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## The Rise of Web 2.0 and Digital Narcissism: Rethinking the Aesthetics of Death

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### Abstract

The study aims to analyze the posts related to death on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Thus, the study examines the gravity of death among the social media users and the impact of digital narcissism on the aesthetics of death. The theoretical framework for this study is based on Christopher Lasch's book *The Culture of Narcissism*, which provides insights into the influence of web 2.0, particularly the digital platforms that are used to post death related contents. The study utilizes a summative content analysis approach, focusing on selected statuses and corresponding comments on Facebook and Twitter that pertain to death. The findings of the summative content analysis suggest that Facebook and Twitter have been poorly managed, leading to mistreatment of human values and attitudes towards death. For instance, insensitive comments on the death-related posts indicate a form of abuse within these digital platforms. Additionally, the study highlights the growing use of emojis in expressing grief and mourning on the Web 2.0 platforms. The study concludes that the rise of Web 2.0 such as social media platforms has led to a shallow and often disrespectful portrayal of death, ultimately diminishing its intrinsic beauty and significance.

**Keywords:** Web 2.0, aesthetics of death, digital narcissism, social media

### Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in academic interest and scholarly discussion regarding the convergence of death and digital media. The emergence of web 2.0, particularly social media, has resulted in a significant transformation in the societal understanding and representation of the aesthetics of death and the grieving process. Death as a personal and familial matter has been thoroughly examined by scholars such as Cumiskey and Hjorth who regarded death as a deeply personal and private emotional journey, this shift has been extensively discussed by them (212). Nevertheless, there is a growing trend among individuals to publicly express their grief on these platforms (Giaxoglou et al. 8).

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Due to the impact of the internet on the experience and manifestation of grief in modern society, the study of social media regarding the grief and mourning experience on someone's death has been extensively studied by scholars (Walter et al. 275). The phenomenon of expressing grief on social media platforms can be observed as a reflection of offline practices, where users modify traditional rituals to suit the online environment (Egnoto 283; Gamba 81). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter present innovative avenues for individuals to engage in the grieving process. These platforms enable users to express their grief online and foster the establishment of networks that offer support during times of bereavement (Gibson 221; Varga and Paulus 443). However, the study claims that the act of expressing condolences on social media platforms often lacks sincerity, as individuals often fail to fully understand the significant impact that their words can have on individuals who are experiencing the grief of someone's death.

A significant body of literature exists that explores the various ways in which individuals utilize online platforms to commemorate the deceased, sustain connections with departed loved ones prior to their passing and express grief through social networking sites (Bell et al. 377; Kasket 62-63). Scholars have also investigated the distinct function of social media in modern contexts of death, emphasizing that the ways in which death, remembrance and mourning are experienced that extend beyond physical locations associated with the disposal of bodies and memorialization to encompass virtual social networks (Maddrell 167). Previous studies have examined the impact of social media on the public expression of grief for deceased celebrities (Gach et al. 1) and its role as a platform for analyzing and discussing social behaviours after experiencing loss (Brubaker et al. 162).

Numerous studies have investigated the impact of digital platforms on individuals following the death of someone they were acquainted with, focusing on both the beneficial and detrimental aspects of the social networking site and the use of social networking sites as a means of coping with grief and loss (Rossetto et al. 2; Wagner 1; Sanderson and Cheong 328). These studies suggest that social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have been widely used to commemorate the death of individuals. However, very few studies have emphasized the gravity of death based on the comments posted by the digital platform users.

The advent of web 2.0, particularly in contemporary postmodern societies characterized by individualism, has resulted in the erosion of essential human values and the disregard for sentiments pertaining to mortality. Social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, frequently exhibit instances where jokes and criticisms pertaining to death are showcased, thereby inducing distress and emotional pain for individuals who are in the process of grieving. Therefore, the study argues that the modern users of digital platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are diminishing the genuine aesthetic value of death by employing a mere three-digit acronym, 'RIP,' which detracts from the authentic gravity associated with the concept of death. Therefore, to fill this gap in the literature, the aim of this study is to analyze the content of posts pertaining to death on the social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to ascertain the gravity of death among users. Further, the study investigates the impact of digital narcissism on the perception of beauty and aesthetics in relation to death. In doing so, the study specifically emphasizes to seek the answers of the following questions:

- a) How has the emergence of digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter influenced how people perceive and express condolences, particularly in terms of the gravity and sincerity attached to them?

- b) How has digital narcissism challenged and diminished the beauty and aesthetics associated with death?

### Methodology

The data for this study were collected from two widely used digital platforms, Facebook and Twitter. They consist of a collection of statuses posted by users on these platforms, specifically those related to death, along with the accompanying comments provided by other users. The study employs a summative content analysis approach to examine the selected statuses and comments. Summative content analysis involves quantifying and categorizing the content to draw conclusions about the overall trends and patterns present in the data. To analyze the influence of web 2.0 and digital platforms on societal standards regarding death aesthetics, the study utilizes Christopher Lasch's concept of digital narcissism as a theoretical framework that is developed in his book *The Culture of Narcissism*. This framework provides insights into the impact of technological advancements on societal values, including the concept of digital narcissism. By employing the framework of digital narcissism, the study aims to explore how technological advancements have presented challenges and affected the traditional aesthetic qualities associated with death. It seeks to understand whether these digital platforms have contributed to a diminished appreciation for the aesthetic value of death. Thus, the study aims to provide insights into the ways in which web 2.0 such as social media platforms that have influenced societal perceptions of death aesthetics, drawing from the analysis of specific statuses and comments on Facebook and Twitter.

The study seeks to examine the broader public discourse on the topic of death by analysing the posts shared on digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The act of choosing a variety of posts enables a thorough comprehension of the linguistic choices, emotional expressions and subject matters that are deliberated, thereby offering significant observations into the public's perceptions and discussions surrounding mortality. The study focuses on the posts generated by the younger demographic, taking into account their higher level of engagement on social media platforms. Examining the perspectives and attitudes of the younger cohort can provide valuable insights into potential transformations in societal outlooks regarding mortality, as well as the influence exerted by digital platforms on these outlooks. The study encompasses an examination of social media posts that exhibit a lack of sensitivity towards the subject of death, with an aim of comprehending the portrayal and perception of death within this context.

In this study, summative content analysis is used that involves keywords or content followed by the interpretation of the underlying text. A summative approach to qualitative content analysis goes beyond mere word counts. In this analysis, the focus is on discovering underlying meanings of the words or the content (Hsieh and Shannon 1283).

### Death and Social Media

The utilization of social media platforms is a subject of negotiation in relation to the perpetuation of established mourning rituals online, as well as the emergence of new death-related practices (Cumiskey and Hjorth 212). In recent years, scholarly investigations into death studies have identified a growing inclination towards personalized death rituals and the proliferation of non-institutionalized practices (Walter 393). These practices have found a receptive and facilitating environment within digital platforms, with social media being particularly influential (Gibbs et al.). The intersection of death and grieving practices with various aspects of online life is a common

occurrence on social networks. This phenomenon is largely facilitated by the widespread adoption of social networks (Walter et al. 275) and mobile technology (Cumiskey and Hjorth 212). The mass media has played a significant role in increasing the visibility of death, while social media platforms have further amplified its presence in our daily lives, particularly within our social networks.

However, it should be noted that social networks such as Facebook were not originally designed with the intention of facilitating the sharing of grief and commemoration of the deceased, in contrast to web memorials or earlier online support groups (Brubaker 15). Although certain users may have tamed social networks in this regard, it is important to note that public grieving does not always equate to collective mourning. Individuals who opt to engage in online mourning are confronted with the demands and responses of a diverse audience that does not utilize social media platforms for the purpose of commemorating a deceased individual or partaking in the grieving process of others. The experience of encountering death and witnessing the grief of others on social media platforms can elicit feelings of embarrassment or irritation among users (Brubaker et al. 161-62; Pennington 621; Walter 11). There are at least two distinct sets of issues that intersect in this context: the ideologies embedded within the platforms and how users interpret and adapt them, and the conceptualization of death as either a public or private matter, specifically in relation to the personal experience of grief. The prevalence of mortality on the online platforms has led to the establishment of a set of guidelines for appropriate behavior when expressing grief in the digital realm (Christensen et al. 64).

The utilization of online platforms for commemoration purposes also amplifies the potential for conflicts over the remembrance of deceased individuals. Various parties, such as family members, friends, acquaintances and even strangers, possess the authority to remember the deceased and determine the manner in which they are remembered (Brubaker et al. 152; Gibson 222; Marwick and Ellison 384). The individuals who have passed away, as well as their surviving loved ones, face increased vulnerability to online attacks or offensive remarks (Phillips). However, it is important to recognize the increasing integration of online and offline aspects of life (Pasquali et al. 3). From this standpoint, it is crucial to take into account the distinct capabilities and language used on digital platform (Giaxoglou 8).

### **Does Death Possess Aesthetics?**

The word 'death' invokes various thoughts and emotions within us. Throughout history, people have thought about death in different ways. They usually think of it in three main ways: being afraid of it, seeing it as a way to be free, or thinking of it as emptiness. But no matter how they think about it, fear is a common feeling connected to death. People have explored death using philosophy, especially through books and art. They have shown death as a way to escape suffering and the body's limits. Over time, people have shown death in both scary and interesting ways. But nowadays, with technology and social media like Facebook and Twitter, death has a new meaning because we see it on our news feeds.

In this paper, Rabindranath Tagore's poem is used to highlight this perspective. Tagore, who celebrates the aesthetics of death in eastern Hampshire, was deeply influenced by the Hindu philosophy that views humans as part of an ongoing cycle of life and death. Almost all religious principles come to an agreement on certain fundamental values or beliefs and viewed death as a finality, as a passage from one existence to another, and it is believed that the soul is both everlasting and transcendent.

In his book *Gitanjali*, Tagore wrote over fifteen poems dedicated to death, out of the total of one hundred six poems. One specific instance of such poem is "On the Day When Death," which exemplifies Tagore's welcoming vision of death. He glorifies death in a eulogistic manner in such a way:

On the day when death will knock at thy door what wilt thou offer to him?  
Oh, I will set before my guest the full vessel of my life  
I will never let him go with empty hands. (59)

At the same time, the poem "Death" by Tagore reflects the following lines:

Day after day I have kept watch for thee;  
for thee have I borne the joys and pangs of life. (59-60)

The act of collecting both happy and sad moments of life for the sake of death is seen as a romantic quest and a union in Tagore's seminal poem "Death." As a poet laureate, he was known for his exceptional aesthetic personality, which recognizes the importance of beauty in the human experience. Aesthetes believe that there is always room for improvement in the search for perfection, no matter how beautiful something may appear to look, sound, feel, or taste. They strive to find the beauty that makes us complete.

Narasingha P Sil describes Tagore's insight on aestheticism as follows:

If aestheticism a term invented in 9th century Europe stands for "a devotion to beauty" and for a new conviction of the importance of beauty as compared with and even in opposition to other values", The poet laureate of the world of the Bisvaksvi was an aesthetic personality par excellence. (1)

Tagore's appreciation of aesthetics is distinct in the sense that he does not categorize it in terms of pleasure or pain. It simply exists. This same notion of aesthetics is evident in all his poems, which touch on the two fundamental aspects of human life: life and death. He glorifies death in a manner that does not diminish its allure despite its natural connection with loss and emptiness. In his poem "Death," Tagore personifies death as a fresh bridegroom who is about to depart from her birthplace, bringing the poem to a close.

After the wedding the bride shall leave her home  
and meet her lord alone in the solitude of night. (59-60)

Tagore's aesthetic perspective suggests that death is not the end of the light, but merely the extinguishing of the lamp as the dawn arrives. His aesthetic legacy reinforces the idea proposed in this paper. It is clear that death is not as trivial and superficial as modern social media users often portray it in their posts and tweets.

### **The Epidemic of Digital Apathy**

Using the phrase "RIP" which stands for 'Rest in Peace' to express condolences or mourn someone's passing is a common practice now-a-days in digital platforms. However, it is worth noting that while the phrase is a way to pay respect to the deceased, it does not reflect the full scope of their life and impact. Writing "Rest in Peace" or 'RIP' when someone has passed away can sometimes detach people from the real sentiments of death because it can be seen as a generic or impersonal way to express condolences. While the intention of using such phrases is often show respect and honor for the deceased, it can also come across as a superficial or thoughtless gesture. It raises the question: "Can this trend be expressed as a digital Narcissism?"

There is no doubt that the rise of social media and digital communication has brought about changes in the way we interact with each other and present ourselves in the world. With the ability to curate our online personas and broadcast our lives to a wide audience, it is understandable to a question whether this trend could lead a digital narcissism. The despairing view can be justified under the conception of *The Culture of Narcissism* by Christopher Lasch. He shared this view on the pretext of "Americans Life

in an Age of Diminishing Expectations”: “However, describes a way of life that is dying. The culture of competitive individualism. Which is at decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war all against all the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self” (15). The digital platforms are coming as a rescuer for the people who are heading towards individualism and remain as a fascinating realm to flourish the individualistic cultures. The culture has taken the idea of individualism to an extreme level where people are in constant competition with each other and the pursuit of happiness has become a self-centered obsession. This has led to a situation where people are overly focused on themselves and their own needs. The excessive focus on individualism has resulted in a narcissistic culture in which even significant of death can converted into humorous jokes and light meme to express condolences.

The rise of web 2.0 reinforces the self-centered behaviors. It often glorifies self-centered behaviors such as self-promotion, or self-indulgence. As a result, individuals may start to prioritize their own needs and desires above others, leading to a narcissistic behavior. In this case, Lasch notes:

The mass media with their culture of celebrity and their cult of attempt to surround with glamour and excitement have made Americans a nation of fans, moviegoers. The media give substance to and thus intensify narcissistic dreams of fame and glory encourage the common man to identify himself with the stars and to hate “the” “heard” and make it more and more difficult for him to accept banality of everyday existence. (21)

By promoting the culture of self-centeredness and attempting to create an aura of glamour and excitement, mass media has transformed people into a society of fans and moviegoers. By focusing on the lives of famous people, the media encourages people to dream of fame and glory, which can foster a sense of narcissism. As a result, people may become more obsessed with the idea of being like the stars. In this way, the media’s obsession with celebrity culture can make it difficult for people to accept the mundane aspects of everyday life.

For instance, Jon Stratton's work explores how the experience of grief, which is personal and intimate, can be transformed into a spectacle for others. He examines the ways in which death becomes an object of curiosity and fascination for people who are not directly affected by it. This transformation can be attributed to various factors, including the influence of social media and the media industry, which often sensationalize stories of death and grief for commercial gain:

Death was understood as a part of the social order along with life. Being thought of as an aspect of everyday experience, death was integrated in social relations. Now, since attitudes to death were transformed in modernity, death is excluded from the social order and yet has come to saturate it. This saturation is most profound in the social relation of the spectacle. (9-10)

Stratton discusses how the private and emotional experience of grieving for someone's death can turn into a public display, a show for others to consume. He argues that this transformation is due in part to the influence of media and technology, which have changed the way people relate to death and grief. This has resulted in death becoming something that is shared and experienced not just by those who are directly affected, but also by those who are not.

Grieving in the internet enables us to assert our connection to a tragic event, even if we were not directly affected by it. There is a competition among people to be the first to share news about death, which feeds into our need to feel significant, informed and intriguing. The continuous sharing of tragic news through social media is not only

about expressing sorrows but also more about wanting to pretend that we too were affected by loss.

**Digital Narcissism: Obsession with “Likes,” “Comments” and “Shares”**

The culture of "likes," "comments" and "shares" on social media contribute to a trivialization of death. When people post about the death of the loved one, they may receive a flood of comments and condolences, but these messages may lack sincerity or depth. The pressure to perform grief publicly and the desire for validation and attention can lead to a commodification of death and a loss of its deeper meaning and significance.

The line by Anna J. M. Wagner provides additional insight into the emotions and experiences surrounding death. He claims:

With the technological and social surroundings and the mourning practices within these platforms changing, norms for mourning in social media are changing too. The development of new technological features and the ongoing negotiation of norms for mourning and interacting in social media, will impact the way people act in situations of mourning. More empirical studies will be needed, which are capable of capturing these changes. (9)

Social media mourning can include sharing memories, photos, or videos of the deceased, posting condolences and messages of support, or creating and sharing tribute pages or memorials.

Moore et al. discuss the method how social media messaging (SMM) affects the grieving process by examining the various actions and outcomes related to it.

Additionally, it proposes several methods through which SMM alters or impacts the bereavement process:

The model generated here provides a framework upon which SMM communication for these different types of deaths could be developed and tested. Furthermore, our research examined the goals of the mourner or communicator, not the goals of the receivers. Future research should examine receiver goals while another SMM communications' ultimate effects. Thus, future research should focus on thoughts, feelings, and reactions of receivers of SMM communications in a media effects context, specifically what happens to SMM receivers following exposure. (23)

It suggests that the generated model can serve as a basis for developing and testing SMM related to various types of deaths, while highlighting the importance of investigating the goals and effects on receivers of SMM communications in terms of their thoughts, feelings and reactions after being exposed to such messages.

In social media platforms, individuals cultivate and showcase their carefully curated and idealized online personas. In the era of self-portraiture, social media platforms act as a fertile environment for narcissistic tendencies, where individuals are prompted to prioritize themselves and seek approval from their peers. But the very same platform can devalue the significance of someone's passing by reducing the act of acknowledging their death to a simple click of a "Like" or "dislike" button. This reductionist approach can make it seem like the act of showing support or paying respects requires minimal effort, diminishing the gravity and solemnity of the situation. Additionally, it can encourage people to engage with the post solely for the purpose of garnering attention or increasing their own social media clout, rather than out of genuine concern or empathy for the deceased and their loved ones.

It could be argued that reducing someone's death to a mere "RIP" on social media could be considered a form of narcissism, as it places more emphasis on the individual posting the message rather than on the deceased or their loved ones. By

offering brief, impersonal condolences, the person posting the message may be more concerned with how their social media presence can be perceived rather than offering genuine support and empathy for those affected by the loss. The following can be one of the arguments about this issue:

In modernity, death marked the failure to preserve life. In the society of the spectacle, death can also enable entry into the spectacle. As the spectacle becomes more complete with the advent of social media, so death is equated with self-annihilation. A second, more profound criticism concerns the quantification process as it belongs to a commercial and self-promotional logic considered incompatible within the context of death. Ultimately, what is being rejected is “the potential for economic and emotional capitalization, for instance, ‘to get likes’ on Face book. (Sabra 9)

Death used to signify the loss of life, but in the age of social media and the spectacle, it can also grant access to attention and visibility. With the rise of social media, death is often associated with self-destruction. Another critique relates to the commercialization and self-promotion inherent in quantifying death, which is seen as incompatible in the context of death. Ultimately, the rejection is of the desire to capitalize economically and emotionally, such as seeking validation through “likes,” “comments” and “shares” on Facebook.

### **The New Meaning of Death under the Radar of Web 2.0**

The term "new media" is an appropriate classification for web 2.0 and its prevalence in individualistic societies. However, the individualistic nature of society has reached a level where fundamental human values and sentiments about death are often ignored and mistreated. This mistreatment has taken the form of jokes and criticisms about death on platforms like Twitter, which can cause undue stress and hurt for those who are grieving. While expressions of love and support through social media can be appreciated, they can also be poorly timed and add to the emotional burden of those who are mourning. Sharing photos or videos of the deceased can also be deeply upsetting for friends and family and negatively impact the emotional well-being of those who view the content.

The following sample of tweet reflects the sentiment surrounding the basketball legend Kobe Bryant, who tragically passed away in a helicopter crash with his daughter. While expressing sympathy, some Twitter users paradoxically use vulgar slurs against the player, which is ironic:

What has happened is tragic. I am heartbroken for  
Kobe's family.  
He was a sports hero. He was also a rapist.  
And all of these truths can exist simultaneously.

 PM · Jan 26, 2020 · [Twitter Web App](#)

Along with the irony of expressing sympathy, it is disheartening to witness the verbal abuse by labeling him as a rapist. This behavior highlights the insensitivity and lack of empathy present in certain online discussions

The next tweet seems to express a tribute to the deceased person in an extravagant manner. The meaning of the tweet could be interpreted as follows: The Twitter user was reminded of Magdalen Berns, likely a deceased person, and felt the need to inform everyone that she is still no longer alive.





As in some of the tweets discussed above, the following example of a Facebook post illustrates the carelessness and mishandling of the platform without proper consideration:

Just witnessed a mate accidentally  
'haha' react a family members RIP  
post when he was going for a love  
react.  
RIP

Careless handling of comments can lead to misunderstandings and hurt feelings, even when the comments seem harmless. With the rise of technology, mourning has taken on new forms, including expressing grief and sorrow on social media. While this is not necessarily problematic, it is important to consider whether Facebook, which has become a platform for airing grievances and unfiltered emotions, is an appropriate place to discuss sensitive topics like death. Unfortunately, insensitive comments often appear on regular Facebook posts about someone's passing, as demonstrated in the example given, where a comment mocks the act of posting on the deceased person's profile. This highlights the potential misuse of social media, and emphasizes the importance of being considerate and respectful in our online interactions.

The trend of using emojis instead of words has taken mourning to a new level. Users now accompany their words with emojis to express deeper sympathy. This practice may be justified as death is a social event that brings people together, and RIP messages serve as a means of communication between them. It could be an individual's way of expressing sadness and compassion in a gloomy moment, made possible by web 2.0.

However, this study contends that this trend can become inhumane when individuals believe their duty is fulfilled after posting a comment, without giving proper thought or consideration. This is an unfair treatment of the spirit of death, made possible by the rise of web 2.0.

I am on my way to pick up my dead  
husbands body. ER physician. Frontline.  
[#covid19](#)

8:46 AM · 4/13/20 · [Twitter Web App](#)

7,759 Retweets 42.1K Likes

This tweet is an instance of "sad fishing," a term coined by author Rebecca Reid in early 2019. This refers to the act of sharing emotional content online with the intention of gaining sympathy or attention from others. While there may not necessarily be anything inherently wrong with seeking attention or sympathy in this way, it is a behavior that many people engage in, either as perpetrators or as observers. The author's account of her husband's death is unique due to the exceptional circumstances surrounding it, which sets this particular tweet apart from others. While it is essential to remain professional in most cases, it is equally important to recognize and acknowledge one's emotional and human connections.

In the era of web 2.0, the meaning of death has undergone a profound transformation, operating under the radar of social media and online platforms. The digital landscape has given rise to new dimensions of grief, remembrance and expression, as individuals navigate the complexities of mourning in a hyper connected world. However, this evolution also brings forth challenges, such as the trivialization or exploitation of death, the proliferation of online harassment and abuse, and the blurring of boundaries between public and private spheres. As society grapples with the new meaning of death in this digital age, it becomes imperative to foster empathy, respect, and ethical conduct online, ensuring that the commemoration of the deceased remains meaningful and dignified within the realms of web 2.0.

### Conclusion

The advancement of web 2.0, particularly in contemporary postmodern societies characterized by individualism, has resulted in the erosion of essential human values and the disregard for sentiments pertaining to mortality. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, frequently exhibit instances where jokes and criticisms pertaining to death are showcased, thereby inducing distress and emotional pain for individuals who are in the process of grieving. Although gestures of love and support are often welcomed, their timing can sometimes be inappropriate, leading to an additional emotional burden. The act of disseminating photographs or videos depicting individuals who have passed away has the potential to evoke distress and to exert adverse effects on the emotional state and overall psychological health of the families of the deceased. The lack of careful management of comments on social media platforms has resulted in misinterpretations and emotional distress. In light of the transformative impact of technology on the process of mourning, it is imperative to critically evaluate the appropriateness of utilizing social media platforms for engaging in discussions pertaining to sensitive subjects such as death. Comments that lack sensitivity frequently emerge on the posts related to death. However, emojis have gained significant popularity as a means of conveying empathy and sorrow during the periods of mourning, as the advent of web 2.0 has facilitated a sense of communal solidarity among individuals in the face of death. Nevertheless, this phenomenon can be deemed unethical when individuals perceive their

obligations as fulfilled without taking into account the essence of mortality, thereby resulting in unjust treatment.

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