Emotional Expressions of the *Studium* and *Punctum* on YouTube Infant Memorials

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Abstract

How do people emotionally experience memorial videos made by people who have suffered the loss of their infant child? Semiotic analyses identify two states that describe people’s emotions when interacting with images of people who have passed away. The first is the *studium*, or detached form of sympathy, and the second is the *punctum*, or immediate emotional wound. While most prior studies deal with expressions of sympathy as a single category, the present study uses a discourse analysis approach combined with a semiotic lens to understand nuanced levels of emotions that are indexed in text comments posted to memorial videos. An analysis of several hundred comments posted to two videos on YouTube suggests that some people experience a form of the *punctum*, which is not limited to feelings about a person one knows directly, but is often activated through sympathetic feelings toward YouTube participants experiencing similar forms of bereavement.

Keywords

YouTube; online memorials; semiotics; emotion; video

# Introduction

Memorial videos commemorate people who have died. They have appeared on MySpace (Brubaker et al., 2011), Facebook (Kern et al., 2013), YouTube (Wahlberg, 2009), World of Warcraft (Gibbs et al., 2012), and on memorial websites (Finlay & Krueger, 2011). Memorials have aesthetic conventions, such as music, poetry, and photographs that depict the person in childhood and in idealized, recent moments before their death (Wahlberg, 2009). Sharing grief helps people increase social ties and establish feelings of community (Forman et al., 2012). Video memorials’ popularity indicates an increased willingness in American culture to speak openly about death (Wahlberg, 2009; Doss 2002).

Brubaker et al. (2011) investigated emotional work on memorials. They coded for levels of emotional distress in comments on MySpace memorials. But additional work needs to be done to understand nuanced forms of bereavement. How do people translate emotional experiences into comments on memorial videos? How do these experiences compare with prior descriptions of mediated mourning?

In the field of semiotics, Barthes (1981) argued that photographs could be emotionally experienced through the *studium* or the *punctum*. The *studium* included contemplating aesthetic formalisms and experiencing sympathy for the photographic subject. In contrast, the *punctum* was more immediate, and included feelings of intense connection between the viewer and the photographic subject. The *punctum* was felt as a shock which pierced through the more analytical reception of the *studium*. Whereas the *studium* indexed detached sympathy, the *punctum* produced an emotional wound.

Combining a semiotic and discourse-analytic approach, this paper examines how viewers respond to memorial videos for deceased infants*.* The goal is to explore nuanced emotional experiences and to extend understanding of video memorials’ role in the American mediated landscape.

# Methods

The following case studies appeared during a two-year ethnography of YouTube. The project explored how some 150 participants formed communities by sharing and commenting on videos, as well as interacting in person. Although memorial videos only appeared twice in the qualitative corpus of 200 videos, they indexed an especially poignant way in which grieving parents received solace and social support.

William and Jane (both pseudonyms) described losing an infant in videos and ethnographic interviews. William’s video was posted in 2007 and received 425 comments. Jane’s video was posted in 2008 and received 38 comments. A total of 463 comments were analyzed using discourse analysis, as described by Johnstone (2002). Discourse analysis considers how meaning is produced within the context and genre of particular texts. The present study also employs a semiotic lens to analyze how people expressed different emotional reactions to videos. Close attention is paid to commenters’ specific word choices and how texts exhibited sympathy and empathy with video creators.

# Video Wounds

YouTube participants often bonded by sharing difficult experiences. They explained how their participation helped them deal with their pain. William lost his baby to sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Jane’s son died of a rare medical condition soon after his birth.

William’s video orients around a narrative about how he got started on YouTube. Posting memorials often enables self-reflection on a mourner’s present as well as his past (Micalizzi, 2010). William used painful, past home footage to explain how his world profoundly changed after his son’s death. By making videos, he formed deep-seated relationships with viewers who helped him cope.

Jane’s video includes profoundly sad images. Set to music, it depicts her holding her baby in the hospital. Her video includes poetry, ultrasound pictures, photographs of her son connected to tubes and medical equipment, and quotes from medical professionals offering sympathy. In a comment Jane stated:

Somehow I feel like if other people see his face and know a little bit of who he was, it makes his death a﻿ little bit less pointless.

## William and Jane used video to work through their loss, and commenters enabled them to be heard. Connecting to people who will listen to their stories is considered crucial for working through grief (Finlay & Krueger, 2011). Viewers’ comments reveal varied dimensions of emotional support emerging from imagined communities (Anderson, 1985) of YouTube supporters.

## Stereotypical Expressions of Sympathy: Indexing the Studium

A few comments directly addressed aesthetic choices. Many included generic video assessments such as “nice,” “beautiful,” and “touching.” Such stereotypical expressions of sympathy or aesthetics index the *studium*. An index is a sign exhibiting an existential relationship to that which it represents (Peirce, 1955). Such common forms of support index a person’s experience of sympathy for someone else’s pain. Expressions of sympathy in American culture include words like being “sorry” for a person’s “loss” and providing religious images of comfort. Examples from the videos include:

I hope you find or have found happiness. You're baby boy will be waiting﻿ for you in heaven

Probably the best cover of this song I've heard so far. Very moving and I am so sorry about﻿ the loss of your son

Very touching, thank you for sharing.﻿

im﻿ sorry to hear about your loss. bless you and your strength

Such words evidently comforted William and Jane, who often individually thanked commenters, and offered their support to fellow mourners.

## Translating Raw Emotions: Evidence of the Punctum

Several commenters were intensely moved in an immediate and almost non-verbal way. These sentiments index the *punctum*, or emotional wound or shock aroused through media. As Barthes’ (1981, p. 51) stated, “The incapacity of name is a good symptom of disturbance.” Several comments began with the word, “Wow,” as an index of a stunned reaction that was difficult to verbalize. Examples include:

I don't know what to say...That was really touching. I'm sitting here now and I'm crying- but thank you very much...﻿

This was so touching. I'm speechless and﻿ moved.

the words really struck me there.

wow. speachless. i am﻿ a mother and in tears.

Wow! I'm in tears. What a﻿ beautiful sweet little child. I'm speechless.

The *punctum* produces an emotional shock that pierces through ordinary words and stereotypical expressions of sympathy. One commenter expresses being “struck” by the video, indexing an unanticipated reaction. Visceral bodily involvement is indexed through terms such as being “speechless,” “moved,” and “crying.” Barthes argued that the *punctum* was metonymic, meaning that a small moment of viewership might invoke a far larger field of emotions and memories. Commenters similarly indexed an emotional wellspring of memories through detailed descriptions and comments about direct loss or fears of loss as parents of small children.

# Conclusion

Expressions of sympathy are often generically analyzed. Yet, they include nuances, ranging from detached support to intense emotional wounds. The former category is consistent with the *studium*, or sympathetic reactions one has not only to photographic subjects, but to video **creators** who have experienced loss. Although Barthes was dubious about experiencing the *punctum* from a moving image, several participants posted video comments that indexed an emotional wound stimulated by actual or fears of loss.

Future studies might explore the nuances of the *studium* and *punctum* as expressed through comment systems to understand the work they accomplish for viewers and video creators. Discourse analysis is only capable of dealing with the translation work that appears in text comments that index emotional reactions. Future studies might use interviews to delve more deeply into how people experience emotions when watching videos created by mourners.

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