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Losing Robin Williams: an analysis of user-generated Twitter content following the sudden death of a celebrity

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LOSING ROBIN WILLIAMS: AN ANALYSIS OF USER-GENERATED TWITTER

CONTENT FOLLOWING THE SUDDEN DEATH OF A CELEBRITY

A Thesis Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

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Date   Dr. Ronnie Bankston, Honors Thesis Advisor, Dept. of Communication Studies

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Date   Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

Abstract

The purpose of my thesis is to examine how people use social media, in this case Twitter, to share content that reflects their attitudes toward the loss of a celebrity and the issue of mental illness. To complete my research, I examined how users of Twitter created content expressing their reactions to the sudden passing of comedian and actor Robin Williams on August 11, 2014. Williams' death raised mental illness issues that he had faced during his life. After analyzing the data I created a short survey with eight tweets that referred to mental illness. The survey was administered to a group of my peers so that I could better understand how they perceived the remarks.

As a member of To Write Love on Her Arms – UNI, a student organization with focus on spreading awareness about mental illness, this is an issue of great importance to me. In today's society, I feel that those with mental illness are judged without reason, and I hope that the future brings acceptance for those who struggle. Also, I have noticed that people begin to pay attention to an issue once it impacts individuals highlighted in our celebrity culture. I have also noticed social media's prominent role in all aspects of our daily living; for example, many people used their social media platforms to express their grief towards the loss or Robin Williams.

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Introduction

I can remember where I was when I found out about the sudden passing of Robin Williams. I had just gotten home from work, which was around 6:30 in the evening. I sat down in my living room and opened the Twitter app on my phone. There was one tweet about the loss of Robin Williams, but I thought it was a link to yet another celebrity death hoax. This was once true in May of 2012, as Robin Williams had been the victim of a death hoax when his name was mistaken for Robin Gibbs who had recently died from falling off of a cliff (Koplowitz, 2012). Then there was another tweet, and another tweet, with enough people talking about it to realize that this was not a hoax. Soon, Twitter was full of mourning and remembrance. "Celebrity deaths now cause waves of mass hysteria;" it seemed as though all people with access to Twitter were tweeting about it (Harris, 2008, p. 885). Through the interactivity of Twitter, fans of the late comedian mourned together through the social media platform. Twitter users expressed their feelings towards the situation at hand, and everyone had their own opinion.

Robin Williams (July 21, 1951-August 11, 2014) was a well-known and well-loved actor and comedian. He was best known for "numerous memorable film roles, both comedic and dramatic, and after three previous nominations won an Academy Award for best supporting actor for his role in Good Will Hunting" (Biography.com, 2015).

Social Media

Though social media is still a relatively new concept, it has taken the world by storm and changed ways many people communicate. This concept of social media "fuses technology with social interaction via Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (Luxton, June, & Fairall, 2012, p. 195). Now, communication through social media provides individuals and groups of all kinds, such as organizations and governments, the

opportunity to share information instantaneously by posting on social media platforms (Luxton et al., 2012).

With social media, users are in total control of the content they choose to share with other users. It seems that seemingly random posts on social media form the basis of social media relationships, allowing for hours or days of commentary from family, friends, and acquaintances. (Morehouse & Crandall, 2014).

As with many electronic communications platforms, Luxton, et al. (2012) noticed that social media may produce positive and negative results. For example, social media may produce negative outcomes such as cyberbulling and suicide contagion. But, there are positives as well. Thanks to social media, those with similar interests can be brought together. Social media also aid suicide awareness and prevention, as social networking sites can "facilitate social connections among peers with similar experiences and increase awareness of prevention programs" (Luxton et al., 2012, p. 197).

Twitter

Twitter can be described as a microblog social networking service with its 140 character limit posting ability (Hearsum, 2012). Recent statistics show "Twitter reports more than 200 million Twitter users and more than 400 million tweets sent per day" as well as reports that 16% of people who use the Internet also use Twitter (Jennings, Blount, & Weatherly, 2014, p. 98). Twitter's mission statement clearly defines what they are all about: "to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers" (Twitter, Inc., 2014).

Twitter makes it simple to connect with other users. Thanks to Twitter, it seems that "journalistic practice has shifted from 'pull' to 'push' media" according to Hearsum (2012, p.

186). She notes that journalists need not look further than the Twitter feeds of celebrities, as celebrities provide quotes for journalists to intermingle within their pieces (Hearsum, 2012).

Current Study

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how people use social media, in this case Twitter, to share content that reflects user attitudes toward the loss of a celebrity and the issue of mental illness. To complete my research, I will examine how users of Twitter created content expressing their reactions to the sudden passing of comedian and actor Robin Williams on August 11, 2014. Williams' death raised mental illness issues that he had faced during his life.

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Literature Review

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Celebrity Culture

Celebrities are a highly valued part of modern day culture. It seems the public sphere is drawn in by the actions of those given the power to capture attention from large populations around the world (Gibson, 2007). Looking back through history, it seems that our culture is not the first to act in such practice "with roots in the veneration of Egyptian pharaohs and medieval saints" (Radford & Bloch, 2012, p. 43). Since the earliest of days, idolatry of those in the public sphere has been present.

In his piece titled "Celebrity Deaths," Daniel Harris (2008) expressed an interesting, yet eye-opening perspective on celebrity worship in today's society. He compared celebrities to that of kings and queens in the Middle Ages. During that time, people believed that those in the public sphere had two bodies: a physical body seen by all and a symbolic body seen by few. Seeing the physical body of a celebrity is easy; this is the body seen on red carpets and in movies. But, society goes crazy for the paparazzi shot of a celebrity's symbolic body, which proves that celebrities could be regular people underneath the fame and fortune. In days past, it

was a real challenge to see beyond a celebrity's physical body. In today's culture, the lines are blurred between these "two bodies;" there is access to both (Harris, 2008).

Because of this access to a celebrity's "symbolic body," society can feel closer to celebrities than ever before. Fans can engage in the daily lives of celebrities with down to the minute detail. Twitter, Facebook, and other social media outlets have allowed "celebrity veneration to become more participatory" (Radford & Bloch, 2012, p. 44) as users can post comments or send tweets to their favorite celebrities. Also, social media provides information about the celebrity directly from the celebrity themselves. Because of this, fans feel as though "the connection to a celebrity is genuine" (Radford & Bloch, 2012, p. 44).

The advent of social media has also allowed for different levels of fanaticism, as described by Scott Thorne (2009), ranging from little interest to those who devote their life to a celebrity. These levels are dilettante fans, dedicated fans, and devoted fans. Dilettante fans "have casual interests in the topic, but are not yet sufficiently motivated to expand on that interest" (Thorne, 2009, p. 130). Dedicated fans make an effort to adjust their lifestyle towards aspects of the celebrity, such as making plans around the time of a specific television program (Thorne, 2009). Dedicated fans may seek out other dedicated fans, as social media allows fans to "form online communities based on a shared fascination with a celebrity or other public figures" (Radford & Bloch, 2012, p 44). From the outside looking in, this fanaticism may seem strange, but what "these strangers have in common is a powerful identification with a celebrity… someone they believe in, trust, or admire" (Gibson, 2007, p. 1). At the final level, devoted fans may "make major changes to their lifestyles in order to actively pursue the area of interest" (Thorne, 2009, p. 130). Devoted fans may create shrines towards their favorite celebrity, or attend events with fellow fans celebrating the specific famous individual or group. The celebrity

"provide[s] an important component in self-definition" (Radford & Bloch, 2012, p. 44). The higher levels of fanaticism infringe on parasocial relationships, "wherein one person knows a great deal about the other, while the other person knows nothing of the first such as within celebrities or public figures" (Morehouse & Crandall, 2014, p. 28).

Social Media and Death

There are no moments of silence when it comes to social media and death thanks to "the never-ending 24 hour news cycle that makes a death … lack a grace it might have been able to possess in previous times" (Rothstein, 2014). Social media has "altered the way people hear about death, with the news often shared in waves of posting that can quickly overwhelm a user's newsfeed" (Morehouse & Crandall, 2014, p. 26). Thanks to social media, such as Twitter, the news spreads so fast that it is often the fans who know of tragedy before the family does, with technology allowing news of a death to travel faster to technologically connected fans than to the family of the deceased (Hearsum, 2012).

The death of someone well-known by the public allows media markets to get their name out, with celebrity deaths becoming public media events due to a connection between mourning celebrities and commercial interest of the market (Gibson, 2007). Because of the attachment between people of the general public and celebrities, "much of the coverage… play[s] on a seemingly intimate and yet most often illusory relationship between subject and reader" (Hearsum, 2012, p. 188). For example, with the very public death of Steve Irwin in 2006 Gibson (2007) noticed that media markets create media such as news stories and other products pertaining to these deaths to make a profit. Yes, the media should be careful what they are saying; but, saying nothing is a missed marketing opportunity. There is a high demand for "consumption [that] is part of a grieving process and audience desire for an increasingly front-

row insight" (Hearsum, 2012, p. 183). Media outlets may use social media for the initial broadcast of news links and other web sources, but from there it seems the fans take over and share among themselves. And, though a celebrity's death happens just once, "the production of media archives of celebrities ensures that they never entirely disappear… the anniversary [of their death] becomes a commercial opportunity and deceased celebrities are resurrected year after year" as people will keep talking about it each time that anniversary rolls around, giving media outlets another chance to do it all over again (Gibson, 2007, p.2).

As well as mourning loss on social media, it seems that social media also "provides opportunities for jubilation, festivals in which we applaud their last performance, their last role, as a real human being as liable to physical misfortunes as the rest of us" (Harris, 2008, p. 885). Social media allows users to band together through sharing fond members of the life that is lost.

Virtual Grief

The internet and social media provide a new means for expression. What used to be private conversation between close family and friends has now become part of the public sphere, spreading grief far beyond social circles. Thanks to social media, "public and two-way conversation means everyone can participate in the grieving over someone's death" (Morehouse & Crandall, 2014, p. 27). In today's world, "the internet has amplified the expression of public grief" (Harris, 2008, p. 885).

As a result, we have virtual grief. People now have the opportunity to express their grieving publicly by sharing a tweet, whereas more traditional forms of communication have challenges regarding sharing with strangers. Thoughts and opinions can be amplified to a large number of people just by clicking "Tweet."

Virtual grief has elevated grief to an entirely new level, especially from the loss of someone well-known and well-loved by the general public. For the loss of someone in the public sphere, it seems that deaths with high significance have the potential to create communities of mourning (Gibson, 2007). Harris (2008) noted how "the electronic media feeds out morbidity by making it far too easy for us to hold graveside services on our desktops" (p. 885). People can bond together and hold pseudo candlelight vigils as a virtual community, all while sitting alone in the comfort of their own home.

Some people still don't buy into the hype of virtual grief, with a divide between "those apparently prostrate with grief at their hero's demise and those who question the excessiveness of their fellow poster's sorrow" (Harris, 2008, p. 886). It's in an individual's best interest to let alone those who are mourning, even if they do not agree with the virtual grieving process, at the risk of becoming the villain. Rothstein (2014) saw firsthand when an individual dismissed the loss of Robin Williams as "not quite as important as the masses were making it;" he then found himself the subject to a number of tweets calling him out as the bad guy.

Social Media and Depression/Suicide

Present on social media is stigma, "the negative evaluations of others," surrounding mental illness. (Maier, Gentile, Vogel, & Kaplan, 2014, p. 241). Or, due to the perceived stigma of others, people may impose self-stigma, which is "one's own negative evaluation of oneself" upon themselves (Maier et al., 2014, p. 242). Although this stigma tends to be present, there are many who combat stigma in an effort to eliminate it.

The prevalence of the Internet and social media may aid in the battle against depression, allowing the opportunity for "talking to the Twitterverse or your Facebook feed
 which can "really can provide comfort during periods of struggle if you're making individual

connections with people. The point is you're reaching out to get the help you need" (Holmes, 2014, p. 1). Due to the nature of conversation via social-media, some feel more comfortable reaching out because there may be no need to interact face-to-face with the individual at the other end of the conversation. Also, in 2012, the Facebook page for American Foundation of Suicide Prevention was "liked" by more than 29,300 users (Luxton et al., 2012).

Suicide Contagion

Modern media has a habit of sensationalizing topics, and suicide is no exception. With social media, media reports circulate faster than ever before to a much wider reach of people. Though the goal is to inform the general public, the manner in which people are informed can be important. It is wise to consider what to say and how to say it. The downside of the media surrounding death by suicide is the phenomenon suicide contagion, otherwise known as the copycat effect. With this phenomenon, "media coverage or publicity around one death encourages other vulnerable people to commit suicide in the same way" (Dewey, 2014, p. 1).

Suicide contagion is a very real and very serious issue. The manner in which suicide is addressed may have drastic effects. Media reports correlated to the copycat effect may contain "inappropriate headlines, glamorous or sympathetic expression, detailed method used, inappropriate visual material, and lack of help service information," as well as have influence by "the type of celebrity, the quality of media reporting, and the cultural attitudes toward suicide" (Ji, Lee, Noh, & Yip, 2014, p. 60). For example, the copycat effect is more prominent if "explicit coverage is given to the method used" (Tetal, 2012, p. 17). Being aware of this phenomenon raises awareness to cover these tragedies in a more sensitive manner. Those putting the stories out to the public should be careful to "prevent it from becoming a model for others who are vulnerable." (Holmes, 2014, p. 1). Tetal (2012) makes a clear point, stating "suicide rates may be

reduced if news reports stress suicide is avoidable and look at the negative impact of the act on others" (p. 17).

In a 2014 study, Ji et al. examined the connection between the sensationalized celebrity suicide of South Korean actress Lee Eun-ju. In the first four weeks following her death, February 22, 2005 through March 21, 2005, media consumers were exposed to 220 media reports. They decided on this 4 week span because "studies have shown that, on average, the impact of media reporting on suicide lasts about 4 weeks after the first report of celebrity suicide" (Ji et al., 2014, p. 57). In their results, they found 639 suicides in the 4-week period prior, but almost double with 1159 reported suicides in the 4-week period after. They also found that the method described as the celebrity's method increased, while other methods did not. Now, with social media providing media reports 24/7, awareness of the copycat effect is very important.

This issue reaches beyond sentences in a news report. Some tweets with the intent to offer support may instead produce unintended negative outcomes. For example, take the iconic tweet from the loss of Robin Williams by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, in which they tweeted "Genie, you're free" with an image of the Genie from Aladdin. On the surface, this short tweet sounds meaningful and offers condolences to those mourning the loss of Williams. It declares that Robin is now free from all his struggles. Although the tweet sent by The Academy was not intended to glorify suicide and present mental illness in a negative light, it presented his death in an unavoidable manner, whereas his death could have been avoided and freedom from his depression could have been sought by other means. Holmes (2014) wrote, "there's a major downside to viral social media posts like The Academy's because they have the

potential to encourage others to take the same route by implying that they're 'free' from their suffering" (p. 1)

Raising Depression Awareness

One of the biggest impacts made from the sudden loss of Robin Williams is that people are talking about depression in a more open manner. His sudden loss has opened the eyes of the general public on an issue that can be "undertreated due to fear of cultural stigma" (Goodale, 2014, p. 1). Goodale (2014) wrote how "the discussion around Robin gives people permission to talk about something that they otherwise might be too afraid to discuss…Twitter, Facebook, and other social media sites are awash in such discussions" (p. 1). When news spread of his passing, the hashtag #SuicidePrevention trended on Twitter (McKechnie, 2014). Rothstein (2014) noticed how "journalists admitted that they, too, have suffered with depression" (p. 1). Suicide prevention institutions tweeted out to people, encouraging people to get help and providing links on where to find it. Celebrities tweeted out their grief, but also wanted to encourage their followers to treat depression seriously, such as comedian Jimmy Kimmel tweeting out "Robin was as a sweet a man as he was funny. If you're sad, please tell someone" or Ben Roy informing his followers "Before you cry selfishness, remember that depression is a disease. It too can be caused by genetics or lifestyle. And it has a death toll" (Laughspin Staff, 2014). His daughter, Zelda Williams, is using her father's life as a means to spread awareness. On October 10, 2014, she took to Twitter and encouraged others through a series of tweets to seek help on World Mental Health Day (Chiu, 2014).

Social Media Policy

Unfortunately, there are people who use Twitter for all the wrong reasons; for example, in the harassment of Robin Williams' daughter Zelda by cyberbulling "internet trolls." As

defined by Luxton, et al., (2012), cyberbulling is "when a child or adolescent is intentionally and repeatedly targeted by another child or teen in the form of threats or harassments, or humiliated or embarrassed by means of cellular phones or internet technologies;" however, this happens far beyond the age range of adolescence (p. 196). These cyberbullies, or "trolls," "post cruel messages for the sake of generating unrest online" (Suhay, 2014, p. 1). According to Time Magazine, "Two Twitter users sent Zelda Williams malicious photos that appeared to be Photoshopped pictures of her father, supposedly after his death" (Frizell, 2014, p. 1). This upset Williams to the point that she left the social media network for a period of time. But in the triumph of good over evil, it is important to note that the two harassers did have their accounts suspended from Twitter (Moss, 2014).

In times of tragedy, however, there can be times of change. Following the harassment, Twitter has become more aware of cyber-bullying within the social medium's interactivity. In a statement with The Wrap, a spokesperson from Twitter had stated:

"…we are in the process of evaluating how we can further improve our policies to better handle tragic situations like this one. This includes expanding our policies regarding self-harm and private information, and improving support for family members of deceased users" (Moss, 2014).

In the weeks after Zelda Williams walked away from social media, Twitter took into consideration the portion of their policy that would remove pictures of the deceased by request of his or her family. This would improve support for family members of deceased users. Twitter spokesman Nu Wexler said on the issue, "In order to respect the wishes of loved ones, Twitter will remove imagery of deceased individuals in certain circumstances" (Baliga, 2014). This is not to say that the people of Twitter have begun actively seeking out these images in order to

take them down, because that hinders the user's right to free speech. Koh & Albergotti (2014) note how "Twitter tries to walk a fine line between a dedication to free expression, an aversion to being held legally responsible for the actions of its users, and the reality that people will use such platforms to share highly offensive material." It is not in their policy to hunt out inappropriate content, but instead to determine if content flagged by users violates policy.

Research Question(s) to Be Answered

In an effort to determine how people use social media, in this case Twitter, to share content that reflects their attitudes toward the loss of a celebrity and the issue of mental illness, this study sought out the following questions:

1. What content did users generate on the social media platform Twitter after the unexpected loss of Robin Williams?

2. Does this content, if at all, reflect either a positive attitude or negative stigma of mental illness?

3. Is the content Twitter users chose to share an expression of virtual grief?

Methodology

The central theme for this thesis is a content analysis detailing how depression and suicide have been portrayed through user generated content on Twitter following the sudden, unexpected death of Robin Williams in August 2014. Through this contextual analysis, each tweet was placed into one or more categories depending on the content of the tweet. Supplementary research was conducted through a survey administered to my peers so that I could better understand how they perceived the remarks.

Data Collection

   To begin my content analysis, I gathered Tweets using the search tools available to me, which was the Advanced Search option through Twitter. I was able to select specific options for collecting my research sample. There are different categories to specify the search within advanced search, such as a "words" category that specifies which keywords are to be included and how the keywords are used within the search criteria. I searched for tweets containing the words "Robin Williams" using the All of These Words feature. I also specified my search for tweets written in English, because that is my primary language. The Advanced Search options also allowed for selection of content posted during a specific time period. For my search, I selected tweets posted on August 11, 2014, which was the day of the tragedy. I chose this option because I wanted to find the most immediate results following the announcement of Robin Williams' death. My search was all inclusive with the category titled "everything" selected to be sure my random sample would include all types of tweets. These tweets could include links, images, videos, and other accompanying material along with the tweet itself.

   To select my sample, I used an online random number generator. Doing so helped to ensure that my sample was entirely random. This number generator randomly selected the number four. This helped me select my starting point, which was the fourth tweet from the start. From there, I selected every fourth tweet until I had a selection of 200 random Tweets. Tweets were gathered as image files using the screen-clipping tool, and saved within a folder. Each tweet was assigned a number based on the number available, such as the 150th tweet being assigned the number 150.

Data Analysis

I coded my sample based on five different categories. These categories were established between my advisor and I based on common types of tweets from commentary of similar past events. Category 4 was the first category created, as mental illness is the basis of this research, and the other categories were established from there to help categorize the rest of the tweets. A tweet could fall in to more than one category. The categories are as follows:

1. Condolences to the Family

2. Celebration of Accomplishments

3. Loss to Society or Self

4. Reference to Mental Illness

5. Other

For a tweet to be coded under category one, condolences to the family, the tweet should contain the keyword "family." Tweets may offer love, prayer, support, or condolences towards the family, friend, and/or loved ones of Robin Williams.

For a tweet to be coded under category two, celebration of accomplishments, the tweet should mention an accomplishment Robin Williams achieved during his career. Tweets that offered a quote from one of Robin Williams' works were coded in to this category.

For a tweet to be coded under category three, loss to society or self, the tweet should demonstrate grieving. For example, tweets that contained the key phrase "RIP Robin Williams" or any variation of this were coded in to this category. Tweets in this category may also lament "the loss of one's childhood."

For a tweet to be coded under category four, reference to mental illness, a tweet should reference mental illness in some form or manner. These tweets may fall into subcategories, such

as negative/attack, positive portrayal, positive intentions with negative result, and discussing mental illness only through only the web link. Tweets do not need to contain a specific keyword; however, those with the keyword "suicide" were put in to this category.

For a tweet to be coded under category five, it must not fit in any of the above categories. For example, tweets that merely sent out a news link with text only referencing the name Robin Williams would not fit within one of the four previous categories. Also, tweets that did not reference keywords tied to a specific category would not fit in to the previous categories.

Tweets had the potential to be coded in more than one category. For example, a tweet may offer condolences to the family while also making note of career accomplishments.

Survey

After analyzing the data, I created a short survey with eight tweets that referred to mental illness. These eight tweets were randomly selected from the 24 mental illness tweets by a random number generator between 1 and 24. Each tweet referred to four questions. There were also a few questions pertaining to demographics. The survey in its entirety can be found in Appendix B.

The survey was administered to a group of my peers so that I could better understand how they perceived the remarks generated on Twitter. This survey was distributed through e-mail to students in the honors program and students in the student organization To Write Love on Her Arms – UNI, as well as posted on a personal Facebook page.

Limitations

With this study, there were a number of limitations. I was limited to the search terms I provided, such as tweets that contained both Robin William's first and last name; some tweets may have only included a first or last name. Because I used the search options available to me through Twitter, I was limited to the results they provided to me. Through the tools available to

me, I was unable to obtain a total number of tweets posted in the first 24 hours following the death of Robin Williams. Another limitation was that my random sample of tweets was all posted within the same one-minute time frame of 6:59 pm. I am unsure as to why they were all from the same timeframe, or why Twitter provided search results for this specific time. Even after attempts to contact Twitter, I am left with uncertainty.

Results

Context Analysis Results

The tables below identify the number of tweets that fit within the specific categories. Table 1 illustrates the number of tweets associated with each individual category. The numbers in table 1 do not add up to 200 because one tweet could be coded in to more than one category. Table 2 shows the number of tweets that fit in to more than one category. Table 3 identifies tweets related to mental illness. The selection of tweets can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1: How many tweets are in each category?

Category 1 – Condolences to the Family	5
Category 2 – Celebration of Accomplishments	67
Category 3 – Loss to Society or Self	130
Category 4 – Reference to Mental Illness	24
Category 5 – Other	20

Category 1, condolences to the family, had the fewest number of tweets with only 5 out of 200 tweets. Category 3, loss to society or self, had the highest number of tweets with 130 out of 200. Sixty-seven of 200 tweets fell into category 2, celebration of accomplishments. There were 24 tweets out of 200 that fell into category 4, reference to mental illness. The other category, category 5, coded 20 out of 200.

Table 2: What are the number of tweets that fit into multiple categories?

Category 1 and 2	2
Category 2 and 3	40
Category 3 and 4	3

Category 1 and 3	2
Category 1 and 4	0
Category 2 and 4	0
Categories 1, 2, and 3	1
Categories 2, 3, and 4	1

This second table breaks down the number of tweets that fall into multiple categories. Many of the results showed low numbers between 1 and 3. Fourty tweets in my sample showed results in both categories 1 and 2.

Table 3: What message was conveyed through a tweet about mental illness?

Negative/Attack	3
Positively	9
Positive Intentions, Negative Result	4
Through only the web link	7
Other	1

Of the 24 tweets that referenced mental illness, 9 of these tweets conveyed a positive portrayal. Only 3 of the 24 demonstrated a negative attack. Four tweets intended to offer positive intentions, but came across as negative. The tweet marked as "other," tweet #159, was a positive reply to a negative tweet, thus it did not fit in to one of the four categories. These tweets incidentally highlight suicide as a viable method for attaining peace, or something similar. Seven tweets referenced mental illness through a web link.

Survey Results

Eighty respondents completed the whole survey or a majority of the survey. There was some variation in responses to the survey, as a few respondents chose not to answer some questions. The lowest number of responses for a question was 77 responses. Fourteen of these respondents were male, 64 were female, and two replied as other. Respondents were also broken down by classification with 9 freshman, 16 sophomores, 10 juniors, 19 seniors, 9 graduate students, and 17 other. The survey results are presented in more detail in Appendix C.

Tweets were ranked on a 5 point Likert scale with higher scores being more likely or positive. For appropriateness, the mean range was 1.16 (Tweet #2) to 4.51 (Tweet #8).   Effectiveness mean scores ranged between 1.49 (Tweet #2) to 4.48 (Tweet #8). The mean range for content agreement was 1.28 (Tweet #8) to 4.45 (Tweet #2).   The mean range for perceptions of mental illness stigma ranged between 1.98 (Tweet #2) and 1.98 (Tweets #8 and #5).

A one way anova was calculated for each of the four items on all of the tweets. The tests revealed that there were no differences in responses due to classification. Results showed that there were no differences for those who identified as frequent Twitter users or those who identified as Robin Williams fans.

Gender differences were examined by calculating t-tests for each of the four items on all of the tweets. Four significant differences were found in the results for tweet #4, tweet #7, and tweet #8. Males (x=4.43) found tweet #4, a news link quoted with "after a life of spinning comic magic, Robin Williams made his last act a tragedy," to be more appropriate than females (x=3.83) (t=2.255, n=78, df=76, p<.05). Females (x=4.44) found tweet #7, "don't be afraid to ask for help. I know how debilitating depression can be Robin Williams will 4ever be remembered for making us laugh and cry," to be more appropriate than men (x=4.0) (t=-1.928, n=77, df=75, p<.05). Females (x=4.6) percieved tweet #8, "If you ever need to talk to someone call National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 800-273-8255 (TALK) avail 24/7 Please retweet!," appears be more effective than men (x=4.14) did (t=-2.166, n=77, df=75, p<.05).Females (x=4.57) also found the content of Tweet #8 to be more appropriate than men (x=4.08) (t=-2.580, n=75, df=73, p<.05).

Pearson correlations were run to determine if any statistically significant relations occurred among the items. Only those with a moderate correlation of approximately .45 or above were noted, yielding 30 results. The strongest correlation was between content agreement and appropriateness between tweets. There was also a strong correlation between effectiveness and appropriateness between tweets. Also, effectiveness and content agreement showed a strong correlation between tweets.

Discussion

Writer Meghan O'Rourke noticed the same trend as I did, writing about how "the Internet was filled with 'RIP' Tweets, clips of Williams' best stand-up routines, and anecdotes about what the star had meant to this or that person" (O'Rourke, 2014). During the process of selecting and analyzing my 200 selected Tweets, I found this trend to be absolutely true.

Mental Illness

Zero of the tweets in my sample gave explicit detail about the methods in which Robin Williams chose to end his life, thus imposing no threat of suicide contagion. Those tweets that were pointedly negative or accidentally negative could pose a potential risk.

The highest number of tweets that referenced mental illness was the 9 positive tweets. These tweets acknowledged that mental illness is a serious disorder, and that those with mental illness may need some assistance to live with their struggles. Of the 9, the most positive, #185, read, "If you ever need to talk to someone call National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 800-273-8255 (TALK) avail 24/7 Please retweet!" Another, tweet #33, informs other users that "depression can affect anyone at any age, even those who seem so upbeat and positive on the outside."

Four of the 24 appeared to have all intentions of being positive, but demonstrated a negative stigma like that of the Academy's tweet. Tweet #31 says, "I hope you have found peace at last #depressionkills." This tweet is problematic because it insinuates that taking your own life is a viable solution for finding peace.

Of the 24 tweets that referenced mental illness, only three of those tweets were pointedly negative. These three tweets were #7, #14, and #20. One twitter user in tweet #7 applauded Robin Williams, saying "Holy f**king s**t! I admire your balls sir!" Whether this user was being sarcastic or serious, this tweet demonstrates an incredibly negative stigma. Another negative tweet, #14, reads, "How you gonna kill yourself like a b***h." In tweet #20, the user "shakes their head" at Robin Williams' last act, showing a lack of understanding through disapproval.

Tweet #185 corresponded to Tweet #8 of the survey. This tweet, reading "If you ever need to talk to someone call National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 800-273-8255 (TALK) avail 24/7 Please retweet!," demonstrated the most difference in responses between genders with two of the four statistically significant gender differences occurring with tweet #8. Females more than males had a higher agreement with this content and found this content more effective. This may be due to the fact that females may be more expressive and encouraging when it comes to emotions.

Tweet #7 and Tweet #14 corresponded to Tweet #1 and Tweet #2 in the survey. Respondents agreed that these tweets do convey a negative stigma about mental illness, noting that they strongly disagree or disagree that the content did not convey stigma. With a mean of $x=2.69$ for Tweet #1 and $x=1.98$ for Tweet #2, respondents agreed with my views that these tweets demonstrated a negative stigma. The Pearson Correlations demonstrated that respondents

found a connection between these two tweets, with positive correlations between the appropriateness of tweet #2 and the appropriateness of Tweet #1 (r=.575, n=80, p<.05) as well as between the effectiveness of Tweets #1 and #2 (r=.566, n=80, p<.05).

Tweet #31, "I hope you have found peace at last #depressionkills," corresponded with Tweet #3 of the survey. Survey respondents rated this tweet as highly appropriate (x=4.38) and effective (x=4.16) as well as agreeing with the content of the tweet (x=4.48.) This is where I feel that I differ from the respondents as I do not agree with the content of this tweet, as it does glorify peace as a solution to the problem.

The tweet with the highest difference in gender was that of survey Tweet #4. Male respondents (x=4.43) found that this tweet, a tweet reflecting a news link about Robin Williams, more appropriate than female respondents (x=3.83.) This tweet is quoted saying, "after a life of spinning comic magic, Robin Williams made his last act a tragedy." As a female, I can understand why females did not find this tweet as appropriate. This tweet uses interesting wording to catch the attention of the viewer in a manner with little tact.

Virtual Grief

With 130 out of 200 tweets expressing loss to either society or self, I found virtual grief to be present in my sample. 65% of the tweets demonstrated some form of virtual grief. Tweet #155 said "Can't help but retweet all these tweets about Robin Williams…so sad what an absolute legend ☹." Tweet #168 showed the impact of this grief, with one user talking about what they were doing when they learned the news; "I was dialing into a call the second that the news about Robin Williams came over. I don't think I said one coherent sentence."

I anticipated there would be a higher selection of tweets offering condolences to the family, with the first condolence appearing in tweet #73. This tweet stated "my heart goes out to his friends and family as they grieve this great loss."

Many expressed their virtual grief by lamenting how the loss of Robin Williams seemed to correlate with "the loss of childhood," as these Twitter users grew up watching movies such as Flubber, Aladdin, and Jumanji. The keyword "childhood" appeared thirteen times in my 200 tweet sample. Tweet #84 proclaims "Robin Williams is dead? Oh wait you mean my childhood is dead."

There were a select few tweets that demonstrated users who did not buy in to the concept of virtual grief. In tweet #186, one user takes a stance with another user against a user who may have spoken out against virtual grief, exclaiming "ESPECIALLY ABOUT ROBIN WILLIAMS. ABSOLUTELY NO NEED FOR THAT "[twitter handle]: no one thinks your edgy tweets are cool…" Tweet #78 shows a user who must be dealing with attacks on their virtual grief, sharing "Robin Williams was my fucking childhood and you know what that means a lot to me so behave with your comments about Gaza for 5 minutes fuck."

Many of the tweets listed under category 5, other, were because these tweets merely supplied a news link to the mix of Robin Williams tweets. Of the 33 tweets containing a link, 13 provided a link and no other context, such as tweet #69 "BREAKING NEWS. Robin Williams found dead; suicide investigated [link]." These news outlets knew to jump in to this market and try to provide the news to those who may not have seen a news link yet.

Fanaticism

Tweets demonstrating virtual grief also demonstrated levels of fanaticism. Of the three levels of fans, it seemed that all three fanaticism categories were able to participate in the

conversation about Robin Williams. Those fans who felt little connection could offer a tweet to the conversation, and move forward. Fans feeling a moderate connection could casually scroll through Twitter and spend time reading through the tweets, such as #76 stating "All these tweets about Robin Williams touched my heart." Fans with a strong connection had the opportunity to express their heartfelt emotions towards losing someone they valued, sharing tweets such as tweet #42 "My favorite actor just passed away! This is not good… #robinwilliams – feeling sad" or tweet #49 where one Twitter user exclaims "ROBIN WILLIAMS IS DEAD. WHAT AM I GONNA DO WITH MY LIFE." Tweet #88 demonstrates a twitter user referring to Robin Williams as a "friend," exhibiting the idea of parasocial relationships.

There was one tweet in my sample, tweet #56, which mistook Robin Williams for singer-songwriter Robbie Williams. Also, two tweets in my sample referenced the word "hoax," demonstrating how people often do not initially believe that the death of a celebrity is true, such as tweet #32 stating "Daaammm… Robin Williams tho… I was hoping this was another social media hoax… it wasn't… #RIP." There was also one user who seemed to want to be a part of the hype, with tweet #98 reading "Sad that Robin Williams died but also sad that I have no idea who he is."

Policy

Twitter declares in their rules that they "strive to protect its users from abuse and spam" (Twitter, Inc., 2014). In my sample, I did not find any tweets where a user was abusing another user; however, this is an important issue for Twitter use. In Twitter's current policy, they claim "you may not publish or post direct, specific threats of violence against others" (Twitter, Inc., 2014). If it were possible to further modify Twitter policy, I would suggest implementing an option that would prevent users from being exposed to negative Twitter content. This could be

possible through a keyword filter. As of right now, although there is a method for reporting abuse on Twitter, it is on a tweet-by-tweet basis. For those subject to a large amount of abuse, this could be a tedious process to individually report such content. Twitter may also consider a much more efficient way to report abuse on their website.

Future Research

There are potential options for expanding beyond this study. One expansion could be to take a critical look at the web links people chose to share on Twitter. From within my sample, I saw a mix of sources between music websites, official news sources, and entertainment blogs. It could be interesting to see how these different sources may report the issue differently, or how mental illness stigma is reflected in these sources.

Another study in the future may be able to investigate how things may change in the event of a similar tragedy, now that the loss of Robin Williams has raised awareness for some on mental illness. For example, social media has been abuzz lately with the loss of LGBT youth as they struggle with the effects of bullying.

Future research may also delve deeper in to celebrity culture and mental illness. The public may respond differently to someone expressing that they suffer from a mental illness compared to responses towards the loss of an individual to mental illness. Individuals may offer support through social media, but may also attack the individual in question.

More future research could be done in regards to different levels of social media. In this study, with Twitter, users are limited to tweets of 140 characters. It is possible that using different forms of social media, such as Facebook or Tumblr, would yield much different results.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research conducted through this honors thesis study has analyzed how the content Twitter users shared following the unexpected loss of Robin Williams may reflect stigma towards mental illness/suicide and/or virtual grief. My results supported my hope that the stigma is shifting toward a more accepting society.

Through a random sample of 200 tweets posted following the unexpected loss of Robin Williams, 24 of these tweets made reference to mental illness. I found in these 24 tweets that there were a higher number of positive portrayals than negative attacks. This reinforces that stigma is shifting towards a more accepting society.

Also through my research, I found virtual grief to be ever present with those who were fans of Robin Williams and his work. 65% of my sample reflected virtual grief, demonstrating how prevalent it is in our technological society. Twitter and other social media platforms are allowing users to express their grief in 21st century fashion.

With my survey, I was able to gain a greater understanding of how my peers may perceive mental illness stigma. There were situations where my respondents and I agreed and situations where we did not. We agreed that those who attacked Robin Williams for his suicide reflected a negative stigma. But, we disagreed that a tweet with positive intentions may be viewed negatively.

Future research could investigate how the attitudes toward mental illness are continuing to change. For example, should a celebrity express that they are suffering; it could be interesting to take a look at the social media responses. Or, future research may investigate social media response to other losses to suicide discussed in the media.

Through this research, it is important to note how perceptions of mental illness are changing. I hope that through the tragedy of losing Robin Williams, it is possible to gain awareness and understanding for mental illness acceptance and suicide prevention.

Appendix A – Random Sample

1. Wow just month ago I told my friends kids about Robin Williams and recommended they watch flubber. We expected more big things from him.
2. R.I.P Robin Williams. You truly were an amazing human, funny, talented, and loveable. I've loved all your movies since I was a kid. ☹
3. RIP Robin Williams! You Will always be one of my favorite actors
4. This whole thing about Robin Williams brings back a memory. Not publicly sharing what that memory is, but I will say this…
5. I honestly can't believe that robin williams has died, so upset.
6. So sad to hear about Robin Williams death, he brought so much laughter to this world. Rest in Peace #RobinWilliams #comedy#legend
7. Holy fucking shit! #RobinWilliams I admire your balls sir!
8. RIP Robin Williams
9. Breaking News: Robin Williams Found Dead | IHeartRadio [link]
10. "No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world." –Robin Williams, Dead Poets Society
11. Actor Robin Williams dead at age 63 [link]
12. RIP Robin Williams ☹ #sosad
13. Wow. I still can't believe we have lost Robin Williams. No one will ever replace Mrs. Doubtfire
14. How you gonna kill yourself like a bitch @robinwilliams
15. RIP Robin Williams. Thanks for sharing your talent with the world.
16. Robin Williams was a big inspiration for me. He was funny and witty and made every moment happier
17. Such sad news if it's true. Thank you for the many laughs through many years. RIP Robin Williams
18. It's so sad to hear that Robin Williams passed away he was such a funny and talented man
19. No way.. R.I.P Robin Williams
20. Robin Williams died! He is one of my favorite actors to watch… This was his final act of all time… Smh… [link]
21. [twitter handle] have you ever seen bicentennial man? Robin Williams did good in that movie as well
22. James Lipton has no Fux2give abt #MSNBS's live, non-reporting of RobinWilliams death. "I can't see the email on his death bc I'm talking 2u"
23. So sad about Robin Williams #RIPRobinWilliams
24. Rip Robin Williams, a true legend of film n comedy
25. Photo: comedeycentral. Red in peace, Robin Williams thank you for everything [link]
26. If you're struggling with a mood disorder, get help!! Life is too precious to risk handling it on your own. #RobinWilliams
27. Maybe Robin Williams opened up Jumangi again and is back in the jungle
28. Robin Williams. This one just hurts the heart
29. RIP Robin Williams
30. Foto: "You're only given one little spark of madness. You mustn't lose it." – Robin Williams [link]
31. RIP Robin Williams. You were a comedic genius and will be missed by many fans. I hope you have found peace at last… #depressionkills
32. Daaammm… Robin Williams tho… I was hoping this was another social media hoax… it wasn't… #RIP

33. Very sad. Depression can affect anyone at any age, even those who seem so upbeat and positive on the outside… [link]
34. In case you haven't read.. Robin Williams died
35. RIP @robinwilliams such an amazing talented actor. #RobinWilliams #mrsdoubtfire #nightatthemuseum #flubber #jumanji
36. On hearing sad news of Robin Williams passing I flashed don the memory of "Good Morning Vietnam." Rule- breaker, risk-taker, inspiration, loved
37. RIP to Robin Williams, one of the funniest people on this earth
38. RIP Robin Williams ☹
39. "Poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for!" – Robin Williams (Dead Poets Society, 1989)
40. Very sad to hear of the passing of robin williams #RIPRobinWilliams
41. So sad about Robin Williams ☹
42. My favorite actor just passed away! This is not good… #robinwilliams – feeling sad
43. Oh captain! My captain! #rip #robinwilliams [link]
44. "[twitter handle] R.I.P Robin Williams. One of the funniest comedians/actors to ever live. ☹"
45. Robin Williams really does deserve to be remembered! A legend!
46. Robin Williams was the best! He will be missed very dearly
47. Robin Williams financially supported Christopher and Dana Reeve after Reeve's accident. Reportedly broke since. Layers of tragedy. RIP
48. First time I saw Robin Williams live on Broadway I was crying laughing
49. ROBIN WILLIAMS IS DEAD. WHAT AM I GONNA DO WITH MY LIFE
50. At least he will be remembered as a legend to others RIP robin Williams
51. "[twitter handle] Remembering Robin Williams. Glowing 1979 NYT review of Williams' early standup [link]"
52. My favorite Robin Williams stand up video was Live at Broadway. It's on youtube if you can ignore the subtitles
53. Robin Williams is dead and I am sobbing #RIPRobinWilliams
54. RIP Robin Williams. You will be missed
55. Oh my god. I'm truly in shock. I don't want to believe that Robin Williams wont ever make another blockbuster film or television series.
56. [twitter handle] someone just said "Rip Robbie Williams" and I'm confused because I thought it was Robin
57. RIP Robin Williams ☹
58. #offline Robin Williams
59. Mrs. Doubtfire nooooo ☹ #RIPRobinWilliams [link]
60. And of course my favorite movie, Mrs. Doubtfire #bestmovie #robinwilliams
61. Crying over Robin Williams' passing. I'm in denial. He was such a huge part of my childhood. So sad to hear the news </3
62. RIP Robin Williams ☹ #RIPRobinWilliams
63. "[twitter handle] Never cried when Pac died. But I probably will when Robin Williams does." Oh
64. Robin Williams dead!!!
65. Rest in peace Robin Williams – I am praying for your soul
66. RIP Robin Williams ☹ Great actor.. <3

67. @robinwilliams R.I.P. A great person has left the world today
68. What the fuck Robin Williams has died?
69. BREAKING NEWS. Robin Williams found dead; suicide investigated [link]
70. Omgggg one of my favorite childhood actors Robin Williams has passed away
71. One of the favorite #RobinWilliams movies was "Good Morning, Vietnam." But so many others, too!
72. When I was sad, I'd watch a Robin Williams movie. Nowhere to turn tonight [link]
73. Thank you for the many years of brilliance, Robin Williams. My heart goes out to his friends and family as they grieve this great loss.
74. You have always been my favorite actor as a kid and you made my childhood 10x better <3 RIP Robin Williams
75. RIP Robin Williams
76. All these tweets about robin Williams touched my heart
77. RIP Robin Williams. So many classics
78. Robin Williams was my fucking childhood and you know what that means a lot to me so behave with your comments about Gaza for 5 minutes fuck
79. Robin Williams died? Damn. R.I.P.
80. RIP Robin Williams. A heck of an actor and a heck of a comedian.
81. Robin Williams dead at 63: Oscar-winning actor found after apparent suicide [link]
82. I love Robin Williams! He did such a good job in Mrs. Doubtfire, Aladdin, and Dead Poet Society. He's energy will be missed #RIPRobinWilliams
83. "[twitter handle] A HUGE part of our childhood has left us. RIP Robin Williams." Tears.
84. Robin Williams is dead? Oh wait you mean my childhood is dead.
85. RIP Robin Williams, one of the funniest entertainers ever. [image]
86. R.I.P Robin Williams ☹
87. So sad to hear about #RobinWilliams
88. It's hard to imagine a world now without Robin Williams.. Rest In Peace My Friend #RIPRobinWilliams
89. Rest in Peace, Robin Williams. An irreplaceable comedy legend. We won't forget the laughter you gave our lives. #RIPRobinWilliams
90. Such a great loss. RIP Robin Williams! #comedicgenius
91. Why would God take someone that everyone loves? RIP Robin Williams
92. So very sorry to hear the tragic news of #RobinWilliams death ☹ such a fantastic actor, thanks for the laughs #nanunanu
93. Robin Williams, manic comedy star, dead at 63 [link]
94. Favorite Robin Williams movies, GO! Mine: Good Morning Vietnam, Dead Poets Society, Hook, Jack, Jumanji, (cont) [link]
95. Robin Williams' Wife Speaks Out After His Death [link]
96. To reminisce: Robin Williams Reddit AMA [link]
97. Rip robin williams your struggles never hindered your ability to instill happiness in others. we've lost too many greats this past year
98. Sad that Robin Williams died but also sad that I have no idea who he is
99. Actor Robin Williams Dead At Age 63 [link]
100. Sending out love and prayers to robin Williams family #RIPRobinWilliams
101. My most sincere condolences to the family of @robinwilliams the world have lost their laugh

102.   Robin Williams' Wife Speaks Out After His Death [link]
103.   Aww Robin Williams :-----(
104.   "fool I told you again were you born on the sun? I told you its damn hot" – Robin Williams #GoodMorningVietnam
105.   Can't imagine my childhood without movies like mrs Doubtfire or Aladdin. RIP Robin Williams
106.   "Robin Williams dead at 63" [link] R.I.P Robin…such sad, sad news. <3
107.   I seriously can't believe Robin Williams is gone. Tragic. Heartbreaking. #RIPRobinWilliams
108.   I can't believe Robin Williams died ☹
109.   Prayers going out to our favorite childhood actor Robin Williams. R.I.P Genie
110.   R.I.P Robin Williams!!!!!! ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹
111.   It's truly heart breaking to hear about Robin Williams. u never know what ppl are really going thru. So sad!
112.   Wow sad moment #rip #robinwilliams ☹ ☹
113.   I can't believe Robin Williams is gone. Jumanji and Aladdin will always hold a special place in my heart
114.   I think part of my childhood has died along with Robin Williams. A terrific dramatic and comedic actor, a very rare thing. Rest in Peace.
115.   Favorite Robin Williams movie easily Dead Poet's Society – also in my top 10. #RIPRobin
116.   I'm actually really sad about this I really really liked robin Williams
117.   [twitter handle] loved "Jack" @robinwilliams ☹
118.   Oh my god, robin williams is seriously dead. no. ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹ #RIPRobinWilliams
119.   RIP Robin Williams <3
120.   I'm seriously in shambles right now about robin Williams
121.   Robin Williams dead at the age of who gives a fuck!
122.   May the always talented Robin Williams rest in peace. My heart goes out to all his friends, family and fans
123.   RIP #RobinWilliams My favorite flick: The World According to Garp
124.   A legend amazing actor thank you Robin Williams for all laughs my heart goes out to all his loved ones he will always be remembered <3
125.   "[twitter handle] And before y'all start, yes, we have the emotional capacity to be upset over Mike Brown AND Robin Williams. Don't even go there"
126.   It's touching how millions are hurt and are mourning the loss of a single man who tried to make a difference. And did. RIP Robin Williams
127.   The world has lost one of it's funniest R.I.P Robin Williams [link]
128.   Genuinely broken hearted over Robin Williams' suicide ☹
129.   You're only given a little spark of madness. You mustn't lose it." Rip Robin Williams
130.   My mom told me Robin Williams died and I thought it was just a hoax until I turned on the news. Shocked and heartbroken ☹
131.   @robinwilliams rip <3
132.   #LEGEND ☹(RT "[twitter handle] #RIP Robin Williams.." [image]
133.   RIP Robin Williams
134.   RIP Robin Williams T~T A major part of my childhood. So sad :c
135.   This touched my heart! Phenomenal actor R.I.P Robin Williams </3 ☹ [link]
136.   Robin Williams on [link] via [twitter handle]

137.   RIP Robin Williams
138.   [twitter handle] What crime did Robin Williams commit against the Transgenders?
139.   The many faces of @robinwilliams truly a comedic legend that placed so many smiles on so many faces! #RIP
140.   Man I'm so sad to hear about Robin Williams. He was the first actor I really admired as a kid! #mrsdoubtfire #hook #aladdin
141.   "[twitter handle]: RIP Robin Williams, your memory will live on forever"
142.   Robin Williams has died at 63 [link]
143.   RIP. Robin Williams Thank you for all the great childhood memories and contributions you've done throughout your life. Rest well.
144.   Robin Williams committed suicide & if that's not depressing idk what is
145.   Robin Williams dead at 63 of apparent suicide. Depression is a monster. [image]
146.   [twitter handle] Come One Breaking news people. Robin Williams died!
147.   RIP Robin Williams
148.   Damn. I'm still in shock. RIP Robin Williams, go forth and make everyone laugh in heaven
149.   Robin Williams, manic comedy star, dead at 63 [link]
150.   You may never know the silent struggle someone else is having. Never be afraid to lean on those around you. Rest easy, @robinwilliams
151.   R.I.P. Robin Williams [link]
152.   RIP Robin Williams. You will be missed. I just keep thinking about that tattoo from Old Dogs. Fremont.
153.   [twitter handle] Robin Williams "brought audiences hours of laughter," was "ad-libbing genius." [link]
154.   R.I.P. ROBIN WILLIAMS [link]
155.   Can't help but retweet all these tweets about Robin Williams…so sad what an absolute legend ☹
156.   RIP Robin Williams @robinwilliams
157.   In dedication to Robin Williams imma listen to his Pandora station
158.   RIP Robin Williams.. you had brought so much laughter to me before..
159.   "[twitter handle] damn man Robin Williams committed suicide is what I'm hearing… sad that man is goin to hell now" people don't wanna hear that
160.   Robin Williams found dead in California home, local police say [link] ☹
161.   R.I.P Robin Williams ☹ <3
162.   Rest in peace Robin Williams
163.   Just found out that Robin Williams killed himself and a part of my soul just shattered. Fuck
164.   "Caption, my caption." – Dead Poets Society (one of my favorite Robin Williams movie) RIP #legend [link]
165.   RIP Robin Williams ☹
166.   BREAKING NEWS: Robin Williams found dead; suicide investigated [link]
167.   "<3 Dios es Amor <3" Actor Robin Williams Is Dead at 63: 'He has been battling severe dep… [link] "<3 Dis es Amor <3"
168.   I was dialing into a call the second that the news about Robin Williams came over. I don't think I said one coherent sentence
169.   Robin Williams will be deeply missed! Can't believe he's gone. I will always laugh at his movies ☹ #RIP

170.   R.I.P. Robin Williams. You gave me many laughs as a youngster.
171.   RIP Robin Williams you will be missed
172.   Robin Williams and dolphin love documentary. Love this [YouTube link]
173.   [twitter handle] [twitter handle] so saddened to hear the news today, I have many childhood memories of #RobinWilliams working with both of you
174.   Wow just heard the news about Robin Williams ☹ my heart just sank. I can't believe it #RIP
175.   Our generation grew up on Robin Williams movies
176.   I hope your beautiful mind quiets now Robin Williams. Thank You. # Robin Williams
177.   @robinwilliams rest in peace!
178.   Fuck you [twitter handle] .. @robinwilliams is more important ☹ ☹
179.   #RIP #RobinWilliams flubber was my favourite Disney film by far as a kid ☹
180.   RIP Robin Williams
181.   Don't be afraid to ask for help. I know how debilitating depression can be Robin Williams will 4ever be remembered for making us laugh and cry
182.   [twitter handle] @robinwilliams Absolutely heartbreaking. RIP You will be remembered warmly. I will miss your smile
183.   RIP Robin Williams. Thank you for all your talent and warm heart. Mrs Doubtfire, Hook, and Jack will always be some of my favorite movies
184.   Robin Williams died… I was not ready for this…
185.   If you ever need to talk to someone call National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 800-273-8255 (TALK) avail 24/7 Please retweet! #RobinWilliams
186.   ESPECIALLY ABOUT ROBIN WILLIAMS. ABSOLUTELY NO NEED FOR THAT "[twitter handle]: no one thinks your edgy tweets are cool…"
187.   #RobinWilliams "IDGARA" going to miss your comedic genius
188.   There's a direct line from Jonathan Winters to Robin Williams; a master of cultural referenced mayhem. An improviser whose horn was his brain
189.   ☹ Robin Williams died he was one of my favorite actors that's crazy R.I.P…
190.   Sad to hear. #RobinWilliams
191.   AW RIP Robin Williams <3
192.   Robin Williams is dead ☹ ☹ </3
193.   "[twitter handle]: Robin Williams and Queen Latifah was funny as shit in Bringing Down the House" …….well
194.   "You're only given one little spark of madness. You mustn't lose it." – Robin Williams
195.   RIP Robin Williams
196.   R.I.p. Robin Williams, I love RV
197.   R.I.P Robin Williams!
198.   RIP Robin Williams always lovedd your filmss
199.   I'm still in shock right now…Robin Williams made our childhood #rip
200.   Actor Robin Williams found dead in apparent suicide [link]

Appendix B – Survey Instrument

Twitter and Mental Illness Survey

This is a survey designed to discover how audience members perceive tweets about Robin Williams' suicide and/or tweets about mental illness immediately following his death. The responses will be analyzed and used as a part of my honors' thesis.

The survey contains questions about your perceptions of a sample of tweets and some demographic items. It should take less than 5 minutes to complete. There are no right or wrong answers – just work quickly and record your first impression.

You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this survey. You will not be identified individually by your responses and all results will be presented only in aggregate form in my thesis. The answers you provide will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. I will not collect information that would let me identify you as an individual; ip addresses will not be collected in the course of the study and results will only be shared in aggregated form. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Specifically, no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties.

There are no foreseeable risks to you as a participant in this project; nor are there any direct benefits. However, your input is extremely valued and may contribute to knowledge of how individuals process messages about mental illness and/or its stigma.

If you have any questions about the survey, please contact me at mallows@uni.edu or my faculty advisor at laura.terlip@uni.edu . If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research project, please contact the UNI Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Protections Administrator at 319-273-6148 or by e-mail at anita.gordon@uni.edu.

Thank you for your input. I appreciate your cooperation.

By clicking the agree button below you are indicating that you are 18 years of age or older and understand the nature of my project and that you will allow me to use your responses in my research.

Directions: Each of the following tweets is followed by questions designed to assess your perceptions of the message sent. Please work quickly – there are no right or wrong responses.

1.

· @ · Aug 11

Holy fucking shit! #RobinWilliams I admire your balls sir!

Level of Appropriateness

Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High

Level of Effectiveness

Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High

What is your level of agreement with each of the following?
The actual content of the tweet

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neither   Agree   Strongly Agree

This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neither   Agree   Strongly Agree

2.

@I   - Aug 11

How you gonna kill yourself like a bitch @robinwilliams

Level of Appropriateness

Very Low   Low   Average   High   Very High

Level of Effectiveness

Very Low   Low   Average   High   Very High

What is your level of agreement with each of the following?
The actual content of the tweet

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neither   Agree   Strongly Agree

This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neither   Agree   Strongly Agree

3.

@   - Aug 11

RIP Robin Williams. You were a comedic genius and will be missed by many
fans. I hope you have found peace at last... #depressionkills

Level of Appropriateness

Very Low   Low   Average   High   Very High

Level of Effectiveness

Very Low   Low   Average   High   Very High

What is your level of agreement with each of the following?
The actual content of the tweet

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neither   Agree   Strongly Agree

This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neither   Agree   Strongly Agree

@   · Aug 11

Robin Williams dead at 63: Oscar-winning actor found after apparent suicide
nydn.us/1mDS14s

News

Robin Williams dead at 63 after apparent suicide

After a life of spinning comic magic, Robin Williams made
his last act a tragedy. The manic comedian, who kept
America laughing with his breathtaking, rapid-fire humor,
and later won an Oscar for his...

View on web

4.

Level of Appropriateness

Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High

Level of Effectiveness

Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High

What is your level of agreement with each of the following?
The actual content of the tweet

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree

This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree

@   · Aug 11

Genuinely broken hearted over Robin Williams' suicide. 😭

5.

Level of Appropriateness

Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High

Level of Effectiveness

Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High

What is your level of agreement with each of the following?
The actual content of the tweet

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree

This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree

@ · Aug 11

Robin Williams dead at 63 of apparent suicide. Depression is a monster.

6.

Level of Appropriateness
Very Low   Low   Average   High   Very High

Level of Effectiveness
Very Low   Low   Average   High   Very High

What is your level of agreement with each of the following?
The actual content of the tweet
Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neither   Agree   Strongly Agree

This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness
Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neither   Agree   Strongly Agree

@ · Aug 11

Don't be afraid to ask for help. I know how debilitating depression can be Robin Williams will 4ever be remembered 4 making us laugh and cry

7.

Level of Appropriateness
Very Low   Low   Average   High   Very High

Level of Effectiveness
Very Low   Low   Average   High   Very High

What is your level of agreement with each of the following?
The actual content of the tweet
Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neither   Agree   Strongly Agree

This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree Strongly Agree

Aug 11

If you ever need to talk to someone call National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 800-273-8255 (TALK) avail 24/7 Please retweet! #RobinWilliams

8.

Level of Appropriateness
Very Low Low Average High Very High

Level of Effectiveness
Very Low Low Average High Very High

What is your level of agreement with each of the following?
The actual content of the tweet
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree Strongly Agree

This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree Strongly Agree

9. I was/am a fan of Robin Williams.
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

10. How often do you use Twitter?
Never Rarely Sometimes Regularly Always

Demographics:
11. I am a…
Male Female Prefer not to answer

12. What is your classification?
Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate Student Other

Appendix C – Survey Results

Question 1: Consent

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes	102	100%
2	No	0	0%
	Total	102	100%

Overall Results:

Question	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Tweet #1-Level of Appropriateness	1.64	.917	80
Tweet #1-Level of Effectivness	1.91	1.116	80
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?-The actual content of the tweet	1.91	1.070	80
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?-This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	2.69	1.327	80
Tweet #2-Level of Appropriateness	1.16	.665	80
Tweet #2-Level of Effectivness	1.49	1.011	79
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?-The actual content of the tweet	1.28	.763	80
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?-This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	1.98	1.449	80
Tweet #3-Level of Appropriateness	4.38	.704	79
Tweet #3-Level of Effectivness	4.16	.898	79
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?-The actual content of the tweet	4.48	.595	80
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?-This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	3.44	1.210	80
Tweet #4-Level of Appropriateness	3.90	1.014	80
Tweet #4-Level of Effectivness	3.85	1.026	79
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?-The actual content of the tweet	3.80	.960	80
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?-This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	3.41	1.155	80
Tweet #5-Level of Appropriateness	3.98	.886	80
Tweet #5-Level of Effectivness	3.71	.922	79
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?-The actual content of the tweet	3.94	.862	80
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?-This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	3.59	1.110	80
Tweet #6-Level of Appropriateness	3.80	.920	80
Tweet #6-Level of Effectivness	3.85	.873	80
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?-The actual content of the tweet	3.93	.925	80

What is your level of agreement with each of the following?- This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	2.74	1.319	80
Tweet #7-Level of Appropriateness	4.33	.843	79
Tweet #7-Level of Effectivness	4.29	.819	79
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?-The actual content of the tweet	4.33	.696	78
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?- This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	3.38	1.360	78
Tweet #8-Level of Appropriateness	4.51	.827	80
Tweet #8-Level of Effectivness	4.48	.830	79
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?-The actual content of the tweet	4.45	.735	77
What is your level of agreement with each of the following?- This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	3.59	1.384	80

Tweet 1:

#	Question	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High	Total Responses	Mean
1	Level of Appropriateness	47	19	12	0	2	80	1.64
2	Level of Effectiveness	38	22	13	3	4	80	1.91

#	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total Responses	Mean
3	The actual content of the tweet	39	17	18	4	2	80	1.91
4	This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	20	19	14	20	7	80	2.69

Tweet 2:

#	Question	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High	Total Responses	Mean
1	Level of Appropriateness	73	5	0	0	2	80	1.16
2	Level of Effectiveness	59	9	6	2	3	79	1.49

#	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total Responses	Mean
3	The actual content of the tweet	68	6	3	2	1	80	1.28
4	This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	48	12	4	6	10	80	1.98

Tweet 3:

#	Question	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High	Total Responses	Mean
1	Level of Appropriateness	0	0	10	29	40	79	4.38
2	Level of Effectiveness	1	2	14	28	34	90	4.16

#	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total Responses	Mean
3	The actual content of the tweet	0	0	4	34	42	80	4.48
4	This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	6	13	18	26	17	80	3.44

Tweet 4:

#	Question	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High	Total Responses	Mean
1	Level of Appropriateness	1	5	24	21	29	80	3.90
2	Level of Effectiveness	3	2	24	25	25	79	3.85

#	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total Responses	Mean
3	The actual content of the tweet	1	6	22	30	21	80	3.80
4	This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	3	16	24	19	18	80	3.41

Tweet 5:

#	Question	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High	Total Responses	Mean
1	Level of Appropriateness	1	2	20	32	25	80	3.98
2	Level of Effectiveness	0	7	27	27	18	79	3.71

#	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total Responses	Mean
3	The actual content of the tweet	1	4	14	41	20	80	3.94
4	This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	3	12	18	29	18	80	3.59

Tweet 6:

#	Question	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High	Total Responses	Mean
1	Level of Appropriateness	2	2	25	32	19	80	3.80
2	Level of Effectiveness	1	4	19	38	18	80	3.85

#	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total Responses	Mean
3	The actual content of the tweet	1	6	13	38	22	80	3.93
4	This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	17	21	18	14	10	80	2.74

Tweet 7:

#	Question	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High	Total Responses	Mean
1	Level of Appropriateness	1	2	7	29	40	79	4.33
2	Level of Effectiveness	1	0	12	28	38	79	4.29

#	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total Responses	Mean
3	The actual content of the tweet	1	0	4	40	33	78	4.33
4	This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	9	15	11	23	20	78	3.38

Tweet 8:

#	Question	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High	Total Responses	Mean
1	Level of Appropriateness	1	1	8	16	54	80	4.51
2	Level of Effectiveness	1	1	8	18	51	79	4.48

#	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total Responses	Mean
3	The actual content of the tweet	1	0	5	28	43	77	4.45
4	This message does not convey any stigma about mental illness	11	6	15	21	27	80	3.59

Are you a fan of Robin Williams?

#	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total Responses	Mean
1	I am a fan of Robin Williams	1	1	13	23	42	80	4.30

How often do you use Twitter?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Never	31	39%
2	Less than Once a Month	8	10%
3	Once a Month	2	3%
4	2-3 Times a Month	10	13%
5	Once a Week	1	1%
6	2-3 Times a Week	10	13%
7	Daily	18	23%
	Total	80	100%

Gender

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Male	14	18%
2	Female	64	80%
3	Prefer not to answer	2	3%
	Total	80	100%

Classification

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Freshman	9	11%
2	Sophomore	16	20%
3	Junior	10	13%
4	Senior	19	24%
5	Graduate Student	9	11%
6	Other	17	21%
	Total	80	100%

Pearson Correlation

#	Question 1	Question 2	Pearson Correlation
1	Tweet #7 Content	Tweet #7 Effectiveness	.788
2	Tweet #4 Content Agreement	Tweet #4 Appropriateness	.786
3	Tweet #7 Effectiveness	Tweet #7 Appropriateness	.769
4	Tweet #8 Content Agreement	Tweet #8 Effectiveness	.750

5	Tweet #7 Content	Tweet #7 Appropriateness	.743
6	Tweet #6 Content Agreement	Tweet #6 Appropriateness	.712
7	Tweet #8 Effectiveness	Tweet #8 Appropriateness	.694
8	Tweet #6 Effectiveness	Tweet #6 Appropriateness	.688
9	Tweet #8 Content Agreement	Tweet #8 Appropriateness	.678
10	Tweet #6 Content Agreement	Tweet #6 Effectiveness	.676
11	Tweet #4 Content Agreement	Tweet #4 Effectiveness	.673
12	Tweet #4 Effectiveness	Tweet #4 Appropriateness	.665
13	Tweet #5 Effectiveness	Tweet #5 Appropriateness	.632
14	Tweet #8 Content Agreement	Tweet #7 Content Agreement	.632
15	Tweet #5 Content Agreement	Tweet #5 Appropriateness	.628
16	Tweet #2 Appropriateness	Tweet #1 Appropriateness	.575
17	Tweet #2 Effectiveness	Tweet #1 Effectiveness	.566
18	Tweet #8 Appropriateness	Tweet #7 Content Agreement	.537
19	Tweet #1 Content Agreement	Tweet #1 Appropriateness	.535
20	Tweet #7 Effectiveness	Tweet #6 Effectiveness	.519
21	Tweet #7 Appropriateness	Tweet #6 Content Agreement	.483
22	Tweet #7 Effectiveness	Tweet #5 Appropriateness	.476
23	Tweet #7 Effectiveness	Tweet #6 Content Agreement	.476
24	Tweet #6 Appropriateness	Tweet #4 Content Agreement	.470
25	Tweet #7 Effectiveness	Tweet #5 Content Agreement	.469
26	Tweet #8 Effectiveness	Tweet #7 Content Agreement	.469
27	Tweet #5 Content Agreement	Tweet #4 Effectiveness	.450
28	Tweet #7 Effectiveness	Tweet #6 Appropriateness	.444
29	Tweet #6 Content Agreement	Tweet #4 Agreement	.439
30	Tweet #7 Content Agreement	Tweet #2 Content Agreement	-.492

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