allotted space served to provide a preliminary descriptive framework upon which future research can elaborate. Future research will need to provide quantitative data regarding users' conception of death and how these may differ from those without online accounts. In addition, this area of research could benefit from experimentation with measuring of death thought awareness post networking. I hope that this essay may be seen as an explanation of how SNS provide a synthesis of necessary characteristics in alleviating death related anxiety while also providing a sense of digital immortality.

Biographical note:

Kaylee Kruzan is a graduate student in the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Having received degrees in Psychology and Communication Studies her research pursuits are often interdisciplinary in nature. Motivated by a strong curiosity in the human condition, her areas of interest include social media and identity, Medium Theory, media effects on well-being, Terror Management Theory and other applications of existential psychology to the study of internet-based technologies.

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