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Voices Behind the Screen: Twitch Streamer Byron Daniel Bernstein's (Reckful) Community Left Behind with Grief

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Abstract

There is limited qualitative research on our understanding of grief experienced in online relationships. A relationship that starts online and is expressed online comes to a one-sided abrupt end. So, how does the griever express themselves afterwards? Our real-life family and friends may or may not know about our online activities and relationships due to its personal nature, therefore an abrupt ending to an online relationship may not be acknowledged by the people we most want to express our grief towards, thus resulting in disenfranchised grief (Doka 2002). My dissertation research aims to shed light on the untold stories of those who have grieved a relationship that was born and lived online, on Twitch. The person that was grieved for was never met, yet the emotional weight of losing a close friend was experienced by all participants. These are my interpretations of the lived experiences of four members from Byron Daniel Bernstein's (Reckful) grieving Twitch community.

Keywords: Twitch, Parasocial Relationships, Online Grief, Disenfranchised Grief, Hermeneutic Phenomenology

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To my spring of joy, my family, friends, and colleagues who have supported me through COVID isolation, uncertainty and growth, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

In dedication to my uncle, Süha, who passed away too soon. A part of him will always live on inside me.

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Introduction

On July 2nd, 2020 the Twitch (Twitch is a live-streaming platform for gamers and other lifestyle casters that supports building communies around a shared game and/or interest) community livestreamer Byron Daniel Bernstein, better known as "*Reckful*" (a smart play on words on delivering a characteristic of anti-recklessness and calculated behavior), took his own life by jumping off his apartment balcony. He was one of the pioneers of livestreaming and among the first who made his living through playing games and broadcasting his experiences online. Linking your paypal to directly donate to streamers was first used by Byron (Reckful). Byron (Reckful) had 950,000 followers on Twitch. It can be suggested that Byron's (Reckful) example led to future streamers having more agency over their own living. A void was left in his place to many people's surprise all over the world. Like me, most knew Byron (Reckful) by his Twitch streams and nothing more; however, my grief was akin to losing a close personal friend. The responses I saw online echoed the same message. People were shocked hearing the news, but they later felt intense grief and were surprised that they could grieve over a relationship formed to a streamer by only watching him on his livestreams (streams for short). I experienced the same feelings of grief, but my focus was on how I couldn't share my grief to my immediate friends and family due to them not having any knowledge of Byron's (Reckful) existence, yet he held importance in my life. This reasoning led me to talk with others from Byron's (Reckful) Twitch community to uncover their experiences.

The aim of this research study is centered around Byron Daniel Bernstein's (Reckful) community and toward understanding grief in a so called *"parasocial relationship."* I put parasocial relationship in quotations because I hesitate to define this relationship as parasocial because while it does have characteristics of parasocial, the existence of communication between the two individuals, although online, defies the definition of parasocial interaction. A parasocial

relationship is a term initially highlighted by Horton and Wohl (1956) in referring to regular viewers that have come to feel that they know, for example, familiar television personalities almost as friends. This blurring of the lines between *"real"* and *"fake"* relationships and the inability to distinguish what was a fake and real relationship was the concern of psychologists in defining parasocial relationships.

Twitch

Livestreaming is different from other video sharing websites such as YouTube (YouTube is a video sharing service where users can watch, like, share, comment and upload their own videos) or Vimeo (Vimeo is a video-sharing website that allows members to view, upload and share videos) where the video is posted after its completion; however, on Twitch everything is live. The stream of video is broadcasted to viewers with a 1.5 second delay and a simultaneous chatroom (shortly called as chat) is present next to the livestream, consisting of numerous *"chatters"* that reply and give live feedback to everything done on stream. This creates an immediate feedback loop between the streamer and the viewers (Bandura 1997). The existence of options for immediate communication is the reason behind my defiance to the "parasocial relationship" tag that has been attributed to the sort of relationship fostered between streamer and viewers on Twitch. Some streams can have upwards of 100,000 viewers and even if 5% were to write at a certain time that still means 5000 chatters.

The morning of Reckful's suicide, as I read through Reddit (Reddit is a social news website and forum where content is socially curated and promoted by site members through voting, members can also have discussions under topics expressing their ideas on different topics), I saw people's reactions online and compared them to my own, I realized that this wasn't a unique situation.

Everyone was having strong reactions to hearing about Byron's (Reckful) passing and were confused that they had such grief towards someone they had never met (Reddit 2020). I came to the understanding that a relationship originated online can be truly understood online and consequently grieved online. I have additionally strengthened my case by using quotes from online reactions around the time of his death to understand the mental space of the grievers. These resources consist of Reddit posts, YouTube videos, interview quotes and Twitch streams expressing many examples of shock, disbelief and confusion upon Reckful's passing.

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial interaction or parasocial relationship is a term heavily used in the streaming community to describe the one-sided relationships of viewers, where one person extends emotional energy, interest and time, and the other party, the persona, the performer, is completely unaware of the other's' existence. This relationship behavior is most seen in dedicated fans of certain brands or celebrities. The parasocial relationship can also be observed in habits of catching up with what the interested party is doing inside and outside of his/her professional appearance. Getting emotionally invested by their daily social media posts or obsessive responding to get attention can be observed in the fans unaware of what appropriate social behavior is when they try to communicate with their idols or celebrities. There is an inherent negative connotation of parasitic behavior in the word parasocial and for there to be a parasite there must be a host. Thus, this definition paints the image of a viewer feeding on the streamer and the streamer feeding on the income of his/her viewers for their livelihood. The argument for who is the parasite in this relationship can be debated for both sides. A popular streamer 39Daph, describes how an extreme account of parasocial relationship looks like.

It can kind of go off the deep end in what some people describe as a parasocial relationship where they (the viewer) become too attached to you (the streamer). Where they see you as an actual friend that they have and get mad on your behalf and things like that. So, I feel like that is kind of a boundary that you have to set as a streamer but it's hard to gauge where that line is. (Daph 2021)

If we were to view streaming as an exchange between two parties, both parties are getting compensated therefore this relationship is better defined by limited mutual-social interaction where both parties benefit from the situation; however, one party is limited in their ability to interact with the other. The problem lies in the fact that the viewer and the streamer don't stand on equal terms when it comes to holding power of speech. The streamer is able to freely express themselves while the viewer must type in chat, donate or subscribe to get their point across, therefore has limited interaction capabilities. The attention of the stream is the currency in this exchange and the streamer holds the power to shine the spotlight on wherever they please. I do; however, think that parasocial has a negative connotation and whether changing that term can help in how this relationship is perceived is up for debate. At the moment the most popular way to describe this feeling of closeness to a person you have not met is described as parasocial relationship therefore this word was mostly used by me and the interviewees in these interviews. The interviews I have undertaken were video and audio recorded, watched, transcribed and analyzed for 7 main themes. These themes are online grief, parasocial relationships, disenfranchised grief, devalued grief, reactions to grief, grief online vs. offline, and lastly, the community aspect of online grief.

Literature Review

Online Grief

The space for online bereavement is new and uncharted because computer interactions on human behavior is a new field of study. Facebook (Facebook is a website which allows users, who sign-up for free profiles, to connect with friends, work colleagues or people they don't know, online) has been at the center of online grief because a user's profile filled with comments and photos can continue to exist after their death. Therefore, the person continue to exist post-mortem on the most popular social media used by humans, and the platforms emphasis on photos allows Facebook to become something that they never intended to, a space for post-mortem interaction (Walter 2012). In a short amount of time small crowds started gathering around profiles of the deceased for remembrance, leading to another study conducted by Sofka and her colleagues (2012) suggesting that advances in computer-mediated communication, have changed *"the death system"* allowing online memorials, virtual cemeteries and spaces for social support to occur instantaneously. Grieving people want to continue to analyze their personal loss and reactions to it after the person passes away to extract personal meaning out of the incident (Smartwood 2011).

Trans-corporeal communication (TCC) is a key concept of grieving wherein, the griever continues their bond with the deceased by creating an inner representation of that person in lieu of the actual person. Feedback for this communication is based on what the sender believes the deceased would say or do (DeGroot 2009). Trans-corporeal communication (TCC) conceptualization suggests bonds with the deceased do not need to be severed entirely, but rather are transformed so the living can grow and recover from the event. Small acts of meaningful remembrance are also an example of continuing that bond/communication for oneself (Walter 2012). The above-mentioned studies

were later analyzed by Moore and colleagues (2019) transforming these concepts of grieving (that were first spotted in the 2010's because it coincided with the inception of most social media websites) into contemporary social media mourning concepts wherein he describes the reason for social media mourning in three separate ways. This indicates causal conditions of social media mourning as:

(a) sharing information with family or friends and (sometimes) beginning a dialog

(b) discussing death with others mourning

(c) discussing death with a broader mourning community

(d) commemorating and continuing connection to the deceased

Moore et al. (2019) (p. 231) has also previously pointed out that loved ones go through the bereavement process by sharing stories and pictures which works hand in hand with the format of online communities.

A discussion board on Facebook that was formed by family members and friends of a deceased child was studied by Keskinen et al. (2019). Most of the loved ones of the deceased child shared photographs and captions to express their emotions about the grieving process. Their behavior patterns and purposes overlapped with Moore et al.'s (2019) four concepts of social media mourning listed above. This study also showcased another side of online bereavement which is, photographs of loved ones appearing in front of you again and again on social media. This encourages loved ones to accept the death of the deceased as the photographs are a constant reminder of their new loss and change in life (Blood 2014). Photography is an area where the old and new meet, looking through old photographs through whatever medium may be universal among all ages. Grieving through looking at old, developed photographs was done long time ago

and it still exists in another form today through our browsers or phones looking at profiles on Facebook or Instagram (Instagram is a free, online photo-sharing application and social network platform that was acquired by Facebook in 2012). Another study conducted by Brubaker and Hayes (2011) found online memorialization melds existing post-mortem practices and communication with new technologies in the area of photography.

In online grief communities, bereaved individuals not only turn inward, but towards the group for a sense of identity and appropriate behavior. The evolution and transformation of our grieving behaviors is perfectly captured by Egnoto et al. (2014). They also present two variables important to how people grieve online, the first being personal religious activity and the second being gender differences which serves as a tool on how grievers perceive what are socially acceptable behaviors. What is acceptable or not and maintaining a coherent self-identity within the self and the group is important in online bereavement in young adolescents (Turner 1986).

> *"Online grieving acts in part as a time and emotion saving aid, then we see that online grief is not the genesis of new grieving behaviors, but rather the evolution of pre-existing behaviors to accommodate new technologies and facilitate easier interactions while meeting social expectations"* (Egnoto 2014) (p. 300).

Grief & Mourning

A major difference between online and offline bereavement is how grief is constructed by the griever to his/her social circle. Different expectations come from immediate friends and family. In times where immediate friends and family might want the griever to go back to *"their normal behaviors"* (this may be not crying, being happy again or wanting the griever to not feel depressed or sad) grievers may find that online, they can reveal their hidden challenges and seek validation

in a support group easier (Varga 2014). In this sense the grievers carry two personas, one online and one offline, in a bereavement support group, they felt more accepted as the social space was constructed for that purpose and tried to match the grievers pace (Döveling 2017).

An analysis by Falconer and his colleagues (2011) was conducted on grieving in the internet age through the lens of Worden's (2008) four tasks of mourning and how these tasks were transformed in social media appropriate alternatives.

Task 1: Accept the reality of the loss

Task 2: Work through the pain

Task 3: Readjust to the environment

Task 4: Reinvest in life and form a continued bond with the deceased (p. 38-50)

Their conclusion is that task 1 is empowered because more people can be notified of the loved ones passing and start grieving, the acceptance granted by confrontation with the deceased's body is replaced with pictures and notifications but the social acknowledgement from peers is present. In Task 2, creating a supportive environment for the griever is very important and this is one of the areas where the internet can provide a lot of support; however, can it be the only needed support is dependent on many independent factors. Task 3 can be shortly summarized as the deceased no longer employs a virtual space in the social media and that void space or if the profile is still online, but the person is deceased can create another acceptance of reality which can go toward the griever readjusting to the environment. Task 4 is where I believe online bereavement is empowering as this is where the griever reinvests in life and forms a continued bond with the deceased. As Byron (Reckful) also had commemorative paintings and t-shirts sold for charity after his suicide as well as Activison/Blizzard (the company who made World of Warcraft, the game he was famous for

playing) included him as a Non-playable Character in World of Warcraft in honor of his memory. This continuing bond is thus converted into objects and game characters wherein grievers can attach memories for meaning making side of bereavement which is to grapple with the new reality of continuing life after losing a loved one.

Twitch

Twitch plays an important role in this study as it acts as the link between the streamer and viewer to exist. The tools implemented in Twitch such as the streamer having a webcam, the simultaneous chatroom, instant communication and donations are enhancing factors that serve in establishing a relationship with the viewer.

In a mixed-methods study conducted by Diwanji et al. (2019) three live-streaming session chatlogs were examined. Information behavior type model (Sonnenwald 1999) where one user creates and publishes information (the streamer, performer) and the other users (viewers) who receive that information. The synchronous nature of Twitch allows the viewers to take one step further and offer advice from themselves regarding the game or whatever topic is at hand thus producing their own information and adding it into the pool of information. The cycle in movies and TV where the actor acts and the viewer silently views is thus altered by the viewer having the ability to talk and the streamer having the ability to react to said new information. The need to produce information; however, stems for different reasons for streamers and viewers.

> *"Streamers typically produce information for self-presentation, whereas viewers produce information to satisfy their need to belong"* (Diwanji 2019) (p. 7).

In line with social identity theory people communicate more often with those who they consider to be their in-group (Turner 1986). Twitch viewers often perform in-group norms through the use of

Twitch emotes or sub-channel emotes (these are similar to static or animated emoji's that are popularly used in smartphones; however, these exclusive emotes can only be used by subscribers who have paid 5$ to the channel they are supporting) engaging with the community to present their social identity to others. These in-group norms may come in the form of copy pasting memes that are familiar to the community, but it also shows to the streamer and others in chat their loyalty and status of supporter by displaying a badge alongside their name in the chat box that shows the number of months that they have supported the streamer (Dawkins 1976). These behaviors of viewers and streamers carry both aspects from information behavior and social identity theory. The viewer wins a sense of identity inside the streamers community by showcasing and getting recognized with this subscriber-badge.

Co-viewing / Co-presence / Co-experience

Twitch is quite unique in how it differs from other social media websites where the viewer and live streamer are co-present during the broadcast at the same time. They are connected through their shared interest in the livestream, co-presence is defined as the sense of being and acting with others (Slater 2000). There is an important differentiation between co-presence and co-viewing that needs to be addressed before moving on. Co-viewing is defined as group watching, in the digital era co-viewing can be achieved in multiple ways: physically accompanied by others or physically alone but virtually in the company of others, or both accompanied in physical and virtual environment. On platforms like Twitch, the live stream along with real time chat commentary from the streamer and other viewers facilitate a co-viewing experience that you can watch with friends or share the virtual environment with others. Awareness of co-viewing and other viewers can lead to the perception of co-presence within the virtual environment but is not a precondition for it (Sá 2018).

Even though the only social aspect of this virtual environment is the chat and the streamer, users unintentionally affect one another's states leading to said feeling of co-presence (Golland 2015).

Twitch channels and streamers are very different from each other therefore the level of feeling of co-presence and co-viewing felt by the viewer may vary from streamer to streamer. The reason a viewer cannot feel co-present can be due to a mismatch of viewer and streamer (Diwanji 2019). There are very close-knit communities who have high levels of co-presence where the viewers and streamers exchange game advice, personal life anecdotes, even one-on-one conversations; however, this is not the norm, nor can some streamers engage in one-on-one conversations with their viewers due to having too many chatters. Sometimes upwards of 100,000 viewers can be in the same chat and the chat becomes unreadable due to it flying so fast from new messages.

To summarize, the reason behind why people choose to keep watching livestreams, Hu et al. (2017) suggest that two aspects of social identification attract viewers to engage. The first being, broadcaster identification and second, group identification which both were found to be positively associated with continuous watching intention. Personal identification playing a big role in continuous watching intention also corresponds with prior studies which indicate psychological bond forming between individual and groups are important factors for loyalty behavior in virtual communities (Badrinarayanan 2015).

Parasocial Relationships on Twitch

Parasocial interaction is a frequent occurrence on Twitch due to the streamer and viewer being live at the same time leading to feelings of co-experiencing the same event (Slater 2000).

> *"Interpersonal involvement of the media user with what he or she consumes"* (Rubin 1985) (p. 156).

The interpersonal involvement with the streamer includes guidance seeking, friendship and a desire to meet the media figure. These parasocial interactions can evolve into parasocial relationship if the bond between spectator and media figure strengthens outside of the typical media exposures (Bostwick 2016). Parasocial interaction is defined when the viewer has no communication with the media figure in question although feels as though the media figure is his/her friend. Twitch has multiple communication tools between streamer to viewer and viewer to viewer systems in place that allow streamers and viewers to take part in each other's' conversations (Hilvert-Bruce 2018). In this sense although parasocial relationship formation is a very frequent occurrence on Twitch, the way this relationship forms aren't only by parasocial interactions, but rather social ones as well directed at the streamer and other viewers that are typing in chat. There is an inherent power difference between being the streamer that chooses to read out a comment and being on the other side as a viewer writing the comment but there is a tool for communication embedded into the platforms core. This aspect makes Twitch quite different from television, YouTube, Netflix and movies where the communication between the performer and viewer is not instant and undeniable. These relationships complement social relationships and even though people understand that they are not real, they still feel as if the connection they have with media figures is meaningful (Derrick 2008).

Twitch was established in 2011 and was bought by Amazon in 2014. The age demographic of Twitch is quite young and are in the most influential time of their lives. Forty-one percent of Twitch users are aged 16-24; and 32% are aged 25-34 (Kavanagh 2019). It can safely be said that Twitch viewers are young on average, this information paired with Gleason's (2017) study on parasocial interactions and relationships in early adolescents concludes that this age-range is common to form

parasocial relationships in adolescence and this might play a role in their adolescent identity formation and autonomy development.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to understand what the research participants' individual experiences were dealing with the grief of Byron's (Reckful) sudden suicide. Exploring what it was like to grieve someone whom you have only interacted as a Twitch viewer was the objective. As I have talked above, I am very much personally invested in this research therefore I feel as though taking myself out of the study would be a disservice to the study. My experiences of going through this process as well as my own reaction to Byron's (Reckful) sudden death was also investigated as contacting Twitch community members and talking about this topic has allowed me to digest what I went through in the last year.

Initially, epistemologically speaking, subjectivism was considered in order to capture each participant's unique perspective of grief; however, removing myself and my experience as someone who was also affected by Byron's (Reckful) suicide, would devalue my own experience of grief in this scenario. More so, not addressing my personal involvement would result in deceiving the viewer and not recounting the whole story. Therefore, maintaining a subjectivist as well as inter-subjectivist paradigm is optimal. Subjectivism allows me to dive into and understand my research participants' inner world. The inter-subjectivist paradigm enables me to reflect on the whole process of my involvement. Starting with my personal involvement, doing interviews with members of the community, getting to watch and read the conversations I have been a part of will undoubtedly impact my last thoughts while writing this dissertation. The inter-subjectivism also comes into play in the development of my relationship with participants and our mutual grief for Byron (Zlatev 2008).

Ontologically, all interviews undertaken with participants involved in this research study uncovered that each of them had different inner realities, experiences and emotions regarding the experience of going through online grief. This led me to affirm the variety of inner realities when it comes to grief. The aim of this study is to capture the participants' experiences through their words but also understand what they are trying to understand, what lies beneath their words (Ponterotto 2005).

Most articles used as reference in this dissertation are quantitative or use mixed-methods studies whereas this study is qualitative in nature but supported by articles using quantitative data. Previous researchers have used quantitative data instead of qualitative data due to practicality. Another goal of this study is to establish a qualitative link for other counsellors approaching online grief and possibly enrich their understanding of Twitch by providing qualitative approaches and findings taken from the personal narratives of the participants.

A positivist or post-positivist standpoint were found inadequate for the analysis of this study because a deep and qualitative understanding is needed in order to grasp the complexity of grief. The grief process is deeply personal and having a quantitative approach where research participants give their grief a numeric value between 0 and 10 to describe their internal pain seems like a lost opportunity for this research. The ability to talk with grievers and go into detail about their experiences means that grief was talked about in more detail than numeric data can provide. Positivism also emphasizes independence between the researcher and participant which this research is in opposite fashion to, embracing the relationship between the two parties (Tirassa 2008). As for post-positivism, ontologically it draws from relativist arguments of acknowledging multiple realities and the incomplete nature of knowledge which does align the multiple realities of grief; however, it still tries to minimalize biases in research and find an objective stance which

is not the objective of the interviews nor the study (Groff 2004). I believe that this topic and research couldn't have been developed through an objective lens precisely because I was personally affected by Byron's (Reckful) passing and wanted to investigate the online grief of other community members therefore subjectivity is what allowed this study to happen. The inter-subjectivism aim would also be lost if this research was conducted through a post-positivist paradigm as well as the qualitative nature that I believe is needed to give this phenomenon full understanding (Cummins 2014). Quantitative methodologies wouldn't be able to clearly capture the feelings and emotions related to grief which I do not assume that qualitative can fully either because an experience has to be lived rather than heard or read; however, it is better suited to interpret the emotions and experiences associated with grief.

Social situations are influential regarding grief and human concepts of grief is partly constructed through our interactions with one another; however, conducting a social constructivism or critical ideological paradigm would miss the deeply personal and subjective nature of this study and analyze the social aspects around the study rather than look at the core of the study (Lincoln 1994). I acknowledge that bereavement counselling has many social perspectives to consider ranging from how people deal with death to financial responsibilities and how we perceive death; however, I believe that approach would better suit researching a social group's collective understanding and perception of grief rather than their individual experience the members of the social group go through, which I'm more interested in uncovering in this research (Kalaga 2013).

My method of research consisted of interviewing and recording both video and audio involving four people who have not met or interacted in person with Byron (Reckful) but have experienced a significant amount of emotion (positive or negative) upon learning the news of his suicide and during their grief period. I had watched a video addressing Byron's (Reckful) community created

by dalex_live (2020) [which I will refer to as Alex], who had made a video concerning Byron's (Reckful) sudden death.

The two main reasons that I'm making this video. The first reason is I've been a part of his community for over 10 years. I'm a moderator on his Twitch channel (Moderators ensure that the chat meets the behavior and content standards set by the broadcaster by removing offensive posts and spam that detracts from conversations) *you might have seen me in chat. Some of the messages I've seen over the last 24 hours or I've received have been heart-breaking and really hard to deal with because a lot of people feel like they don't have anyone they can talk to about this (Byron's passing). They don't have anyone who understands Twitch, who understand the internet, who understands what being a part of the community was like. I was hooked and I was a part of his community ever since and his streams have been a constant beacon of happiness and enjoyment throughout the turbulence of life. I'm sure many of you who watch this or ever watched Reckful can relate to that for me through high school university relationships. Heart breaks family. Juggles multiple jobs, moving countries and just the ups and downs of life. Generally, Reckful was always there. You know his streams were always there. His content was always there to provide a welcome, laugh or distraction in tough times. So as a result of that, I think a lot of people right now are finding it difficult to communicate. The feelings they're having and about him to people in real life, because the two communities are very disconnected, and you know the word, parasocial has been thrown around, but I don't like that, so I don't want to get into that. But the short of it is that you are justified in feeling grief and sadness, even if you never met the guy, even if you never talked to him. Even if he didn't know you existed. The fact that he was a part of your life alone means you are justified in feeling whatever*

you want right now. Whatever you are feeling, I was lucky enough to meet him in person and spend a day with him. And it's a memory I look back on fondly to this day just. It was truly like meeting one of your heroes. Eventually, you know I got to know him a little bit. I became moderator in his chat. I helped him out with some stream things a few times. (dalex_live 2020)

Alex's words touched me as I felt that his words held true for me and my experience. This study was to confirm with others through interviews whether they too felt *like "they had no one to understand them"* what could be done to understand them and what may have helped in that situation.

I contacted Alex via e-mail (appendix 5) and inquired on how to find people that would be willing to get interviewed on this subject and maybe was distressed, shocked or wanted to share their thoughts. The video had close to 30,000 views out of Reckful's almost 1 million followers. Alex suggested I ask around in Reckful's Discord (Discord is a community communication app that allows you to chat and voice-call other users. Discord users connect to each other through Discord communities that are created and joined through common interests such as chess, gaming, technology or photography) that was created when he was alive and still is active to this day. I created a recruitment flyer (appendix 2) to distribute in order to have a larger pool of selection. I asked a moderator of the Discord community to post my message in the news thread to get more attention and afterward I received messages from 21 people. Some weren't recruited due to not meeting participant inclusion and exclusion criteria. Four people were chosen to interview that met criteria and were willing to be recorded and asked questions on the subject of Byron's (Reckful) sudden passing.

Participant Inclusion and exclusion criteria:

•	Above the age of 18

•	English speaking

•	Are a part of Reckful's Twitch community or have been affected by his sudden passing

•	Have never met Reckful in-person

•	Was a part of Reckful's Twitch community for at least 1 year before his passing

•	Felt strong emotions of grief upon learning of Reckful's passing

•	Felt confusion as to why you felt strongly for someone's death that you haven't even met in real life

•	Are not currently undergoing any form of therapeutic treatment for other mental health issues and is currently not using any psychotropic medications.

Any participants that agreed to being interviewed were contacted through e-mail and sent a recruitment flyer (appendix 2), participant information sheet (appendix 3); consent form (appendix 1) and interview questions (appendix 4). The consent form was also verbally approved prior to the interview on the Discord call by the participants. The recording of consent was uploaded onto the University of Edinburgh OneDrive. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym which does not replicate their Twitch username or any name they have used in other online communities. Discussing grief is a serious subject therefore these pseudonyms were changed to generic adult male names to anonymize all participants but still be able to understand who said what phrase.

The interviews were semi-structured and done one by one on separate days with the four members (appendix 4), on Discord to understand the seven themes relevant with my dissertation topic which I wanted to explore (Gilham 2000). The interviews were recorded using Open Broadcaster Software to record my screen and voice as well as the audio and video of the interviewees. Recordings were then immediately uploaded to the University of Edinburgh OneDrive and deleted from local drives. The duration of the interviews were between 25 to 45 minutes. The last interview didn't have interviewee's face camera; however, in my view there was no loss of quality. (I would like to suggest that video anonymity may be able to make people open up easier about topics of grief.) I have also undertaken a pilot interview to refine my questions and have made amendments to my interview questions adding in the last two questions to understand the grievers progression and current situation.

Questions were aimed towards uncovering some of these topics: How did it feel to hear the news of Byron's passing and hinting at the parasocial relationship aspect of it and how they felt about the use of this term and their relationship with Byron (Reckful) (1995). Did the research participants feel the need to grieve for Byron's (Reckful) passing, what was different from when/if they grieved someone who they knew personally? Bringing into the dialogue disenfranchised grief may have directed their experience and conversation towards this direction therefore I was reluctant to use this term in the interviews but eventually ended up using it as the interviewees were already presenting behavior that signaled disenfranchisement, so the conversations naturally included the topic. Providing the participants, a neutral but welcome environment was employed to prevent directing their experience or conversation but provide them a free zone to express themselves. I believe that my position of frequent Twitch viewer as well as someone who grieved for Byron's (Reckful) loss is biased but will make it easier for the research participants to share their honest

experiences and perspectives with me (Mazzei 2012). What I want to achieve through this research is to give broader context to grieving in the online sphere as well as what this unique relationship between viewers and live streamers on Twitch looks and feels like from the viewers' perspective. I believe that while other grief experiences may be similar this is an unknown in the counselling field (Fewell 2016). A debrief e-mail (appendix 6) was sent to all participants after the interview was completed that included additional information on bereavement care if they needed further guidance.
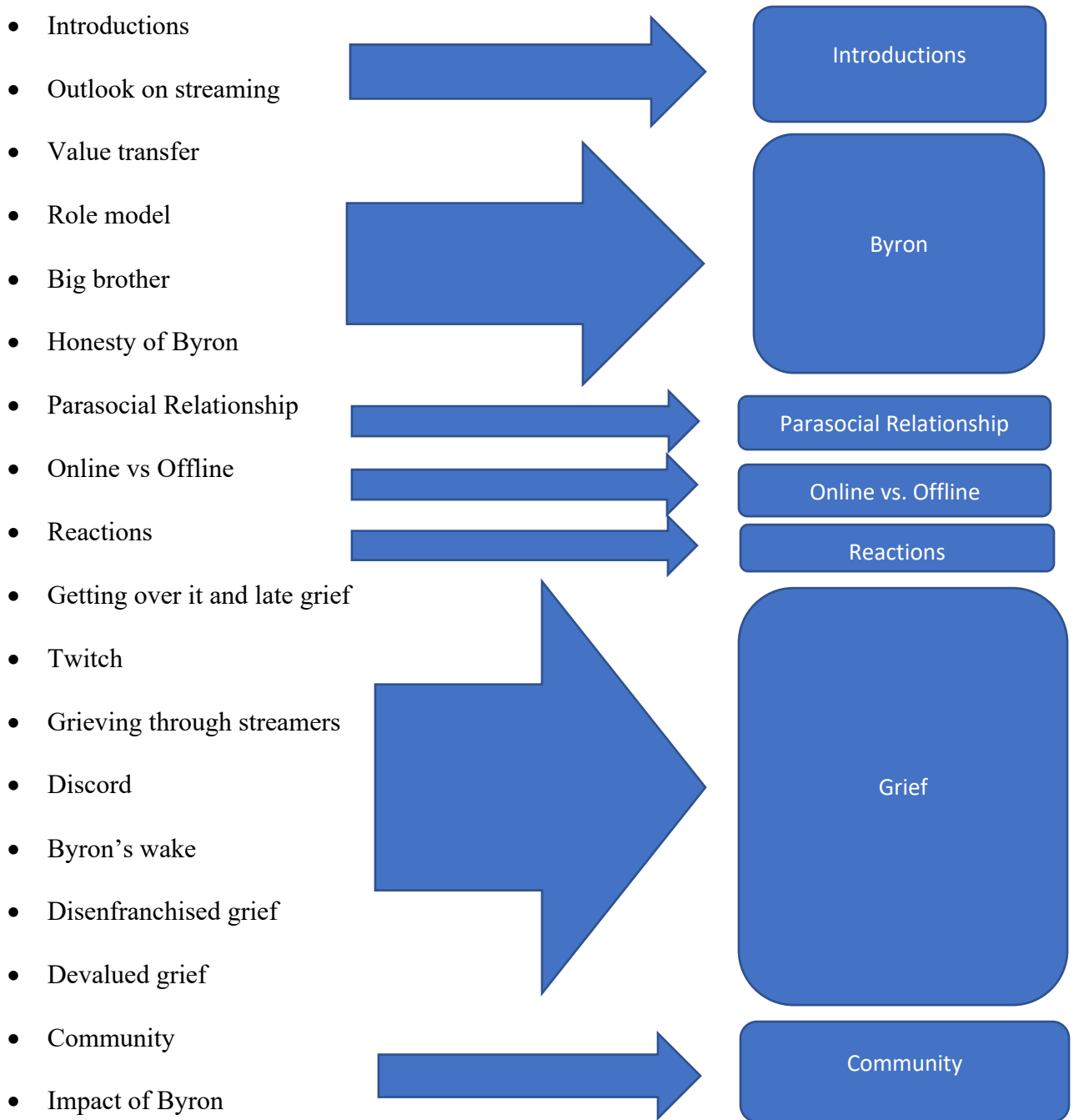
Analysis

After completion, all interviews were watched twice and transcribed word by word (sometimes notes or expressions were included) to conduct an interpretative phenomenological analysis in hopes of reflecting upon what my research participants not only said as I transcribed them, but also to explore the text and interpret their experiences to give greater depth of meaning to their words and experiences (Harper 2011). The transcribed material was read more than fifteen times in different intervals to discover themes of devalued and disenfranchised grief in the words and feelings expressed by the participants. The grief process of each participant was analyzed to determine whether they had trouble experiencing or sharing their grief with others as this is an important indicator of disenfranchised grief (Doka 2002). Did the participants feel more comfortable sharing their grief in Reckful's Twitch community or did they seek comfort in their real-life relationships was another aspect of interest?

The reason I chose my methodology as hermeneutic phenomenology is because I believe that understanding the depth of grief needs context and an intertwining between both science and art. I believe that the researcher's' interpretation of the words used by research participants as well as

the context within they are used comes into play if we are to intertwine these two fields. Multiple meanings can emerge from the data and interpretation is needed to understand these emergent multiple meanings.

I have tried to maintain a person-oriented stance in the interviews. The aim for this stance was to allow the participants experiences to take center stage. After transcribing and reading through the interviews I found eighteen relevant themes and topics which I afterwards reduced to seven. The eighteen themes were reduced to seven as some lacked enough content to become a theme by themselves and others were conveniently close to another theme therefore was bundled under the same theme. These were responses to some of my questions that I had posed to them in the interviews but opinions on those emerging topics were quite nuanced creating more questions than answers. The topic at hand is humanistic, I believe that to capture that in the paper also needs commitment beyond science toward the humanities (Finlay 2011).

- Introductions

- Outlook on streaming

- Value transfer

- Role model

- Big brother

- Honesty of Byron

- Parasocial Relationship

- Online vs Offline

- Reactions

- Getting over it and late grief

- Twitch

- Grieving through streamers

- Discord

- Byron's wake

- Disenfranchised grief

- Devalued grief

- Community

- Impact of Byron

Introductions

Byron

Parasocial Relationship

Online vs. Offline

Reactions

Grief

Community

Ethics

I come from a biased position into this study because I am a member of Byron's (Reckful) community as well as frequent Twitch viewer. I completely accept that this may affect my decisions on my research; however, my position also allows me the ability to enter into this community and communicate their experiences and is a pillar of this research study. I will, therefore, take caution of said bias during my research in whatever shape or form it may appear. My objective is to give meaning to what I and community members experienced in this bubble that was formed around technologically cutting-edge community membership, where grief is now experienced not only in real life but online. Understanding and interpreting this experience may be on the fringe of our understanding at present but looking at adoption rates of computers and technological devices in societies around the world, this experience may give a glimpse of what grief counsellors may encounter more regularly in the future. I am personally interested in bereavement care and counselling for those who grieve, therefore this study is in line with my future interests as a counselling practitioner.

This research gives an opportunity to highlight how participants felt during a difficult grief period. Furthermore, because this type of grief is rather new and confusing to grasp, participants may have a cathartic experience in being able to share their grief with someone from within the community.

The study was examined thoroughly to not include any information apart from the narratives of interviewees to limit how much information the interviewees had to reveal about themselves. All video footage was deleted upon transcription from the University of Edinburgh OneDrive in order to remove the stored information of study participants.

Any questions were welcome from the participants post-interview. A lot of the participants wanted to learn why I was personally interested in doing this study and all of them were quite supportive in my interest of capturing the grief of this event which was the reason why they joined the research.

I have undertaken the necessary ethical measures for my participants and myself; however, the ability to stop the interview at any time as well as retract any information that participants may feel necessary was given to them to ensure enough agency for ethical comfort. I have gone through the necessary training to undertake this study. More importantly, I have processed my emotions and grief in regard to Byron's (Reckful) suicide to assure my mental health in being able to conduct the interviews. In addition, I will seek support, if required, from student counselling at the university and will also keep in regular contact with my supervisor.

Findings & Discussion

Introducing participants & Twitch

The interviews were online and aimed to provide a space where the lived experiences of participants could be expressed clearly to me. I wanted the participants to introduce themselves briefly at the start of the interview.

> *"I always have enjoyed video games, obviously, ever since I got my first computer when I was like 8. It always made me feel connected to other people since I used to be extremely introverted. I'd say right now, I'm an extrovert but it's much easier for me to form a connection online. So, yeah, the computer and the Twitch community has been helping me my whole life."* (Jonathan)

All interviewees expressed an interest in video games and an eagerness to reach out to the other people and the world through the internet.

> *"I enjoy the idea of how a group of hundreds of thousands of people can follow the life of someone who makes waves in all of our separate lives, and it can introduce you to new friends and experiences that wouldn't have even been possible without the community."*
> (Michael)

Most of the interviewees had been watching Byron (Reckful) for at least 2 years and they were very knowledgeable on what was unique about Twitch.

> *"I enjoyed watching Byron (Reckful) over the years, not only doing what he was doing, but watch him develop and change as a person. This person who doesn't know you, kind of becomes a part of your daily or weekly life, and I find that really interesting. It's really good*

to be able to watch somebody just kind of grow as a human being. You know them, but they have no clue who you are. It's very strange, yeah?" (Michael)

There is a strangeness admits Michael, in watching someone for long amounts of time but them (the streamer) never being aware of your existence or opinions. This relationship is unique because it looks from the outside as classic celebrity idolization, yet it is different because the viewer and streamer both share in memories that happen on stream and regularly communicate with each other.

"Twitch provides this unique look into someone's life for 12 hours a day. Back and forth communication. I can write something in chat, he reads it instantly. You can't replicate that with something other than Twitch. You don't meet the person in real life, even though you, you see him every day and the person streams every day." (Steve)

This strong connection isn't towards Twitch; Twitch is only viewed as a vehicle for streamers to deliver their content to the viewer therefore the loyalty of the viewer stays towards the streamer. The impact of streamers is very strong and their effects on viewers' lives will always be understated. It could be argued that human civilization has never experienced connectedness on such a level thanks to high-speed internet connections and advancements in computer technology.

"For a very long time I watched videos of Byron (Reckful) and streams on a daily basis. It became a part of my routine for God knows how long. It affects who you are as a human being. Who you're around affects who you are and, even though they're past the screen, you're around this soul.

It affects you, and it's very important to me. It's a part of who I am. It's something that changed my personality and has made me a better person for it and like I said, it became part of my routine for a while, and though I didn't watch him very often in the months before his passing for a portion of my life, it was all I did in my free time. I spent time with this person, and it is very effective." (Michael)

This strong feeling of connection isn't unique to Byron's (Reckful) stream. It is quite often for viewers who watch content for 12 hours to be dedicated fans of a streamer; however, these interviews reveal many reasons right out of the viewers' mouth on how such a strong connection was established between them and Byron (Reckful).

"Who you're around affects who you are and, even though they're past the screen, you're around this soul?" This quote by Michael was taken from the introduction above encapsulated perfectly interviewees that although through a computer screen the feeling of hanging out with another person was still present on Twitch. All participants felt that Byron was a member of their social circle. They expressed to me that the time they spent watching Byron (Reckful) was interactive. As Slater (2000) suggested, even though people may not share a physical space, sharing a digital space is sufficient to feel the others' presence and an overall feeling of togetherness. They felt Byron's presence in the streams, in their life and as a viewer they felt that they too had the power to communicate back to Byron (Reckful) whether limited or not (Hu 2017). My overall feeling from these conversations were that each participant cherished the connection they had to Byron (Reckful). My initial assumption was that this relationship that was established online would be weak. The responses were quite the opposite. I had undermined this relationship. After I came to this realization, I wanted to further understand what Byron (Reckful) represented to these participants and how that played a role in how they grieved.

Byron Daniel Bernstein (Reckful)

Byron (Reckful) was definitely an *"odd ball"* in the streaming space. Most streamers' behaviors and values influence their viewers. However, Byron (Reckful) had a unique talent in how he used his charisma, intelligence and humor but what surprised most people was how freely he spoke his

mind. Although people boast honesty and speaking your mind freely a lot on the internet, Byron (Reckful) was among the few who practiced what he preached.

>*"I always valued his brutal honesty, even when his opinions were completely stupid."*
>
>(Jonathan)

Every interviewee pointed out Byron's (Reckful) honesty specifically and shared memories of how they were influenced by his strong will. Honesty became a core value that they remembered Byron (Reckful) by and some of them were so inspired by his honesty that they took up and integrated that value into their own lives.

>*"Byron is so incredibly open about his insecurities, everything in his life leads to you thinking that this being is a person on the internet with feelings and genuineness. You also have feelings towards such a person."* (Steve)

In my interpretation, this quote reveals one of the reasons why people were drawn to Byron (Reckful) apart from others in the streaming space. His (Byron) honesty allowed his viewers to truly experience being with another person and not a fabricated persona presented carefully for streaming, he owned up and spoke about his flaws and tribulations, shared his real thoughts and life. Twitch and YouTube has made creating a persona for such avenues a viable option, the persona may be a larger-than-life version of yourself; however, it is hard to be and find other streamers and creators that are just themselves in this job.

>*"I struggled with depression ever since I became a teenager, it started around when I was 13 or 14, so having him (Byron) around and the community was really helpful over the years."* Since he (Byron) was struggling with both depression and bipolar disorder and *was as honest as me, I try to be as honest as I can myself. I looked up to him every single time. I envied his streams and how honest he can be, even though he has a huge audience, he's not afraid to show his true colors, even though some people might not like it. Whenever*

I had my ups and downs, it always made me appreciate that I had someone to turn to, Byron

(Reckful) himself." (Jonathan)

Jonathan confesses here, that he related with Byron and relied on him as a constant reminder of living through difficulties in an honest manner. It could be argued that Byron (Reckful) showing his true colors to millions persuaded them to conduct themselves in a similar manner.

"My sometimes-brutal honesty came from Byron, actually, and at first I wasn't like that, but watching more and more streams of him doing that (being honest), it taught me to maybe try it now and then, and then it just kind of stuck with me. So, whenever I have any problem or I have some viewpoints I want to share, I just do it." (Jonathan)

Jonathan admits to being influenced by Byron's honesty and has taken up his values and recreated it for himself.

"It's just like, I think the most different thing and about Byron was, like he was always so fucking genuine. Like he was honest to a fault. You got it every fucking time you came to the stream. Every day 12 hours a day, you were in touch with him. You know it's like a like a friend. And it's kind of embarrassing to say but over the years. It definitely felt like a close friend." (Steve)

One important part in the above quote is the phrase *"it definitely felt like a close friend."* This suggests that although the viewer knew that Byron (Reckful) wasn't his friend, the feelings they carried was most closely described by the word friend. The thin barrier between befriending a streamer and being a nobody to them is a very confusing area to emotionally navigate. While ones logic may completely accept that he/she isn't ones friend the feelings fostered through watching someone's streams live or later creates familiarity; however, this creation is exclusive to the viewer. The streamer lives this experience and shares it with his/her *"chat"*, which is the embodiment of

his/her audience. This feeling of *"close friend"* stems from a strong parasocial relationship which will be discussed in the next section.

"He (Byron) really helped me get through this (depressive) stage. Well, if he can do it, I can do it. That was why it was so important to me. He had giant problems. His brother took his own life. He broke up with his fiancé. He had bipolar disorder and depression. He was balding. (chuckles as this is again another Twitch inside joke.) And somehow, he could smile every now and then, he made so many friends he could have traveled all over the world. He had so much money, was pursuing his lifelong dream, Everland. Well, if you can do all the all these things, then maybe I can too. Maybe I don't have to give up when I'm feeling really down.

"Big Brother" is a really good term for how I felt about him (Byron)." (Jonathan)

The term *"big brother"* was very important because it was used multiple times by different participants and emphasized the influence Byron had on each of his viewers. He wasn't just a character but a person (distant friend) whom they checked on regularly and motivated their own actions.

"(He opened up-) All the worst parts of his life to people. There are so many highlights that you can find on YouTube of times where he talked about the very worst stuff that he'd ever been through and you know, was very open about it. So, to see him do that (talking regularly about his mental struggles) wasn't really shocking to me. You know, I think about how he talked about when he tried to commit suicide the first time and how crazy it was that he survived or when he was opening up and talking about what it was like to not win BlizzCon (BlizzCon is an annual convention created by Activision/Blizzard to announce games, compete in their e-sports games and try out new releases)

and he just kind of broke down. You know those (Byron opening up about his past trauma) weren't really surprising because it was just like, that's how he was. You know, he was very open with the good and the bad." (Nick)

Opening up ones feelings on stream is considered very dangerous as it may allow your viewers to influence your actions or manipulate your psyche because the feeling of friendship felt by viewers also happen in regard to the streamer where they feel their viewers as their friends. The distinction between who are truly real-life friends and who are viewers is very important because although at some points those two people may overlap; a viewer mustn't be trusted only because they watch the streamer. A viewer is not immediately the streamer's friend. Streamers have struggled immensely in the past from their community (Galloway 2021).

"I mean, I'm not one of the lucky people who ever got to meet him or interact with him or anything like that, but I think that you know it's very easy to watch someone's example and take from it and I think that how genuine and forthright Byron was. It was an important trait that I value as well. You know, I've been through a lot of stuff in my life with people who were not honest and genuine. I've reached a point in my life where authenticity and genuineness are really, really important to me. That's why, if someone asks, I will say that he was probably my favorite streamer to have ever lived because he embodied a lot of the values that I have." (Nick)

In the above examples many testimonies were given on how Byron (Reckful) impacted his viewers. How Byron's (Reckful) characteristics and virtues especially honesty were taken into their (participant's) own self-identity and integrated as part of themselves is proof that they felt Byron's (Reckful) words and thoughts were valuable enough to listen and implement in their (viewers') lives. As Gleason (2017) expressed in her study parasocial relationships can be very influential in early adolescence and it is certainly true for this studies' participants because all have confessed to

being moved by Byron's (Reckful) many qualities. I believe one of the main reasons for this strong impact is due to the participants watching Byron (Reckful) for at least more than 2 years as well as their values overlapping with Byron (Reckful) thus achieving a sense of belonging and comfort within his streams.

I felt that the stories told by the participants were ones of meeting another soul that they admired and looked up to. It was close to knowing up to a big brother in your family neighborhood that you aspire to become and hear of doing remarkable things. It's almost as if the participants regard Byron (Reckful) as a hero or an idolized version of a real person. I think the reason I say idolized version is because Byron (Reckful) chose when and what he streamed therefore was always deliberate in what part of his life he shared to his viewers. I believe this suggestion of *"idolized version"* vs *"real-life"* version is the explanation behind the question of why research participants felt such a strong connection to Byron (Reckful). The idolized image of Byron (Reckful) that was distributed to viewers was a narrative and not the real person Byron (Reckful). This is an important difference because some interviewees have admitted to being *"helped"* by Byron (Reckful) and none of these people have met Byron (Reckful) but a part of him or his life story has supported them in life. In this sense, it's almost as if there are multiple versions of Byron (Reckful), one in the viewers' minds and one in real-life. However, do the viewers know of this difference, and how does it impact their relationship with Byron (Reckful)?

Parasocial Relationships

Twitch can provide a 1080p video connection with under 2 seconds delay between what is live and what is broadcasted to an audience that may live on the other side of the Earth. As long as the person streams, their point of view (their main monitor) can be seen on their stream. So, the viewer is directly seeing the same thing as the streamer creating an instant connection because

both parties are looking at the same thing. This view can become so alluring that not looking at ones own life but living through another's view has become a frequent occurrence on Twitch (parasocial relationships). Nick expressed feeling this type of connection many times in Byron's (Reckful) streams.

> *"You're watching someone experience it, and it's so easy to lose yourself in that and feel like I was there. You know, we're in a table in this restaurant in Japan and all this crazy stuff is happening. You feel like you're there with him and interacting. Sometimes he'll read your chat and you'll be like, oh my God, this feels great. Like you're contributing to this experience and especially with Byron (Reckful), who, despite the fact he had an extremely fast chat, you know he was always pretty much running over 10,000 viewers. He's still interacting with his chat all the time. You know, it's crazy. He would literally pause chat and answer all these different people. So, it's really easy to feel like, hey, this was a friend, and this was someone that I knew very well because it's like. Even if you never met him, you know if someone asks you to describe who Byron (Reckful) was. It's like anybody who's watched him for any amount of time can tell you what it was like to be around Byron (Reckful) and maybe pretty accurate. You know he wasn't a different person offline, yeah?"*
>
> (Nick)

Nick felt confident in saying that Byron was genuine and even though he was on the other side of his screen he felt like he knew Byron's character and preferences. He also uses the word "to lose yourself" when describing the feeling of watching Byron's (Reckful) stream and being unable to distinguish whether he was in his house or in a restaurant in Japan. This unique mirage-like haze that viewers enter when watching streams for a long time has been called by many streamers and viewers as *"living vicariously through streamers"*. (This is not an academic term but rather a term

used often by streamers and viewers when discussing this issue). In this state the viewer constantly indulges in watching his/her favorite streamer or other streamers and disconnects from their life little by little. This is not healthy mental behavior (to disconnect from life); therefore, majority of viewers aren't attached to their favorite streamers to that extent. Some streamers do address the parasocial relationship aspect and informs their community on their stance. A popular streamer by the name of "Ludwig" was asked while streaming by someone in his chat "How could we not get attached to someone like you?"

> *Just treat it like you would treat the TV show Mad Men? You shouldn't form a relationship with me. At the end of the day, I'm entertainment. If I stop entertaining you, stop watching. That's it. That's what I want from you guys. If I'm ever ResidentSleeper (boring to watch) I want, you to stop watching me 'cause I'm not your friend. I will never, ever hang out with you and I don't care about you because I don't know you. I can't. There are 13,000 people here I can't care about all of you 'cause I don't know any of you. So, all I do is I turn on Twitch. I treat you like a coherent body of people (chat) and I stream to entertain. That's all I do, and you have to recognize that.* (Ludwig 2020)

When it comes to this topic, most streamers don't outright reject their community and walk a fine line between having emotional or uncomfortable real-life encounters when they are spotted outside or called out on it. People trying to be their friends or open up about how that person has helped them is most of the time awkward because while the viewer has lots of meaningful memories with their "icon" or "idol", the reality is that the streamer doesn't share in those memories therefore isn't as touched by the encounter as much as the viewer is. Most celebrities and streamers tolerate these interactions as a part of being in *"the business"* (fame). The parasocial relationship can be felt both ways where streamer feels anger or resentment towards "chat" if there are arguments or infighting

and the viewers may overstep and presume that they are friends with the streamer. This type of relationship can become very problematic to traverse explained by Nick:

> *"Parasocial relationships are tough. There are a lot of people who take it way too far or way too seriously and it can be problematic but at the same time, there are people out there who want you to think parasocial relationships are crazy and ridiculous and will be like, you know, "you're never going to be the streamers friend. Blab la bla." You know, to an extent, you're usually right. Most people are probably not going to end up being friends with the streamer that they're watching.* If you're a big Mizkif fan (another streamer who was a real-life friend of Byron), *you're probably not going to get to hang out with Mizkif at some point, but that's not true for every streamer, and I think you kind of have to take it for what it is and if you go and you hang out in a community and eventually it does happen and there are plenty of streamers that I follow that know who I am, and I interact with and you're not always going to be their best friend. You may not get close, but sometimes you do and it's like if you really love who somebody is on stream and you enjoy their content. As long as you can accept that, it's not something that you can feel entitled to. If you get to hang out with, if you've been watching someone you love their content, you think they're a cool person and you eventually get to hang out with them. That's awesome, but it's like you can't be entitled to that.*
>
> *So, it's tough. I think that there are a lot of problems with parasocial relationships, but I also think there's a problem with immediately being like, "every parasocial relationship is fake" and well, I don't fully agree."* (Nick)

I felt as though the last part of this quote in parasocial relationships is crucial to understanding them. Someone is bound to become attached to someone they spend 6 hours or 12 hours a day every day even though it is from a computer screen. Streamers saying to viewers that they are not

friends with them is an honest logical conclusion and sign of good will, but it lacks in truthfully conveying the emotional investment by both parties in the stream. The viewer invests into the streamer with his time, first and foremost this is a very big investment in the digital era because attention equals money in this business. Although the streamer is not indebted towards the viewer for anything the viewer may think otherwise, because the actual content provided by the streamer (the stream itself) is free to watch. So many participants have used the term "investing time" about being interested or watching behaviors in a particular streamer and gave this reasoning into why they felt shocked upon learning of Byron's (Reckful) suicide (because they had invested so much time into this person). From the words of the participants, I felt as though that time investment they mentioned felt equal to investing time outside with a close friend and there was no differentiation between the two depending on the words of the participants.

For lack of a better term parasocial relationships have become a part of humans daily lives. We build one-sided relationships with media we consume and some even go further into acquiring information about the real-life person behind the media character whom we have built our relationship to. Although on paper this relationship seems illogical to entertain and continue the required low effort of maintaining such a relationship makes it convenient to exercise some aspects of real-life relationships as originally suggested by Derrick (2008). The formation of parasocial relationships isn't unique to Twitch; however, the limited communication tools provided by the website gives the possibility of creating the perfect environment for this relationship to foster. This isn't an evil manipulation but rather a byproduct of technological advancements in feelings of connectedness developing at a rapid pace over the last ten to fifteen years thanks to the wide-spread use of the internet.

All research participants admitted to having a parasocial relationship with Byron (Reckful); however, none of them seemed to carry unhealthy obsessions or behaviors stemming from the

parasocial aspect of this relationship, at least to my knowledge and interviews. The parasocial aspect of the participants' relationship with Byron (Reckful) makes this relationship a personal rather than social relationship; however, the time spent together on Twitch with the community could also be considered to carry aspects of social interaction therefore it can be argued that it carried social aspects as well as having its initial formation as a personal activity which develops into becoming a relationship with multiple aspects both personal and social. Conversely, Horton and Wohl (1956) had limited the definition of parasocial relationship as *"giving the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer"* but on Twitch there is no illusion only limitation. The streamer is facing the viewer; however, the viewer is limited to communicating through chat. This necessitates a different definition for this relationship other than parasocial as it fails to encapsulate the limited ability of communication provided to the viewer by technology whereas true parasocial viewers have no ability of communication to the performer. The ability of live communication opens up the possibilities of where relationships fostered on Twitch can continue to become. The immediate nature of this communication between streamer and viewer allows the parasocial relationship to become something else where both parties take role in playing part in each other's' experience because the existence of chat encourages conversation in the streamer and viewer. The aftermath of forming online relationships on Twitch with streamers or other viewers can be as complicated as a real-life relationship because it has the ability to grow and evolve into a close relationship. It may also stay inside of a classic performer viewer boundary of strictly communicating through chat and interacting with the community. However, the ability to communicate with anyone in the world and chat with them through the internet on Twitch, is an incredible testament to how human conversation and communication has developed and played an important role in relationship formation over the lifespan of human civilization. The more connected humans become with the internet we find more tools to communicate with each other as

well as spend time apart from each other. In this sense, technology brings us closer and farther away depending on how we choose to use it plays a big role in our perception of its influence.

Online vs. Offline

In this section I seek to explore how interviewees felt about the difference between the intensity of online vs. offline relationships.

> *"Even though there was only a connection through the Internet, it didn't really feel like there was much of a difference if it was IRL (in real life), to be honest."* (Jonathan)

I also wanted to understand whether they felt any different grieving someone from their real-life versus grieving someone they met online.

> *"I don't find it that different because I'm still losing that person in some form and I'm also losing that part of myself. It's not that much different. The grieving process is very similar, and it's also very strange how it kind of works because you're not really expecting it to hit you that hard, but it does."* (Michael)

I thought that this response was quite spiritual when Michael mentioned *"losing that person in some form and also losing that part of myself"*, I didn't expect such mature, clearly defined concepts and owning of both Byron's (Reckful) death and his inner loss of him (DeGroot 2009). He also mentioned that he didn't really expect it to hit him that hard. This is another theme that is analyzed in the subsequent section (disenfranchised grief). I asked Michael about grieving online in a discord vs. grieving in the traditional funeral way, Michael responded with:

> *"Your whole mini friend group (on discord). Is just hurting all at once and it is very similar and then in a lot of games and a lot of friends you'll have virtual funerals for those people, and I think it's really interesting how everyone can come together. Even people that I hated would come together and just remember that life."* (Michael)

Nick spoke about differences in how he grieved differently about Byron (Reckful) from others whom he had known in real life.

> *"You know you're not really going to have many moments like that with someone that you haven't met face to face, right? It's like you're not going to find yourself being like, oh, I should call so and so because. You know you probably didn't have a lot of interaction with them, but beyond that it's not quite on the level of losing a family member, but I definitely think it's not different from losing a friend."* (Nick)

I felt that this was a genuine response from Nick having perspective on both types of loss. The difference of cultivating an online relationship as well as online grief was what I wanted to understand from the interviewees. As Degroot (2009) suggested Michael explored Byron's (Reckful) loss as two separate losses, firstly the real loss and second is the transcorporeal part, the image of Byron that Michael carried within himself that he had lost as well. Most participants didn't express any difference inside the relationship due to its nature whether it be online or offline. They rather chose to focus on the aspect of the potential possibilities that were created by the availability of the internet. Whether that relationship became a close one due to it being online or offline wasn't important because in their minds these relationships were impossible to form were it not for the internet. The difference and intensity of the grief they felt will be further discussed in the upcoming themes.

Reactions to Byron's (Reckful) passing

I asked each participant their first reactions and feelings upon learning of Byron's (Reckful) suicide. The following narrative was Jonathan's experience of learning Byron (Reckful) had taken his own life:

Jonathan

"Seeing him do that just like that? It was like my whole world, just kind of fell apart and my whole viewpoint of Byron that he's that strong and mentally always dealing with his problems in his own way and all the obstacles in life (shattered – he doesn't say the word, but the phrase is leading up to it). And then he just at one point gave up. That was, a really tough moment for me and. (Even recounting the story is enough to get him emotional.)

It took me a long time. Probably like two or three months to get over it, and the first one was the hardest and my own depression kicked in, but it was set up by this unfortunate event and that was hardly helpful. It was a real shock to me, definitely. I did have some relatives, obviously, who passed away during my lifetime, but it wasn't really this sudden.

Once you pass 70, you kind of see it (death) coming at some point. If someone is going to pass away. They're either going to die from a stroke or a heart attack, or a cancer or whatnot. So, when that happens, you're not really that surprised you, just you know. So, I could tell it coming from a mile away. Obviously, those deaths affect you somehow. You were probably connected to that person in some sort of way but again, in in my situation I saw it coming and I was a little sad, but I wasn't depressed over it. I wasn't crying that much, but when someone takes his own life in their prime age because he (Byron) was in his 30s, it's so early in life that everything can happen at this point and knowing that I thought about that (taking his own life*) sometimes. Byron's community and Byron himself not doing it, taught me that maybe it's a really dumb idea to even think about that, taking your own life.*

I wasn't really talking during the first week. I was barely talking. I didn't really want to eat.

I didn't want to work; I didn't want to do anything. I was just sitting there, lying-in bed doing nothing, staring at the ceiling and just. Uh, all my bad memories came back from my early days and I didn't really know what to do, didn't really know how to deal with this and I knew that it was textbook grief. I was sitting in the Discord a lot, watching the memorial art. Sitting in the memorial chat and I just tried to connect with others. Uhm, making them share my grief while sharing their grief. We're exchanging stories of Byron (Reckful). It was like a giant funeral that was lasting for a month. Among communities, you know, usually, funeral's last like one day and here it was lasting like a month or even longer."

In Jonathan's reaction there are many information we can ascertain. First off, Jonathan is deeply involved with Byron (Reckful) as he gets so affected by his suicide that his own underlying traumas get triggered. Second, he mentions the suddenness of Byron's (Reckful) passing as another cause for being deeply affected by his suicide. His own grief behavior of losing interest, lack of appetite, boredom, self-doubt is in line with regular grief behavior (Hall 2014). What surprised me; however, was that Jonathan immediately went to Byron's (Reckful) Discord server to get in touch with like-minded people who were grieving as well. Cultural transformation of grief customs and behavior is often encountered among different cultures (Egnoto 2014). One culture chooses to laugh, share memories and dance another grieves silently among close family. How a person chooses to grieve is often times influenced by the origin of the deceased. Byron's (Reckful) influence in streaming and online entertainment was undoubtable therefore, his funeral was ongoing for millions and open to anyone because there was no real virtual funeral, but everyone reached out in different social spaces towards each other whether that be YouTube, Reddit, Twitch or Twitter.

Steve

Steve had a very direct manner of thinking and talking. I was quite shocked when he revealed how hard it was to go through grief.

> *"When a famous musician dies, I don't care, I mean it's sad, but even though that's another person, I don't really care about it. I have never cared about anyone the way that I cared about Byron that day, and I don't know why, but holy shit it was so different. The first hour I was like the classic, you know there's no way. His phone got hacked probably and the other person account got hacked too. I was like, there's no way and then it got really confirmed later on that evening. Then at first, I thought like, well, that's sad and I just cried, and I went oh, that's cool that I feel that way for someone. But then, the following first week after was like hell, holy shit. In the way, I couldn't. I was non-stop bawling my eyes out. I thought I couldn't eat for the first-like, I ate, I had a glass of milk or whatever I could get. The first five days, I just felt like I've never felt that intense grief before. It was really hard to let go of. It was maybe like half a year after things returned to normal. Obviously, I wouldn't cry every day after the first like 2 weeks or whatever, it slowly tapered down.*

At this point I asked Steve what had changed about his grief in the next weeks and months.

> *The pain faded slightly. Equally but like 1 percent down each, no. It faded slightly each week. After 20 days you know. One day, I would be like, oh, that's cool. I haven't thought about Byron today and then the next day I would be like a folly, like a breakdown saying "I can't believe he's gone. I can't talk to anyone about it. I can't talk about it to my friends like this. Here we go. Like what the fuck you can't cry over a gamer that you haven't met wtf?" I couldn't talk to my parents, like I can't talk to anyone, and that's when I remember*

I first joined the Discord. I went on the night of when he passed, and I remember I went into the voice channel."

Listening to Steve's story was harder for me because he outwardly expressed disenfranchised grief on many levels (Doka 2002). His struggle to express himself to his friends, family and hiding the pain from ones loved ones makes grief harder to process. Steve also ends up going into Byron's (Reckful) Discord in hope of finding someone to share his pain. I saw my pain in his stories, I felt the sadness and aloneness. He didn't hide or downplay his solitude. I felt relief in his honesty.

Michael

Michael was quite brief on his perspective and the whole interview. He also mentioned that losing Byron (Reckful) felt quite close to losing a real friend.

It's a lot like you said, losing a friend even though they never knew you because you were still someone that was influenced by them and it's like I said, it's a lot like losing a friend. A lot of you, going through your own mind a lot and thinking, well. It just really sucks and you're like what if this? What if that? What were possible? Almost thinking about parallel universes. What could have happened? A lot of what ifs that end up going through my brain, it was very hard on me."

Michael produced answers but I couldn't discern any underlying emotions or feelings regarding Byron's passing. I didn't confront or ask him about it and that was due to my inexperience as an interviewer; however, the other 3 participants were quite open and descriptive about their experience that I didn't need to further encourage them.

I felt as though I couldn't connect with Michael in the same emotional wavelength as I did with others. In hindsight, I didn't properly set the right environment and closeness I had with other particpants and that was due to my immaturity as an interviewer. I have taken upon myself to create

similar environments and relationships with all participants and I believe with Michael I have failed in providing the necessary conditions which is why I wasn't able to extract too much meaningful data worth discussing from his initial reactions.

Nick

Nick was the last one that was interviewed. I felt as if he wanted desperately to talk to someone about Byron's (Reckful) passing. I asked him what happened inside him when he received the news of Byron's (Reckful) passing.

> *"My first reaction was shock. Holy cow, you know he'd always talked about it, but you kind of never expect it (suicide) to really happen.*
> *At the time, I wasn't even super invested in the stream, but it was just so- (stops).*
> *Hey, someone that I invested a lot of hours in is gone now and it was actually surprising to me. How bad it ended up hitting me that he had done that. If you had asked me before it happened, what I would think if he did it. I would have been like, oh, you know that would be sad, but it is what it is and then it happened, and I was like wow, this actually kind of left a big hole that I didn't realize was there. That was a large part of how I got involved in the reruns and stuff like that.*

Nick is shocked at how much Byron's death affects him; he never expected such intense grief and therein lies devalued grief of oneself. *"This person doesn't mean that much to me"* is the logic behind the realities of most internet relationships or connections; however, Nick realizes that this one hurts, this one mattered to him. Even Nick wasn't aware how important Byron (Reckful) was to him until he lost him. He uses the words *"left a big hole"* as a reminder of the empty space Byron once filled in his life. The physical description adds to the importance and gravity of his loss and brings his pain to the forefront. A rerun-on Twitch was started soon after Byron (Reckful)

passed away in his memory because it was Byron's request that upon his death his stream would run for all those that felt lonely and had no entertainment. The reruns ran for a long time; however, had issues recently and Nick has taken actions to make the 24/7 re-runs a reality.

My own reactions were close to study participants' experiences of shock and disbelief, followed up by denial in the initial hours of learning about Byron's (Reckful) passing. I undervalued my hurt of learning about what Byron had done. My reactions were close to Steve's as I myself hadn't allowed myself to grieve about Byron (Reckful) and denied how much I was affected by the news of his passing. Learning of the participants experiences were cathartic to me because I felt validated in my pursuit and feelings. The next themes will go into detail on the period of grief that participants had gone through as well as my personal reflections.

Grief

In this section I asked participants to elaborate about their grief and what has helped to ease the pain and/or come to terms with.

> *"For me, the only thing that has helped is honestly, time went on. The pain has lessened. It's still there like whenever. Did you see the last song he played? Whenever I hear that. I still tear up. I can't watch streams (reruns), for more than-. I'll pop-in sometimes and say (in chat). Hey Byron, we miss you. Maybe that helped. After the week he passed, I started writing a letter to him to let my feelings out. And I think that helped as well. I would just try to get it out somehow. Like, if no one can relate to what I'm feeling I'm just going to get it on paper. Just get it out somehow. It can't go on like this.*
>
> *Yeah, I was just googling like crazy on how to deal with grief and I thought of-dude I can't. I just need to like-So, I started doing all that. You know, going down the list.*

The only thing that would help me in the moment like I said, was reading about others

having similar pain. I would go to forums for parents that have lost their children to suicide,

and I would read that, and I would feel like oh, this person gets. They obviously have it

much worse, but I get their pain and that common like humanity like feeling grief about

this. Yeah, it helped in the moment. I don't know how much it helped in the long run."

(Steve)

Steve expresses that he has had problems expressing his grief. Getting it out on paper or learning how to process what he was going through was new to him and because there were no social support in place due to this relationship being online in nature he felt alone. If one were to lose their neighborhood best friend, the neighborhood would acknowledge and support the child in need who's grieving; however, the need to hide or difficulty to describe the reason for being in this parasocial relationship removes all social interactions off the table. This relationship is seen as giving into fake relationships where the other party doesn't care about you therefore most choose to hide their relationship out of fear of being judged or shame thus leading to disenfranchised grief. The habit of reading through others' grief stories is in accordance with information behavior model because Steve is trying to first understand what he's going through although he has a vague idea of it (Sonnenwald 1999). The letter Steve writes is actually a Trans-corporeal communication (TCC) device that lets him express his honest feelings directly to Byron (DeGroot 2009) . TCC is very compatible to streaming because most of the time the viewer is already interacting with their constructed version of the streamer in their mind when they type in chat or interact in other ways. The real person is still out of reach, the TCC framework is therefore already constructed in the Twitch viewers' mind as the relationship was already close to that frame pre-mortem.

"I will never go on voice normally and I was just looking for people that felt the same as I

did. Yeah, I remember that's the only thing that helped. I would watch like Mitch Or Venruki

(other World of Warcraft streamers that were Byron's real-life friends) *and I am watching them cry for Byron and feeling the same pain that I felt. That was the only thing that helped. I could feel like this person gets what I'm feeling right now. I just need someone to (understand- he never said the word understand, but I felt the meaning underneath.) Yeah, you can relate with that because it's really like. No one else. No one to share the pain. You're alone with it, just like Byron was alone. (The sadness can be seen from his eyes.)"*

(Steve)

This was quite emotional for both of us because I understood that he was holding on to sharing this for quite a while and expressing it was cathartic to him because from the beginning of his grief period he searched and yearned for people to *"feel the same pain that he felt"*. It helped Steve to see other streamers expressing their grief. The social aspect of grief is observed here as individuals we respect or look up to normalize what is acceptable or not and allow the griever to face the reality that they too are grieving (Egnoto 2014). Steve closes on a sad note about how Byron (Reckful) was alone in his last moments. Talking about the topic has affected his mental state negatively as he expresses his dark thoughts.

The most common grieving behavior according to the participants were to communicate with people who shared in their interest of Byron (Reckful). They searched for others who shared their pain. The need to grieve with loved ones was present in participants thus they reached out to online communities that inhabited Byron's (Reckful) viewers (Varga 2014). However, these communities are numerous and inhabit different social media websites such as Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Discord and Twitch. This means that there are divided multiple communities which viewers gather around depending upon their personal preferences. This is convenient but means that there are no singular address for Byron's (Reckful) viewers to go to. Now that his livestream will never be the same again as his stream was an extension of him and he no longer exists.

Devalued & Disenfranchised Grief

My initial aim with this study was to confirm whether or not the disenfranchised and devalued grief I had gone through was particular to me or were all of these situations combined creating my particular grief. My interviews revealed that what I had gone through and felt was quite common.

> *"In the beginning I felt like. I had it working otherwise he didn't mean that much to me. When a famous musician dies, I don't care, I mean it's sad, but even though that's another person, I don't really care about it. I have never cared about anyone the way that I cared about Byron that day, and I don't know why, but holy shit it was so different."* (Steve)

> *"Hey, someone that I invested a lot of hours in is gone now and it was actually surprising to me. How bad it ended up hitting me that he had done that. If you had asked me before it happened, what I would think if he did it. I would have been like, oh, you know that would be sad, but it is what it is and then it happened, and I was like wow, this actually kind of left a big hole that I didn't realize was there."* (Nick)

> *"The most surprising part was. I've lost both my parents, so it's. I'm no stranger to grief and dealing with that-. The really shocking part about it was it felt like I just lost a real actual friend. So, it ended up being a lot harder than I expected. Getting through that was very similar to what I've been through before. It's learning to accept it and learning to take the good from it so that you can try and deal with the loss."* (Nick)

Nick wasn't a stranger to loss and grief, but he was still shocked that he was affected by Byron's (Reckful) suicide. The other quotes were taken from different sections but each shows patterns of reactions to realizing their devalued grief.

> *"At least for me it was so excruciating, what I said about being alone with pain, there's no one. You're completely isolated. You can't talk about it. You are bearing all the baggage and there's no one that shares your experience. There's no one, at least that I could find to share it. Not the same way I did, so that was the absolute worst part."* (Steve)

This is textbook disenfranchisement (Doka 2002). Feeling alone, unable to express or share. Isolated, bearing all the baggage and no one to share your experience. All the words describe a cry for help to someone who understand his pain.

> *"Well, obviously my fiancé couldn't really relate to what I was feeling that much because she never talked to Byron, she didn't really watch his stream. She didn't have any memories of him and memories of any connections that I had. All these members of the Twitch community were like a family of relatives, just mourning one of their own and mourning with my fiancé wouldn't really make that much sense. It would be like a third party coming to a funeral who never met the person and already knew him from when you saw a headline in a newspaper or something like that. So obviously you can't share grief with someone that never became that invested in the community in talking to that specific person. In this case, Byron."* (Jonathan)

Jonathan expresses that the appropriate channel to grieve was with others who shared memories of Byron (Reckful) and would understand the emotions that he was bearing at the moment. The problem is Discord is an unofficial way to connect with the community although it is considered as the defacto solution to this community problem. What tools must be in place in this occasion for

people to be able to freely express their grief? Anonymous online grief support groups supported by Twitch perhaps?

"After the week he passed. I started like writing letter to him. So, like to let my feelings out. And I think that helped as well. And I would just like try. To get it out somehow. Like if I can, if no one can relate to what I'm feeling I'm just going to get it on paper" (Steve)

"I remember when Forsen (another streamer that was friends of Byron's) *found out Byron's (Reckful) passing. He just closed his stream and didn't stream for a week and of course a lot of these people would just never show. He hardly ever shows his emotions and doesn't let private life affect him.So, seeing him affected that much like it proved to me, how big of a deal it is, and maybe I'm not alone in this. It made it a bit a bit easier to deal with."* (Jonathan)

The acknowledgement of grief from respected peers (Forsen) allowed Jonathan to own up to his own grief because before that point, he felt pain; however, didn't know why or if he was grieving.

Devalued and disenfranchised grief was my main experience when Byron (Reckful) passed away. I felt as someone whom I knew so many things about was gone and no one knew that I had lost someone that I cared about. I didn't feel comfortable expressing sadness and grief over someone I had never met and never knew I existed. I felt embarrassed by my own feelings. The research participants and their willingness to share their stories have made me realize that this was a common response among all participants. In her now famous study Kenneth Doka (2002) suggested that "a loss that cannot be socially sanctioned, openly acknowledged or publicly mourned" enters under the definition of disenfranchised grief. Disenfranchised grief has sociological, political and interactional dimensions that all influence of our grief experience (Neimeyer 2003). The inability

to express grief results in hiding grief behaviors from the social circle and undervaluing of the recent loss (Doka 2002). Many participants have echoed the same sentiment of pain and shame in hiding their grief or lacking the social means to grieve properly. A proper communication channel must therefore be formed for grieving members to grieve in groups of smaller numbers wherein they feel safe and listened to. While work in online grieving chatrooms are advancing and the results look promising as members report feeling safe to share their stories Twitch had no proper support for such a tragedy and no one could blame them for it (Smartwood 2011). This was a very unique and sad situation.

Community

Community is very important in the grieving process (Doka 2002). The process of regrowth after death is often accompanied by the help of one's community whether this is your immediate family or a couple of friends (Sofka 2012).

"It was very-(laughs). Very shocking the first time, it was like a day or two after (Byron's death) and I was going to check my twitch follows and seeing his stream up near the top, it was like, what? Because It's like a cognitive dissonance moment. So, I was like, this is impossible. And then I clicked in and it was them running reruns and I thought that was really cool, that he had wanted them to do that If he ever died. I wasn't someone who cared about world of Warcraft at the time. I never really liked World of Warcraft but watching those old streams and seeing you old Twitch and all that. It was something that I ended up needing a lot at that time. So, when that started running, I got really involved in that and it was nice seeing the same people every day who were still sticking with it. I got to see a lot of streams that I never would have seen otherwise, and over time it was like OK. Well, this is now like a comfortable thing that's like an active part of my life. When the

editor started kind of falling off and it seemed like, maybe this is going to end up stopping. I was like, OK, well I don't want it to stop. So how do I prevent that. Going back and watching all of these streams and seeing all the really cool moments again and all the stuff that made him special was like, this shouldn't stop if we can help it. Watching people tune in day after day and share their story or seek help or comfort and people make friends. All that stuff was just really special, and I met a whole bunch of really, really cool people."

(Nick)

Nick describes a community forming in an organic way around the passing of Byron (Reckful) who wanted to grieve together. The grievers went to Discord, Reddit, Twitch and Twitter to express themselves, there were no one channel of communication for the whole community.

"There were like 20 people that was always in his Discord. We would chat every other day. Well, a couple of years ago it was like every day then I had a lot of duties due to my university, so I didn't have that much time and then the pandemic hit, and I kind of drifted away a little bit from from this community due to lack of time." (Jonathan)

Jonathan also shared experiences of connecting and communicating with others that he found through the community Discord. He previously shared that they had helped him through dark times. In this sense when a viewer reaches out to Byron's community they are interacting with the community as an extension of Byron, everyone that is a member of his community that goes through the trouble of joining Byron's (Reckful) community Discord is dedicated enough to have self-interpretations on what Byron is like, so they behave a certain way among other community members.

Conversely, Steve felt as though the community aspect of Twitch was unhealthy.

"I didn't really give a fuck about Twitch communities honestly. I didn't want to be a person that was heavily invested into another person's community because I thought that was

unhealthy but this time around, with Byron's (Reckful) community and everything. Obviously, those are like whole different people, at least for me. They were also invested in Byron and it was kind of nice. So nice and I would use the discord, as a central hub for people that care about Byron. You know, invested in his life or whatever." (Steve)

Steve immediately separates Byron's viewers from other Twitch communities as he holds them in a higher regard. This is strong proof of in-group preference. Proving his strong connection to the community although he claims otherwise (Turner 1986).

"I just stayed in his Discord, I could always find someone who could talk to me when I was in a really bad mood or my mental state was uhm… (stays silent)

I felt extremely connected to the community and Byron himself because I thought to myself if he can go along day-to-day struggling with his problems, maybe I can too." (Jonathan)

Jonathan views Byron as a big brother but he also could see himself in his shoes because he also suffered in his own mental struggles. The fact that Byron (Reckful) had given up on his fight meant maybe when it gets bad, he might give up as well and that reasoning frightened him.

Byron was a child of the internet; he rose to fame in his teenage years and lived his life online after his success. He unfortunately chose to end his own life but all those who watched his stream or chose to watch his videos spent time with Byron and he touched their lives in return. These interviews allowed me to communicate and express my own pain as well as listen to others who went through similar experiences (Egnoto 2014). I now realize that I sought to do these interviews for myself as much as I did for my research study because I felt there was something in me that I needed to uncover with others (Smartwood 2011). These interviews allowed me to open up about my grief, express and discuss it with others and for that I am grateful to all the participants.

Conclusion

The aim of this research study was to understand the grief caused by Byron's (Reckful) passing and the impact it had on his viewers. I watched Byron's life over the years and felt great loss upon learning of his death. I wanted to confirm and understand others who had watched Byron as I did. Learn their stories of grief and share what it was like to be a member of Twitch and the internet that bore witness to Byron (Reckful). Capturing this moment and feelings in time was the essence of this research study. I believe that grieving Byron's passing entered into disenfranchised grief territory because being a member of a Twitch community is not accepted or known about as much as other popular forms of entertainment. In other words, it is not yet socially accepted to be a Twitch viewer. It is a niche side of the internet and has no connection to most users real lives thus resulting in no acceptance of the grief from ones immediate social circle. The parasocial relationship that was formed among participants and Byron (Reckful) was a key aspect in creating intense feelings of grief and I believe that as long as overall connectedness levels increase parasocial relationships will become a bigger part of entertainment and human life, to a higher level than we have yet seen.

I am grateful to all the participants and people who helped me and took time out of their lives to take part in this study and advance our understanding of this relationship. The intimate stories they shared will hopefully open the door to other counsellors better understanding of online grief. I found the experience of contacting and talking with the participants cathartic but most importantly scientifically and emotionally rewarding.

I think there needs to be more studies which attempt to understand the human-computer interaction and cyberpsychology. One such field inside of that group is online bereavement,

where more therapeutic work must be provided in these situations considering the convenience of connecting with anyone who has available internet. The future of mental health must consider computer interaction if it is to fully understand the human experience of the 21st century because the human experience has become intertwined with technology at this point.

Limitations

This research study was conducted under the COVID-19 virus. All interviews were conducted online thus interpreting the video footage was difficult as all of it was collected from a webcam with differing qualities. The online nature of the interviews prevented to control all aspects of the interview therefore sub-optimal levels of audio quality sometimes prevented understanding of some words harder or impossible while transcribing. The qualitative nature of the study makes generalizability impossible; however, it also gives a unique glimpse into a niche community that may have never gotten the awareness it needed.

Having only four participants limited the view on the overall experience of Byron's (Reckful) viewers and their grief experience; however, it proved useful to showcase four unique voices that gave detailed accounts of grief and sadness. This level of detail would be impossible with a larger sample and my aim was to give detail in the hands of the reader as this is where qualitative research is truly at an advantage over quantitative research.

Appendix

Appendix 1

<u>PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM</u>

<u>Study Title</u>: **Experiences of Grief: Twitch Community In Mourning**

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study.

2. I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided, ask questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction.

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can ask to withdraw at any time. Data that has been collected until then will be used in the dissertation.

4. I understand that my anonymised data will be combined with data from other participants and will be stored until submission of the dissertation.

5. I agree to take part in this study.

Name of person giving consent   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____

Pseudonym of your choosing

(Please choose something people can't trace back to you and is not a replication of your Twitch username or any name you use in other online communities)

_____

Name of person taking consent   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____

Appendix 2

Project Title: Experiences of Grief: Twitch Community In Mourning

<u>Recruitment</u>

Hello, I am Ali Tunçgenç and I am undertaking an MSc in Counselling & Psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh. I have been a Twitch viewer since 2015 and was interested in Byron Bernstein aka Byron's (Reckful) streams from the start. I was quite shocked and confused upon learning of his suicide and didn't understand why I felt such strong grief towards someone I had never met.

For my dissertation topic I am conducting a study to analyze the experiential grief of members of the Twitch community in relation to the suicide of Byron (Reckful). The interview will last 40 to 60 minutes.

If you are interested in taking part in this study the eligibility inclusion and exclusion criteria is that you:

- Are above the age of 18

- English speaking

- Part of Byron's (Reckful) Twitch community or have been affected by his sudden passing

- Have never met Byron (Reckful) in-person

- Were a part of Byron's (Reckful) Twitch community for at least 1 year before his passing

- Felt strong emotions of grief upon learning of Byron's (Reckful) passing

- Felt confusion as to why you felt such strongly for someone's death that you haven't even met in real life

- Are not currently undergoing any form of therapeutic treatment for other mental health issues and currently not using any psychotropic medications.

If you are interested taking part in an online interview about this topic you can contact me:

Ali Tunçgenç, Msc in Counselling & Psychotherapy Candidate at: s2112833@ed.ac.uk .

Appendix 3

<div align="center">

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

</div>

You are being invited to take part in research on grief in online communities. Ali Tunçgenç MSc in Counselling & Psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh is leading this research. Before you decide to take part, it is important you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of the study is to highlight the untold stories of those who have grieved a relationship that was born and lived online.

WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

You are invited to participate in this study because you were in Byron Daniel Bernstein's (Reckful) community at least during the last year of his 'stream' and were affected by his suicide. Grieving for someone you haven't met is also an important part of this study therefore you were also chosen because you felt strongly about his passing, yet you have never met Byron (Reckful) in real life.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?

No – it is entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part, please keep this Participant Information Sheet and complete the Informed Consent Form which will be undertaken by audio recording prior to the interview to show that you understand your rights in relation to the research, and that you are happy to participate. If you do decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Please note down your participant chosen pseudonym and provide this to Ali Tunçgenç.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?

You will be asked a number of questions regarding your feelings related to Byron's (Reckful) suicide, and your relationship with him. The interview will take place online (Zoom, Discord, Skype, Microsoft Teams all are viable) in a safe environment at a time that is convenient to you. The interview would be video, and audio recorded, and consent will be undertaken at the beginning of the interview. Please note that your location should be in a fairly quiet area where you will not be interrupted, and the interview will last for 40 – 60 minutes.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

By sharing your experiences with us, you will be helping Ali Tunçgenç and the University to better understand the experience of grief in online communities as well as potentially offering you an opportunity to discuss your relationship with Byron (Reckful).

ARE THERE ANY RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH TAKING PART?

Sharing your emotions on this topic can be therapeutic; however, it may also arouse emotions you might not be ready to talk about so please consider carefully on whether or not you are ready to discuss such topics before choosing to take part in the study.

WHAT IF I WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

Agreeing to participate in this project does not oblige you to remain in the study nor have any further obligation to this study. If, at any stage, you no longer want to be part of the study, please inform Ali Tunçgenç who can be contacted at s2112833@ed.ac.uk . You should note that your data will be used in my dissertation for the MSc in Counselling & Psychotherapy programme prior to your withdrawal and so you are advised to contact myself (Ali Tunçgenç) at the earliest opportunity should you wish to withdraw from the study. On specific request we will destroy all your identifiable answers, but we will need to use the data collected prior to your withdrawal, and to maintain our records of your consenting participation.

DATA PROTECTION AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Your data will be processed in accordance with Data Protection Law. All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential. All information will be anonymized in our records, your data will be referred to by a unique participant pseudonym chosen by you rather than by your real name or the name you use within Byron's (Reckful) community or any other online communities you are a member of. If you consent to being audio and video recorded, all recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. Your data will only be viewed by the researcher/research team. All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer file,

uploaded to the University of Edinburgh OneDrive and no paper records will be stored. Your consent information will be kept separately from your responses in order to minimize risk.

INTERNATIONAL DATA TRANSFERS

Your data will only be stored locally and on the OneDrive by Ali Tunçgenç and no one else will have access to your raw data outside of Ali Tunçgenç. Anonymized data may be shared with project supervisor for feedback purposes.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY?

The results of this study will be summarized in my dissertation. 4 participants will be asked for an interview, your data will be anonymized and will be combined with the other 3 participants data in the final dissertation.

WHO CAN I CONTACT?

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact the lead researcher, Ali Tunçgenç who can be contacted at s2112833@ed.ac.uk .

If you wish to make a complaint about the study, please contact:

Prof. Matthias Schwannauer who can be contacted at headofschool.health@ed.ac.uk:

In your communication, please provide the study title and detail the nature of your complaint.

For general information about how we use your data go to:

https://www.ed.ac.uk/records-management/privacy-notice-research

Appendix 4

Project Title: Experiences of Grief: Twitch Community in Mourning

<u>INTERVIEW QUESTIONS</u>

- How do you feel about being a member of a Twitch community?

- How long have you been a member of Byron Daniel Bernstein (Reckful)community?

- How would you describe your relationship with Byron (Reckful)?

- What was its importance to you?

- What did you feel upon learning of Byron's (Reckful) passing?

- How have your feelings changed in any way in the following days, weeks and months?

- How about right now?

Appendix 5

Hello dalex_live, my name is Ali Tunçgenç and I am undertaking the MSc Counselling and Psychotherapy programme at the University of Edinburgh. I am undertaking a research study on grief in online communities for my MSc dissertation under the supervision of Dr. E Joanna Alexjuk. She can be contacted via jo.alexjuk@ed.ac.uk.

I have been a long time Twitch viewer and was affected quite a lot by Byron Daniel Bernstein's (Reckful) sudden passing.

During my grief period your video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIc1xgXoLSs came to my attention in my recommendations.

I had an inexplicable sadness upon Byron's (Reckful) passing and I couldn't understand why I felt this way for someone I hadn't met, but your video made me realize the importance of this relationship and how little we actually understand about grief in online communities. For this reason, I have set my dissertation topic to understand what we have collectively experienced during Byron's (Reckful) passing away. I am seeking for 4 participants for my research, and I wanted to reach out to you to ask you to assist me in finding participants for my research project. During your video you gave a "shout out" to anyone who wanted to talk about the topic, and I assume some people have reached out to you.

I am asking for you to circulate the attached recruitment e-mail to anyone who you think may be a suitable participant in the study.

Thank you.

Ali Tunçgenç MSc in Counselling & Psychotherapy Dissertation Candidate at:

s2112833@ed.ac.uk

Appendix 6

Project Title: Experiences of Grief: Twitch Community in Mourning

<u>DEBRIEF</u>

Thank you for participating in my research looking at the experiences of grief in Byron's (Reckful) Twitch community. It is important that researchers and caregivers understand that online relationships and online grief can have different aspects to consider. Your contribution in this study will hopefully have contributed to a better understanding in this area which may assist in our understanding of providing better care to others in the future.

<u>Support</u>

Some of the topics that have been discussed in this research are hard to talk about. I am grateful for your participation. If you feel affected in any way by any of the questions asked, you can find more information and/or support through the websites given below.

https://healgrief.org/virtual-support/ Healgrief free grief support (US based)

https://www.cruse.org.uk/ - Cruse Bereavement Care (UK based)

https://www.thegoodgrieftrust.org/ - The Good Grief Trust (UK based)

<u>Thank you</u>

Ali Tunçgenç S2112833@ed.ac.uk

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