"They Are Not Gone – yet!":
Iranian Social Media Users' Reaction to the Perceived Death of Cyber Acquaintances

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Abstract. Through in-depth interviews with 28 Iranian social media users, this paper examined the reaction of social media users to the perceived death of their online friends in order to find common threads of anxieties and uncertainties among users who experienced such events. We found that subjects experience contextual, cognitive and emotional difficulties in absorbing the news, leading them to go through an initial stage of wandering before dealing with the actual trauma. Such difficulties are categorized in terms of 5 generic conditions: Conceptual Dilemma, Rational Denial, Situational Puzzlement, Relational Confusion, and Environmental Inconsistency. With ample examples, we have discussed each condition and their interrelatedness. It seems that rather than an absolute fact, the death of an online friend is understood, or felt, as a fuzzy state of mixed presence and absence, in relation to which later death events in online or even offline situations may be understood.

Keywords: Medium, Social Media, Death, Friends, Trauma, Reaction.

1. Introduction

A few years ago, I was invited by a friend to a small, closed-circle group in a popular messaging app. The group was created to share pieces of literary value, either their own writings or passages they came across in their readings. One morning, a group member named Ali, resident of a far-located city in southeastern Iran, wrote something about the strangeness of death. Replying to him, I said that death sometimes paid us a surprise visit, catching him off-guard in the middle of everything else that went on in life. Furthermore, he said that some people were lucky enough to be waiting for its arrival. Another member of the group then privately told me that Ali had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and his days were numbered. She also told me that we wouldn't speak directly about Ali's condition in the group. Ali and I managed to keep the appearances of normal conversation in the group, though it was anything but normal to me. Less than two months later, Ali passed away after being in a coma for several days. He apparently didn't manage to resolve his wonder at the

"definitive" meeting with death, not at least consciously so. Group members pooled their resources together to send a bouquet with a note of condolence to his funeral.

The experience was an odd one for me, the first of many to come, i.e. getting close to someone on a purely online basis only to have to deal with their death. And in every instance of such experiences afterwards, I was reminded of Ali, and how difficult a time I had resolving my many unprecedented issues with his death.

The core situation I have explored here may be boiled down to losing someone you had some significant interaction with but you had never personally met, or in other words, someone with whom you interacted via a medium. Therefore, even though the World Wide Web in general and social media in particular have fundamentally changed the way we practice interpersonal communication (Bailenson et al., 2008), one may find instances of this situation whenever and wherever humans used a medium to communicate.

Modern communication technologies have had a multi-layered effect on this phenomenon. To begin with, on their surface, they have not only made people more aware of the death events which used to go unnoticed in former times since "[i]n the immediate aftermath of a death, social media platforms may serve as a vital communication tool" (Scourfield et al., 2020), but also democratized the specific experience at hand, making it, fortunately or not, available to almost anyone with regular access to web and significant interest in cyber activity, as they have done to numerous other human experiences previously available only to some select few, such as journalism (Atton, 2008), political activity (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018), or maintaining a public gallery of their photographs (Serafinelli, 2018, p. 153). In addition, they have provided the bereaved with profoundly different possibilities to communicate about grief and mourning (Moyer & Enck, 2020; Westerlund, 2020), virtually interact with the deceased's friends (Blower & Sharman, 2021), and produce narratives to make the loss one's own (Karkar & Burke, 2020), all by creating a space for digital storytelling about grief and bereavement (Rolbiecki et al., 2021). It also should be noted that, as of writing this paper, the Corona pandemic has made this specific experience even more universal "in this hour of grief and anxiety" (Binjola & Patel, 2020), and it is expected that more empirical studies provide us with a better understanding of the effects of the pandemic on bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2021).

The speed, colorfulness, and ubiquity of the new media have also removed many former temporal and spatial barriers, paving the way for a far more immersive experience of the interaction as Miguel (2018) has argued. This may bring about deeper levels of closeness which would potentially make the death of cyber companions a more traumatic event.

Artificial intelligence used in social media platforms to tailor the contents for individual users might have a role to play too, though the nature and scale of its role is ambiguous due primarily to a lack of access to the algorithms it applies (for a thorough discussion, see: Bechmann & Bowker, 2019). Some scholars, however, maintained that the platforms tended to create semi-isolated islands of same-minded people in what was best known as audience segmentation (Fowler et al., 2017), which was perhaps an extension of the already-established fact that "people seek the information they agree with… to reduce cognitive dissonance" (Thurber, 2017).

According to some scholars, however, the new media have brought about more *fundamental* changes in our perception of communication and the world in which it occurs. In her authoritative account of such changes, Turkle (2011) argued that for the children brought up around modern technologies, communicability becomes a measure of livingness. She argued that computers "turned children into philosophers" (Turkle, 2011, p. x), and pragmatic ones for that matter, who now talk "about robots as alive enough for *specific purposes*" (Turkle, 2011, p. 26, emphasis in original).

The term "alive enough" is especially relevant to this research because to some of my subjects, the deceased cyber acquaintance seemed to be "not dead enough" to be considered departed. This was particularly evident in their uses of metaphors such as patients in vegetative state or soldiers missing in action (MIA) in order to make sense of the rather eerie presence of the deceased in cyberspace.

The last two metaphors deserve closer attention. Several users we interviewed pointed out that the cyber embodiment of the deceased usually remains intact upon their death: they only cease to move, or make further moves if you like. In pure instances of cyberlife, the line between the "effects" of a person (the posts, the likes, the interactions) and the person himself/herself is blurred. *A patient in a vegetative state* was the closest analogy they could draw to make sense of the death of their cyber acquaintances in terms of their knowledge of death as it occurs in real-life. The reference to MIA is also significant. The Iran-Iraq war may arguably be understood as the most enduring traumatic collective experience of Iranians in modern times. According to Roxanne Varzi, missing soldiers who "only leave a trace" become ghosts who are "only present after death" (Varzi, 2006, p. 187). Some of our subjects actually described the remaining cyber traces of the deceased as their ghosts, haunting the scene of cyber life. That might explain why these users did not move towards acceptance as Kübler-Ross (2014) model postulated: they are still "half-hopeful." Besides, communication technology promises to extend the communicative performance of the deceased beyond their biological death in a semblance (or beta version) of the ever-elusive promise of eternal life it has always made to humans.

2. Methodology

The research design was explorative in nature and, as Stebbins (2001) has put it, emphasizes development of theory from data. We resorted to in-depth interviews with volunteers to learn more about the nature of the problem we aimed to study. In most cases, it took some time for the subject to feel comfortable enough to openly talk. To that end, we drew upon the work of Corbin and Morse (2003) to conduct the interviews which were carried out over a period of 3 years.

We were interested in subjects whose only significant interactions with the lost one had been online. In other words, desirable subjects should have had very limited or no offline connection with the deceased. The subjects also should have found themselves somehow close to the deceased so that hearing the death reports would mean something to them and count as trauma, for which we relied on self-identification. In addition, the subjects should have been active users of social media, the definition of which is arbitrary. Thus, we set the limit of spending one hour a day on average on social media as part of the primary criteria. Finally, the subject should have interacted with the deceased for a period of at least three months.

We started our research with 32 subjects. Three subjects decided to withdraw from the research somewhere in the middle of the process and one subject asked us not to include her contributions once our interview with her was complete. This left us with 28 finished interviews with subjects. 8 subjects who could attend face to face meetings and other subjects were interviewed using real-time online messaging applications. Interviews took between 30 minutes to two hours. We reviewed interviews twice to identify major problems that subjects faced in such cases. In each interview, key statements related to major problems were thematically coded and marked for further analysis. A long list of problematic themes was then developed which we used to compare experiences of subjects in order to reveal similarities and differences. Then we tried to come up with a shortlist of conditions that could explain such thematic problems.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Conceptual Dilemma

An important factor that complicates the reaction of social media users to the perceived death of their cyber acquaintances is the concept of death itself. The death report implies the question of what happened to whom. In this section we discuss the 'what' component that looks into the impression of a user's death in social media.

In real-world cases, death means that the deceased stops being present in our daily lives, even though traces of his/her past presence might be readily available in our

surrounding space. In cyberspace, however, death doesn't literally remove the deceased as we knew him/her from the space. According to Subject #6, death of a user felt "as if their body is still here; it just stopped moving." In real-life, the act of removing the body from the daily space, the burial, is an essential element of the grieving process, without which the relatives can hardly begin to mourn the loss. This act is almost non-existent in today social media platforms – though technical options are being developed for users to formulate a protocol for after-death events of their social media profiles, for example deleting the profile upon requests of friends or after a certain period of inactivity, transferring username and password to a friend, or posting an obituary, which may or may not further complicate current situation.

This "confusing situation," as called by Subject #23, is one of the first things our subjects encountered because exploring the social media upon hearing the death report was a fairly common behavior among our subjects. 21 subjects (12 females and 9 males) mentioned that the first thing they did was to return to social media. More interesting was that eleven subjects (7 females and 4 males) said their first action was to check the deceased's profile. However, the meanings they associated with the profile-checking were not consistent. Some users used the profile to represent the deceased himself, while others equated the deceased's profile with her space of cyber life. According to Subject #23:

> When my grandmother died after struggling with death for six months, I immediately went to her home and spent an hour or so in her room. When I heard about my friend's death, I immediately went to her profile. I think it was the cyber equivalent of what I did in offline life.

And to Subject #17 it was unclear whether the profile represented her friend, his space of life or his past effects on a life space:

> There [on his profile], everything was normal. His page was exactly similar to one I had checked the night before his accident. It was as if I were the first one to leave a comment there after he was gone. I wrote: "I can't believe it…"

Though such 'disbelief' might be rhetorical in the sense that any person facing such a situation might be expected to say similar things, in cyberspace it has some literal merit as well. In fact, some subjects felt that death did not strike the virtual personhood of another user the way it struck living organisms. That is why Subject #19 felt that his deceased friend is "half dead-half alive":

> I can mention him in a public post. I can send him a private message. The only difference is that he doesn't answer. And sometimes this does not feel that different from the time he was among us. You know, he rarely answered me immediately. Sometimes it took him 24 hours to reply my message. So, if I send

> him a message, I know I should wait for at least 24 hours. And sometimes I send him a message, and find myself actually waiting for a response. An eternal waiting, one might say.

The idea of death as 'eternal waiting' is an interesting observation, in parallel with remarks of Subject #10 who received delayed announcement of his friend's death:

> He was dead for four days and I didn't know it. During those days, I mentioned him and left him comments four or five times. I thought he might be on a vacation or have lost his connection for some reason. All of a sudden, I found out I'd been waiting for a dead person to answer.

The same idea is also relevant to the experience of Subject #25 who used "vegetative state of life" to compare virtual impression of the death of a user to the current condition of his hospitalized grandfather, as well as the experience of Subject #15 who compared her dead friend to her uncle who went missing-in-action in the battlefield. (Battlefield aside, the comparison was especially meaningful to Subject #15 because her friend died while they were in the middle of doing a common term paper together.) Other metaphors such as spirit, ghost, and not-known-to-us presence were also used by subjects to describe pseudo-presence of deceased users. The latter term was offered by the self-identified religious Subject #9 who referred to Islamic teachings to describe how he felt about the deceased user:

> Quran tells us that the Shahid [Martyr] is not really gone, rather alive and present in a way that we can't comprehend. Here [in social media], he was working for the good of people and had Godly intentions in mind. I find his death somehow resembling martyrdom.

This view is echoed in statements of Subject #2, another self-identified religious user, who said that she felt "he witnesses our actions." Put together, such descriptions point to the fact that for many users, the deceased users are not, in terms used by Subject #19, "that dead," or in terms used by Subject #13, "they are not gone – yet."

In this regard, Subject #26 made a quite interesting observation. According to him, a software engineer, right now AI-based bots are being developed that can mine the written data produced by a user (or, for that matter, groups of users) and produce texts which feel like they are originally written by the user in question:

> They are still in experimental phases, not surprisingly error-ridden, grammatically and otherwise. But just imagine a future time when the bots could create and follow appropriately meaningful texts and conversations, or in our technical terms, pass the Turing Test. This bot would not feel different to me than the actual user with whom I've solely had written interaction.

To stretch it a bit, he proposed a thought experiment: a dying person activating an efficient text-producer bot on their profile without informing anyone. She therefore would enjoy an eternal life because, in the terms used by Subject #26, "the aliveness is in the eyes of the uninformed beholder."

3.2. Rational Denial

In the original Kübler-Ross model, denial may be interpreted as an effort to counter facts which constitute the traumatic event. Such an effort is bound to be fruitless in real-world cases. The cyberspace, however, leaves room for doubts grounded in rational thinking. Since several cases of death reports in social media have been established to be faked by either the user in question or others, there is always the risk of falling victim to a fake death report, especially for those who hardly have any offline access to each other. On a more benign level, misinformation or honest mistake of another user is always an option. According to our findings, doubting the truthfulness of the news was a fairly common reaction among the subjects. Subject #14 recalls his first few hours after reading the death report before it was confirmed:

> I prayed for the news to be false. I even hoped it would be fake because it was easier for me to be fooled than to lose her forever.

Subjects #5 and #21 mentioned that they thought it might be an April Fool's hoax, though the thought was easily refuted by remembering the date. Though 'doubt' is a good choice of term to describe the nature of their reaction, their doubt seemed to be triggered by a defense mechanism rather than a rational analysis of the situation. That was why we chose the term 'denial.'

Such a rational denial doesn't end with doubting the truthfulness of the death reports. A subtler version of denial on yet another level, probably aimed at alleviating the pain of losing someone, occurs when the subject reconsiders his/her relationship with the deceased. According to Subject #8:

> I thought of us as close, even intimate, friends. That night [upon her death], I checked our latest exchanges of comments on each other's posts. The last comment she left in my profile was two weeks old, and my last two comments on her profile were left unanswered. Perhaps we were not that close at all.

This type of reaction is closely interrelated with Relational Confusion which will be discussed later. However, there is a difference. Relational confusion is an extension (and sometimes intensified version) of the ambiguous relationship that existed between two users prior to the death event, while in this type of denial there is a rethinking process at work, a deliberate act of posthumous analysis of the relationship.

In this sense, several factors may make the subject rethink his/her relationship with the deceased. Evidences that support the rethinking process or its triggers might come from within the space of subject-deceased relationship (as already mentioned in the case of Subject #8) or from without it. In the latter case, the most frequently mentioned outside trigger of or ground for the rethinking process is the poor attention that the subject receives after the trauma. Facing the loss, the subject who had an established relationship with the deceased might look for evidence to reaffirm his/her sense, and sometimes the evidence is expected to come in the form of others' endorsement of their relationship which usually translates into condolences and signs of sympathy with the traumatized. While the quantity of received attention does matter, its quality (i.e. those kinds of attention that define the relationship of the subject with the deceased) seems to be more important. According to our findings, statements such as "you were close friends" or "you were like a sister to her" are proved to be most reassuring for the traumatized in reaffirming his/her sense of their past relationship. However, if the subject is denied the attention he/she expects, he/she might have solid grounds to rethink his/her relationship with the deceased. In an extreme case, the sister of the deceased announced publicly that she would not want any cyber friend to attend her sibling's funeral and refused to give out information. This denial was especially hurtful to Subject #1:

> It was like waking up of a dream. I was so immersed in cyber relationships that I couldn't understand they were just virtual. They do not mean a thing to real people, you know, to people of blood and flesh. For a long time after that, I could not trust sincerity of cyber friendships.

For Subject #1, the denial translated into denouncing her long-held belief in cyber closeness, giving rise to a form of conceptual dilemma. This sort of give and take between various problematic conditions that subjects might face is a bit further discussed in later sections of the paper.

3.3. Situational Puzzlement

A factor that regulates a person's reaction to a traumatic event is the nature of the incident, or, in other words, the answer to a primary question: how did it happen? The 'how' refers to both the cause of death as well as the quality of the deceased's life around the death event.

In fact, death of a terminally ill person, getting killed in an accident and suicide evoke different sentiments in relatives of the deceased. In our study, 8 subjects received a properly detailed account of the event alongside the death reports, while 19 subjects had to wait between 2 to 72 hours to get the information. And Subject #27 never found out what had actually happened:

> Some say it was an accident. There is a rumor that she committed suicide. One of her relatives insisted it had been a staged suicide. Since I live abroad, I may never know the truth.

Several subjects pointed out that being unaware of the circumstances of their friends' deaths made them feel hanging in the balance, overwhelmed, puzzled or emotionally swinging. In one of the cases we investigated, the cause of the death was unknown to other users for three days until a sibling of the deceased briefed fellow users. This period of not-knowing is in some ways much more horrible than instantly being informed of even the most tragic events because the subject failed to find his/her way through the situation. Subject #11 who found out his friend was killed in a car accident recalls his wanderings:

> I went back and forth, again and again, from simplest to most frightening scenarios. I was trying to avoid contemplating the suicide scenario, though that thought didn't leave me alone. Through his posts and comments I had felt he had been depressed and in one of our last brief chats we had discussed the worth of life. I was very busy those days [before his death] and didn't have much time to talk with him. If he had committed suicide, I could never have forgiven myself.

Though none of the deceased users in our research were proven to commit suicide, at least 6 subjects said they thought their friend might have committed suicide. The prevalence of this thought was discussed with Subject #26 who attributed it to "generally unhappy atmosphere" of the posts that his circle of friends shared on the social media:

> There, people rarely talk about personal accomplishments while talking about misfortunes is commonplace, as if being alone or failing in one aspect of life or another is fashionable. Many users try to solicit sympathy, whether knowingly or not.

Many subjects mentioned that in the absence of actual evidences of death, such a guessing game makes it emotionally difficult to believe that their friend is actually gone. Hence, this aspect of situational puzzlement may further complicate the Conceptual Dilemma discussed in section 4.1.

The cause of death aside, the life circumstances of the deceased play a significant role in the subject's reaction to the death reports. Initially, the subjects often want to know how the deceased felt about life before his/her death. In her remarks, Subject #3 best summarized this aspect of situational puzzlement: "if I knew he was happy, I would feel much better." Subject #17 recalled that during the course of their somehow extensive private exchanges, her friend had once admitted he was homosexual. Given the generally unpleasant life of non-straight men in Iran, he kept it a highly guarded secret and they never talked about it again. After his death due to "natural causes" which she was either unwilling or incapable of explaining, she found out he had been in a fulfilling relationship:

> After a week or so, his partner sent me a private message. He introduced himself and after a while we met each other. Apparently the deceased had told his partner about me. They had a good relationship, a somehow functional one I assume. I was relieved.

The more tragic cases, such as the death of an old person, a newlywed groom and a new mother of an infant, however, evoke vastly different sentiments in subjects. The latter case actually happened to Subject #28:

> Since the time she found out she was pregnant, most of her posts were about the baby. The day after the labor, she posted something like 'I'm fine, baby is fine, we are happy' and we didn't hear a thing for a few days. Then she came again with a lot of posts to share about her newly found motherhood. When the baby was 4 months old, she died in a car accident. For a whole month, I was almost useless. I couldn't do anything. I was literally depressed.

Furthermore, sharing the pain of others, especially that of close relatives of the deceased, seems to be a common reaction to the trauma. Subject #4 remembered that her friend's parents had only her in their life, which made her death hurtful to all the people around her:

> She had two older siblings who both had immigrated overseas. After she got her master degree, she decided to stay with her parents. It didn't last long. One year later, she was gone too.

Many users who were uncertain about the circumstances of the deceased's life said that they had a hard time finding or establishing their "true emotional state." According to Subject #14, this made his relationship with the deceased even vaguer than it was, or in other words, exacerbated Relational Confusion which will be discussed in the next section.

3.4. Relational Confusion

In the context of social media, "Who died?" is a tricky question for several reasons, the most important one of which might be the problematic situation of cyber personhood which was discussed in section 4.1. That aside, here we deal with two additional problems: (1) occasionally obscure personal information, and (2) lack of well-defined online relationship models.

Using pen names and deliberately obscuring offline identities is a common practice in Persian social media. This practice helps users avoid disturbing real-life consequences, be more open about private aspects of their life and personality that they wouldn't dare to announce publicly, and modulate projection of their offline identities onto their desired cyber image. Moreover, users of online spaces tend to lie about some biographical information, especially gender, age and marital status. Hence, users might have reasons to

doubt or be actually unaware of some basic personal information of each other. Even though the deceased users in our research were fairly open and trustworthy about their biographical information such as gender and age, it was possible to locate some blind spots, the most important of which was relationship status.

To our best knowledge, 15 deceased users were believed by subjects to be in some sort of relationship – married, engaged, or otherwise having a significant person in their lives. The remaining subject-deceased pairs never actually had a romantic relationship. In 5 cases, however, the subjects and the deceased had some sort of feelings for each other at one point or another during their interactions. For Subject #12 whose "moment" with the deceased was almost two weeks before his death, the traumatic event left her with unanswered questions:

> During those two weeks, he sometimes wrote romantic things that I interpreted, or wanted them, to be about me. But did they actually refer to me? Were we on the verge of becoming special to each other? I may never know.

Though such anxieties may also occur in real-world relationships, solely verbal cues of social media in a high-context culture such as the Iranian one are more likely to lead to confusion, especially if they are framed as indirect talks which are a common practice in romantically-themed posts in Persian social media.

Romantic possibilities aside, lack of non-verbal communications proved to be problematic for subjects in yet other ways. In fact, 6 subjects had never seen a photo of the deceased and 22 subjects had never heard the deceased's voice. Somehow strangely, this made it difficult for some subjects to establish the form of their relationships with the deceased because of the deceased's "vague personhood," according to Subject #21, who also called her circle of friends "worse than the city of blinds":

> Even the city of blinds is blessed with touch, with tone, with smells. Here, we only communicate through written words. He was a nice guy, but sometimes I could hardly understand who I was talking to.

Her case was actually rare because many users of the social media reveal enough of their 'personhood' in long-term interactions. However, she pointed to a problem which is fairly understandable from a certain point of view. Security and safety concerns have created serious "trust issues," as Subject #22 put it, in the Persian-speaking cyberspace, leading many users to limit the amount of identifiable information they share about themselves. Within such a highly secretive atmosphere, deciding to share more than just impersonal written texts and very basic background information would establish a level of trust between the users which improves their closeness while deciding otherwise would create question marks. And deciding otherwise would highlight significant question marks. According to Subject #2:

> Against my implied requests, he never revealed anything about his real-life existence besides the fact that he was a man in his twenties, living in Tehran as an office clerk. For all I know, he could be any man I saw in the streets.

More specifically, being unaware of the educational background of the deceased was also among problematic issues mentioned by some users. Subject #5, a student of psychology, stated that though her friend usually wrote about everyday issues, sometimes their interactions felt like talking with a university professor, a psychology professor in particular, because "his comments were deeply scientific and analytic." It seems that in the absence of other clues in social media, educational background is a significant determinant or predictor of the personality. The relevance of personality to interpersonal communications is also established elsewhere.

To address the second question raised earlier, it should be noted that cyber relationships are not well-defined as many users struggle to map the nature of their electronic exchanges onto more familiar offline types of interactions in order to find their way through various situations. However, the models established to explain offline social relationships such as parent-child, siblings, friends, classmates, teacher-student, coworkers, etc. seem to be inadequate to model the relationships that people develop and experience in cyberspace. This problem is best described by Subject #18 in her reflections on hearing the death reports:

> Then I kept thinking who was she [the deceased] to me: intimate or close friend, classmate, sister, or neighbor? She was all and yet none of them.

The problem seems to be more acute for people who are new to social media. Subject #13 had only been a social media user for one year when he heard about the death of his friend. He says:

> I knew I lost someone valuable. He was one of my first cyber friends, as if you are new to a social group and someone makes you feel welcome. But I couldn't allocate him a certain place in my mind. There were contradictions: we could not meet in person because we lived in too far apart cities, yet he knew things about me that I would share with very few close people in my life. That was strange because I used to only share my secrets if I could look at someone's eyes.

Inadequacy of offline social relationship models to explain online ones keeps subjects confused. This might be a temporary problem as an ongoing, though slow, collective effort is underway to define new models effective in making sense of online relationships. Regardless of the reasons, however, relational confusions may well persist beyond the death event, making it difficult for the subject to make sense of his/her loss.

3.5. Environmental Inconsistency

In real-world cases, people around the person traumatized by the death of a friend try to provide a comforting or reassuring atmosphere for him/her. They offer condolences, hold their otherwise personal happiness to themselves, sympathize with him/her, and let him/her know that, in the words of Subject #3, "she is not alone in her pain." The series of appropriate behavior around the traumatized person, called 'mourning etiquette' by Subject #3, are much easier to observe in a real-world case due to spatial and temporal limits.

The cyberspace, however, makes it much more difficult, if not impossible, to behave properly around the person who has experienced a loss. In stark contrast with real-world cases, there is no nonverbal clue such as sad face or black dress to indicate the loss. Hence, many subjects decide to announce the news to their friends. The announcement alarmed the friends who then struggled to be nice, but they often failed, at least in the eyes of the traumatized beholder. Once she realized her friend was gone, Subject #7 posted an obituary. She was known to be a close friend of the deceased and received several condolences from her friends. Then she explored the stream of notes her friends had posted:

> I'm not sure; maybe 1 in 20 posts had something to do with her death. They either didn't know about her, or just had moved on.

Among her 138 friends on the social media, Subject #7 had only 12 friends in common with the deceased and not all of them were close enough to the deceased to post something about her death. The general atmosphere of her stream was not that of "shock, sadness or mourning." Such inconsistent atmosphere was typical of the situation most of our subjects had experienced. Sometimes it was even worse. Subject #16 recalled a furious encounter with one of his friends:

> One of my friends, whom I suspected knew the deceased, posted a joke. I got mad at him, really mad. I left him an angry comment.

Environmental inconsistency sometimes keeps the subject from focusing on the trauma. This may help the subject come into terms with the traumatic event. According to Subject #8:

> I found other users talking about their usual stuff. In fact, very few people I know on the social media were affected by her death. It was as if I took a walk in a nearby street or shopping center. And that was exactly what I did when I was abroad and heard about my cousin's death.

Reading others' 'normal' stuff arouses emotional states in the subject which are far different from grief. These states may actually overcome the grieving feeling. In a rare case,

Subject #20 found out that another cyber friend gave birth to a daughter on the same day her friend passed away:

> I suddenly felt relieved. One dies, another one comes to life. That's the circle of life. Suddenly, it all felt very natural.

However, if the new emotional states fail to overcome the grief, the mere presence of contradicting emotional states may translate into rage, an outcome of the subject's effort to help grief overcome rival emotions, which was evident in the case of aforementioned Subject #16.

In order to impose environmental consistency, at least six subjects had asked their friends to be "more caring," which means observing 'mourning etiquette' referred to by aforementioned Subject #3. These six subjects were more or less content with the reaction of their friends who tried to sympathize with them. Two of them decided to create a private temporary community of friends who shared sympathy for the deceased, a "mourning forum" according to Subject #4:

> For three or four days I only visited that page. There we shared memories, relevant quotes and sad poems, and sometimes reshared some of her older posts and discussed it. Over the time, the number of contributions declined and after three months the community was almost inactive, though even after two years sometimes people post things there, especially on anniversaries of her death.

Some of the subjects who failed to impose consistency decided to leave the media temporarily. Subject #13 recalled that after exploring the stream of notes for three or four hours, he decided not to return to the media for some days until he could put himself together. In several cases, subjects tried to attend the actual funeral of the deceased, perhaps in order to both find themselves in a consistent atmosphere where they could mourn the loss and overcome the conceptual dilemma discussed earlier. In addition, the interrelatedness of Environmental Inconsistency and Conceptual Dilemma will be discussed in the next section as well.

Yet another important aspect of Environmental Inconsistency occurs when others don't recognize the intimate pain someone feels upon the death of a user. It was most acute in the case of Subject #12:

> His death shocked our circle of friends. And at least in that circle, I assumed I was his best friend, if not more significant. We had some really extensive interaction going on publicly. But it seemed that to the eyes of other users, our friendship was as casual as any. It wasn't and it hurt me that it was not recognized. But maybe I was wrong in my assumption.

Such instances clearly might also reinforce the relational confusion.

3.6. Discussion: Interrelated Problematic Conditions

In almost exclusively cyber relationships, both factual and subjective elements of the perceived death of a close acquaintance are open to doubt, negotiation, reevaluation, and ultimately redefinition. Users who receive reliable reports of the death of a close cyber acquaintance go through a series of mental wanderings, at least initially: What does the death of an exclusively cyber friend mean? Compared to real-life events, is there more room for denial? How were the circumstances of their death? What was our relationship? And why does it look different from a real-life death? Our observations demonstrated that these uncertainties were interrelated. The categorized version of these problematic conditions and their reinforcing relations are shown in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Problematic Conditions and Their Interrelatedness
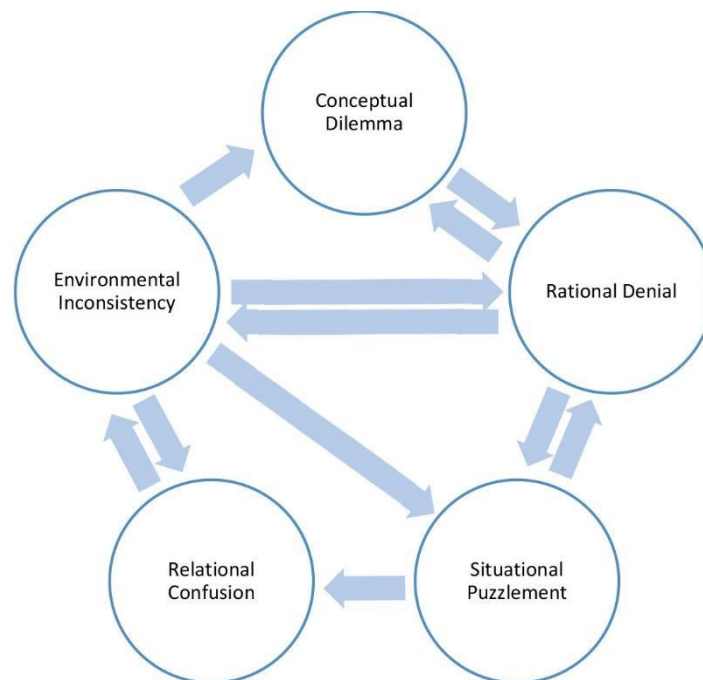
As it can be seen in the above chart, each mode of uncertainty, from the most apparent (Environmental Inconsistency) to the most philosophical (Conceptual Dilemma), may induce or be induced by other modes, whether directly or indirectly. That is why and how a state of uncertainty haunts the traumatized, at least for a while.

4. Conclusion

The ambiguous nature of many aspects of cyber life, compounded by Iranian local culture, has created highly complicated reactions of Iranians to the death of their cyber acquaintances. Such obscure circumstances bring about many sources of uncertainty, and anxiety, in users dealing with the death of their exclusively cyber companions. They might wonder about the meaning of such a death, how reliable it is, the circumstances of the death, their relationship to the deceased, and the unfamiliar mourning space they encounter. Based on our observations, each one of these sources of uncertainty might strengthen or induce others. This might ultimately redefine the nature of death for the subjects.

The learned concept of death, in its turn, helps users make sense of and interpret later death events in online (or even offline) situations. In its most abstract form, death of an online friend seems to be understood as a fuzzy state of presence or absence, neither alive enough nor dead enough. They usually begin to reconsider definitive elements of their wanderings in order to come to terms with the death of their cyber companions through removing some of their cognitive and emotional dissonances. Additionally, in most cases, time seemed to be the ultimate cure.

This study suggests future research to examine the case of the younger generation who might be different from those who adopted such technologies at a later point in their lives (which was the case for our subjects). In a more expansive sense of "knowing the deceased," one could include instances of one-way interactions, such as people hearing the news about the death of celebrities. The reactions of the users to such events may deserve a deeper exploration, especially given the rather richer history of such incidents before the arrival of modern communication technologies.

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