

“I can’t believe #Ziggy #Stardust died”

Stance, fan identities and multimodality in reactions to the death of David Bowie on Instagram

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Social networking sites (SNSs) have changed the way we mourn. Reactions on SNSs to celebrity death in particular have begun to attract the attention of both academic researchers and the broader media, yet so far linguistic studies thereof remain relatively rare. This study addresses this research gap by examining the pragmatics of Instagram posts labelled #bowie following the death of the musician David Bowie on 10 January 2016. It shows how Instagram users engage in affective stance-taking strategies ranging from disbelief to acceptance. It also suggests that the multimodality of Instagram posts functions as a means of combining grief and identity work within a fan community. The findings are relevant for an understanding of mediated affect and offer further evidence of a renegotiation of norms of mourning online.

Keywords: celebrity, celebrity death, David Bowie, fandom, hashtags, Instagram, mourning, social media

1. Introduction

Celebrity deaths increasingly involve large public outpourings of grief (Böhme 2017; Brown, Basil, and Bocarnea 2003; McCurdy 2010; Thomas 2008). In terms of their broad social impact, the deaths of high-profile figures can be seen as “cultural flashpoints” (Schudson 1992), symbolic moments that inspire “reflection on societal norms, hopes and fears” (Kitch 2000, 173). At a more individual level, celebrity deaths are moments “in which people feel compelled to assess their identities and beliefs” (Kitch 2000, 174) and to reflect on the meaning of the celebrity for their own life narrative (Courbet and Fourquet-Courbet 2014; Harju 2016; Hills 2016).

In the era of digitally mediated communication (DMC), social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have come to play a central role as arenas where individuals converge online in remembrance of celebrity figures (Burgess, Mitchell, and Münch 2019; Cesare and Branstad 2017; Klastrup 2018; Radford and Bloch 2012; Van den Bulck and Larsson 2019). The social media reactions to the death of musician David Bowie (born David Robert Jones, 8 January 1947–10 January 2016) are of particular interest for the study of mourning, fandom, and the affordances and constraints of DMC. Bowie's career as a musician spanned over six decades and 25 studio albums; through his experimentation with gender roles and musical styles, Bowie appealed to a diverse audience in a manner unrivalled by other musicians (Black 2017; Bradley and Page 2017; Cinque and Redmond 2017, 2019; Jones 2018; Kardos 2017). The social media response to Bowie's passing prompted widespread commentary and even criticism in traditional media outlets, with some journalists questioning the sincerity of the emotions expressed (e.g. Burchill 2016; O'Neill 2016). The online grief at Bowie's death thus opened up "a renewed and reflexive dialogue about the public mediation of celebrity death" and highlighted the role of social media in the mourning and memorialisation thereof (Burgess, Mitchell, and Münch 2019, 231).

Scholars from a number of academic disciplines, including sociology and communications science, have increasingly focused on reactions to celebrity death online (e.g. Cesare and Branstad 2017; Goh and Lee 2011; Sanderson and Cheong 2010; Van den Bulck and Larsson 2019). Thus far, however, linguistic studies of online grieving of celebrity figures remain relatively rare (cf. Klastrup 2018). Attention has also primarily been focused on SNSs such as Twitter and Facebook, with platforms such as Instagram receiving less interest, despite the multimodal affordances of the latter and its importance for a key millennial demographic (E-Marketer 2016).

This study addresses this research gap by examining the interplay between stance-taking, fan identities and multimodality in Instagram posts labelled #bowie in the period 11–17 January 2016. It shows how Instagram users engage in a range of stance-taking strategies as part of a process of online mourning. It also suggests that Instagram posts can function as a means of combining grief and identity work within a fan community. The study adds to research into how affect is represented, shared and mediatised in social media and contributes to understandings of renegotiated norms of mourning in DMC.

2. Beyond the parasocial relationship? Fandom and celebrity in digital media

Traditional understandings of fandom have been based on Horton and Wohl's (1956) notion of parasociality. Horton and Wohl describe the fan-celebrity relationship in mainstream media as the "illusion of [a] face-face-relationship with the performer" (1956, 215), characterised as "one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development" (223). The parasocial relationship (PSR) is thus one that "exhibits the 'illusion of intimacy' between individuals and media personalities" (Radford and Bloch 2012, 139), in which the celebrity may be considered a friend, sibling or ersatz father/mother figure, compensating for deficits in "real-life" relationships (Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen 2016; Hills 2016; Turner 2014, 102–105).

As Dibble, Hartmann and Rosaen point out, some researchers distinguish between parasocial *interaction*, referring to a particular media exposure situation (e.g. watching a celebrity on television), and the parasocial *relationship*, referring to the "more enduring (positive or negative) long-term [...] relationships or socioemotional bonds that users develop with media performers" (2016, 23–24). Although Horton and Wohl's (1956) use of the terms is "somewhat ambiguous" (Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen 2016, 24), I use the term *parasocial relationship* here, particularly as the focus of this study lies on the broader meaningfulness of celebrities for the identity of fans.

Horton and Wohl's classic model of the PSR has been highly influential, but, as Hills (2016, 464) makes clear, has led to a negative stereotyping of fandom as being a compensatory relationship by the "socially inept" involving distance and a lack of authenticity. More recently, the nature of fandom has been re-evaluated in terms of how it can go beyond the "second-order intimacy" (Rojek 2001, 52) of the PSR to tangible and meaningful identification (Hills 2016). Studies have shown that fan-celebrity relationships can mirror elements of social bonds such as long-term "fidelity" (Stevenson 2006), raise political awareness (Click, Lee, and Willson Holladay 2017), and empower fans against bullying and homophobia (Click, Lee, and Willson Holladay 2013), thus relativising the parasocial/social binary and the "pathological" nature of the PSR (Hills 2016).

This is particularly true in the context of digital technologies. Galuszka (2015) highlights how audiences have been empowered by DMC, with fans online having a broader spectrum of activities in which they can engage. Social media in particular have transformed the nature of the relationship between fans and celebrities, "blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production" (Pearson 2010, 84). By communicating via

social media, fans can now engage in a visible and public exchange with their favourite celebrity, allowing users to express their opinions and fan identities to both the fan community and the public at large. The result of this is that “substantial elements of this relationship [...] no longer look like the ‘simulation’ of a conventionally social relationship at all” (Turner 2014, 76), and that fan-celebrity interactions are now a normative element of media culture (Hills 2016, 463).

One key issue that is raised by social media’s impact on celebrity and fandom is therefore that of authenticity (Black 2017; Ellcessor 2012; Hills 2016; Marwick 2013; Marwick and boyd 2011b). Social media facilitate inferred intimacy via access to “backstage” behaviour (Ellcessor 2012; Marwick and boyd 2011b), and allow for celebrity performances of a “public private self” (Marshall 2010, 44–45), whereby what would conventionally be aspects of private self-identity are publicly played out for the networked audience (Marwick 2013, 213). This is not to say that fan-celebrity hierarchies no longer exist: as Marwick and boyd point out, celebrity is “a co-performance that requires fan deference and mutual recognition of unequal status to succeed” (2011b, 155). Yet notions of authenticity are now renegotiated and regulated in online media between celebrities and the fans themselves (Click, Lee, and Willson Holladay 2013; Hills 2016).

Overall, therefore, social media have ‘depathologised the parasocial’ (Marwick and boyd 2011b, 148) and transformed it into what Hills (2016) terms *multisocial* interaction: “fans can simultaneously draw on celebrities as a resource within their self-narratives *and* share and perform these narratives with multiple fan others (both known and imagined)” (2016, 471). Thus the fan-celebrity dyad has been shifted towards a more triadic form of interaction in which authenticity and fandom are co-constructed, monitored and reflected upon within digital fan communities (Harju 2016).

3. Stance-taking in social media

As well as being sites of information-sharing, social media are “emotional media” (Döveling, Harju, and Sommer 2018, 1), in which the sharing of emotion has become central to notions of identity and community. On SNSs, users converge around expressions of emotion such as grief or anger, forming *affective publics* (Papacharissi 2015, 2016; Papacharissi and Oliveira 2012) – “networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (Papacharissi 2016, 311). Within fan communities, too, expressions of emotional bonding with celebrity figures play a key role in both the interaction between fans and celebrities and among fans themselves (Cinque 2016; Hills 2016; Marshall 2010; Marwick and boyd 2011b).

Linguistically, such expressions of emotion are a form of affective stance-taking. Stance is “a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects” (Du Bois 2007, 163). Du Bois’ (2007) model of the *stance triangle* has been used to analyse stance in face-to-face (FTF) communication (Figure 1). By expressing an evaluation through linguistic means, such as the utterance *I’m afraid of Americans*, a speaker simultaneously foregrounds their subjectivity through the pronoun *I*, expresses an orientation towards an object (Americans) and also aligns themselves with other speakers who share that position (cf. Du Bois 2007, 159). Thus Du Bois’ model sees stance in terms of dialogicality and intersubjectivity, whereby “the stancetaker’s words derive from, and further engage with, the words of those who have spoken before” (2007, 140).

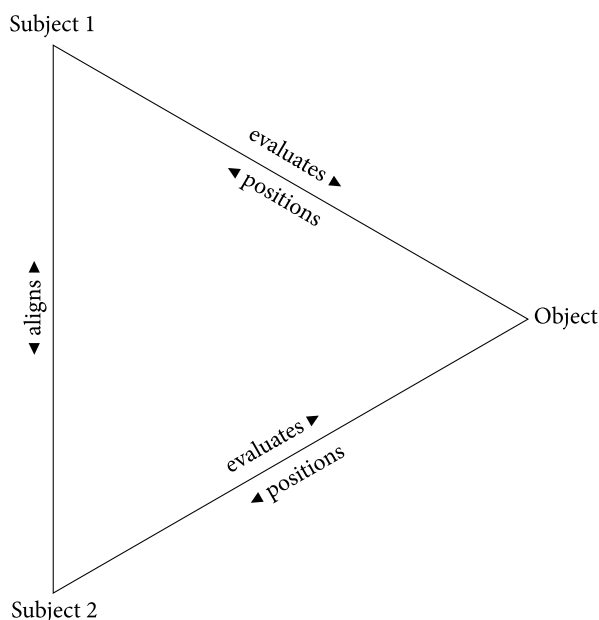


Figure 1. The stance triangle (Du Bois 2007, 163)

The affordances of SNSs such as multimodality and emoji make them “stance-rich” environments that encourage the expression of feelings and evaluations (Barton and Lee 2013; Lee and Chau 2018). Photo-sharing sites such as Instagram offer a range of stance-taking features, of which the ability to post images is in itself an integral component (Barton and Lee 2013, 91). Further features such as filters allow greater control over images, and via comment and like functions users can evaluate posts, thus enabling users to employ images as both stance-

taking resources – the means of making an evaluation – and stance objects – the object that users can evaluate (Barton and Lee 2013, 90–91). One further central feature of SNSs is hashtags (such as #ILoveIt, #sad). Hashtags are a “form of social tagging that allows microbloggers to embed metadata in social media posts” (Zappavigna 2015, 274). While their primary function is to make content searchable, hashtags can also perform a range of functions including stance-taking (Evans 2016; Giaxoglou 2018; Lee and Chau 2018; Wikström 2014; Zappavigna 2015; Zappavigna and Martin 2018).

Importantly, the nature of communication on SNSs has an impact on the dynamics of the stance triangle. Du Bois sees stance as taking a position on content that is “locatable in the prior discourse” (2007, 149), i.e. as a response by Subject 2 to a previous utterance by Subject 1 (Figure 1). However, on Instagram, a post usually has no immediate “prior discourse”. Thus, the “dialogicality” that forms the basis of the stance triangle is one that arguably takes place with a broader community of users, linked in a “structure of feeling” (Papacharissi 2015, 118) via the “ambient affiliation” that hashtags afford (Zappavigna 2015, 276).

4. Grief and mourning online

Grief is “an individual’s response to loss” (Buglass 2010, 44) and has both psychological and social dimensions. Psychologically, grief work involves a “cognitive process of confronting a loss [...] and working towards detachment from the deceased” (Stroebe and Schut 1999, 199). One influential model of grief work is Kübler-Ross and Kessler’s five-stage model (2005), suggesting that individuals pass through denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance in mourning.¹ A further model is the Dual Process Model (Stroebe and Schut 1999, 2010), which describes how individuals oscillate between loss-oriented coping (e.g. rumination about the deceased) and restoration-oriented coping (e.g. adjusting to resultant changes) following a bereavement.

Socially, the practices of mourning and remembering the dead have been influenced by historical and cultural factors. As a result of the “sequestration of death in late modernity” (Klastrup 2015, 149), grief became a “compartmentalised and private experience” (Cesare and Branstad 2017, 2). Yet towards the end of the 20th century, death and mourning re-entered public life via digital technologies (Klastrup 2015, 2018; Pitsillides, Waller, and Fairfax 2013; Walter et al. 2011). Social media in particular have changed the way individuals and communities

1. Kübler-Ross and Kessler’s model is not prescriptive but can be seen as a “loose pathway” which mourners follow in coming to terms with loss (Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013, 153).

perform grieving practices. SNSs enable users to create online communities of the bereaved (Christensen et al. 2017), continue connections with the deceased (Bouc, Han, and Pennington 2016; Giaxoglou 2015), and manage the balance between individual expressions of sorrow and conventional forms of mourning (Pitsillides, Waller, and Fairfax 2013). Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish (2013) summarise that social media have thus expanded mourning *temporally*, by integrating it into everyday experience, rather than in the “temporally bound settings of traditional funerals and memorials” (160); *spatially*, by removing geographical barriers, and allowing mourners to participate in a “shared production of grief” (161) from a range of locations; and *socially*, by including individuals across multiple social groups and contexts (161). Online spaces thus serve as arenas in which mourners can engage collectively and become part of a hybrid community of the bereaved.

Research on mourning celebrities online suggests that SNSs offer platforms for both communal grieving and the expression of fan identities. In examining reactions to the death of Michael Jackson on Twitter, Facebook and TMZ.com (a celebrity news website), Sanderson and Cheong (2010) found that such sites allowed users to create “unique personally meaningful tributes” (337). Sanderson and Cheong also highlight how users came together to construct a positive legacy for the celebrity, enacting ritual practices that enabled fans to cope (337). Cesare and Branstad (2017) showed how SNSs enabled users to respond to the deceased celebrity “more as a symbol of personal inspiration [...] than as an individual” (10). Klastруп (2018) showed that social media offered users a venue where they could collectively mourn a celebrity (Paul Walker of the *Fast and Furious* film franchise) over longer periods of time, undergoing several stages of grief. In examining responses to the death of David Bowie on Twitter, Van den Bulck and Larsson (2019) showed that while the platform was used to express love and respect for the celebrity, there were only a limited number of “expressions of fan creativity” such as fan art. Van den Bulck and Larsson suggest that users may thus only wish to identify with the news topic via the use of hashtags such as #bowie, but not necessarily express a “more in-depth fandom” (2019, 320), raising questions of the nature of fan identity and authenticity among griever.

Overall, therefore, the impact of social media on mourning celebrities has arguably been to ‘re-enfranchise’ a community of griever who have been disenfranchised both by the nature of the PSR and the constraints of traditional forms of mourning. Disenfranchised grief is the reaction to a loss “that [...] cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (Doka 1989, 4; see also Corr 1999; Doka 2002). In DMC, reactions to celebrity death involve both personal expressions of grief as well as alignment – via hashtags – with a com-

munity of the bereaved that is enfranchised and socially sanctioned (Döveling, Harju, and Sommer 2018, 6).

5. Outline of the study and methodology

This study focuses on the reactions to David Bowie's death on Instagram in the period from 11 to 17 January 2016. Using Picodash, an Instagram search engine, I gathered all posts labelled #bowie in the period from 11 January 2016 (0:00 hrs GMT) to 17 January 2016 (16:00 hrs GMT). Although a range of hashtags is often used in the aftermath of a celebrity death, the hashtag #bowie was chosen – rather than others such as #RIPDavidBowie – as it was the broadest in scope in terms of the possible responses (cf. Cinque and Redmond 2019, 165–7; Van den Bulck and Larsson 2019, 312–3).

Using DiscoverText, a text analytical tool, I first conducted a quantitative analysis of the frequency of a selection of keywords over time in the Instagram posts. I then took a randomised sample of 400 posts, from which I eliminated posts that were not in English, had since been deleted or were obvious spam, leaving a total of 361 posts, for which I carried out a quantitative visual content analysis based on intuitive, data-driven categories. I then conducted a qualitative analysis of stance-taking in the sample based on the themes of mourning and fan identities. Thus while the qualitative analysis is selective, the triangulation of methods allowed me to conduct an in-depth study of individual posts in the context of the overall reaction to Bowie's death.

In conducting the study, I addressed the following research questions:

1. What types of stance are circulated in reactions to David Bowie's death on Instagram?
2. How do Instagram users position themselves vis-à-vis David Bowie's death in terms of fan identities?
3. What role does the multimodality of Instagram posts play in reacting to David Bowie's death and engaging with an online fan community?

In what follows, I show that the posters engage in a range of stance-taking connected to grief work (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2005; Stroebe and Schut 1999, 2010). I also highlight how the multimodality of Instagram posts functions as a means of combining grief and identity work within a fan community. Overall, I suggest in the analysis that the interplay of grief and fan identities is reflective of notions of digital affect culture (Döveling, Harju, and Sommer 2018) and multi-social digital fan identities (Hills 2016).

6. Results

David Bowie died on 10 January 2016, and news of his death was first announced in Western media outlets on 11 January 2016 at approximately 07:00 hrs GMT. As Figure 2 shows, there was an immediate spike in Instagram posts labelled #bowie from around 07:00 hrs GMT, with a subsequent peak around 13:00 GMT (08:00 EST in the USA). Overall the response to the news is considerable in terms of the number of posts, with 27,887 posts labelled #bowie in the first six hours following the announcement of Bowie's death and 109,930 posts total in the overall timespan under analysis. While this figure is far lower compared to the 4.3 million tweets posted worldwide in the first 24 hours after Bowie's death (Sullivan 2016, see also Burgess, Mitchell, and Münch 2019), illustrating Twitter's more prominent role as a participatory news platform in the event of celebrity death (Goh and Lee 2011), it is nevertheless indicative of the "digital footprint" (Papacharissi 2016, 312) that affective publics create as they materialise around news events on social media.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of posts within the timespan in question containing a selection of keywords related to Bowie's death. The most frequent terms within the posts are *legend*, *hero* and *sad*. The focus on Bowie's status as a *legend* reflects a preoccupation with Bowie's acclaim and cultural influence as a musician, which parallels findings by Van den Bulck and Larsson (2019, 314) in which large percentages of tweets focused on Bowie's musical legacy and role as an artist, 23.3% and 19.4% respectively of a sample of the most retweeted posts. The emphasis on Bowie's status as a hero, a keyword that also combines an intertextual reference to the eponymous 1977 song and album titles, is indicative of the importance of Bowie as a source of personal inspiration for fans within a traditional parasocial fan-celebrity hierarchy (Hills 2016; Marwick and boyd 2011b, 155), while sadness as the most common affective stance within the data reflects Van den Bulck and Larsson's findings that sorrow is the most common emotion expressed in retweeted posts (2019, 314).

Table 1 shows the categories of the visual content of posts labelled #bowie in the random sample. The largest category of visual material in the sample is photos – including montages as in Figure 4 – of David Bowie in various personae (28.2%). This is illustrative of how mourners “[sanctify] meaningful symbols [...] that may signify the identity of the deceased” (Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013, 153). Interestingly, the second largest category is self-attributed fan art (21.6%). This category includes a range of art forms (see Section 6.2) including paintings, computer art, collages and even food with Bowie emblems. This high level of fan art stands in stark contrast to the findings of Van den Bulck and Larsson (2019), who documented only low incidences of original visual material in Twitter posts

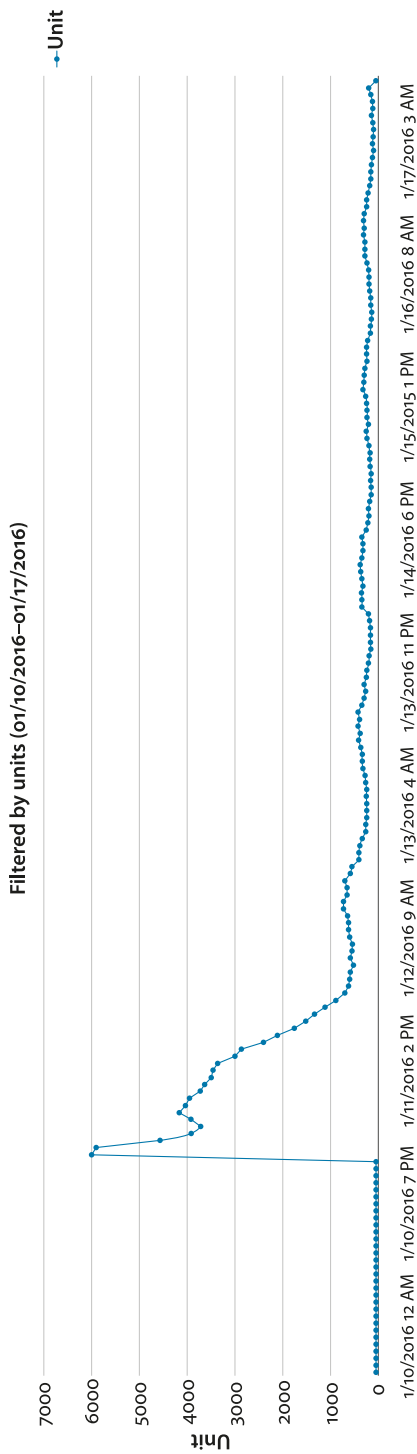


Figure 2. Distribution of Instagram posts labelled #bowie from 10 January 0:00 hrs GMT to 17 January 16:00 hrs GMT 2016

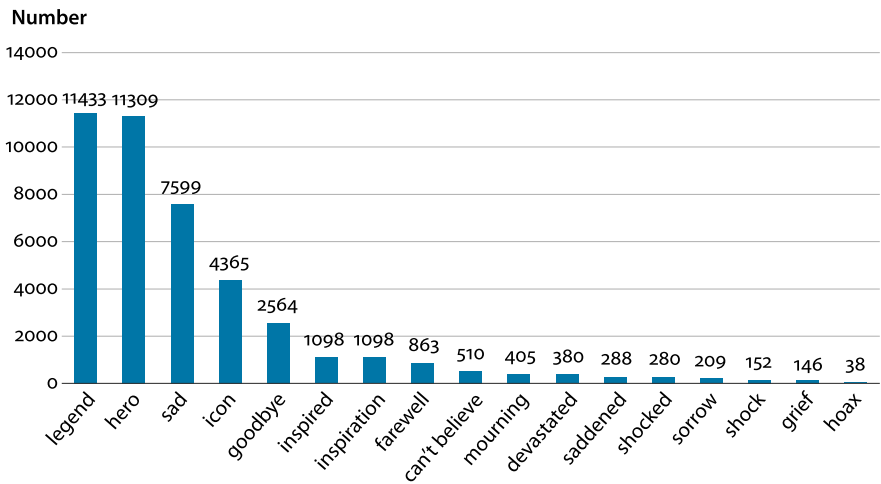


Figure 3. Number of Instagram posts labelled #bowie containing selected keywords 11–16 January 2016

labelled #bowie in the immediate aftermath of his death. This is reflective of other studies that suggest that Instagram is used for showcasing creativity and promoting the self (Hu et al. 2014; Sheldon and Bryant 2016).

Table 1. Types of images labelled #bowie in the random sample

Category	Number	Percent
Photo of Bowie	102	28.2
Fan art (own, as attributed)	78	21.6
Bowie album(s)	31	8.6
Film still featuring Bowie	16	4.4
Fan art (by others, as attributed)	15	4.2
Photo of people other than Bowie	15	4.2
Tributes (flowers, posters, etc.)	15	4.2
App screenshot	14	3.9
Selfie/photo of self	13	3.6
Video footage, various (Bowie video, tribute concert, self, etc.)	13	3.6
Quotation	10	2.8
Photo of Bowie and others	7	1.9
Makeup design	6	1.7
Fan items (badges, concert posters, etc.)	4	1.1
Magazine/newspaper cover(s)	3	0.8
Graffiti	3	0.8
Miscellaneous	16	4.4
Total	361	100%



Figure 4. Image accompanying post by *myeyesexploded*, Example (1) (see Section 6.1)

Overall, therefore, the data are indicative of the different ways in which posters respond to Bowie's death, combining personal bereavement of a source of personal inspiration with a focus on the broader global loss of Bowie as an iconic musician. The quantitative analysis also shows a number of differences in usage patterns in celebrity mourning between Instagram and Twitter (cf. Goh and Lee 2011; Van den Bulck and Larsson 2019). This is an initial indication of how different communities on SNSs develop a "platform vernacular" that is based on "shared conventions and grammars of communication" (Gibbs et al. 2015).

6.1 Affective stance-taking in mourning David Bowie

In contrast to claims in some media outlets that the response to Bowie's death was 'not grief' (O'Neill 2016), the vast majority of posters appear to be emotionally affected by the death of Bowie and mourn his passing. Kübler-Ross and Kessler's (2005) linear model of grieving describes a range of feelings experienced during the mourning process, beginning with denial. Although the overall number of posts expressing denial is low (operationalised here as posts expressing disbelief via "I can't believe" or "hoax", i.e. 548 out of 109,930 posts in the dataset as a whole,

and 12 out of 361 posts in the random sample), they are nevertheless of interest as Bowie's death from cancer was largely unexpected (Black 2017).²

- (1) *myeyesexploded* I can't believe what I'm seeing, my heart is in shambles and I don't know what to do, David Bowie has died??? Please tell me this is some sick hoax. One of my favorite artist and human beings on this planet. I didn't even know he was this bad, I had no clue. I turn on social media and blam! Like a brick fucking wall. I have never thought I'd see this day. Honestly. Rip to the thin white duke. I can imagine some of you feel the same. Forever bowie. ❤️❤️ #thinwhiteduke #halloweenjack #bowie #davidbowie
- (2) [username] Okay my Dad just sent me a text saying Bowie died please tell me this a hoax or else I'm just gonna fucking break down #DavidBowie #Bowie
- (3) [username] I can't believe this 🤖 first Lemmy, now Bowie, I'm crushed 💔💔💔 I know people die everyday, but these two have been so influential in my life. Forever in my heart and on my mind. #rip #lemmy #motorhead #david-bowie #ziggystardust #bowie #sadness #badmagic #blackstar #cantbelieveit #punk #rocknroll #legends #music #revolutionary #aceofspades

The affective stance of disbelief is expressed through phrases such as “I can't believe this” in Examples (1) and (3), or the hope that the news is a hoax in (1) and (2). The stance of disbelief is also coupled with expressions of the intensity of shock through metaphor and simile (“my heart is in shambles” and “like a brick fucking wall” in (1), “I'm just gonna fucking break down” in (2), and “I'm crushed” in (3)). This reflects other research findings that fans experience a strong bond to celebrities that entails an initial refusal to acknowledge their passing (Courbet and Fourquet-Courbet 2014; Sanderson and Cheong 2010). In addition to expressing a subjective stance of shock and disbelief and thereby indexing an identity as a bereaved individual, the posters explicitly appeal to an online fan community (the initial half of the question-answer adjacency pair in “David Bowie has died???” as well as “Please tell me this is some sick hoax” in (1), and “please tell me this is a hoax” in (2). This positioning therefore goes beyond mere alignment with a community of grievors (also explicitly performed in “I can imagine some of you feel the same” in (1)) to appeals for support. Previous research has indicated that when grieving on social media, posters rarely address each other (Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013), but the relational work (Locher, Bolander,

2. All posts are rendered with original spelling, grammar and punctuation, including errors. With respect to ethical concerns regarding data taken from online sources (British Association for Applied Linguistics 2016), the posts have been anonymised, and traceable unique hashtags have been removed from the data. Images and user names are given only with explicit permission from the holders of the Instagram accounts in question.

and Höhn 2015) of requesting confirmation from a community here suggests that the expression of disbelief forms an exception, thus being more explicitly formulated as public communication within the community rather than merely expressing personal loss.

The reactions to Bowie's death also include expressions of anger, focusing particularly on the cause of Bowie's death, as shown in Examples (4) to (7) below:

- (4) [username] 🌈 ⚡ Heart Broken ⚡ Such a sad day. We lost @davidbowie. Rest in Peace 😭 Fuck YOU Cancer ! We lost a legend at the young age of 69. Such an inspiration. ⚡⚡⚡⚡⚡⚡⚡⚡⚡ #sweet1985 #rip #davidbowie #rockandroll #grunge #Bowie #night #love #fuckcancer #musician #idol #artist
- (5) [username] FUCK CANCER!!!! #Lemmy #Bowie #Rickman....
- (6) [username] Three #legends ... #fuckyoucancer #lemmy #bowie #alanrickman cancer
- (7) [username] Iman and David | She had his back til the end. I really hope she is surrounded by a strong support system. Cancer is such a mean disease. I hate what it takes from us. What a love they seemed to share. ❤️ #ripdavidbowie #bowie #lifeonmars #legend #superhuman #myedit #rip #davidandiman #alovestory #loveatfirstsight #fuckcancer

The affective stance of anger is primarily expressed via expletives such as “Fuck YOU Cancer !” in (4) (and similar in (5)), as well as through the first-person verb “I hate what it takes from us” and the attribution “such a mean disease” in (7). Both Examples (4) and (7) align the poster within a broad fan community via the use of inclusive first-person plural pronouns (“We lost @davidbowie” in (4) and “I hate what it takes from us” in (7)), while the emotive stance of anger is directed at cancer as the stance object, reflecting findings by Radford and Bloch (2012) that fans of celebrities direct their anger at the cause of death. The intensity of the emotion is also indicated by the repeated use of the “high voltage” emoji (or lightning bolt, with intertextual connotations of the 1973 *Aladdin Sane* album cover) in (4), and repeated exclamation marks and capitals in (5). As Döveling, Harju and Sommer (2018, 6) point out, “[i]ntensity of emotion is a constitutive feature of [an] identity-defining fan relation”. Furthermore, three of the four examples here are tagged either #fuckcancer or #fuckyoucancer, which as interpersonal hashtags (Zappavigna 2015, 279) allow a further evaluative meta-comment that takes an affective stance on the content of the post. Equally, in the context of the spate of celebrity deaths around the turn of 2015/2016, several of which, including that of actor Alan Rickman (21 February 1946–14 January 2016) and musician Lemmy (24 December 1945–28 December 2015), were cancer-related, the affective stance

of the hashtags may have a broader resonance across a number of different fan communities.

A further emotion expressed in the data is that of acceptance of Bowie's passing. Acceptance is expressed in a range of ways, the most frequent of which is to bid farewell to Bowie, particularly addressing a number of his many personae, as Examples (8) to (12) show:

- (8) [username] It took me two days to stop crying my heart out and accept reality as it is. The person that influenced my life so much passed away. Nothing left to loose, nothing left to say... Except one big "Thank you." 🧡 #bowie
- (9) [username] And so we bid thee farewell, Goblin King. Rest in Peace Mr. Bowie. May you be the stardust to inspire and create the hope and dreams of many more to come. #davidbowie #bowie #goblinking #labyrinth #restinpeace #rip #ripdavidbowie #fearmelovemedoasisay
- (10) [username] Goodbye to a genius from another dimension #bowie
- (11) [username] Good bye, Bowie! Good bye, starman! ✨ #davidbowie #starman #bowie #ripbowie #rip #graphic #graphicdesign #minimalism #art #illustration #illustrator #graphicart #design #desenho #dibujo #picame
- (12) [username] "The stars are never far away" Thank you for everything, you magnificent weirdo. You touched so many lives. #davidbowie #bowie #fanart #digitalart #rip #art #starman #missyou

A recurrent theme in the posts is that of Bowie's otherworldliness, as in "Goodbye to a genius from another dimension" in (10) or through the description of Bowie as a "starman" in (11). Indeed, such intertextual references, including citations of song lyrics as in (12) "The stars are never far away" from Bowie's 2013 single "The Stars (Are Out Tonight)", can also be seen as a means of indexing a fan identity among a community to whom the references are familiar. The posters also frequently refer to Bowie's legacy and influence as an artist, as in "May you be the stardust to inspire and create the hope and dreams of many more to come" in (9) and "You touched so many lives" in (12).

A further recurrent theme in the posts is gratitude towards Bowie as a source of inspiration as in (8), (9) and (12). Overall, the posts directly address the persona of Bowie, either through the pronoun *you* (or *thee* in (9)), or through "Goodbye" in (10) or "Farewell" in (9). The bidding of farewell and expressions of gratitude can be seen as expressions of "continuing bonds" (Silverman and Klass 1996; see also Bouc, Han, and Pennington 2016) with Bowie. The posts are thus illustrative of the importance for mourners to maintain a relationship with the deceased, particularly in terms of fan-celebrity interaction – here evidenced through dialog-

ical textual features – and of how a “process of meaning reconstruction” is important for that relationship to be productive after death (Bouc, Han, and Pennington 2016, 636).

A further recurrent emotion expressed in the posts is that of sadness, as shown in Examples (13) to (16) below.

- (13) [username] Lost a hero, very sad news. Legend. #davidbowie #davidbowieforever #bowie
- (14) [username] Sad news today #RIP #bowie #labrynth #goblinking #king #music #icon
- (15) [username] A very sad day in music history yesterday rip David Bowie ❤️ #davidbowie#lazarath#movie#rip #david#bowie
- (16) [username] Was very sad to hear about David Bowie this morning. The world has lost a wonderful and creative musician. #bowie

Sadness is a central element of grieving (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2005); nevertheless, here the posters express less a personal stance of subjectivity as a mourner, but instead characterise the “day” or “news” – the stance object – as sad, even in arguably rather clichéd terms. In (16) the poster themselves is the stance object (“Was very sad”), but there too the formulation is in the past tense rather than an expression of ongoing grief. These posts can thus be seen representing “standardised displays of solidarity symbols” that emerge following the initial expression of shock (Collins 2004, 53; see also Döveling, Harju, and Sommer 2018, 6), and show similarities with the somewhat formulaic expressions of sadness on Twitter documented by Cinque and Redmond (2019, 167–169).

Overall, the emotions expressed by the posters reflect grief work as outlined by Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005). The affective stance-taking is also indicative of some elements of grief work in the Dual Process Model (Stroebe and Schut 1999, 2010), bearing features of loss-oriented coping, such as rumination about the deceased’s persona and reflection on the circumstances surrounding Bowie’s death. The posts are also an initial indication of how the hashtag #bowie can form a “structure of feeling” (Papacharissi 2015, 118), in which the intensity of emotions, particularly those involved with mourning, is a constitutive element. Overall, they are suggestive of how the social sharing of emotions forms a key characteristic of digital affect cultures (Döveling, Harju, and Sommer 2018, 4).

6.2 Fan identities

This section addresses the question of how Instagram posters reacting to Bowie’s death position themselves as fans (or non-fans) within a mourning online com-

munity. One recurrent manner in which posters index a fan identity is to refer to Bowie as a source of personal inspiration, as illustrated by Examples (17) and (18) and Figures 5 and 6:

- (17) *milenamadethis* anyone with a creative fibre in their being can appreciate the greatness and glory that was David Bowie. Bowie was such a major influence throughout my teens, and even today. his music encouraged me to sing, to play my guitar, to draw, to paint. RIP, you're in heaven now 🎵🎨. #davidbowie #Bowie #drawing #art #sketch #watercolor #painting #artFidoBowie

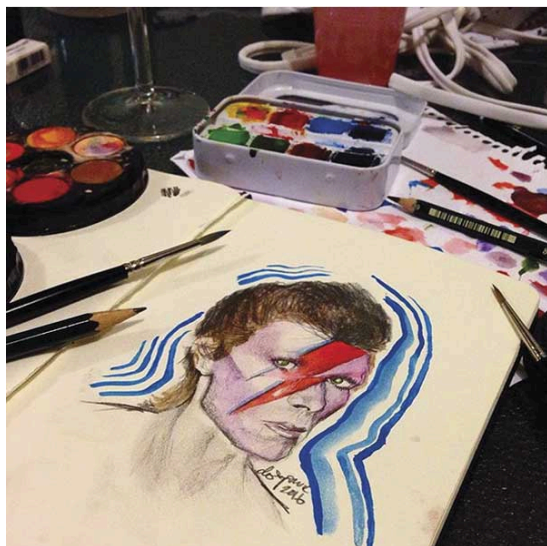


Figure 5. Image accompanying post by *milenamadethis*, Example (17)

- (18) *catherine_chant* Sad day today. As a teen and college student and well into my late 20s David #Bowie's music had a huge influence on me. I attempted to paint a picture of him back in '84.

Here the posters take an evaluative stance on Bowie's work as being influential particularly in formative periods in their lives, as in "Bowie was such a major influence throughout my teens, and even today" in (17) and "David #Bowie's music had a huge influence on me" in (18), simultaneously positioning themselves as creative individuals. They furthermore highlight their "long-term fidelity" as fans of Bowie (Hills 2016), thus also indexing an authentic fan identity. As Stevenson (2006, 157) points out, by doing so, fans create coherent "self-continuities, using Bowie's image and music as emotional resources".

Within such posts, the visual component can be seen to fulfil a number of functions. One is as a form of evidential stance-taking – "indicating the information source the speaker is relying on to make a claim" (Diewald, Kresic, and

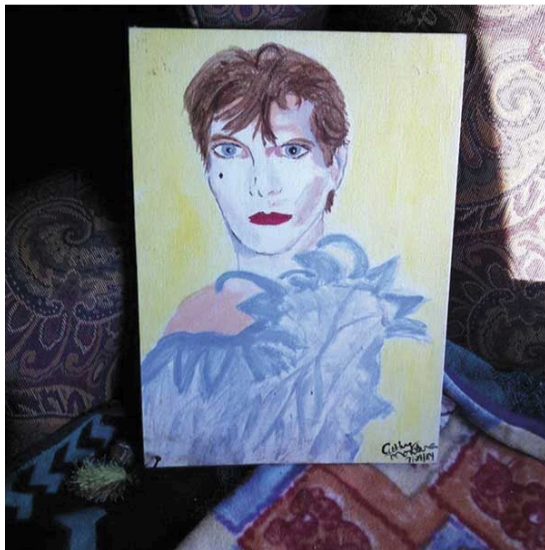


Figure 6. Image accompanying post by *catherine_chant*, Example (18)

Smirnova 2009, 190) – in that they index fandom – the images portray likenesses of Bowie – and artistry, as both fan art works in Figures 5 and 6 are signed and dated, with the year of 1984 legible in Figure 6 also bearing testimony to the long-term fidelity of the poster. Thus the visuality of these posts similarly indexes fan identification over time and a coherent self-narrative (Stevenson 2006). They also connote authenticity in that fan art “suffers less from cultural mediation and mass production” (Cinque and Redmond 2019, 25–26). Equally, Cinque and Redmond (2019, 98) highlight how cherished fan items form a central element of fan cultures that are ‘kept secret’ until occasions such as the celebrity’s death, when they are shared among the fan community for approval. In this sense such digital sharing of fan art is also reflective of the concept of multisociality (Hills 2016) in that the posts are embedded in broader discourses and hierarchies of authenticity negotiated among fans.

The notion of multisociality is further highlighted by one particular post in which the user thanks members of her personal network for supporting her in her grief over Bowie’s death, given in Example (19) and Figure 7:

- (19) *mllesvenskah* I just wanted to Thanks everyone who shown me there compassion over Bowie’s loss. My heart is full of tears & I still can’t believe it, so all your LOVE is really appreciated. Bowie Will always Be The most important Man in my Life, he has been My God & spiritual father for so many years. I’m inconsolable, tears don’t want to stop. #ripdavidbowie #davidjones #david-jones #Bowie



Figure 7. Image accompanying post by *mllesvenskah*, Example (19)

In terms of affective stance, the poster expresses gratitude to those who sent messages to her, while also expressing her ongoing disbelief (“I still can’t believe it”) and deep sadness at Bowie’s death (“My heart is full of tears”) in similar metaphorical terms to Examples (1) to (3) in Section 6.1. The poster also expresses a clear parasocial relationship to Bowie, citing him as “My God & spiritual father for so many years” and “The most important Man in my Life”, and is thus illustrative of elements of “parasocial grief” (DeGroot and Leith 2018). As Hills (2016) points out, the multisociality of online fandom does not exclude what may be seen as archetypal elements of the PSR, but embeds the fan-celebrity relationship in a triad of celebrity-fan-community relations.

The visual component of the post consists of a collage of tweets and messages sent to the poster by her personal network, many of which express support (“stay strong, I am so sorry for your loss”, “Si tu as besoin de quoi que ce soit, je suis là” [If there’s anything you need, I’m there for you]). Thus, on the one hand, the image is a further form of evidential stance-taking providing evidence of the poster’s acknowledged status as a high-profile fan, with the montage of messages as stance resources and the poster herself as the stance object. While evidence of “co-constructed empathy” (Döveling, Harju, and Sommer 2018, 6), it is also indicative of how the relationship with the celebrity often “constitut[es] a *secondary* aim, the primary one being one’s relationship with one’s surrounding social network” (Van Krieken 2012, 87, emphasis in original). The post thus also

illustrates the multisocial nature of celebrity mourning online, in that posters demonstrate a self-consciousness of their own “brand” within a community as a high-profile (grieving) fan (cf. Smith 2014).

A number of posts also index a “non-fan” identity, as shown in Examples (20) to (22):

- (20) *philwallaceartworks* I can't say that I am the biggest David Bowie fan in the world, nor can I say I know or like all of his songs. I can say however that the songs I love the most from him have moved me in a huge way and remain some of my favorite songs of all time. An amazing artist and inspiration. He will be greatly missed. #davidbowie #bowie #ziggystardust #aladdinsane #painting #watercolor

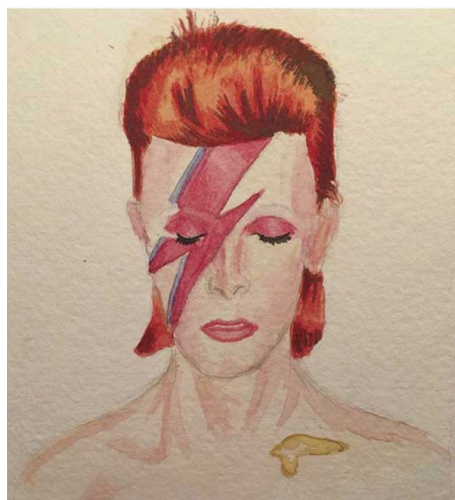


Figure 8. Image accompanying post by *philwallaceartworks*, Example (20)

- (21) *beardednyorkdad* #RIP #DavidBowie.. I cant confess to be the biggest #Bowie fan on the planet if I am honest and I can't say that he #Inspired me like every one else is saying because he didn't... But I can understand what he has done for music over the last 6 decades and I have no doubt that he is a #Legend in every meaning of the Word and he will be missed by many around the world.. Another amazing #Singer #Songwriter #Icon gone... So #RIP #Ziggy So I thought he deserved his own #Villainedit 🗡️👉👑👉🍻🍻
- (22) *nitaniel996* A little tribute from me. I can't say that I am a crazy #Bowie fan, but he was a significant, great, inspiring artist. As, for me personally, I will forever remember him as #jareth #thegoblinking because, I can't describe in words how much I adore #labyrinth, and Jareth stole my heart the moment I saw him. #jareththegoblinking #davidbowie #davidbowieforever #sketch #portrait #pencilsketch #art #drawing



Figure 9. Image accompanying post by *beardednyorkdad*, Example (21)

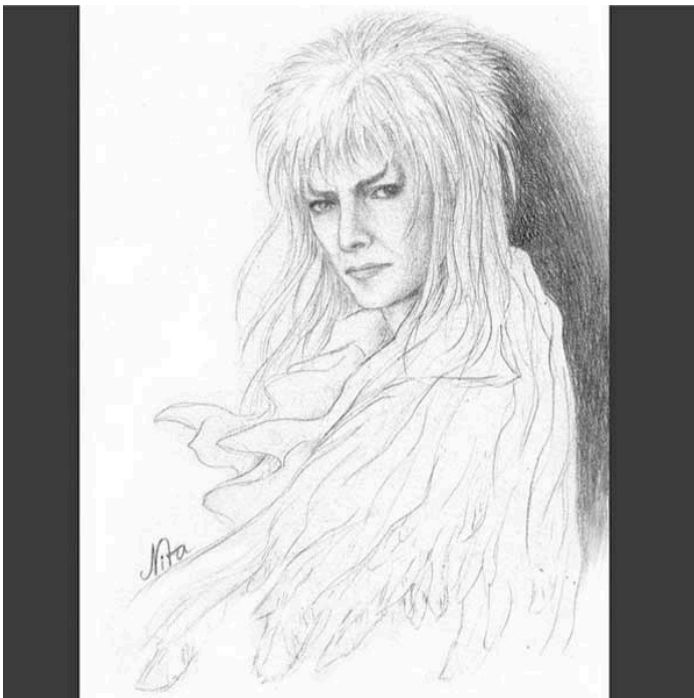


Figure 10. Image accompanying post by *nitaniel996*, Example (22)

In these examples the posters engage in dual stance-taking through text-image interaction. On the one hand, the posters explicitly disclaim a core fan identity as in (21) “I cant confess to be the biggest #Bowie fan on the planet if I am honest and I can’t say that he #Inspired me like every one else is saying because he didn’t...”, even disaligning themselves from a broader fan community via “like every one else is saying”. The stance expressed in the posts is also a mixture of affective stance (“the songs I love the most from him have moved me in a huge way” in (20) and “I can’t describe in words how much I adore #labyrinth” in (22)), and evaluative stance expressing a rational understanding of Bowie’s impact as in “I can understand what he has done for music over the last 6 decades and I have no doubt that he is a #Legend in every meaning of the Word” in (21). The posts thus demonstrate an awareness of hierarchies in fan communities (Hills 2002, 46–64). On the other hand, the images of fan art can be seen as stance resources that position the posters as creative individuals themselves and re-align them within a fan community as appreciative of Bowie’s influence. Due to context collapse on social media (Marwick and boyd 2011a, 123), posters face a range of audiences within which fandom can be renegotiated via both textual and visual means as shown here. These posts thus highlight how, following Marwick and boyd (2011a, 124), there no single benchmark of (fan) authenticity: instead understandings of authenticity are highly context-dependent and constantly renegotiated in online fan communities.

7. Conclusion

This article contributes to an understanding of “digital affect cultures” (Döveling, Harju, and Sommer 2018) in several ways. It shows how Instagram users converge online in expressing their grief at Bowie’s death around the hashtag #bowie in a “structure of feeling” (Papacharissi 2015, 118). A central component thereof is the expression of affective stance, whose dialogicality is constituted not through direct interaction with other users (cf. Du Bois 2007) but through the “ambient affiliation” of hashtags (Zappavigna 2015, 276). It thus provides further evidence for the claim that mediatised emotion is a key component of participation in online communities (Papacharissi 2015, 2016).

The results also highlight the importance of stance-taking as an integral part of constructing fan identities within an online community of mourners. Instagram users employ both text and images as resources for affective, evaluative and evidential stance-taking. Although the persona(e) of Bowie, his loss and legacy constitute the stance object in many of the posts, the study also shows how – in some cases – the object of stance-taking is in fact the mourners themselves,

be it their own subjectivity as grievors or their own status as authentic fans. It is thus indicative of new norms of appropriateness in online mourning in that the persona of the mourner rather than the mourned often takes centre-stage (Gibbs et al. 2015). It also provides evidence of the *multisociality* of fan identities in online communities (Hills 2016), showing that notions of authentic fandom are continually negotiated in collapsed contexts where different fandoms collide (Hills 2016, 475). This supports findings from a meta-analysis of studies of online grief (Wagner 2018), which suggests that there exists a “hierarchy of legitimacy” in influencing *who* has the right to express grief (and how) on SNSs. Overall, the study demonstrates the key affordance of the *multimodality* of Instagram posts as a resource that allows fans to express fan identities, to create devotional artefacts and to engage in ritualised digital mourning practices.

This article adds to an understanding of such issues, but, as Giaxoglou and Döveling (2018, 3) make clear, there is a need for continued research into how affect and emotion are mobilised across different digital communities. There is, for example, scope for more research that investigates the potential of multimodality as a stance-taking resource in digital affect cultures, particularly in the context of online grief. Equally, while this study of Instagram contributes to the overall picture of the cross-media commemoration of celebrity figures such as David Bowie (cf. Black 2017; Cinque and Redmond 2019; Van den Bulck and Larsson 2019), there remain unanswered questions as to the ways in which the perceived functions and norms of particular platforms lead to different emphases in digitally mediated forms of mourning. It is noteworthy, for example, that discussions of gender and sexuality are largely absent from the Instagram posts analysed here, which contrasts with Bowie’s function as a role model for fans in transcending gender boundaries as documented by Cinque and Redmond (2019, 51–57). While this is due in part to the selective focus of this study, there is potential for cross-platform studies that attempt to establish how apparent “biases” of digital media (cf. Reinecke and Trepte 2014) impact the mourning of celebrity figures.

Ultimately, however, this study cannot do complete justice to the grief and loss that fans of David Bowie felt at his unexpected death on 10 January 2016. As a chameleon-like figure with multiple on-stage personae, Bowie continually redefined what stardom meant (Bradley and Page 2017; Cinque and Redmond 2017, 2019; Van den Bulck and Larsson 2019), making him both an unattainable, ephemeral “starman” and a concrete source of inspiration for generations of fans. As Stillman (2014, 50) points out, due to the “fractal nature” of individuals, few mourners can claim to know people, especially celebrities, holistically. It is perhaps herein that lies the key affordance of social media as providing “a vehicle for reconstructing, rehabilitating, and maintaining a postmortem identity in col-

lective memory” (Martin 2010, 37), mitigating disenfranchised grief (Corr 1999) through shared perspectives on the deceased’s life. Social media such as Instagram thus allow users to mourn celebrities in new ways, helping them to know themselves, and to come to terms with the loss of an influential figure in their lives.

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