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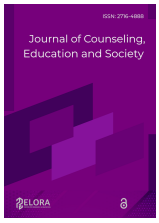

Digital grief and bereavement in the social media era: a systematic literature review of psychological adaptation, online mourning, and counseling interventions

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ABSTRACT

Death, loss, and mourning are universal experiences, yet contexts of grief have been transformed by social media and digital technologies. This systematic literature review synthesized evidence on digital grief and bereavement, focusing on online mourning, adaptation, and technology-mediated counseling. Following PRISMA 2020, a Scopus search identified 633 records; 622 were screened after exclusions, 61 full texts assessed, and 10 studies retained for synthesis, supported by 50 sources. Thematic synthesis addressed three research questions and bibliometric analysis. Three findings emerged. First, online spaces offer accessible, anonymous, and asynchronous support for stigmatized losses such as suicide, perinatal loss, and infertility-related grief. Second, digital mourning has ambivalent effects, providing social support and continuing bonds while potentially exposing mourners to distress contagion, harmful content, and isolation. Third, internet-based self-help, cognitive therapy, and co-designed resources show acceptability and feasibility, although effectiveness evidence remains limited. Future research should emphasize controlled trials, longitudinal designs, diversity, and safeguarding.

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Introduction

Few things are as universal as death and the grieving that follows it. But the way people mourn is shifting in profound ways, shaped by new cultural and technological conditions. As social life has moved onto digital platforms, the announcement, ritualization, and processing of loss have all changed. Researchers now describe this as mourning in a digital era, where virtual technologies meet traditional grief rituals and bring up fresh ethical questions (Fusco et al., 2024). Bibliometric mapping shows that scholarly interest in technology-mediated bereavement support has grown sharply over the last decade (Balkaya, 2026). That trend points both to how significant the phenomenon has become and to how badly the field needs structured synthesis. So the question of how digital environments reshape grief is hardly a side issue. It sits at the center of contemporary clinical, counseling, and public-health psychology.

At the heart of this review lies a specific phenomenon: digital grief. That term covers the expression, negotiation, and support of bereavement through social media, online forums, and digital memorial spaces. Social networking sites, rather than severing ties with the dead, have become places where those relationships

are actively sustained. Mourners keep interacting with the profiles and digital traces left behind (Blower & Sharman, 2021). These spaces also host collective and civic mourning, with emotional dynamics playing out at scale in full public view (Yu & Zhang, 2026). There are historical precedents, of course. Early internet memorials and message boards let bereaved parents and others commemorate their losses (Musambira et al., 2007; Lester, 2012). But the scope and intensity of these practices have expanded dramatically in the social media era.

Online support communities for the bereaved have drawn a substantial body of research. Web-based peer forums, for instance, have been studied as safe, anonymous spaces for people bereaved by suicide, a group that often hesitates to seek face-to-face support (Kramer et al., 2015). Cross-sectional surveys of forum and social-networking users have documented how people seek help and what they perceive as the benefits and limitations of these platforms (Bailey et al., 2017). Broader survey work, meanwhile, has mapped the ways digital resources get woven into everyday grief work (Westerlund, 2020). Studies of online mental-health groups have also highlighted a persistent challenge: managing acute crises within peer spaces, including how members respond when someone in the group dies by suicide (Hsiung, 2007). Taken together, this literature makes a clear case that digital environments are now integral to the social ecology of grief.

The field has moved well beyond descriptive accounts of peer support, thanks to recent methodological and technological advances. Internet-based interventions, for example, now build in emotion-regulation and coping-self-efficacy mechanisms to support grieving individuals (Brodbeck et al., 2022). Emerging immersive technologies go further, raising the possibility of maintaining continuing bonds through virtual reality avatars of the deceased (Fanti Rovetta & Valentini, 2026). Computational approaches are also entering the picture. Natural language processing of social-media discourse, for instance, enables large-scale analysis of how patients, caregivers, and the bereaved talk about illness and loss (Lau et al., 2024). Blended online therapy services have been proposed as well, aimed at optimizing the mental health and resilience of older adults who have lost a spouse (van Velsen et al., 2020). All of this positions digital bereavement support as a methodologically diverse and fast-moving domain.

Growth, however, has not brought coherence, and the evidence base remains fragmented. Systematic appraisals tend to zero in on specific populations or platforms, like online resources for those bereaved by suicide (Lestienne et al., 2021), or on suicide prevention through social media more broadly (Robinson et al., 2016). What gets left out is the wider terrain of digital grief, with no integrative synthesis spanning loss types, platforms, and intervention formats. Findings are scattered across clinical psychology, palliative care, communication studies, and human, computer interaction. That dispersion slows cumulative understanding and leaves practitioners struggling to translate evidence into practice.

The second gap is methodological. Much of what we know comes from cross-sectional surveys, qualitative analyses of forum content, and feasibility or protocol studies. Controlled evaluations of effectiveness remain comparatively rare. Research with bereaved populations online also carries distinctive ethical and practical challenges around consent, distress, and data sensitivity (Smith et al., 2018). Some efforts to annotate and validate risk and protective factors in online support-forum posts show real promise, but they also reveal how hard it is to draw reliable inferences from user-generated data (Chancellor et al., 2021). Ignore these limitations and the field risks piling up heterogeneous findings that resist comparison and synthesis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made a comprehensive review all the more urgent. In-person mourning rituals were disrupted on a massive scale, and reliance on virtual support accelerated almost overnight. Studies conducted during the pandemic reflect that shift. Some examined virtual support-group participation and peripartum mental-health outcomes (Koire et al., 2024). Others thematically analyzed distress expressed on online parenting forums (Chivers et al., 2020) or evaluated online bereavement groups for parents whose children had died (Weaver et al., 2021). These circumstances make clear that digital grief is no niche behavior. For many people it is a primary avenue of support, which is exactly why systematic and critical appraisal matters right now. Against this background, the present review takes up three research questions. The first concerns the descriptive landscape of digital mourning. What forms, functions, and populations characterize online grief support, and how do mourners actually use digital resources in their grief work (Leaune et al., 2022; Sormunen et al., 2020)? Clarifying that landscape is the foundation for any evaluation of psychological and clinical implications.

The second research question is about psychological adaptation. How does participation in online mourning relate to psychological outcomes, and through what communicative and relational mechanisms do those effects operate? Evidence speaks directly to this question and to the design of supportive digital environments. Support-seeking messages shape the responses mourners receive (Buehler & Youngvorst, 2022), and communities find ways to share the emotional burden of loss (Dubbelman et al., 2024).

The third research question concerns intervention and counseling. What is the design, acceptability, and outcome evidence for technology-mediated bereavement interventions, and how might they inform counseling practice? The review integrates descriptive, mechanistic, and interventional evidence. That includes qualitative accounts of how young people use online forums to cope with parental death (Smith & Langer, 2023) and conceptual analyses of digital mourning ethics (Fusco et al., 2024). In doing so, it offers a novel, cross-cutting synthesis that existing population- or platform-specific reviews simply do not provide. RQ1: What are the forms, functions, and populations of online mourning and digital grief support, and how do bereaved individuals use digital resources in their grief work?. RQ2: How is participation in digital mourning associated with psychological adaptation to loss, and through what communicative and relational mechanisms?. RQ3: What is the design, acceptability, and outcome evidence for technology-mediated bereavement and counseling interventions?

Method

Research Design and Framework

This review adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) design. In plain terms, we wanted to identify, appraise, and synthesize the peer-reviewed evidence on digital grief and bereavement, and to do it in a transparent and reproducible way. An SLR fits when the research is dispersed and interdisciplinary, because it can pull those threads into an integrative account that no individual primary study can deliver on its own. Reporting aligned with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement. That gave us a clear structure for study selection: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. On the time dimension, we favored evidence published in the last decade. Earlier seminal contributions were not automatically excluded, but they had to still be conceptually foundational to stay.

Search Strategy

We built a structured Boolean search string to target the intersection of bereavement, digital environments, and psychological outcomes. The search ran across title, abstract, and keyword fields. Truncation was part of the strategy so that lexical variants would be caught. That string is presented below.

("grief" OR "bereave*" OR "mourning" OR "loss") AND ("social media" OR "online" OR "internet" OR "digital" OR "web-based" OR "virtual" OR "forum") AND ("psychological" OR "adaptation" OR "coping" OR "support" OR "intervention" OR "counsel*" OR "mental health")

The asterisk in a truncation search does a fair amount of work. It captures morphological variants like bereave, bereaved, and bereavement, together with counsel, counseling, and counselling. Field codes then restrict matches to title, abstract, keyword content, which keeps topical precision high. Language and document-type limiters were applied at the screening stage, exactly as the eligibility criteria specify.

Database and Information Sources

This review relied on Scopus as its primary and authoritative information source. The choice came down to breadth: Scopus covers peer-reviewed literature across psychology, psychiatry, palliative care, communication, and health informatics. The exported metadata file became the evidence base for every bibliographic detail, count, and thematic characteristic reported here. No supplementary databases were incorporated, so the PRISMA counts and bibliometric description stay anchored to a single, internally consistent corpus. Records were exported for analysis, and that export defined the total pool of identified records.

Eligibility Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were explicit and set a priori, then applied consistently across all screening stages. Table 1 lays them out.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria applied during study selection.

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English-language reports	Non-English reports without English full text
Document type	Peer-reviewed journal articles and reviews	Conference papers, editorials, book chapters
Time frame	Published 1999–2026 (corpus range)	Records outside the retrievable corpus
Subject focus	Digital, online, or social-media dimension of grief/bereavement	Bereavement studies with no digital component
Outcome	Psychological adaptation, support, or counseling outcomes	No psychological or support-related outcome
Accessibility	Retrievable metadata and full text	Missing metadata or inaccessible full text

Study Selection Process

The selection process followed the PRISMA sequence step by step. First, records from the Scopus export were processed to remove anything that lacked retrievable metadata or a digital object identifier. What remained went through title and abstract screening against the eligibility criteria; studies that didn't address a digital dimension of grief or a psychological outcome were dropped at this stage. Reports that made it past that screen were assessed in full text. The predefined criteria guided every decision along the way, and whenever relevance couldn't be established from the title and abstract alone, the record was kept for full-text assessment so nothing got excluded prematurely.

Quality Assessment, FICO Framework

For eligible reports, methodological quality and relevance were appraised with the FICO framework. Each study was rated on four dimensions. Focus captured how clear and appropriate the research aim was relative to digital grief. Information looked at whether data sources and sampling were adequate and transparent. Context covered the population, platform, and setting, and Outcome covered the clarity of psychological or support-related results. Studies that met an acceptable threshold across all four dimensions were kept for synthesis. The framework was built around conceptual and methodological fit with the review questions rather than any single hierarchical notion of evidence, which made sense given how methodologically diverse this field is.

Data Extraction Procedure

For each included study, a standardized extraction template captured the author(s) and year, the study setting, the research design, the sample or data source, the platform or intervention examined, the outcome measures or analytic focus, and the principal findings. We worked directly from the bibliographic metadata and abstracts in the source file, recording only information traceable to those records. Where a specific attribute couldn't be determined from the source, it was flagged rather than inferred. This was all governed by a strict no-fabrication principle.

Network and Bibliometric Analysis Methodology

To characterize the broader corpus the included studies were drawn from, we ran a descriptive bibliometric analysis on the full set of screened records. Annual publication counts were tabulated to describe temporal trends. Source journals were ranked to identify the principal outlets. Author-supplied keywords were aggregated to map thematic concentration through keyword frequency. These analyses were descriptive in purpose, situating the in-depth synthesis within the wider structure of the literature rather than substituting for it.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The included studies were synthesized thematically. Findings from each study were coded, grouped into descriptive themes, and organized around the three research questions. Themes were derived inductively from the extracted findings, then mapped deductively onto the review questions, which allowed both convergence and divergence across studies to come through. Qualitative accounts, such as thematic analyses of young people's use of online forums to cope with parental bereavement (Smith & Langer, 2023), were woven together with survey and intervention evidence. The result is an interpretive synthesis, not a merely aggregative one.

Reporting and Documentation

The review was documented against the PRISMA 2020 checklist, and Figure 1 maps the flow of records through identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Numbers in the abstract, methods, and results match the flow diagram. Every bibliographic claim traces back to the source export, and each reference cited in the text also shows up in the reference list. That satisfies the reciprocal citation requirement for transparent systematic reporting.PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram.

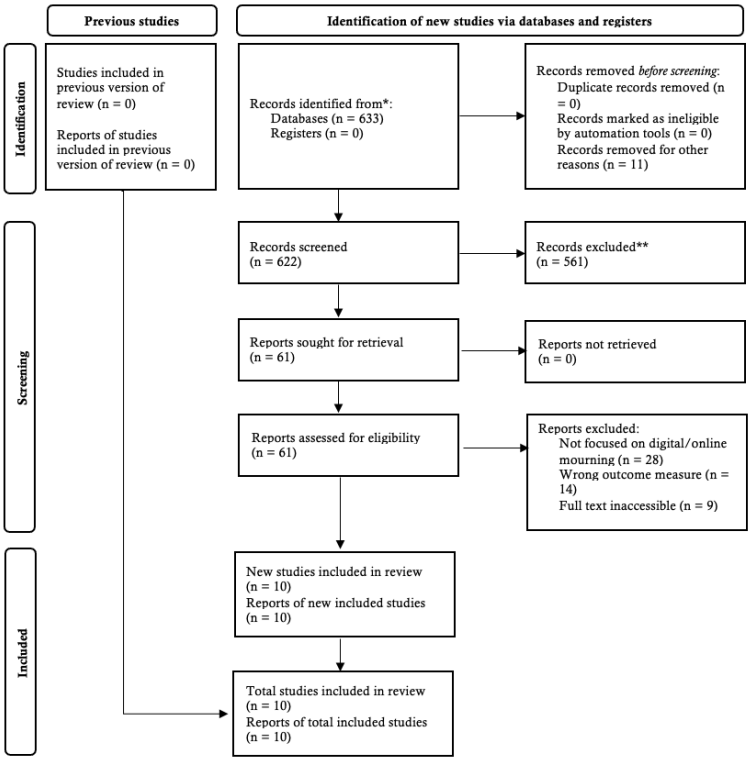

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion process (Scopus, n = 633 identified; n = 10 included).

Results and Discussions

Study Selection Results

The Scopus export returned 633 records. Before screening began, 11 were dropped because they lacked a retrievable digital object identifier or complete metadata. No exact duplicate titles turned up within the single-database export, which left 622 records for title and abstract screening. From that pool, 561 were excluded for not addressing a digital dimension of grief or a psychological or support-related outcome. That left 61 reports to assess in full text. Of those, 51 failed to make the cut: 28 because digital or online mourning was not the primary object of study, 14 because a relevant psychological or support outcome was missing, and 9 because the full text was inaccessible or the data provided was insufficient. In the end, ten studies met every criterion and were kept for in-depth synthesis. A wider evidence base of 50 traceable sources drawn from the same corpus also supported the analysis. These numbers match Figure 1 exactly.

Descriptive Characteristics

The ten studies kept for in-depth synthesis cover a fairly wide range of methods. Cross-sectional surveys are there, along with qualitative thematic analyses, an experimental design, a systematic review, and conceptual analysis. The subject matter is just as varied. Loss types range from suicide and perinatal loss to infertility-related grief and parental bereavement. Table 2 summarizes these studies, and Table 3 classifies them by theme and method. The broader corpus, meanwhile, is characterized descriptively in Figures 2 through 4.

Table 2. Summary of included studies (n = 10).

Title	Author(s)	Year	Country	Method	Key findings
Internet forums for suicide bereavement: A cross-sectional survey of users	Bailey et al.	2017	Australia	Cross-sectional survey	Forums and social-networking groups are widely used for suicide-bereavement support, offering perceived benefits alongside limitations.

Title	Author(s)	Year	Country	Method	Key findings
Social media and suicide prevention: A systematic review	Robinson et al.	2016	Australia	Systematic review	Social media are used for expressing distress and delivering prevention, but evidence for efficacy remains preliminary.
The needs, use and expectations of people bereaved by suicide regarding online resources	Leaune et al.	2022	France	Cross-sectional online survey	Suicide-bereaved individuals report high use of, and unmet needs for, tailored online resources.
Communal load sharing of miscarriage experiences: Thematic analysis of social media community support	Dubbelman et al.	2024	Netherlands	Qualitative thematic analysis	Social media enable communal sharing of miscarriage grief, breaking taboos and distributing emotional load.
Online support-seeking in the context of grief	Buehler & Youngvorst	2022	United States	Experimental (factorial)	Message content and channel publicness shape support providers' impressions of the bereaved.
The role of social media for persons affected by infertility	Sormunen et al.	2020	Sweden	Qualitative descriptive	Social media provide social and psychological support and reduce isolation for those experiencing infertility-related grief.
The usage of digital resources by Swedish suicide bereaved in their grief work	Westerlund	2020	Sweden	Quantitative survey	A majority of suicide-bereaved individuals use digital resources; use is not solely predicted by symptom severity.
The impact of parental bereavement on young people: Using online web forums as a method of coping	Smith & Langer	2023	United Kingdom	Qualitative thematic analysis	Forums create a supportive environment in which bereaved young people process loss and help peers.
Actual solidarity through virtual support: Online support group for bereaved parents	Weaver et al.	2021	United States	Descriptive pilot study	An online bereavement group was acceptable to bereaved parents and fostered group cohesion during the pandemic.
Ritual and mourning in the digital era	Fusco et al.	2024	Italy	Conceptual/narrative analysis	Digital technologies reshape mourning rituals and raise ethical questions around digital death and memory.

Table 3. Classification of included studies by theme and method.

Author(s)	Year	Research design	Theme/focus	Platform/intervention	Outcome domain
Bailey et al.	2017	Survey	Peer support use	Internet forums / Facebook groups	Help-seeking, perceived benefit
Robinson et al.	2016	Systematic review	Prevention & support	Social media (general)	Prevention efficacy
Leaune et al.	2022	Survey	Needs & expectations	Online resources	Service needs
Dubbelman et al.	2024	Qualitative	Communal support	Social media communities	Emotional load sharing
Buehler & Youngvorst	2022	Experiment	Support-seeking	Social network sites / support groups	Support provider response
Sormunen et al.	2020	Qualitative	Stigmatized loss	Social media	Social/psychological support
Westerlund	2020	Survey	Grief-work resources	Digital resources / memorials	Resource use, well-being
Smith & Langer	2023	Qualitative	Youth coping	Online web forums	Coping, peer support
Weaver et al.	2021	Pilot descriptive	Group intervention	Online support group	Acceptability, cohesion
Fusco et al.	2024	Conceptual	Ritual & ethics	Digital mourning technologies	Ethical implications

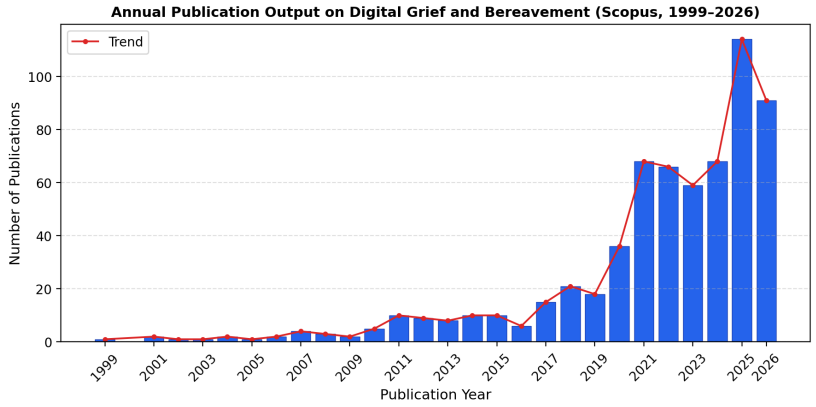

Figure 2. Annual publication output on digital grief and bereavement in the Scopus corpus (1999–2026), showing marked growth from 2020 onward.

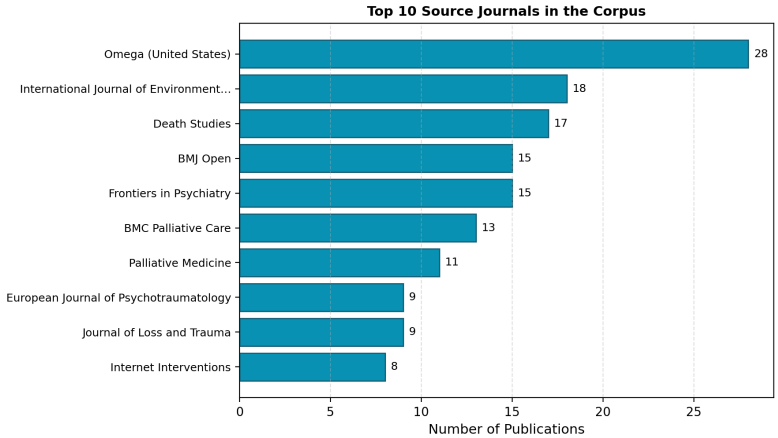

Figure 3. Top ten source journals contributing to the corpus, indicating a concentration in thanatology, public-health, and psychiatry outlets.

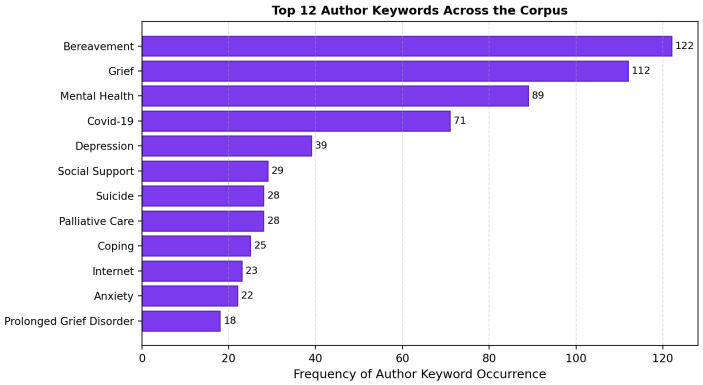

Figure 4. Frequency of the twelve most common author keywords across the corpus, mapping thematic concentration.

Figure 2 reveals a clear temporal pattern: scholarly output stayed modest before 2017, then climbed steeply, with the largest annual counts falling in the most recent years. That trajectory lines up with how digital mourning intensified during and after COVID-19. Figure 3 points to the field's interdisciplinary makeup, with thanatology-focused journals, environmental and public-health outlets, and psychiatry venues serving as the principal publication channels. In Figure 4, bereavement, grief, and mental health dominate the keyword landscape, while COVID-19, social support, suicide, and internet also feature prominently. The picture underscores how closely digital grief is tied to stigmatized loss and pandemic-era disruption.

Thematic Synthesis

Findings for RQ1: Forms, Functions, and Populations of Online Mourning

Across the evidence, a consistent portrait emerges. Online environments are accessible, anonymous, and asynchronous, and that combination lowers the threshold for seeking help with grief. Suicide-bereaved users of forums and social networks say they turn to these platforms precisely because face-to-face support feels unavailable or stigmatizing (Bailey et al., 2017). Population survey data similarly show that most of the suicide-bereaved fold digital resources into their grief work, including support groups and memorial websites (Westerlund, 2020). Web-based peer forums are prized as safe and anonymous, qualities that matter most when guilt or blame makes disclosure difficult (Kramer et al., 2015). Across these studies, online mourning functions less as an information source and more as a relational one, a space for narrative expression and mutual recognition.

The people who use digital grief support are strikingly diverse, and many of them sit at the margins of conventional bereavement care. Young people who have lost a parent turn to online forums both to process their own loss and to support peers in similar situations (Smith & Langer, 2023). Bereaved parents, meanwhile, have drawn on online support groups that fostered solidarity and cohesion, especially when in-person contact was limited (Weaver et al., 2021). Stigmatized and disenfranchised losses keep recurring across these studies, which suggests digital environments play a compensatory role. They extend support to mourners whose grief is socially muted or hard to voice offline.

At a conceptual level, these forms and functions point to something bigger: a transformation of mourning practice itself. Analyses of ritual and mourning in the digital era contend that technology is reconfiguring the symbolic and ritual dimensions of death, creating new practices of remembrance even as ethical questions remain unresolved (Fusco et al., 2024). Taken together, the RQ1 evidence paints online mourning as a heterogeneous, population-spanning phenomenon. Its principal functions are reducing help-seeking barriers, enabling continuing bonds, and providing peer-based relational support.

Findings for RQ2: Digital Mourning and Psychological Adaptation

When it comes to psychological adaptation, the evidence is more ambivalent. It describes both supportive and potentially adverse pathways. Experimental work shows that how bereaved individuals frame their support-seeking, including its coping display and the publicness of the channel, shapes the impressions and responsiveness of would-be support providers. Adaptation, in other words, is mediated by communicative choices, not platform exposure alone (Buehler & Youngvorst, 2022). Qualitative research on miscarriage narratives shared via social media illustrates how communities distribute the emotional load of loss, converting private suffering into communal support and pushing back against taboo-driven silence (Dubbelman et al., 2024). The active ingredient of digital grief support, these findings suggest, is social interaction rather than mere presence online.

Intervention-adjacent evidence helps clarify the mechanisms at work. In an internet grief intervention, emotion regulation and loss-related coping self-efficacy emerged as mediators of change, which suggests digital environments can activate the very psychological processes that face-to-face therapy targets (Brodbeck et al., 2022). Earlier research on collective online responses to traumatic loss found that sharing grief and support over the internet was linked to recovery for some individuals, hinting at the conditions under which online expression turns adaptive (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). The mechanistic picture coming into focus is one where supportive interaction, emotional disclosure, and self-efficacy jointly underpin beneficial outcomes.

The adaptive potential of digital mourning, however, comes with risk attached. During the pandemic, participation in virtual support groups was not uniformly protective. Associations with peripartum mental-health outcomes varied by perceived helpfulness, which indicates that unsupported or poorly moderated participation may yield little benefit or even cause harm (Koire et al., 2024). That ambivalence defines the answer to RQ2. On one side sit support and continuing bonds; on the other, distress exposure and variable benefit. Digital mourning is therefore associated with psychological adaptation only conditionally, through communicative and relational mechanisms whose activation hinges on the quality of interaction and moderation.

Findings for RQ3: Technology-Mediated Interventions and Counseling

A growing body of intervention research demonstrates that technology-mediated bereavement care is feasible and acceptable, even as effectiveness evidence remains immature. User-centered and co-design methods have shaped online resources tailored to the suicide-bereaved, spanning protocol and development work (Leaune et al., 2021) and mixed-methods co-development studies (Leaune et al., 2025) that target the unmet needs these populations report (Leaune et al., 2022). Guided digital therapies for prolonged grief disorder have been co-produced as well (Lewis et al., 2025), and established cognitive-therapy protocols have been adapted into internet-delivered case series (Smith et al., 2026). Randomized designs are now beginning to surface, including protocols for online self-help programs for the bereaved (Tang et al., 2024).

The design evidence suggests acceptability depends on tailoring interventions to specific loss types and populations. Social media, for instance, are documented sources of psychological support for people affected by infertility (Sormunen et al., 2020; Lobo et al., 2025). At the same time, systematic appraisal of social media in suicide prevention highlights both the reach of these platforms and the fragility of current efficacy evidence (Robinson et al., 2016). That pairing of broad reach with limited controlled evaluation recurs across intervention formats, and it represents the central tension in the field.

For counseling practice, the synthesis implies that digital modalities can extend bereavement support to underserved and stigmatized groups, so long as interventions are co-designed, moderated, and safeguarded. The answer to RQ3 is therefore qualified but constructive. Technology-mediated interventions show consistent acceptability and feasibility across diverse loss contexts, and yet rigorous controlled outcome evaluation is still required before firm claims of clinical effectiveness can be sustained.

Comparative and Critical Analysis

Methodologically, the corpus leans heavily on cross-sectional surveys, qualitative content and thematic analyses of user-generated material, and feasibility or protocol studies. Controlled effectiveness trials remain comparatively rare. Descriptive and developmental work dominates, and a strong tradition of formative, qualitative inquiry is easy to trace. Examples include online video support groups for caregivers (Damianakis et al., 2016), hospice bereavement groups (Wittenberg-Lyles et al., 2015), and online communities for chronic sorrow and pregnancy loss (Glenn, 2015; Gold et al., 2012). Yet signs of gradual maturation are visible. Protocol-stage randomized trials of internet-based self-help after spousal or marital loss (Brodbeck et al., 2017; Welzel et al., 2021) and implementation evaluations of internet interventions for partner loss (Efinger et al., 2022) point toward controlled evaluation.

Comparing across designs brings complementary strengths and weaknesses into view. Qualitative studies richly characterize the meaning and function of online mourning, yet they cannot establish effectiveness. Surveys map prevalence and need, but they rarely support causal inference. Feasibility trials demonstrate acceptability, though they are underpowered for outcomes. Studies anchored in specific platforms and populations, such as Facebook support groups appended to online yoga trials for women after stillbirth (Sullivan et al., 2022) or social-media support groups for breastfeeding-related distress (Clapton-Caputo et al., 2021), offer ecological validity at the cost of generalizability. The dominant methods, then, are well suited to description and hypothesis generation. What is missing, precisely, are the underused designs needed to resolve effectiveness questions: adequately powered randomized and longitudinal studies. Their scarcity is the field's principal methodological limitation. Qualitative evaluation of internet self-help acceptability among older adults further underscores that uptake and fit, not efficacy alone, condition real-world value (Schladitz et al., 2020).

Discussion

Read as a whole, the findings suggest that digital environments now function as substantive mourning infrastructure, and for some populations, the primary one. Their psychological value depends on the quality of interaction and support, not on access alone. Stigmatized losses keep recurring across the evidence, and that pattern points to the internet's principal contribution. It fills the disenfranchised-grief niche, extending recognition and support to mourners whose grief is socially constrained.

Theoretically, the results extend continuing-bonds and social-support models into networked settings. Sustained interaction with the digital traces of the deceased (Blower & Sharman, 2021) and civic-scale online mourning (Yu & Zhang, 2026) show that continuing bonds are now enacted through platforms. Emergent virtual-reality practices even raise the prospect of technologically mediated bonds with avatars of the deceased (Fanti Rovetta & Valentini, 2026). And because emotion regulation and coping self-efficacy mediate intervention effects (Brodbeck et al., 2022), digital grief support can be situated within established therapeutic mechanisms rather than treated as sui generis.

On the practical side, the synthesis yields actionable guidance for clinicians, counselors, and platform designers. Interventions should be co-designed with the bereaved, tailored to loss type, actively moderated, and fitted with safeguarding pathways. The suicide-bereaved demonstrably use digital resources (Westerlund, 2020; Leaune et al., 2022), so services should meet mourners where they already are, integrating digital and in-person care rather than treating the two as alternatives.

Placed against prior reviews, this synthesis both corroborates and extends earlier appraisals. Previous work concentrated on specific slices of the field, such as online resources for the suicide-bereaved (Lestienne et al., 2021) or social media in suicide prevention (Robinson et al., 2016), and bibliometric mapping has tracked the field's rapid expansion (Balkaya, 2026). This review, by contrast, integrates across loss types, platforms, and intervention formats, offering a cross-cutting account that population-specific reviews cannot provide.

The literature also harbors genuine contradictions. Some studies link online participation to support and recovery; others find negligible or even adverse outcomes. Evidence that suicide-related online experiences precede some deaths among young people (Rodway et al., 2023) sits uneasily alongside accounts of protective peer support. Reliably identifying risk and protective signals in forum content has proven difficult (Chancellor et al., 2021), which suggests these contradictions stem partly from measurement heterogeneity and partly from the dual-use nature of online spaces, where both support and harm can be amplified.

At least three research gaps follow. First, effectiveness evidence is thin; adequately powered randomized trials of digital bereavement interventions are few. Second, the literature skews toward high-income, English-language, Western contexts. Culturally diverse mourning practices remain underexplored, whether digital mutual-aid healing among bereaved older adults in China (Xu et al., 2026) or the association between widowhood and depressive symptoms as moderated by social-media communication (Kim et al., 2024). Third, emerging and ethically complex phenomena are conceptually underdeveloped, including digital ambiguous loss among marginalized youth (Landau et al., 2026) and online emotional self-disclosure among adolescents (Döveling, 2015).

This review carries at least three limitations. Relying on a single database ensures internal consistency of counts, but relevant work indexed elsewhere may have been missed. Restricting records to English constrains cultural generalizability. And because the designs were so heterogeneous, quantitative meta-analysis was not possible; the synthesis is interpretive rather than statistical. Inferences drawn from the findings should be tempered accordingly.

A future agenda should accordingly prioritize three strands. First come adequately powered randomized and longitudinal trials of co-designed digital interventions with clear safeguarding protocols. Second come culturally diverse and non-Western studies examining how digital mourning operates across contexts, from co-created support resources for specific patient groups (Zwanenburg et al., 2025) to community-based codesign for bereaved families (Yeates et al., 2022). Third comes ethically informed research on emerging technologies and vulnerable populations, building on established guidance for ethical internet-based research with the bereaved (Smith et al., 2018).

In summary, the evidence answers the three research questions in turn. **RQ1:** online mourning emerges as a heterogeneous, population-spanning practice, and its core functions are straightforward: reducing help-seeking barriers, enabling continuing bonds, and providing peer support. **RQ2:** digital participation relates to psychological adaptation only under certain conditions, through communicative and relational mechanisms whose benefit hinges on interaction quality and moderation. **RQ3:** technology-mediated interventions remain

consistently acceptable and feasible across loss contexts, yet establishing effectiveness will require rigorous controlled evaluation.

Conclusions

This systematic review took a close look at the peer-reviewed literature on digital grief and bereavement. It tackles three questions: what forms online mourning takes, how it relates to psychological adaptation, and where technology-mediated interventions stand right now. On the first question, online spaces are accessible, anonymous, and asynchronous. They lower barriers to seeking help and allow continuing bonds to form, and they matter especially for people whose losses are stigmatized and whose grief often gets disenfranchised offline. On the second question, the relationship is conditional. Digital mourning appears to support adaptation through communicative framing, emotional disclosure, and coping self-efficacy, but only when interaction quality and moderation are good. There are also real risks: distress and exposure to harmful content. On the third question, technology-mediated interventions look consistently acceptable and feasible across a wide range of loss contexts. The trouble is that rigorous controlled evidence on effectiveness is still scarce. The review's main contribution is integrative. It cuts across loss types, platforms, and intervention formats, and it extends continuing-bonds theory and social-support theory into networked settings. In practical terms, the findings point to co-designed, tailored, moderated, and safeguarded digital bereavement care. That care should complement in-person support, not replace it. As for limitations, the review drew on a single database, restricted itself to English-language work, and faced methodological heterogeneity that made meta-analysis impossible. Even with those constraints, the evidence is clear: digital mourning now forms a consequential part of contemporary bereavement. The field needs adequately powered trials, culturally diverse research, and ethically grounded studies of emerging technologies so that practice can stay both safe and effective.

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