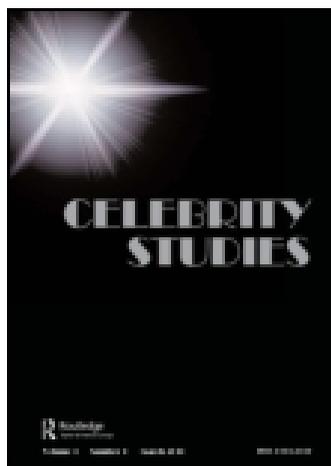


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When a celebrity dies ... Social identity, uses of social media, and the mourning process among fans: the case of Michael Jackson

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The present qualitative survey studies fans' reactions to the death of Michael Jackson (MJ). We put forward the hypothesis that the time of a celebrity's death is when the researcher can most fully understand certain psychological and social functions of the celebrity in question. The results highlight that the relationship between fans and celebrities can be mediated by a third person, a loved one who is part of the entourage of the fan. The fan is emotionally attached to this person. We explain how the use of interpersonal communications and social media operate differently depending on whether the fan has based the construction of their identity on the image of MJ (which is of course a complex process) or on their position as a member of the social group of fans. Fans whose identity was based on MJ need to rearrange their model of personal identity. The results underline five functions of social media in the mourning process. They also show that prolonged use of social media could be associated with a slower resolution of the fans' mourning process. These results are aimed at gaining a better understanding of the relationships between celebrities and their fans, especially parasocial interactions and the role played by celebrities in the construction of fan identity.

Keywords: social media; fans; social identity; parasocial interactions; mourning process

Many people feel as though they are very close to celebrities or that they know them. Although they may form intense socio-affective relationships with famous people, these are only established in one direction. Horton and Wohl (1956) define these relationships as 'parasocial interactions' (PSI; see Giles 2002). Fans can develop a real love for a celebrity (Steuer 2011), or even a pathological relationship with them (Maltby *et al.* 2006), as they would during interpersonal interactions. Although defined as a one-sided, imaginary relationship, PSI can be very influential in terms of audience members' identities, lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviour beyond the viewing situation. Thus, PSI with the celebrity can be felt as particularly intense.

Three aspects characterise fans' motivations and involvement (Havitz and Dimanche 1997): first, their strong attraction to the celebrity and what they do (e.g. the singer and their music) – that is, the high level of perceived importance and the great pleasure associated with the activity (listening to their music); second, the social identity it gives to the fan – that is, the possibility of sharing information relating to the self with others, and increasing self-esteem; and third, the centrality of the fan status. This status provides a

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particular lifestyle and allows fans to meet other people who are equally passionate. The Internet and social media (e.g. Facebook) intensify both the act of being a fan and PSI (Stever 2011). They provide many spaces specifically dedicated to the celebrity and for communication between fans. Therefore, in this study, we consider the way in which the fans use social media.

In this article, we put forward the hypothesis that the time of celebrity death is when the researcher can most fully understand certain psychological and social functions of the media celebrities and certain aspects of PSI (Meyrowitz 1994). How can we explain the high levels of individual and social sadness following the death of a celebrity, which can even lead to suicide, when the celebrity was virtually unknown to the fans personally? As regards the literature on celebrity culture (Turner 2004, Holmes and Redmond 2006, Redmond and Holmes 2007), little research has been conducted on the mourning process among fans (however, see Wang 2007). Studying this process can allow us to better understand the relationships between the celebrity and their public, and more specifically their fans.

Literature on both PSI and fans emphasises the importance of celebrities in social identity construction. There is, however, a lack of research on PSI and fans' social identity when the celebrity dies. This is why, in this article, we analyse the functions and uses of social media and interpersonal communication in the mourning process.

According to the common-sense view, it is necessary to express one's emotions following the loss of a loved one in order to dispel sadness. Yet there is no research on fans, the death of a celebrity, or the uses of communication, including communication through social media. More generally, how does the mourning process operate in the weeks and months that follow? We chose to study the case of Michael Jackson (MJ) because the fans' reactions to his death have been significant in social media (Garde-Hansen 2010). After stating our theoretical background and research questions, we will set out the methodology, discuss the results, and then indicate what new prospects for understanding the relationships between celebrities and their fans have been revealed by our findings.

Theoretical background and research questions

Parasocial interactions, the death of a celebrity, and bereavement

PSI are the development of a 'seemingly face-to-face relationship' (Horton and Wohl 1956, p. 215) with fictional characters and celebrities during media consumption. By studying PSI we aim to broadly understand relationships with celebrities, because the affective bond persists outside the media use context (for a review, see Giles 2002). Whereas some researchers have studied PSI with quantitative methods (Schramm and Wirth 2010), we use a qualitative approach and an exploratory perspective because we know little about the nature of PSI between fans and a celebrity who has died suddenly.

Bereavement, which we define as grieving the loss of a loved one following their death, is one of the most difficult human experiences. The grief that accompanies the loss is composed of psychological (affective, cognitive, and behavioural) changes, physical characteristics (physiological and somatic), and social responses, varying considerably in nature, extent, and development over time according to the person and their situation (Stroebe *et al.* 1995). It is not unusual for bereavement to lead to serious depression and even suicide.¹ The dual-process model of coping with bereavement (Stroebe and Schut 1999) explains how the bereaved person must first adjust to the loss of the relationship and the bond with the deceased person. This involves managing negative emotions on the

one hand and performing the task of mourning on the other; that is, giving meaning to the loss on a cognitive level – ‘[the mourner] knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him’ (Freud 1915, p. 245). Second, alongside this, the bereaved person must also manage indirect changes, some of which represent ‘fundamental cognitive problems’ caused by the loss. If the deceased was dear to them, the bereaved person must often modify and restore psychological models linked to their own identity and their relationships with others. Is this the case with fans when the celebrity dies? Several pieces of research mention the importance of fan status in the construction of the fans’ identity and in their social relations and communications (Laverie and Arnett 2000).

In the light of this understanding of bereavement, we formulated a first set of research questions: what are fans’ reactions to the news of MJ’s death? What can the study of interpersonal and mediated communication of fans when MJ died reveal about specific aspects of PSI with MJ?

The identity of fans and ways of using communication

Research shows that celebrities play an important role in the construction and management of the identity of the individual (Turner 2010). Social identity has several categories (Tajfel and Turner 1986). The person constitutes themselves as a being, via multiple social interactions, by taking on the social roles and values of their group. The human being is therefore permanently engaged in multiple social comparison and identification processes. The fan’s identification process does not, however, lead to the ‘abolition’ of their personality (Giles and Maltby 2004), but rather enables them to take on an additional role, connected to their identity, which they can emphasise in certain situations in order to stand out from their immediate circle or to affiliate themselves with a peer group (other fans). Two main processes are developed by fans in constructing their identities (Reysen and Lloyd 2012). First, the individual forms a social identity as a member of a group of fans who like the same celebrity. This feeling of belonging leads them on the one hand to emphasise their perceived similarities with other fans and to identify with them and, on the other, to emphasise their perceived differences from people who are not fans of the celebrity in question (Turner *et al.* 1987). In the present article we use the term ‘groupal identity’ to refer to this type of identity. Second, within the group of fans, the individual may seek to acquire a more ‘personal’ identity. She/he feels herself/himself to be a unique individual who is different from the other fans. To differentiate herself/himself from the other fans, her/his personal identity may be based on multiple elements linked to specific knowledge of the celebrity’s life, lyrics, or choreography and possession of collectables related to celebrity (Le Bart 2004). In the present article we use the term ‘personal identity’ to refer to this type of identity. On the basis of this literature, we hypothesise that these two types of identities will be found in the sample of surveyed fans.

We thus formulated a second set of research questions: what are the roles of and ways of using mediated communication in the management of bereavement? Is coping with bereavement dependent on the way fans have constructed their identity? What are the functions of social media in the context of fans’ mourning process?

Methodology

In France, we surveyed 29 people who had been MJ fans for several years, 16 men and 13 women, with an average age of 25.8 (age range: 17–36). As intense PSI with celebrities are frequent up to the age of 16 (Maltby *et al.* 2005), we wanted to obtain a sample of fans in a

greater age range, whose passion for MJ had lasted for several years. Their profiles were diverse with regard to socio-professional criteria: five were in the liberal professions and management; seven were white-collar workers/technicians; 13 were students and secondary school pupils; one was a musician; two were salespeople; and one was an unemployed person. In terms of ethnicity and geographical criteria: 27 were French and lived in various regions of France; one was German; and one was French-Canadian. The respondents were contacted in four ways: MJ fan networks on Facebook; attendance at a screening of the film *This Is It* (released on 28 October 2009 in France); the interpersonal networks of the surveyors; and the interpersonal networks of the respondents. The face-to-face survey took place 15–21 weeks after the announcement of MJ's death on 25 June 2009. These semi-directive interviews, conducted in French, lasted just over an hour on average (range: 30–90 minutes), and consisted of three parts. The interviewee was first asked about their passion for MJ and his music to provide a better understanding of the background and history of the fan. Through empathic behaviour, we analysed the non-verbal elements such as silences, glances, and facial expressions (Moustakas 1994).

Second, we used the retrospective account method to study the fans' reactions. This method was used for better understanding how different types of adjustment to the loss operated in the mourning management process from the first seconds to five months after the news of MJ's death (Courbet and Fourquet 2003). We found that surprising and highly emotive social and media events are engraved in the episodic memory of the respondents in the form of flashbulb memory (Wright and Gaskell 1995). This type of memory is very detailed and pictorial, and retains a lot of contextual information on the event in question. To facilitate the recollection process, the subjects were re-exposed to the first television pictures relating to MJ's death that they had seen previously. The subjects were asked to explain in detail how they reacted when they first saw these and during the minutes that followed. These accounts highlight the socio-cognitive and socio-emotional processes of the fans who constructed the meaning of the event, alone and in interaction with their direct circle of acquaintances. Albeit that the method could lead to people 'reconstructing memories' of the event, it provides interesting information on the meaning that fans attributed to MJ's death. Third, the interviewer talked to each person to find out as much as possible about their thoughts (cognitions), feelings (affects), communication, and social media interactions immediately following MJ's death, from the days that followed up to the time of the interview.

We carried out a content analysis of the collected verbal material, performed systematically by two analysts, which resulted in a satisfactory level of intercoder reliability.² In addition, we wanted to understand the invariant intentions and meaning that constituted the mourning phenomena. Through fans' discourses, we wanted to sense the feel and unique meaning of experiences. We wanted to 'keep the phenomenon alive, illuminate its presence, accentuate its underlying meanings, enable the phenomenon to linger, retain its spirit, as near to its actual nature as possible' (Moustakas 1994, pp. 58–59). Any disagreements between the two analysts were settled by discussion. We achieved the saturation point³ (Glaser and Strauss 1967) for the analysis at the 21st interview.

To confirm the findings obtained from the respondents and to expand the number of observations, we also carried out a content analysis to identify the main themes present in the written traces and epitaphs in French, taken from three social media platforms for MJ fans (Facebook pages – 'MJ' and 'MJ Fans francophones' – and the MJ France Forum website) during two different periods: three to six months after MJ's death, and 13–17 months afterwards. Indeed, during a media event like the death of MJ, it is no longer sufficient for people simply to watch the live broadcasting of the event. They also want to

participate in the event, for example through Facebook. We only analysed the messages showing the cognitions ('A true legend! Though he's gone, his music will always be alive') and affects ('I miss U so much ... I miss your presence and your voice') of the fans, in particular those connected to their ties with MJ himself (e.g. phatic messages such as 'hello to all' had been filtered out). The results of the analysis of the 1851 selected messages are presented at the end of the 'Results and discussion' section.

Results and discussion

In this paper, four main results are presented and directly discussed within the theoretical context. First, the findings highlight a feature of PSI: a third person, generally a loved one, is present in the relationship between the fan and MJ and plays a fundamental role in the PSI with the celebrity. Second, the findings highlight two ways of constructing one's identity based on the act of being a fan. The mourning process and the uses of interpersonal communication and social media differ according to these two ways. Third, the content analysis of fans' discourses underlines five functions of social media in the mourning process. Fourth, it seems that returning frequently and regularly to social media could hinder the resolution of the mourning process for those fans who identified most deeply with MJ.

The celebrity, the fan, and the 'real' attachment figure

We now answer the first set of research questions. According to our findings, many people learnt of MJ's death first by text message, and then by turning on the television to validate the news. Faced with the news of MJ's death, the fans had intense and brutal affective reactions described as shock or amazement. Alongside this, their immediate cognitive reaction was not to believe that MJ was dead:

I didn't realise what had happened. I stood in a state of shock in front of my television screen. I didn't know what to do and it was a big drama for me. (Emma, aged 23)⁴

Alongside the reactions to the death of MJ, many fans said they feared 'losing their past' and, symbolically, certain loved ones who were attached to it. These were 'real' attachment figures (in the sense of Bowlby [1969]: siblings, parents, lovers, etc.) from a micro-social environment. Among the multitude of experiences that the fans shared with attachment figures, some were connected to the music of MJ (e.g. birthday parties). From the first moments of mourning onward, many remembered events they had experienced with attachment figures where MJ played a mediating role. After a few minutes, fans felt the need to interact with these attachment figures:

I immediately thought of my brother with whom I held great parties and where we danced like MJ, we were teenagers. What made me sad was that I was never going to relive what I had lived with my brother when we made his choreographies. My brother is important for me. (Paul, aged 32)

Their sadness was all the greater since they associated the real loss of the celebrity with a symbolic, imaginary loss of happy memories from their past:

I said to myself, 'It's not possible. Part of my childhood is being stolen ...' (Rayan, aged 33)

For some fans, the loss of MJ also meant the loss of the attachment figure from the micro-social environment. These fans were afraid of losing the attachment figure:

I phoned at once to [the attachment figure]. I had the impression that he too was going to disappear and that I was going to end up alone to the world. (David, aged 22)

It is interesting to see that fans first tried to contact attachment figures, either face to face or by mediated communication, SMS and telephone in particular. They contacted the attachment figures as if to make sure that they were still present. This contact also helped them to form a closer relationship with the attachment figure. Together, they frequently talked about their common memories, providing evidence of their intense affective relationship. Although the content of the communication essentially concerned MJ and his music, these aspects in fact only played a secondary role. In talking together, people assured themselves of their attachment to each other and co-consolidated their memories.

These attachment figures perhaps played an important role in the fans' personal and socio-affective history at a key moment in their existence (first love, for example). Following on from Stever (2011), we think that it is perhaps during these key moments that the fan simultaneously attaches themselves to the celebrity. The fans who were not able to contact their attachment figures experienced a longer-lasting state of discomfort and even suffering.

The attachment figure of some of the fans was dead, preventing them from solving the cognitive problem linked to the loss of MJ. The death of MJ seems to have revived painful memories of the death of the loved one. It seems that a significant part of their grief reaction was, in fact, caused by the death of the loved one:

My mother made me love MJ. She died two years ago. When I think of MJ, I always think of her and I cry. (Flora, aged 30)

Sadness among some fans in this situation was particularly intense. This sadness resulted not so much from the death of the celebrity as from the sad memories concerning the deceased attachment figure. These results provide empirical support for a hypothesis posited by Johnson (1999). In his work on the mourning of Princess Diana, Johnson (1999, p. 31) identifies the same form of attachment to the celebrity in terms of 'transferred feelings':

Diana was clearly the object of transferred feelings that had little to do with her own life and death, and everything to do with the lives of members of her public. Many people told [...] how they had cried for Diana, but also at the same time, for some other loss. (1999, p. 31)

Perhaps these loved ones were associated with Diana in their history. In the same way, the attachment figures were associated with MJ in the history of the fans. One important contribution of the results is that they empirically highlight the role of a third person, an attachment figure from the micro-social environment of the fan. In the PSI this person takes a position between the fan and MJ. Having studied the PSI at the time of the death, the present survey identified an original feature of the PSI between fans and a celebrity, in this case MJ. Further research is needed to confirm this result and offer an understanding of the 'double affective bond' defined in PSI between the fan and the celebrity, on the one hand, and between the fan and a loved one from their micro-social environment on the other.

Two mourning processes according to the fan's identity and communication uses

The findings highlight two ways of constructing one's identity (Turner *et al.* 1987) based on the act of being a fan. In our interviews, on the one hand, some fans indicate that MJ is 'part of them' and that he is emotionally connected to them. This illustrates the development of a process of psychological identification in the construction of their identity. They exhibit a personal identity. On the other hand, some fans define themselves more as members of a social group. They construct their social identity with reference to the fan group and exhibit a groupal identity.

Our results are consistent with the studies of Reysen and Branscombe (2010) and Reysen and Lloyd (2012) on sport fans. They highlighted a difference between *fanship* and *fandom*. In fanship, fans emphasise the personal attributes they possess that other fans do not possess, thus exhibiting a personal identity. With fandom, fans define themselves more as members of a social group, emphasising the attributes they share with other fans. They exhibit a groupal identity. This difference is illustrated in the following part of our research.

The content analyses also show that the mourning process and the uses of interpersonal communication and social media differ according to these two types. We explain how the mourning process operates differently according to the two types of identity highlighted in the analyses, and so we are able to answer the second set of research questions.

Mourning among fans who constructed their identity with reference to MJ (fanship and personal identity)

Fans whose identity was based on MJ himself found themselves having to manage a significant cognitive problem. This problem compromised the stability of the identity and required a rearrangement of their models of personal identity. This type of fan seems to have suffered particularly and felt strong negative emotions:

I suffered a lot, a part of myself died that day. (Paul, aged 32)

Their mourning work required frequent phases of 'withdrawal' in solitude, as mentioned by Stroebe and Schut (1999). The way in which this type of fan uses websites and Facebook has essentially consisted of maintaining the parasocial tie they had with MJ by addressing messages of attachment directly to him ('I miss you'). On the meta-cognitive level, by communicating with other fans and comparing themselves with others, they were able to reassure themselves that their intensely negative affective reactions were 'normal'. Although the fans who constructed their identity with reference to MJ feel like they belong to a group of fans, this form of belonging remains virtual in so far as the other is another who is 'like them'. These fans define a personal identity for themselves which is distinct from that of the other fans. Thus, they signal their difference through their style of writing and the creativity they display in their messages on the websites. Using the Internet in this specific way is about emphasising their personal identity, which is different from that of the other fans. This type of fan therefore uses social media in a very specific way, to solve the problem associated with their personal identity.

This problem has been observed among MJ fans who adored him as a person. For some of them, the problem seemed hard to handle, but for others it was well on its way to being resolved after five months had passed. In this respect, five identity management

strategies for resolving the problem were identified in the survey. The first strategy is identification reinforcement. A media myth never really dies, so some fans further solidified their identificatory process; thus these fans avoid any cognitive dissonance caused by the need to change to a different identificatory figure:

My love for him, he will always remain the same, I still love him just as much. (Rayan, aged 33)

The second strategy is a reinforcement of individualisation as a ‘real’ fan. For some, the death reinforced MJ’s role in their identity. This enabled them to maintain a certain stability in terms of their identity and to maintain their own personal identity within the fan group. They even based their personal identity on the death to further reinforce it and set themselves apart from the others:

People who knew that I was a fan of MJ treated me with more respect. (Emma, aged 23)

Some fans had already started to carry out identity work by ‘transferring’ the value they placed on the man to the value of his musical work. This transfer to the musical work characterises the third strategy:

Finally now it’s his songs that interest me, and not directly the man himself. We will forget him, his songs remain forever. (Tiphaine, aged 24)

Two people we questioned had already found another musical style after five months, in order to fill their identity gap. The fourth strategy involves turning to other styles of music or other celebrities:

I used to dress like MJ. Now I’m a Goth. (Julien, aged 23)

Finally, representing the fifth strategy, a few of the fans in the survey remained in denial about MJ’s death. They were prepared to maintain the fantasy of the celebrity still being alive in an imaginary mode. They claimed that a genuine conspiracy had been orchestrated by MJ himself or his friends and family to enable him to live the rest of his life in peace, away from the stress of the media.

Whatever the strategy used, many fans reinforced the new facet of their identity by leaving messages showing evidence of this change on websites such as Facebook:

On my Facebook profile, everyone knows I’m Gothic. (Julien, aged 23)

Mourning among fans who constructed their social identity with reference to the fan group (fandom and groupal identity)

The second type of fan defines itself not by direct reference to MJ but as a person belonging to the MJ fan group:

MJ is the only artist on the planet to attract so many people. All his fans around the world are united. We are part of a large family. (Valerie, aged 27)

They tried to experience the mourning process in interaction with the other fans. They have no ‘fundamental cognitive problem’ to solve concerning their identity, since the fan

group, the fundamental object of their identity, still exists. In keeping with the social identity model (Tajfel and Turner 1986), these fans feel affectively close to the other fans in so far as these belong to the same reference group. The fans who have groupal identity think, write, and express their sadness as the group does. This second type of fan seems to have felt fewer negative emotions than the first type of fan, in that they have no fundamental cognitive problem. They were able to derive reassurance from contact with the group. They are strongly attached to the group, on the basis of which they define their identity, a groupal identity. The fan group enabled them to feel secure, feel the empathy of other people and also show empathy towards them:

I really wanted to communicate with other fans, with them I felt good. (David, aged 22)

Interpersonal and mediated communications are essentially used to interact with other fans. The messages that we see most often on Facebook are generally of the ‘MJ, we all miss you’ type.

These results provide a better understanding of the relationships between celebrities and their fans because they stress two mourning processes that depend on the fans’ identity, whether personal or groupal identity. The rearrangement of models of identity seems to be more complex in fanship than in fandom because it requires real identity management strategies accompanied by greater moral suffering.

Social media seems to play different roles – sometimes positive, sometimes negative – in the mourning process. In the following two sections, we answer the second set of research questions. First, we explain the main functions of social media in the mourning process. Second, we show that frequent and regular use of social media is associated with a slower resolution of the mourning process.

Five functions of social media in the mourning process

The content analyses highlight five functions of social media in the mourning process. First, fans – who are the object of real social stereotypes – may be misunderstood. They can even be subjected to mockery in the case of a celebrity whose image is as controversial as that of MJ. This social media community enables fans to be in a context where a certain socio-affective security prevails. They exteriorise themselves more easily. On the meta-cognitive level, they are reassured that their affective and cognitive reactions are normal by comparing them with those of other members of the group they belong to in the social media:

In fact at that moment, we support each other, but we also collapse together, shall we say. (Anthony, aged 36)

I think that from that moment on, mourning really started for everyone, when they saw they were not alone. (Celine, aged 24)

A second function of the Internet concerns the possibility of having information on MJ or other fans close at hand. This quick accessibility gives fans the impression that they permanently have ‘MJ with them’ wherever they are and wherever they go (thanks to mobiles and laptops). Unlike classic funeral rituals, this possibility of controlling space combined with the possibility of controlling time contributes to individualising the process of adjustment to bereavement, breaking away from classic anthropological mourning rituals. This role played by the Internet and social networks makes it possible

to individualise the mourning process, according to each fan's rhythm and needs. In classic funeral rituals experienced in real life or via the television, people are spectators who are forced to follow the socially imposed rhythm of the ritual. They are also compelled to experience what others are experiencing at the same time. Furthermore, they are forced to see others' sadness, and therefore to feel it out of empathy, which increases their own sadness (Rimé 2005). With the Internet, the fan becomes an actor, manages their own use of websites and social interactions based on the death, selects the messages they want to read, when they want to read them, and so forth. Thus, according to the stage each person is at in the mourning process, they can find something to meet their immediate need on the Internet: mourning in solitude, turning off their computer, or mourning by looking for information but without interacting with others or by interacting live or asynchronously with other fans. The Internet thus offers them the possibility of 'self-managing their mourning'.

A third function of social media and the Internet concerns the opportunity given to each fan to emerge from anonymity, to leave behind a personalised and lasting trace, like an epitaph on Facebook. By contributing to the forum, they are rewarded with a sense of participation in the collective memory and history of the worldwide event. The fans are taking part in this event because it is taking place online as well as offline. This inscription helps to accelerate the fan's mourning process. Indeed, they feel that they are constructing an individualised trace that provides evidence of their identity and has meaning for them:

A lot of people wrote the same things. I really tried to make something very personal. (Julien, aged 23)

The act of writing in which the person expresses their emotions following a death is not as salutary as common-sense would have it. Indeed, it is essentially beneficial for people who have an 'insecure attachment style'; that is, who feel a certain affective deficiency (Stroebe *et al.* 2005).

Several researchers in the human and social sciences (Rimé 2005) explain that when a person is facing major negative emotional phenomena they cannot deal with individually, they feel the phenomenological need to give meaning to them, to refer to collective representations. Here we see the fundamental anthropological need of human beings, whose individual cognitive and emotional systems are insufficient for interpreting a phenomenon, to refer to a stable social system (Durkheim 1912/2003). This system embodies a cultural base, in which collective representations and collective memory play a fundamental role (Halbwachs 1992). They may also feel the psychological need to 'recharge their batteries' there. An MJ fan who cannot manage the mourning of their celebrity alone feels the need to refer to this stable social system. Through their social reliance function, regardless of continents, religions, ethnicities, or generations, Internet-based social networks can embody such a stable social system for fans, in the anthropological sense. With this fourth role, the social media provide them with the socio-emotional and socio-cognitive reference points to co-construct the meaning of the event. Thus, the fans are able to go beyond the limits of their individual management of the phenomenon, and cope with the death better. Like interpersonal, face-to-face communications in mourning (Horowitz *et al.* 2001), Internet-based social networks play a dual beneficial role of emotional social support. They provide 'support through union', satisfying a need for affiliation and belonging to the group of fans. In social networks the fans can restore their social identity as members of a cultural community. On an affective level,

interpersonal communications also provide positive emotions; in particular, in so far as they feel a sense of social reliance.

Finally, the fifth favourable function identified in the survey concerns ‘support through action’, which enables fans to write, exchange, and meet up physically at ‘real-life’ events. The aim of these events is to pay tribute to MJ, by dancing together in particular. Following meetings arranged via the Internet-based social networks, many fans met up to commemorate the memory of MJ. The affective social support they obtained was more direct and more personal:

I so much needed to meet the other fans, to share things with them; it is thanks to Facebook that we all met. (Christophe, aged 23)

Meeting others enables a fan to solve ‘fundamental cognitive problems’ in so far as they can obtain and reclaim information more easily on how other fans rearrange their model of identity. In other words, direct social interaction is far more effective in helping them, like during the flash mobs that gathered to perform MJ’s dance moves *en masse*. The Internet helped them to prepare for meetings. The Internet made it possible to create phatic communication to enable fans to form an initial socio-affective relationship, helping to prepare them for real-life social interaction.

Moreover, most fans surveyed said that they felt a strong need to dance by copying MJ’s typical dances and listening to his music on a loop:

On the day he died I did his dance moves, I did it naturally because it’s something that’s in me. (Patrick, aged 36)

The academic literature on bereavement explains that in the first phases following the death of a loved one, people overinvest the object of loss, identify with them (Field *et al.* 1999), and engage in imitative behaviour (Lubchansky 1998).

Results showed that most fans who had not resolved their mourning process five months after the death of MJ had two things in common. On the one hand, they were adept at fanship and, on the other, they continued to visit and write about MJ in the social media. The intensity of their negative emotions seemed to have slightly decreased compared with the negative emotions experienced by fans adept at fandom or at fanship, which significantly limited their visits to the social media.

A causal link is difficult to establish but it is likely that prolonged and frequent use of social media has played a negative role in the mourning process of the media celebrity, MJ. How did this process take place?

Prolonged and frequent use of social media seem to be associated with a slowed resolution of the mourning process

Social interactions and funeral rituals do not directly solve the cognitive problems caused by the death of the person. They do not directly reduce the negative emotions caused by the loss itself, but pile positive emotions on top of the negative emotions felt (Zech and Rimé 2005). Finally, the affective state tends to be less negative. In the long term, however, negative emotions can only be diminished by solving the ‘fundamental cognitive problems’ linked to the death.

Concerning identity, the results showed two types of cognitive problems arising from MJ’s death. First, there is a groupal identity problem among fans practising fandom.

Second, there is a personal identity problem among fans practising fanship. Social media contribute directly to solving the cognitive problem linked to groupal identity in fandom, in so far as they directly meet the need for affiliation with the fan group. The Internet and technological mobility offer the possibility of forming a large number of relevant social interactions for each fan, virtually constantly.

Social media, however, cannot directly solve the cognitive problem linked to personal identity in fanship. Like the mourning that takes place following the loss of a loved one, for this type of fan to be able to mourn the celebrity, they themselves need to answer questions that lead them to rearrange their own cognitive models that are linked to the different facets of the concept of the identity (Neimeyer 2006). In particular, they must be able to give meaning to MJ's death and answer questions linked to two fundamental aspects of the concept of the identity: first, 'What is MJ's role in the image I have of myself?'; and second, 'What is MJ's role in the image others have of me?'. Although social networks and media provide short-term satisfaction in fanship, it would appear that in the longer term they hinder the resolution of the mourning process, for two main reasons.

First, they lead to fans reading, writing, and exchanging content dominated by negative emotional tonalities. These are the same feelings of sadness and disappointment that return and are systematically dwelt on:

I have tears in my eyes whenever I write anything about him on Facebook. (Nadege, aged 25; five months after MJ's death)

Research on bereavement shows that emotional rumination is harmful because it is self-perpetuating and intensifies the negative emotions of the person, hindering resolution of the cognitive problem (Nolen-Hoeksema 2001). Returning frequently and regularly to fan sites such as Facebook regularly regenerates negative thoughts, increasing the frequency of the negative emotions felt and heightening their intensity. This problem is all the more pronounced since the Internet, which offers new images, new information, or previously unseen photographs of MJ, makes it interesting and exciting for the fan to surf the Web and therefore spend a lot of time online:

Later I stopped [going on the Internet] because I realised that I was becoming crazy. (Jean, aged 35)

Communicating and expressing negative emotions in the first stage of mourning is often necessary to obtain empathy and social support but it can be harmful for a person to prolong this phase. Contrary to the common-sense view, expressing negative emotions does not help to reduce them (Zech and Rimé 2005). The person may only reduce their sadness by directly solving the cognitive problems linked to the death. This cognitive work will be all the more effective as the negative emotional phase will be neither self-perpetuated nor intensified by harmful emotional rumination.

Second, thanks to their chronology and temporal structuring, classic funeral rituals offer a calendar enabling mourners to manage their negative emotions in a reasonable way. Once the days of intense sadness have passed, the rituals (ceremonies, burial, etc.) no longer directly generate negative emotions, thus encouraging the survivors to immerse themselves in their social lives once again. Yet with the Internet, this temporal structuring no longer exists. The possibility of ruminating and maintaining negative emotions is far greater among frequent users of web pages that pay tribute to the deceased. Five months

after the death of MJ, interviews showed that a lot of fans who were adept at fanship and continued to visit and write in the social media had not resolved their mourning process.

These results are confirmed by content analyses of 1851 messages present in the three social media that we studied, three to six months after and then 13–17 months after the death. In each period, the three most common themes in the writings and their frequency of occurrence are identical: a great sadness; withdrawal symptoms; and nostalgic love. Eight messages out of 10 concern at least one of these themes. We did not observe any reduction in this frequency between the two periods. The three themes occurred in the same order. Very few inscriptions show that fans have dealt with cognitive problems with their identity. The Internet therefore does not help fans to share ‘models’ that might help them to direct their mourning towards a resolution of the identity problem.

Fans who stayed in denial about the death, without *a priori* solving their cognitive identity problems, found material on the Internet to feed the rumour that MJ was still alive. Given the large number of testimonials from fans who believe this rumour, this can only have reinforced their meta-cognitions and the certitude that the celebrity was still alive:

On the internet, I saw photos of MJ in the crowd at his funeral, and now he’s on an island ...
(Patrick, aged 36)

The results of the interviews show that for fans who had managed to solve their personal identity problem, meetings and face-to-face interpersonal communications helped them more than the Internet.

More generally, our results are consistent with studies that show associations between intensive Internet use and negative moods. For example, Van den Eijnden *et al.* (2008) found that time spent surfing the Web was in certain contexts associated with increases in depressive symptoms.

Conclusion, limits, and new prospects for research

One of the original features of the present empirical research is that it assumes that it is at the celebrity’s time of death that we can most fully understand certain psychological and social functions of celebrities. The research contributes to the academic literature on celebrities for several reasons. It allows us to better understand the connections, notably the PSI, between celebrities and their public, more specifically the fans. It demonstrates the considerable role that the celebrity plays in the identity of fans. It also demonstrates the importance of interpersonal communications of fans and the communications via social media in efforts to understand the grieving process. More specifically, we can summarise the contributions to academic literature in three points.

First, the findings show that a majority of fans have felt a need to communicate with attachment figures. Fans have lived with these attachment figures many intense emotional experiences, where the celebrity played a mediating role. Fans contacted them as if to make sure that they were still present. These results could reveal an original feature of the PSI: the celebrity could be a ‘socio-affective mediator’ between the fan and the attachment figure. The PSI with the celebrity could ‘hide’ another affective and more latent bond between the fan and the attachment figure(s). Other research must be done for better understanding of the role played by the celebrity as a ‘socio-affective mediator’.

Second, the findings highlight two ways of constructing one’s identity (Turner *et al.* 1987), based on the act of being a fan. The mourning process and the use of interpersonal

communication and social media differ according to these two types. Fans whose identity was based on the celebrity himself (fanship) find they have to manage a significant cognitive problem. For this first type of fan, this problem compromises the stability of the identity and requires a rearrangement of their models of personal identity. Five identity management strategies were identified in the survey. The second type of fan defines itself not with direct reference to the celebrity, but as a person belonging to the celebrity fan group (fandom). This type of fan tries to experience the mourning process in interaction with the other fans. They have no 'fundamental cognitive problem' to solve concerning their identity, since the fan group, the fundamental object of their identity, a groupal identity, still exists. This second type of fan seems to have felt fewer negative emotions than the first type of fan.

Third, the findings show the important role of social media and highlight five functions of social media in the mourning process. Frequent and regular use of social media could be associated with a slower resolution of the mourning process.

Our study has a number of limitations. First, it is not possible to establish a causal link between identity, the use of social media, and the mourning process among fans. There are likely to be complex interactions between these processes. Further research is needed for better understanding of the bonds between identity, the use of social media, and the mourning process among fans. Second, the scope of the results obtained is limited to the subjects questioned and to the case of MJ.

Among the new prospects for research that are opened up, an initial line of enquiry would be to monitor the temporal evolution of the celebrity mourning process and the use of social media over a period of several years. It would also be interesting to study gender differences and intercultural differences in fan mourning, and more generally in fanship and fandom in connection with social media. In this context, another line of enquiry could consist of studying the PSI between fans and other celebrities in different fields such as sport or film.

Notes

1. Twelve suicides and over 100 suicide attempts were recorded following the death of MJ ([online] www.mjjcommunity.com [accessed 9 December 2012]; this information is, however, unverifiable).
2. Inter-coder reliability refers to the extent to which two or more independent coders agree on the coding of the content of interest with an application of the same coding scheme.
3. The saturation point is reached when additional interviews provided little or no new information, but rather provide the same information over and over again.
4. The citations have been extracted from semi-directive interviews. Initially done in French, they have been translated into English.

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