

# First-of-its-kind study analyzes digital mourning practices of gang-affiliated youth

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A new paper co-written by Desmond Upton Patton, a professor at Penn's School of Social Policy & Practice (SP2) and Penn's Annenberg School for Communication, explores the role of images in the online grieving

practices of gang-affiliated Black youth.

The study is believed to be the first of its kind and aims to add to a limited body of scholarship. Dr. Patton, a [pioneer](#) in the interdisciplinary fusion of social work, communications, and [data science](#), coauthored the new study as senior author.

Due to his groundbreaking body of research, Dr. Patton was one of 13 participants invited to the White House last week for a listening session convened by the Biden-Harris Administration's Task Force on Kids Online Health and Safety (KOHS Task Force).

The new paper, [published](#) in *New Media & Society*, explores how gang-affiliated Black youth use Twitter content, photos, and emojis—referred to as multimodal tweets—to memorialize the deceased and navigate feelings of grief and loss. "Black grief is not well-understood, both in offline and online spaces," the authors write.

The paper's co-authors include researchers at Columbia University, led by SAFELab doctoral student Nathan Aguilar, as well as Dr. Aviv Landau, co-director of SAFELab and research assistant professor at SP2; and Shana Kleiner, LMSW, lab manager of SAFELab. A research initiative at SP2 and Annenberg, SAFELab is focused on examining the ways in which youth of color navigate violence, grief, and joy online and offline.

The researchers analyzed a dataset of Twitter conversations among youth residing in Chicago neighborhoods characterized by high levels of gang activity, taking a critical lens toward the impact of racial segregation and grief on the offline experiences of this population.

Their findings reveal that multimodal tweets are intrinsically linked with the grieving process of gang-affiliated Black youth. This population of

young people utilizes photos to speak to those who have passed away and maintain a connection to their lost loved ones. Researchers identified three themes among the multimodal tweets:

- Adoration— Expressing connection and affection for the deceased.
- Maintaining reputation—Safeguarding the social status and image of the deceased.
- Perseverance—Embodying a commitment to moving forward and embracing life.

The study offers insights that can inform the development of prevention and intervention strategies to support gang-affiliated youth experiencing grief and loss. "Attempting to understand language and imagery posted online by gang-affiliated [youth](#) is also an attempt to understand their internal meaning-making and memorialization process when presented with violence, loss, and hardship," the authors write.

**More information:** Nathan Aguilar et al, Digital mourning in tweets: Multimodal analysis of image-based grieving practices among gang-affiliated Black youth, *New Media & Society* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/14614448231223732](#)

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