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# Grief hypejacking: Influencers, #ThoughtsAndPrayers, and the commodification of grief on Instagram

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## ABSTRACT

At the intersection of the attention economy of human vision on social media, the tyranny of machine vision on platform algorithms, and the emergence of hashtag publics as an immediate reaction to various global events, this article takes interest in the phenomenon of “grief hypejacking,” where users bandwagon on high-visibility hashtags and public tributes on Instagram to generate mourning content with the specific intention to misappropriate such temporarily trending public channels of collective grief for self-publicity. Against the backdrop of saturation fatigue and slacktivism through the rhetoric of #ThoughtsAndPrayers on social media, this study traces the behaviors of ordinary Instagram users and highly prolific influencers to understand how they hijack grief-related hashtags on Instagram through a variety of semiotic and textual strategies that problematizes digital mortality and the value of collective mourning. Specifically, the article uncovers an insidious shift from “public grieving” to “publicity grieving,” and brings together theories on micro-celebrity in celebrity studies, brandjacking in business studies, and grief publics in internet studies to examine the commodification of grief on social media.

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## Introduction

A terror attack takes place. A large protest breaks out. A natural disaster occurs. A prominent public figure dies. In the earliest minutes, while news networks are scrambling to give the event a name, ordinary users on Instagram offer a flurry of hashtagged tributes with text post prayers, stock photography, and artful homages. Soon, a primary hashtag and emblem for the event emerges: The yellow umbrella for #OccupyCentral (September 2014), the Monumen Nasional for #KamiTidakTakut (January 2016), the Eiffel Tower for #PorteOuverte (November 2015), silhouettes of the late Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew for #PrayForLKY (March 2015). Yet, alongside these condolers are Instagram users who seek to appropriate the attention current for self-publicity, flooding dedicated hashtags with scarcely relevant selfies—outfit of the day shots, wares for sale, and redirected links. In other words, at the confluence of online grieving, hashtag publics, and the attention economy, many Instagram users opportunistically participate in globally trending grieving hashtags by injecting content to redirect some of the attention to themselves,

whether to promote their social media profiles or to hawk wares.

Such practices are emblematic of influencer cultures (Abidin 2015), which grew with the explosive growth of microcelebrities (Senft 2008), that spur the documentation and subsequent commodification of ordinary, mundane recounts of everyday life on social media into a highly lucrative pursuit. Unlike traditional celebrities in the mainstream entertainment industries who may also have public presences on social media, social media influencers are perceived to be closer in status and experience to the everyman (Abidin 2018a). Their appeal lies in their very ability to encapsulate and amplify the common experiences of an ordinary citizen, which are then parlayed into opportunities to embed sponsored messages in the narrative of their lifestyles. As part of their packaging of lifestyle narratives for the vicarious consumption of their followers, commercially successful influencers often juxtapose the highlight reel of their recent accolades and privileged experiences alongside personal failure and grief, in a strategic bid to water down the growing status differentiation between themselves and

their followers. Such attempts to bridge this growing rift are essential for influencers to maintain the story of their humble grassroots origins, to the extent that personal failures and grief are not only documented but also heavily re-narrativised and hyper-visualized to solicit reciprocal empathy from their followers.

This article examines the growing trend of Instagram users who participate in global grieving events, how social media influencers have intensified and capitalized upon such grief publics, and the implications of the move from “public grieving”<sup>1</sup> to “publicity grieving.”<sup>2</sup> It does so through an ethnographic study of influencers in Singapore who bandwagoned on a series of public grief tributes—#Brussels and #BrusselsAttacks in Brussels (March 2016), #JakartaBlasts in Jakarta (January 2016), #PorteOuverte and #CharlieHedbo in Paris (January 2015, November 2015), #PrayforLKY in Singapore (March 2015), and #OccupyCentral in Hong Kong (September 2014)—to perform “grief hypejacking”—“the bandwagoning on high-visibility hashtags or public tributes where users wrestle to misappropriate highly public channels of collective grief for self-publicity” (Abidin 2018b, 169).

To flesh out the connection between public grieving, social media influencers, and the attention economy of Instagram, this article begins with a review of related work. Next, the methodology section details the processes of data collection and analysis. Thereafter, the “Commodification of grief” section lays out the visual repertoire of public grieving and publicity grieving on Instagram and provides exemplars of the ill consequences of grief hypejacking. The “Saturation fatigue” section offers some reflections from influencers on the calculated risks involved in performing grief hypejacking, as well as ethnographic data on everyday Instagram users’ blasé attitudes toward the slacktivism of transient mourning and superficial support within the #ThoughtsAndPrayers genre of hashtag publics. Finally, the article closes with offerings on how the phenomenon of grief hypejacking problematizes digital mortality in the age of humans and networks.

## Related work

### *Influencer as the everyman*

In one of the first studies of such internet celebrities, Senft (2008) uses the term “microcelebrity” for the practice wherein people attempt to gain popularity by employing digital media technologies, such as videos, blogs, and social media. Unlike traditional entertainment industry celebrities who are public icons with

large-scale followings, microcelebrity “is a state of being famous to a niche group of people” and involves the curation of a persona that feels “authentic” to readers (Marwick 2013, 114). Turner (2004, 4) argues that celebrity can be approached in three ways: as a *symptom* of a “cultural shift” that “privileges the momentary, the visual and the sensational over the enduring, the written, and the rational”; as an innate *quality* gifted to “extraordinary individuals”; and as a *product* of identity commodification in the industry through “representational processes employed by the media” in framing particular persons. However, microcelebrity emerged in the era of more communicative media formats such as social media. In this light and borrowing from Turner’s (2004, 4) symptom-quality-product trilogy, I posit that microcelebrity emerge as:

*A symptom* of our move from representational media to presentational media (Marshall 2010), where users have the increasing ability to negotiate and control their public personae online with “tools with which to become famous” (Bennett 2011, 179) such as social media;

*A quality* of everyday ordinariness situated at the intersection of the attention economy (Goldhaber 1997) and the “demotic turn,” where “lived experience of ‘the ordinary’” (Turner 2014, 92) appear to be authentic and dedicated representations of everyday life “as lived” despite actually being calculated productions of entertainment in the guise of democratic access; and

*A product* of “a wedding of consumer culture with democratic aspirations” (Marshall 1997, 9) through mechanisms such as product endorsements and sponsorships. (Dyer 1986, 2–3)

As such, many microcelebrities are able to sustain and organize their online fame to monetize their content. In so doing, they transit into another elite category of content creators who are driven by commerce and partake in microcelebrity full-time as a career. These are “influencers” who generate entire bodies of content based on their lifestyles, then go on to embed and astroturf<sup>3</sup> various sponsored messages using their daily lives as a canvas for advertorials (Abidin 2014). In other words, the social media output from influencers is more likely to: be self-referential to build up their own brand name; privilege sponsored advertorials interwoven into their lifestyle narratives rather than simply displaying their talents for free; and capitalize on global trends and viral flows in order to tap into parallel attention economies and accumulate more followers.

In Singapore, young female lifestyle influencers on Instagram tend to hold great multi-platform prominence and commercial success, judging by industry

reports (Statista 2018). While there are male influencers, the scene in Singapore predominantly features women aged between 15 and 35. Reflecting Singapore's ethnic make-up, the majority of them are Chinese. Those with a sizable viewership are able to monetize their presence on social media platforms by selling advertising space on their sites, by writing advertorials, and by taking on sponsorships of various brands and companies. Their strength is noted in the Infocomm Media Development Authority's (iDA) 2012 report, which lists "Reading blogs that are created by others" as the third most popular activity after "social networking" and "instant messaging" (iDA, 2012). As such, influencers have emerged as thought leaders and influential opinion leaders across the present teenage, adolescent, young adult, and working adult cohorts in Singapore, mostly pitching to readers between the ages of 13 and 35.

As briefly mentioned earlier, Turner (2014, 92) notes that media industries have enabled celebrity to be increasingly "ordinary." By this, he means that representations in the media are increasingly tending toward the "lived experience of 'the ordinary,'" such as in the television genres of confession talk shows. Drawing on research on reality TV, Grindstaff argues that the primary directive in these ordinary peoples' expression of their personal stories is performing "the money shot," or a display of human emotionality and volatility to the audience so as to signpost their performance as "real," "ordinary," and "authentic," emphasized visually through a corporeal embodiment of emotions (2002, 19–20). Likewise, some influencers have learnt to cut through the saturation of "picture perfection" in the industry by publicly discussing their personal or collective grief and mourning to channel impressions of empathy and vulnerability.

### **Hashtag hijacking**

Gilkerson and Berg (2018, 141) explain hashtag hijacking to be a "situation in which a hashtag... becomes commandeered by others in the community and is then instead used to mock, satirize, or negatively critique the original hashtag sponsor." The others terms for this phenomenon include "hashtag spoiling,"<sup>4</sup> "hashtag spamming," "hashjacking," and "trend stuffing" (Najafabadi and Domanski 2018). Existing research on hashtag hijacking has mostly focused on Twitter, perhaps due to the ease of data collection via scraping tools and ease of applying textual analysis methodologies to a corpus of tweets. On the other hand, scant research has investigated hashtag hijacking behavior on Instagram, perhaps due to the

difficulty of scraping data from the platform and its strictly closed API (Highfield and Leaver 2016), the highly visual nature of the posts, the non-chronological order of posts on hashtags, and the Explore page (see methodology section below).

Pang et al.'s (2018) study of hashtag hijacking of crowdsourced campaigns on Twitter found that the factor that exposed a hashtag campaign to hijacking the most was wrong timing. Therefore they emphasize: "it is important to consider the right timing to launch a Twitter campaign. This is closely linked to the results of the environment scan on public sentiment toward the organization and the climate it is operating in" (373). In a similar vein, Gilkerson and Berg (2018, 147) locate the vulnerability to hashtag hijacking in situational factors: "mixed dynamic of what could be considered a form of social media *schadenfreude*—and the news media's natural interest, driven by a motivation for increased readership, to aggressively cover major companies' embarrassing and often entertaining moments of failed marketing strategy."

"Brandjacking" is an umbrella term for behaviors wherein consumers appropriate, takeover, spam, or spoil a brand's original message. Essentially, here they usurp the message from marketing professionals, which has been characterized positively as a way to "enhance [the] evolution" of a campaign (Cova and Pace 2006, drawing on Wipperfurth 2005) and negatively as harming the brand with parodies, spoofs, etc. (Eichinger and Gudacker 2016). Often, such brandjacking occurs when users occupy the brand's dedicated hashtags on social media. In their study on hashtag hijacking of coffee brand Starbucks on Twitter, Luoma-aho et al. (2018) identified six types of hijackers: humorists, critics, complainers, transmitters, hecklers, and opportunists.

Grief hypejacking, the focus of this article, refers to a specific and more contentious form of attention hacking. It occurs when everyday users and influencers bandwagon on internationally trending social media hashtags to redirect attention to themselves or hawk wares. Such users engaging in (at least some degree of) collective effervescence, and their "spoiling" of hashtags is manifest in how insincere, spammy, and commercial a public grieving hashtag has become.

### **Grief publics**

Grief studies scholars have interrogated the shift toward grieving, mourning, and memorializing online (Walter 2015), through websites (Arthur 2009), message boards (Radford and Bloch 2012), discussion forums (Varga and Paulus 2014), and on social media

including MySpace (Brubaker et al. 2012), Facebook (Gibson 2015), Twitter (Sanderson and Cheong 2010), and Instagram (Gibbs et al. 2014; Leaver and Highfield 2018; Meese et al. 2015; Thimm and Nehls 2017). Specific to Instagram, scholars have examined visual norms at funerals (Leaver and Highfield 2018), the taking of #funeral selfies for Instagram (Meese et al. 2015), and mourning on Instagram by family members (Thimm and Nehls 2017). Gibson (2015, 339) observes that the mediation of networked social media and automation of news has changed the “temporality of mourning in a culture of speed,” where “the immediacy of communications about disasters, celebrity deaths and other mortality stories automatically brings mourning into mass and social media circulation with little or no delay.” This has altered our experience of death as users adapt social media functions such as the use of emotion reaction buttons, forwarding and tagging of content—leading to the construction of new “grief contexts.” Gibson terms such behaviors as “automated mourning” where a “self-propelling logic of user-generated media” compels people to “respond not just to events themselves but responses of responses” (341). Further, Gibson points to the conventionalized culture of collective mourning that becomes more evident when mediated through social media, where in “mass production of standardization that becomes obvious and highly visible as repetitious posts gather apace in real time” (342–343).

As such, unlike studies on the strength of social ties in mourning practices on Facebook (Pennington 2013, 2017), or on emerging norms of talking about birth and death on Instagram (Leaver and Highfield 2018), this article focuses on the participation of online grieving as a form of bandwagoning and “parasitic opportunism to promote self-image and self-interest” (Gibson 2015, 343). In their study of the discourse on ends of life—birth and death—on Instagram, Leaver and Highfield observe that Instagram mourning is largely framed by individual mourners on their personal accounts, where they “document their own loss and grief as part of a stream of personal imagery, most of which is unlikely to be related to death, rather than as a bespoke and specific arena for grieving or remembrance” (31), and where the mourners speak of “their experiences of loss rather than explicitly eulogizing the deceased individual” (41). Interestingly, grief hypejacking exemplifies such behavior. However, contrary to Leaver and Highfield’s finding, such behavior *does* in fact carve out “new spaces of collective mourning” (41), especially when grief hypejackers tap into international networks of viral hashtags to “game the system” and appear on

Instagram’s Discover and Explore pages, or appear as the top posts on a particular hashtag (Gillespie 2014). In other words, grief hypejackers labor over the portrayal and dissemination of their grief and online mourning “so as to be better recognized and distributed by” the platform’s algorithm (184). They can be considered a form of “grief tourist[s],” who are “users who have no real-life connection to the victim and who, according to the trolls [on Facebook memorial account pages], could not possibly be in mourning” but instead are “masquerading” their desire for attention as grief (Phillips 2011, n.p.).

## Methodology

The project discussed in this article (concluding in 2016) is a record of early grief cultures on Instagram. It draws on a larger research project on influencers in Singapore, which entailed digital participant observation of 190 influencers and related backend actors in various roles since mid-2010, and also archival research, web archaeology, semiotic analysis of images, and coding of text from social media posts. In addition, between December 2012 and July 2013, 173 interviews lasting between 10 minutes and 3 hours were conducted. Furthermore, between December 2011 and January 2015, there was continued interaction with other actors involved in the influencers’ social milieus, including their peers, backend production management, sponsors, and advertisers, and followers. The project also draws on time-specific projects (2014–2016) tracking the vernacular reactions to global grieving moments on Instagram in the initial post-event hours, i.e., #OccupyCentral (wishcrys.com 2014), #CharlieHedbo (wishcrys.com 2015a, 2015b), #PrayForLKY (wishcrys.com 2015c), #PorteOuvrte (wishcrys.com 2015d), #KimaTidakTakut (wishcrys.com 2016a), #Brussels (wishcrys.com 2016b). Sustained observations of influencers performing grief in the first study resonate with the trends of Instagram mourning examined in the second study.

Based on content analysis of global grieving moments on Instagram, the phenomenon of bandwagoning on public tributes and high visibility hashtags is investigated in a practice this article terms “grief hypejacking.” Screengrabs of social media posts on trending global grieving hashtags on Instagram were captured at regular intervals between one and seventy-two hours after the appearance and population of the hashtag, following prior methodological strategies by Meese et al. (2015, 1821–1822). However, unlike prior studies that relied on scraping posts (Leaver and Highfield 2018; Meese et al. 2015), this

study manually captured the earliest reactions on the hashtag as a way to gather a fair sampling of the diverse spread of vernacular sentiment on the hashtag during the infancy of its virality, before the Instagram algorithm registered the influx of viral posts and augmented the visibility of Instagram tributes by selectively ranking and amplifying some social media posts over others, thus rendering a majority of posts lost in the white noise. The capture of these early hours also enabled the author to record some of the sincere vernacular reactions from actual Instagram users before the intrusion of waves of automated spam from bot accounts hoping to “cash in” on the attention accorded to viral hashtags.

A grounded theory approach (Glaser 1978) was adopted for the thematic coding. Operationally, after data collection, Instagram images were sorted into open semiotic categories such as national flag, a national monument (e.g., Monumen Nasional in Indonesia, Eiffel Tower in France), a culturally-related cartoon (e.g., Tintin for Brussels, Charlie/Wally for France), art works (e.g., calligraphy, digital posters, comic strips, watercolor paintings), screengrabs (e.g., news from the media, other social media posts, instructions or guidelines from activists and aid providers), photographs (e.g., photographs from prior holidays, photographs at the current site with destruction pictured). Next, these open codes were subjected to axial coding to identify relationships within and across the categories. For instance, under the open code of art works during the #CharlieHedbo attacks, the pencil emerged as a dominant theme (because the victims were illustrators at a newspaper) and images were further sorted according to different degrees of symbolism: Some pencils were integrated into sketches of the Eiffel Tower, some were sketched as images of New York’s Twin Towers as a callback to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, some were remixed into paintings of Liberty Leading the People, and some were drawn as the imagery of a crucifix to honor the victims. In another open code of photographs during #OccupyCentral, photographs on the site of the protests were further sorted into axial categories including: Photographs of protest signs on cardboards (many of which eventually became memes on social media), bird’s eye view of the crowd (perhaps intended to mobilize more citizens to join in), flatlays of essential health and safety equipment recommend before entering the site such as masks and water (which were circulated as advisory instructions for protesters), downtime of uniformed service and police personnel (captured resting on the ground overnight across the street from protesters who were also taking

a respite), protest selfies (by locals and foreigners, in different facial expressions such as pain, fatigue, or smiles), etc.

Finally, all open codes were subjected to substantive coding where discrete categories across the various concepts and codes were cross-referenced and compared to generate the visual repertoires below. At this stage, social media posts were also sorted into those produced by ordinary social media users and by influencers, judging by standard influencer status-signaling metrics such as the number of likes and comments accumulated on a post, and the follower-to-following ratio of specific Instagram accounts. At this stage, it further emerged for instance that the axial code of “on site protest selfies” when corroborated against the captions revealed categories of protesters including: Tourists who specifically went on site for an opportunistic photo, locals who used their captions to promote their wares or social media accounts, protesters who were seeking to normalize their grievance through accessible images to play down any sentiment of fear constructed by the press, or carefully stylized selfies with inspirational Hallmark-esque quotes meant to convey some collective support without diluting the brand image of the Instagram poster’s account.

### Commodification of grief

Following the inductive coding process above, this section presents the visual register of public grieving and publicity grieving based on the sample of Instagram posts studied and later corroborated with interviews of selected influencers.

#### Public grieving

The visual register of “public grieving” comprises of:

- An *iconic visual symbol with cultural significance to the grief event*, such as a national landmark or an instrument signifying victims or perpetrators. These may be illustrations, photographs, or various art forms (e.g. the Eiffel Tower for #PorteOuverte, the pencil for #CharlieHedbo, silhouettes of Mr. Lee Kuan Yew for #PrayForLKY, national flag for #KimaTidakTakut)
- An *iconic image/scene from “the ground” that captures the essence of the movement*, such as a prominent victim or perpetrator photographed in action, or a group of actors performing a powerful gesture (e.g. hands raised in surrender)

for #OccupyCentral, snaking queues to pay last respects for #PrayForLKY).

- *Emblems borrowed from a lexicon of political statements* and redesigned for the event (e.g. the yellow ribbon for #OccupyCentral, the peace symbol incorporating Monumen Nasional for #KimaTidakTakut)
- “#PrayForX” in various artistic fonts and illustrations, usually printed on a plain colored background or superimposed onto a background image of iconic landmarks, scenes, or scenery.
- “Keep Calm and X” advice in various fonts and illustrations, usually appealing to the power (e.g. Keep Calm and Pray for Paris) of prayer, or an often risky and ill-timed comedic relief (e.g. Keep Calm and Eat Baguettes).
- *Emblems borrowed from popular culture and repurposed* for the event (e.g. Where’s Charlie comic for #CharlieHedbo, Guy Fawkes mask for #OccupyCentral).
- *Images of event-specific paraphernalia* peddled to users (e.g. yellow ribbons for #OccupyCentral, silhouette artwork for #PrayForLKY).
- *Screeengrabs of event-related news updates*, usually cross-posted from other social media such as Twitter and Facebook, or mainstream television.

While the elements of “grief esthetic” on Instagram have emerged as vernacular norms of acceptable “public grieving” visibility practices, some users tap into this global current of attention in less palatable ways. In “public grieving,” users sincerely partake in a global expression, narrative, and dialogue of a grief event through the use of high visibility trending hashtags. In “publicity grieving,” users opportunistically harness the attention currency of high visibility trending hashtags to promote their brand and wares.

### Publicity grieving

The visual register of “publicity grieving” comprises of:

- *Selfies and close-ups of dramatic crying or concentrated prayer in action*, wherein the user is otherwise seemingly primed for the camera with carefully done hair and make-up. Followers have sarcastically called this out as “glam[orous] crying” or “fake crying.”
- *Outfit Of The Day or #OOTD images*, in which the user poses for the camera in fashionable clothing awkwardly juxtaposed against an

unrelated expression of grief and consolation in the caption. Here, it is clear that what is featured is the outfit and self-as-brand. This misalignment of image and caption has been called out as “attention whoring.”

- *Photographs of the user at a landmark* in the place where the grief event occurred, usually from a past visit. Users often overstate a personal connection to the event by emphasizing how close it felt temporally (e.g. “it’s been two years but it feels just like yesterday”), how geographically close they had been to the site the grief event occurred (e.g. “I can’t believe we stayed just three blocks from this place”), what (arbitrary) emotional ties they had with the site (e.g. “I have always enjoyed the country”), and how they felt the same vulnerability as that of current victims and grievors (e.g. “if this happened when I was there, I could have died”). Such practices have been called out as “riding a trend” and “narcissistic.”
- *Photographs of the landmark* in the place where the grief event occurred, usually copied and reposted from other sources—users re-gram photographs taken by (semi-)professional photographers on Flickr, Pinterest, or Instagram and insert captions with expressions of grief clouded in the rhetoric of authenticating practices. These authenticating practices serve to convey a user’s personal connection to the place, which they never visited, through romanticizing a connection (e.g. “everyone’s recent tributes from their travels made me wish I had visited before the incident”), aspirational travel plans (e.g. “I’ve always wanted to visit this place”), and superimposed empathy (e.g. “I can’t imagine if this happened to my own country”).
- *Overt advertisements of products and services on offer*, usually accompanied by redirected URLs, user handles, or sponsored hashtags in the caption. These spam-like posts are the most cluttering of the “publicity grieving” practices, and are least used by influencers and celebrities who fervently avoid creating an impression of engaging in a “hard sell” (Abidin and Ots 2015).

### Grief hypejacking gone wrong

Former president of Singapore, Mr. S.R. Nathan, died on August 22, 2016. The hashtag #RIPSRNathan trended on Twitter in the days after his death with

many teenagers taking to social media to share their personal and collective social memories of the only president they knew of during their schooling years; Mr. SR Nathan was the president of Singapore for eight years between 1999 and 2011.

However, as the hashtag gained momentum across social media and some Tweets attained short-lived virality through numerous Retweets and Favorites, more teenagers jumped on the bandwagon of grief tributes without sincerity and with factual inaccuracy. In competing to publish the most prominent and viral tributes, many teenagers resorted to romanticized superlatives, hyperbolic tributes, and orchestrated grief in 140 characters or less. For instance, some young Tweeters dramatized the death by proclaiming that being an Indian man, the late president was the “first minority race” president in Singapore, when in fact the very first president in Singapore was also a minority race man—Tun Haji Yusof bin Ishak, who served between 1965 and 1970. Other young Tweeters noted that they now felt “lost,” “without direction,” “empty,” “lonely,” or that “life will never be the same” because the person behind the presidential portrait they once saw daily at school was now dead. Still other young Tweeters, clearly ignorant of current affairs yet desiring to bandwagon on viral trends, exclaimed their shock at imagined political unrest. For instance, one Tweet read #RIPSRNATHAN. Whose gonna be the next president? So sad.”—despite the fact that Mr. Tony Tan Keng Yam was the president at the time of the death, serving from 2011 to 2017.

Although such misplaced grief hypejacks are common, they gain notoriety when executed by public figures. In the aftermath of the November 15 Paris attacks, Member of Parliament (MP) Baey Yam Keng posted a picture on Instagram of himself with arms akimbo next to the Eiffel Tower against a clear blue sky, with the following caption:

I was in Paris in May as part of President Tony Tan’s state visit delegation. It is such a beautiful city with a rich culture.

The recent multiple attacks by gunmen and perpetrators with explosives resulted in many innocent lives lost. My heart goes out to those who have lost their loved ones.

Such planned acts are mindless but very real. This is a common security challenge that many countries, including Singapore, face in the world today. There is a need for constant vigilance and no place for complacency.

#prayersforParis #peace.<sup>5</sup>

Many Instagram users publicly speculated that MP Baey’s photograph was edited such that he was superimposed next to the Eiffel Tower, while others

suspected that he had photoshopped the image to make himself appear heroic—he was, after all, standing with arms akimbo, looking pensively into the distance, with a neat hairdo and all-black outfit. As the comments accumulated, MP Baey responded in the image’s comment thread that his photograph was in fact genuine:

In case some people are wondering, this photo was taken when I was in Paris in May. It is not a photoshop.☺

However, the negative publicity had already spread beyond control. Popular media outlets began polling internet users on the veracity of the photograph (Lay 2015a). On his official Facebook account which cross-posts photographs from Instagram, Facebook users criticized MP Baey’s tribute with comments (Yeo 2015) such as:

“Inappropriate picture Sir”

“Very very inappropriate you narcissistic politician”

“*Alamak* [colloquial exclamation that loosely translates to “oh my goodness”]. Speech politically right. Picture *macam* [colloquial expression that loosely translates to “resembles”] model lah.”

Several internet users began poking fun of MP Baey, turning his photograph into a “Where is Baey?” meme in the vein of the popular cartoon character “Where is Wally?.” In various memes widely disseminated on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, various internet forums, and popular press outlets, MP Baey was photoshopped posing next to other international landmarks such as the Leaning Tower of Pisa (Italy), Big Ben (England), Kremlin (Russia), and Petronas Twin Towers (Malaysia) (Lay 2015b). In other memes, MP Baey was photoshopped next to the Eye of Sauron from the movie trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, among polar bears in the Arctic, wearing the official *sarong kebaya* uniform of Singapore Airlines, donning Wally’s iconic red hat, and draped with a red superhero cape floating in the wind (Lay 2015b). The message was clear: MP Baey was pretentious for posting a tribute that drew attention to himself, and opportunistic for capitalizing on a global grieving event to draw publicity for his political performance.

During this spectacle, some influencers felt that MP Baey was attempting a move usually enacted by their peers in the industry, albeit without their digital vernacular and publicity savvy.<sup>6</sup> On the comment thread of MP Baey’s Facebook version of the Instagram post, popular influencer Hirzi of the YouTube duo

MunahHirzi was among the first internet personalities to comment publicly on the matter. He posted a photoshopped image of himself replacing MP Baey in the original photo, dressed in all white in contrast to MP Baey's all black outfit, perhaps with a subtle jab at his politics—an all-white attire is the dress of the political party from which MP Baey hails, the People's Action Party. Hirzi captioned his photo as a responsive dialogue to MP Baey: "I went during Spring. It was a little bit cloudier ... When did you go? Follow back? #Follow4Follow."

Hirzi's jesting was in actuality a retort: Firstly, "When did you go?" accords with the third trope of grief hypejacking presented earlier, wherein tribute posters compete with each other for temporal proximity to the tragedy; Secondly, "Follow back?" references a common attention-garnering practice among influencers and followers who grief hypejack, by commenting on viral photos in order to promote their own handles and Instagram accounts to other commenters; and finally, #Follow4Follow intentionally patterns after MP Baey's use of two viral hashtags at the time of the incident, #prayersforParis and "#peace," intended to increase the publicity of one's Instagram post through high traffic channels. Through his humorous but critical banter, Hirzi highlighted the distaste of grief hypejacking by translating MP Baey's long, sophisticated caption into a distilled three-liner popular among the target demographic of users who engage in "Instagram speak."

In response to the backlash, MP Baey posted a second Instagram tribute, this time with the photograph of the Eiffel Tower and its surrounding landscape without himself in the frame (Yeo 2015). His caption read:

The last photo I posted had attracted much attention. I regret that it has distracted the message on the global challenges we face today... I had wanted to provide a personal connection to my thoughts beyond text and decided to re-post a photo I uploaded then. The photo was taken with a timer when I was having a rest during my morning run and I was able to chance upon this interesting perspective with the Eiffel Tower. I appreciate the frank comments by many and I do respect the views expressed. On hindsight, I could have been more mindful about the choice of photo....

It is unclear if MP Baey's retraction and apology soothed public displeasure and viral hate, as memes continued to proliferate for the next few days. However, the natural rhythm of social media publics and attention spans slowly weeded the incident from internet headlines, and MP Baey was slowly but surely

reinstated as the Member of Parliament most celebrated for his social media and Instagram savvy (Ang 2015).

## Saturation fatigue

This section offers some reflections based on influencers' thoughts on the calculated risks they take when performing grief hypejacking, and based on the ethnographic data on everyday Instagram users' blasé attitudes toward the slacktivism practices of transient mourning and superficial support within the #ThoughtsAndPrayers trend of hashtag publics through memes.

## Calculated risks/web amnesia

MP Baey recovered from his grief hypejacking faux pas as the newsworthiness of incident was quickly replaced by newer, more enticing, and more controversial spectacles in a constant stream of news flows. For the influencers, this consideration was not a happy coincidence or mere afterthought, but a strategic calculation whenever they dabble with negative attention strategies that could potentially backfire, such as grief hypejacking. In personal interviews, influencers weighed in on vulnerability-commodification rituals as effective though contentious attention strategies. Many agreed that "it is very important to stay relevant," that they "want to remain talked about," and that they want to "differentiate" themselves from others. Yet, they also value the ability to dissociate themselves from deviance over time. While not always explicitly expressed, many influencers make references to the sentiment of "forgetting," or what I term "web amnesia."

While the internet "never forgets" due to its data retention capacity (Rosen 2011), users can experience "web amnesia" in the age of abundant data (Goldhaber 1997). In this regard, three vernacular understandings of web amnesia emerge from the present analysis: Firstly, given the level of activity on social media, grief commodification practices easily lose the capacity to sustain attention. Secondly, there are typically several simultaneous grief commodification trends in any given period of time, colliding and appealing to different segments of internet users—these practices often chance into national and regional virality by timing or plain luck. Finally, new genres of self-shaming practices are proliferating as influencers pioneer new forms of clickbait (Blom and Hansen 2015). In effect, grief commodification practices

constantly shift moral boundaries of mores and taboo as followers become desensitized to old scandals. While spectacular incidents of grief hypejacking by influencers and public figures may be eroded in public memory as time wears on, the steady undercurrent of grief tributes, from millions of social media users across various platforms and between numerous global grieving events, may serve to dilute public consciousness and interest in global tragedies altogether.

### #ThoughtsAndPrayers

To understand how ordinary users on Instagram were responding to the onslaught of #PrayForX tributes and #ThoughtsAndPrayers public and publicity grieving practices, the content posted on the “#ThoughtsAndPrayers hours rayers” hashtag on Instagram for a ten-day period between 10 July 2016 and 19 July 2016 was analyzed. Five notable tropes emerged signifying different expressions of saturation fatigue toward continuous mass public grieving on social media:

Firstly, saturation fatigue regarding the newest onslaught of passive “internet solidarity” and satirical remixes of #ThoughtsAndPrayers were displayed in brilliant comics. One example is a comic (Figure 1) featuring dialogue between two men, one who is drowning and the other idling on the pier:

In another sketch (Figure 2), a man in a business suit is seen watering his pot of flowers with a hose while watching an old man burn in flames. His speech bubble reads: “My thoughts and prayers are with you.” Both these comics imply that internet users who



Figure 1. A four-panel #ThoughtsAndPrayers comic that made the rounds on Instagram.



Figure 2. A popular #ThoughtsAndPrayers sketch that went viral on Instagram.

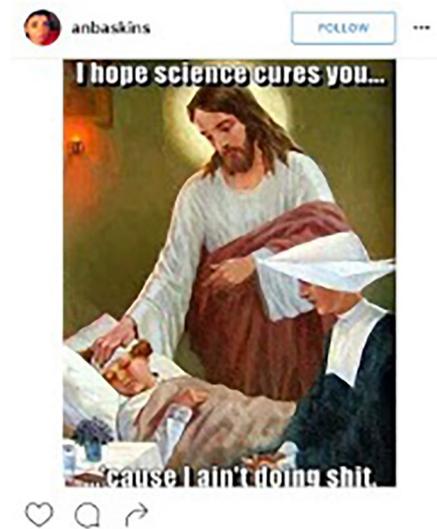


Figure 3. A popular Instagram macros meme edited to deliver a punchline from “God.”

simply publish posts in the genre of “thoughts and prayers” on social media are inactive, ineffective, and inefficient in helping to alleviate the problem:

Secondly, at times, users adopted the persona of a higher power to deliver angry or humorous responses. One popular illustration depicts Jesus looking down at a patient in bed, saying “I hope science cures you ... cause I ain’t doing shit.” (Figure 3). In a screenshot from a prolific Twitter account, God is portrayed as saying: “Fuck thoughts and prayers, get off your lazy ass and help someone out.”

Thirdly, some users adopted the #firstworldproblems approach to expose the casualness and frivolity with which people were jumping on the #ThoughtsAndPrayers



**Figure 4.** A screengrab of a text conversation which has integrated the #ThoughtsAndPrayers phrase to highlight the mundaneness of the sentiment.

bandwagon. In one post, an image of dinosaurs is accompanied with the text: “RIP the dinosaurs. Can’t believe it’s 65 million years already. Always in my thoughts.” In another post an image of a toilet bowl with a faulty seat is captioned in the style of a text message that reads: “I have a new toilet. Please have thoughts and prayers for my old one. It’s been through hell and it’s sad that it passed.” (Figure 4).

Fourthly, other users simply displayed their outright rejection of users sprouting #ThoughtsAndPrayers on social media, alluding to a displaced sense of pseudo-activism, and inflated impression of aid, and a general ineffectiveness despite participation in a highly visible and populist activity that still promotes passive solidarity from a distance. These include pictures of cats with overlay text that read: “I named my cats Thoughts and Prayers because they are useless.”; Space invaders icons with text spelt out in pixels: “HUMANS SUCK.”; and an image of garbage truck parked in the middle of a landfill of trash, with the truck labeled “THOUGHTS & PRAYERS” (Figure 5).

Finally, more astute Instagram users turn their focus on state governance and leadership, and the cyclic routine of public grieving. One particularly viral image is that of a four-stage cycle comprising: Terror attack → #PrayFor\_\_\_\_\_ → Change Facebook Profile pic to overlay of flag → Life goes back to normal → Terror attack (Figure 6).

What initially began as influencers and public figures riding on the attention currents of high profile



**Figure 5.** A photograph edited to display the #ThoughtsAndPrayers hashtag on a garbage truck.



**Figure 6.** A flowchart highlighting the futility of the #PrayForX type of online campaigns that went viral on Instagram.

global grieving events for self-publicity, has gradually given way to a steady current of publicity seeking tributes by masses of people, usually across long periods of times, for numerous successive events. Although enacted by ordinary users with insignificant follower counts, this continuous rhythm of public(ity) grieving appears to be more salient than the spectacular grief hypejacks by prominent public figures in desensitizing users to grief, and wearing thin their concern and interest in participating as stakeholders of political decisions and aid during traumatic events.

### Grief hypejacking and digital mortality

This article began with an anthropological inquiry into how Instagram users responded to global grieving events by investing their visual register of grief

esthetics. It focused on how the affordances and cultural norms of Instagram use, the value system of microcelebritydom, and influencers' taste choices, constitute a visual technology in the attention economy. It then mapped this study onto a similar but distinct context of publicity grieving, where Instagram visual registers privileged the opportunistic harnessing of high visibility trending hashtags to promote brand and wares, eventually culminating in a practice the article termed grief hypejacking. Public grieving on Instagram has evolved into competitive publicity grieving, peaked as opportunistic grief hypejacking, and recalibrated into the stasis of a constant acknowledgement and celebration of grief. By becoming memeified as #ThoughtsAndPrayers and institutionalized as a bona fide genre of social media posts, public grieving has transitioned into a passive participatory culture divorced from sincerity and genuine emotions. The continuous and repetitive cycles of public grieving through tribute hashtags have become routine in social media cultures, and perhaps have rendered young users more familiar with and more desensitized to grief and death en masse. While there are now more ways to remember the dead, they are also fast becoming forgotten, victim to the pace of online trends.

In the vein of Bray's technological optimism (2008), perhaps the initial forays into public grieving did accord users the capacity to demonstrate empathy, construct solidarity, and exchange transient intimacies in an ad hoc network of consolation and care centered on a key viral hashtag. However, in their later pursuit of social capital on Instagram—most clearly demarcated by the number of likes, positive comments, and re-gram one accumulates—many users' intimate disclosures evolved into a “grief Olympics,” wherein hurt and sorrow are exaggeratedly performed discursively and photographically in order to compete for the attention and affection of other users by soliciting reciprocal empathy. In other words, networks of intimacy have transited into networks of celebrity when the focus of grief-sharing and grief-posting becomes self-promotion. It seems that the tyranny of the algorithm—opaque in mechanisms, governed by inorganic computer intelligence, affirmed by the surrender to big data, and propagated by millions on Instagram users who attempt to “game” the platform by performing guesswork and visibility labor in order to formulate popular posts—supersedes initial intentions of intimate disclosures and perpetuates internet folklore on how to generate virality and populism. While there are now more ways to practice memorialization online, these options and opportunities have also been

hijacked as new avenues for generating online reputation and fame, as mourning becomes hyper-performative, and the dead become enshrined in digital discourses only to serve as a backdrop for the living to polish their online identities.

Yet, one must take care to remember that behind every viral hashtag of global grieving events lie death and the dead. While “humans have remains that are other than physical, generated within and supported by new information communication technologies” (Graham and Montoya 2015, 1), “these remains are variously attended to or ignored” (Graham and Montoya 2015, 2). Just as not every global grieving hashtag is equally gamed, not every global grieving event is deemed to have the potential to generate equal social and cultural capital when enticing users' investment of visibility labor and microcelebrity strategies. For instance, #PrayForParis, trended more significantly among Singaporean influencers and followers than #PrayForJakarta, which is curious considering that Jakarta is geographically and culturally more proximate to Singapore, and that many Singaporeans are likely descendants of forefathers from Indonesia. Similarly, tributes to Brussels outnumbered those for Hong Kong. There seems to be a pattern of selective remembering and forgetting (Graham and Montoya 2015), and grieving and gamifying, among users partaking in grief hypejacking—a colonial hangover where the exotica of faraway, foreign Europe is more enticing than the more familiar of one's backyard, and, correspondingly, the grieving events in the former providing of greater opportunities for generating cultural capital than the later via online mourning. This trend echoes Butler's (2015, 2016) observation that some lives seem more “grievable” than others, especially when considered against the backdrop of racism and media portrayals of different peoples. More recently, *Al Jazeera* journalist Nelen Fernandez (2019) pointed out that global public grief over the Notre Dame fires in April 2019 wherein no lives were lost had drawn much more worldwide attention, outpouring of grief, and financial support and intervention than the ongoing mass deaths occurring in the conflict zones of Gaza and Yemen. Algorithmic mourning has reiterated such global racism and power asymmetries, amplifying the impact of some deaths while neglecting others altogether.

In the economy of grief hypejacking, such “enduring digital remains of humans” (Graham and Montoya 2015, 1) are indeed “malleable and problematic,” in that they seem to imply hierarchies of value when assessing the loss of human lives. This is not governed by the “unnaturalness” or “massiveness” of a death

event as the authors suggest, but rather, measured by the exotica that constitutes one's privileged access to the site when reminiscing temporal, romantic, or nostalgic proximity, as well as one's abiding taste and cultural discrimination when selectively gaming attention currents for self-promotion. In this sense, feelings toward death, loss, and finality can be "can be transversed, reached beyond, and selectively rewritten and adjusted, not just for the famous few, but for the many" (Graham and Montoya 2015, 7). In the case of grief hypejacking, "the end" of someone's life could potentially be capitalized upon to compose the beginning of someone else's life of virality and microcelebrity. Thus, while "the end" is indeed "selectively rewritten and adjusted" (Graham and Montoya 2015, 7), it is rescripted not for the dead whose lives we mourn but for the living who harness the attention value of mourning the dead. This is underscored by the authenticating practices observed in publicity grieving tropes, wherein users feel the need to articulate their proximity and "right to grief," in part to accrue online validation, in part to preemptively safeguard themselves against accusations of insincerity or irrelevance.

Perhaps the generous saving grace is that the trope of viral hashtags around global grieving events now also function as news flashes for young people who rely on social media for information and knowledge of current affairs. Such technologies can "provid[e] information and entertainment and in facilitation communication and transactions" (Lim 2008, 199). This is especially so when the distinction between entertainment and education is increasingly collapsing in a saturated attention economy. However, the potential for viral Instagram posts to be accurate and timely news flashes is likely overwhelmed by the hegemony of visual registers and competitive esthetic taste displays on Instagram, wherein the primary directive is to curate a beautiful and attractive feed of photographs rather than to inform users of current affairs.

Between gamifying algorithms through interventions into the aesthetics of publicity grieving and grief tributes and the selective mourning of the dead, grief hypejacking finds itself at the intersection of "structures of feeling and political economy" where the "micro- and macro-politics of technology" (Bray 2008, 163) illuminate the hierarchical value of human lives through a post-death network of virality and celebritydom. Following from Gibson's (2015) provocations of "automated mourning," ordinary users and influencers who are vying to have their performative grief and mourning witnessed are now entangled in the practice of an "algorithmic mourning" having to be

visible at once to both the machine eye and the human eye: Grief hypejacking demonstrates the ability of such opportunistic users as literate of both the machine eye of Instagram's sorting mechanisms and the human eye of audience's social media preferences and practices. Further, such uses of mediated networks to partake in a collective effervescence intended to exploit the transient co-presence of strangers in an online space challenges prior works of online mourning where users sincerely gather for self-expression en masse (Leaver and Highfield 2018) or to seek out community (Pennington 2013, 2017). Death has truly been reevaluated with new market value in the era of social media where we are entangled with the commodification of grief.

## Notes

1. Public grieving occurs when "users sincerely partake in a global expression, narrative, and dialogue of a grief event through the use of high-visibility trending hashtags or by partaking in highly visible networks of grief" (Abidin 2018a, 169).
2. Publicity grieving occurs when "users opportunistically harness the attention currency of high-visibility trending hashtags or public tributes to promote their (self-) brand or wares" (Abidin 2018a, 169).
3. Coordinated action that is stealthily disguised to give the impression of organic, unsolicited, widespread sentiment.
4. See Najafabadi (2017) for a study on intentional spoilage of hashtags meant for political discussion – nuclear negotiations with Iran – to deflect public attention on important issues.
5. Screenshot in Lay (2015b).
6. The grief hypejacking in which influencers participate, while seemingly easy to emulate, actually requires a nuanced understanding of boundary markers and subversive play in order to remain under the radar, avoiding public backlash.

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