Original Article

From private to public: the experience of mourning in digital society between digital obituary and digital gravestone

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ABSTRACT: The digitization of society has redefined many dimensions of social reality, including such an individual experience as death. Even today, the end of life and the experience of mourning represent social issues that, on both the analog and digital planes, provoke broad debates and contrast spaces for reflection and the crossing of ethical and epistemological thresholds. While, however, in the physical world, there is the persistence of an invisibilization of death, in the digital world, death would seem to regain wide spaces of argumentation, narrative, and explicitness, shared and regulated by internalized social and moral norms. The article aims to analyze the social, emotional, and imaginary aspects of the end of life and the experience of mourning mediated by digital tools. In the context of digital ethnography, these aspects were explored through content analysis of living people's interactions with the deceased's profile on three social media (Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp¹). The aim was to identify a typology of users and the different narrative and elaborative modes of mourning by introducing the terms "Digital Gravestone" and "Digital Obituary", not lacking, in the concluding part, references to ethical aspects on possible end-of-life scenarios and the experience of mourning.

KEYWORDS: digital death, mourning, digital obituary, ethics, digital gravestone

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¹ WhatsApp, despite being an instant messaging service, has recently been considered a social media because the new features—such as status sharing and the possibility to subscribe to thematic groups—are peculiar characteristics of social media (Parent et al., 2011).

1. EXPERIENCES AND REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH

Studying death still means breaking very strong taboos. The human being, in his naturalness, tends to live more and more and better and can only face death with anguished fear. He knows that it must end, and since antiquity, he has tried more and more to push this moment away even if, often, by an act, he wanted to end his existence voluntarily (Mangone, 2009). The struggle for life seems to take hold more and more vigorously—Bergson (2003) spoke of "vital momentum"—as at every moment, human beings experience their needs to improve their bodily and social existence. Since time immemorial, life and death have represented the highest issues of humanity. Indeed, "Death is the only absolute in life, the only surety and truth. Because it is the only condition that all life must consider, it is the only human a priori. Life matures, develops, and aims at death. Death is its very purpose. We live in order to die. Life and death are contained within each other, complete each other, are understandable only in terms of each other" (Hillman, 1988, p. 59). Many questions have been asked, but few concrete answers have been given; death is individual, but it can be collective, and today, it is indeed social and even digital, as will be observed in this article.

Hillman, for example, nicely captured the meaning of death for human beings, arguing that an individual cannot choose life until they can say no to it; for such reasons, he insists on the "experience" of death and its "representation". Therefore, the individual's position is ambivalent depending on whether one confronts them with death or the dead. Death and the dead carry behind them a multiplicity of rites, more or less affluent cults, magical and religious beliefs that vary with the passage of centuries, and popular traditions always dragging behind them that aura of taboo (Douglas, 1966). For primitive peoples, it was not an abstract representation. It was a magical ritual. The dead individual continued to survive without his mortal remains and was enriched with powers.

Going beyond the study of religious beliefs and primitive peoples, let us consider the "representation of death" in two distinct aspects: the presence or absence of the danger of death. The general representation of death, and especially of one's death, requires an abstract prediction based on the known subjective experiences, nothing more than imagining one's cadaverous existence in the world of the dead. It is, however, of ordinary mortals not to think about death; they live as if they do not have to die; it is necessary. Unfortunately, the death of a relative, a friend, or even a stranger makes us attempt a *post-mortem* representation approach and provoke strong emotion. In this way, one has experienced the notion of death before having experienced it. Still, for this to be factual, sufficient intellectual development is necessary, and if there are three distinct stages in children (total misunderstanding of the phenomenon, death is denied; death is considered an absence, the dead body having been conceived; death is part of the representation of the world that through the external elements is made manifest), in the adult human being the representation of death is influenced by the education received, and when

the latter has a religious orientation (regardless of faith), death is nothing more than the passage from earthly life to the afterlife; in other circumstances, death is limited to the concrete representation of the corpse. Wanting to propose a macro simplification of the complexity of the representations of death, we have two very simple forms: one positive, the continuation of being from life corresponding to the religious vision and the possessive and preservative tendency of the individual; the other negative, disappearance of being, of life resulting from objective reasoning rather than from an instinctive-affective foundation.

The present century confronts us with innumerable ambivalences, and one of them concerns death: medicine, which has reduced human individuality to pure organic objectivity, tends toward the removal of pain and, in so doing, actually wants to hide or even deny death, forgetting that it is part of the life of every human being. In the essay *The Loneliness of the Dying Man,* Elias highlighted these aspects well: "Death is a problem of the living. Dead people have no problems. Of the many creatures on this earth that die, it is human beings alone for whom dying is a problem. [...] But they alone of all living beings *know* that they shall die; they alone can anticipate their own end, are aware that it can come at any time, and take special precautions—as individuals and as groups—to protect themselves against the danger of annihilation" (Elias, 2001, pp. 3-4); an aspect that becomes a cause for bewilderment in modern society in which both the sense of existence and the sense of death have been "lost" (Cavicchia Scalamonti, 1984), what seemed the clear frame of reference even from an ethical point of view begins to waver under the pressures of society's rapid transformations also in the technological sphere. This is even more true in the current historical phase in which there is a shift from the *network society* (Castells, 1996) to the *platform society* (van Dijck et al., 2018) in which the latter are characterized as sites for the exchange of communicative practices, forms of togetherness and participation in public life, and as technologies that enable both individuals (individual or collective) and institutions to come into contact and achieve their own ends. This creates a new ecosystem within the media ecology (Strate, 2004), giving rise to new phenomena such as digital subcultures. Then again, many phenomena have moved from physical (offline) to digital (online) environments in a process of *mutual and social shaping* (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999). The focus will be on what can be defined as subcultures of death that take place in digital society and affect the grieving processes through informational events that take place due to the proliferation of forms and ways of communication and visibility supported by the spread of digital media.

The theme of death, and therefore the theme of the experience of mourning, is transversal to various disciplines of the Human Sciences, which have always turned their attention to the analysis of cultural processes and the different narrative modalities of the end of life of the afterlife and the methods of elaboration of loss and memory concerning historical-cultural changes and the various implications they have generated from a social point of view. Therefore, it is inevitable to refer to disciplines other than sociology

despite the latter being the authors' discipline of reference. This article aims to analyze – with a mainly sociological and media studies perspective – the relationship between the experience of grief and the use of social media and digital platforms, trying to identify points of continuity—and, at the same time, discontinuity—with the experience of grief experienced in digital interactions, with particular attention to how social media co-participate in the preservation and commemoration of remembrance and memory.

In the first part, to reconstruct a theoretical frame of reference, in general, the phases that have led from the denial to the re-appropriation of death in the contemporary world, which is characterized by being digital, will be highlighted, substantiating the concept of *Digital Death.* In the second part, the results of an exploratory research experiment will be presented and discussed using mixed methods: in the first part, a survey was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 30 people aged between 22 and 45 from different Italian regions selected through an expression of interest expressed via various social media (Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp); in a second part, a digital ethnography experiment was conducted that analyzed the posts, shared images and arguments of users subscribed to different groups that had as their unifying theme the experience of mourning and the death of loved ones that occurred suddenly or as the unfortunate outcome of a long illness.

2. FROM DENIAL TO RE-APPROPRIATION OF DEATH IN DIGITAL SOCIETY

This article, starting from the experiences and representations of death as described in the previous paragraph, will focus on the experience of mourning and, in particular, on the relationship between the latter and the advent of digital society.

However, in order to understand the cultural and narrative changes in the experience of mourning throughout human history, it is essential to outline the historical-cultural features and representations of death and the end of life in different societies and along a chronological dimension.

Death and its representation and narration, therefore, changes and evolves through the different eras, diversifies and becomes invisible with the advent of industrial society, and changes again in form and mode of expression and narrative with the advent of the Internet and the digitization of society. Indeed, the latter has profoundly involved and transformed contemporary society, changing and reworking many dimensions of social reality, including such an individual and social experience as death. Despite the fact, however, that in society wrongly—anachronistically—considered offline, we witness the persistence of an invisibilization of death. In a digital society, on the other hand, death seems to regain broad spaces of argumentation, narrative, and explicitness, which are shared and regulated by internalized social and moral norms. News about the death of famous or important people travels faster on social media than on traditional news outlets—such as television news and radio—and people can share emotions and thoughts

about the dying or deceased person in a generalized, unrestricted farewell of space and time (Walter, 2012; Moreman, 2017). In this way, social media and digital platforms come fully into the narrative and grieving processes at all stages, from the announcement of the loss to the remembrance and commemoration of one's deceased. However, before going into the research details, an attempt will now be made to trace the cultural-historical trajectory that has led to the denial and erasure of death from the discourses and narratives of contemporary society.

Ariès (1967) points out how death, for centuries at the center of human discourse and narrative, in contemporary times becomes less and less present in the daily lives of individuals and is progressively juxtaposed with feelings of shame, modesty, and invisibilization. This process began with separating cemeteries from the center of cities with the edict of Saint-Cloud,[2] ordered by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1804. In fact, cemeteries were moved outside the city walls or areas inhabited by the population, restoring the barrier that separated the *land of the living* from the *place of the dead* (typical of the Roman Age). From this time, the separation of death from life will affect all Western societies, from France to the United Kingdom from Italy to America. It is precisely in the latter society that the idea that death should not be talked about is consolidated; it is also necessary to modify the semantic expression of the term and substitute, in the spoken language, verbal terms or locutions that can represent more acceptable and less impactful constructions.

The British sociologist Gorer (1955) spoke of *forbidden death,* pointing out how, in contemporary society, the process of the end of life and departure has become the new and absolute social *taboo*, progressively replacing sex, which has instead been partially cleared through customs since the second half of the twentieth century. However, Henry James (1909) spoke of *the conspiracy of silence,* or the progressive tendency in society to "silence" death and the narratives around it. The word *death* is not uttered. Never. In the news or mass media, terms such as *have left us passed away*, or *is no longer with us are* used.

One does not talk about death with the dying person. There is a tendency to spare them from suffering and the realization—and awareness—that one's life is ending. This phenomenon, which would seem to be entirely personal and aimed only at the individual's well-being, also has deep motivations in the erasure of death from society since it creates an upheaval, an emotion too great to handle, too complex to be spread uncontrollably by mass media. The denial and erasure of death from daily life is facilitated-and perhaps accelerated-by social and cultural changes involving the development and advancement

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[2] The Edict of Saint-Cloud was enacted in the French Empire by Napoleon and provided for the prohibition of burying the dead within Churches, temples, synagogues, hospitals, public chapels or enclosed places where citizens gathered for the celebration of their cults; it also forbade the practice of burial within cities by stipulating as the minimum distance for from the city boundary to 40 meters in an elevated position, facing north in sunny and airy places to ensure ventilation from any bad odors and being surrounded by walls at least two meters high.

of medicine and changes in the places of death: many people die away from their homes but experience their end of life in hospitals or hospices (medicalization of death).

Over the past three decades, the emergence and spread of the Internet and social media have profoundly transformed how individuals construct, reproduce, and narrate social reality, including end-of-life and death experiences (Sumiala, 2013; Christensen & Gotved, 2015). Sisto (2016), for example, pointed out that, currently, the largest cemetery in the world is not the Paris Monumental or the London cemetery, but Facebook, as it contains millions of profiles and digital identities of deceased or missing people. It is estimated that in 40 years, there will be more than 100 million profiles of dead users (Cumiskey & Hjorth 2017).

The recent COVID-19 pandemic and the dramatic events of the long period of the spread of the disease have amply demonstrated that—even if in contemporary society, processes of re-appropriation of the narration of death have begun—this denial of the pain of death and the battle against it through the help of medicine still represent one of the main socio-cultural frames (Colombo, 2022) and are widespread and rooted in Western society.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the perception of online mourning. Practices that were previously not very visible have suddenly become common and widely accepted. This area, like other aspects of daily life, has also experienced an acceleration in the processes of adaptation to digital technologies.

However, the representation of death on social media and in digital society would seem to turn offline and contemporary modes upside down: death reclaims its narrative spaces and becomes, instead, current, present, and interesting. It is not unusual to witness announcements of the passing of a loved one on social media, such as following the farewell of a famous person through posts, memes, and hype posted on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. And, as we will see below, the profile and digital identity of the departed person becomes a veritable digital tombstone on which messages, thoughts, and actual virtual processions of relatives and friends are collected and celebrated.

The phenomenon of privatization of mourning already present in contemporary society ties in with the new modes of communication proposed by the digitization of society and re-processes the needs of the dying person's loved ones, who feel the need to socially and publicly share their grief, loss and restart after the mournful event; however, the phenomenon of digitization of the space of mourning and death is not free from criticism, ethical concerns and moral dilemmas. The coexistence of the deceased person's digital identity with the accounts of living persons exposes the former to a range of uses and actions by the latter without any voluntariness or possibility of replication; the digital identities of the deceased, in the absence of express provisions on digital inheritance, could be at the mercy of posterity. Abidin (2019), in this regard, argues strongly and persuasively that all Western (and non-Western) states should provide specific rules and regulations for end-of-life treatment of digital identities as well to avoid the spread of digital specters in

the web society (Baranowski, 2024).

Seeking to understand how digital technologies are revolutionizing our relationship with death, altering the grieving process, and transforming the perception of remembering the dead, the concept of "Digital Death" has evolved over the past decades. A clear and comprehensive definition of this concept (or phenomenon) is provided to us by Davide Sisto (2016) in his essay entitled *Digital Death: How Death is Narrated with the Advent of the Web*:

> The concept of digital death (Digital Death) is usually understood to refer to the set of issues concerning the ways in which the relationship between subjective identity and death has changed due to the development of new information and media technologies (beginning with the popular spread of the Internet). In particular, Digital Death scholars focus on three specific issues: a) the consequences that the death of a single individual produces within digital reality and, therefore, in the lives of those who suffer the loss; b) the consequences that the loss of personal digital objects and information produces within the physical reality of a single individual; and c) the unprecedented significance that the concept of "immortality" takes on in relation to both the individual and personal digital objects and information. (Sisto, 2018, p. 80)

It is evident that, over time, digital technologies have generated a profound anthropological transformation in how we deal with death. Significantly, the advent and development of social networks have inevitably brought about a radical change in habits, transposing a considerable part of actual existence into the digital domain. The rapid spread of information has brought even the most intimate aspects, such as pain, suffering, and death, into the online world, exposing users to an increasing amount of content of this nature and normalizing what was once profoundly private. We can thus discern how the continuous reworking of such a sensitive topic as the loss of a person is amplified and, paradoxically, undone by contemporary society. The disappearance of a loved and known person represents a tragedy for many cultures; however, nowadays, we can also be constantly updated on the misfortunes of others by accessing information from the other side of the globe with the click of a button. In addition to the processes of concealment, removal, and relocation of place, protagonists, and values, an additional phenomenon has marked death in the modern and postmodern era: its spectacularization (Brubaker et al., 2013, Battista, 2024).

> Death is not only removed, but also—or especially—trivialized, to the point of substantial affective neutralization in the media. It is estimated that each hour of television production contains two or three provoked deaths. Precisely because it is repetitive, it must present itself with increasingly attractive features, and then it even becomes spectacular. (Agustoni, 1998, p. 282)

Media spectacularization has turned suffering and death into commodities, selecting

them for their relevance. Indeed, the culture industry has shown an extraordinary ability to exploit a range of traditional images of death. As a result, the pain of victims and their families is offered as a spectacle to the public, who often become accustomed to the role of spectator, anesthetizing their emotionality. It is possible to see how the media report on murders and other extreme acts with the same emphasis reserved for less dramatic news events. In these cases, death is exploited as a tool to boost ratings. Details about deaths are displayed with close-up images of the deceased, accompanied by background music, moments of suspense, and personal information about the victim - think of the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom in 2022.

The death depicted is theatrical, told in an entertaining language similar to that used in cinema. By depicting death with such theatrical features, there is a risk of perceiving real disappearances as spectacles, greatly complicating the grieving process for those involved. In the past, this task was entrusted to traditional rituals and the ability to express one's grief freely.

According to Italian philosopher Davide Sisto (2018), this is one of the main dangers of the spectacularization of death. In fact, he states that:

> The sharing of live death and dead bodies highlights the presence of a short circuit between a society that has disaccustomed us to thinking and seeing death and the digital culture that puts communication, information, and images before everything else. The greatest risk we run is to confuse the actual and painful reality that belongs to death with its theatrical, televised and cinematic representation. (Sisto, 2018, p. 84)

The spectacularization of death is evident in both traditional and digital media, finding particularly fertile ground in social networks. However, the latter do not simply make death a spectacle; they are taking on an unexpected and innovative role in redefining the relationship that many people have with the taboo of death, creating a space in which this topic can be discussed more openly, a space that is often lacking in offline reality. Talking about death and dying touches on sensitive issues that can provoke discomfort or embarrassment. In traditional communication, words are filtered by social desirability and prevailing cultural values; online, however, this filter is often bypassed. In social media, death is present in a multitude of posts, images, videos, and stories. It is neither concealed nor confined to the private sphere; on the contrary, it finds a new space where awareness can be raised and the memory of the deceased kept alive (Savin-Baden & Mason-Robbie, 2020).

The role that the Internet is taking on involves significant changes in the processing of mourning, introducing new interactive modes that profoundly transform the relationship between the community of the living and the community of the deceased. To fully understand what we are talking about, it is appropriate to recall the thought of Luciano Floridi, who coined the neologism "Onlife" in 2013 to identify the new human condition

in the digital age:

> Onlife is like the mangrove society. They live in brackish water, where that of rivers and that of the sea meet. An incomprehensible environment if you look at it from the perspective of fresh water or salt water. Onlife is this: the new existence in which the barrier between real and virtual has fallen, there is no longer a difference between "online" and "offline", but there is precisely an "onlife": our existence, which is as hybrid as the mangrove habitat. (Floridi, 2014)

The concept of "Onlife" represents a view of our modern existence in which the distinction between *online* and *offline* is now blurred. This terminology describes a hybrid existence, where our digital and real lives are closely intertwined, making it impossible to separate them sharply. The mangrove analogy offers an eloquent metaphor for understanding this concept: mangroves, in fact, thrive in brackish water environments where fresh water from rivers mixes with salt water from the sea. This environment cannot be fully understood by considering only one of the two components (freshwater or saltwater); it is a unique ecosystem that emerges from the interaction of the two. Similarly, "Onlife" describes a reality where the boundary between the digital and physical worlds has fallen. We are no longer simply online or offline but live in a permanent condition of interaction between the two worlds. This implies that our experiences, relationships, and activities are constantly influenced and mediated by digital technology, creating a new form of existence that is as much real as virtual and in which there is the encroachment of the private into the public and vice versa.

In the *Onlife* experience, we become *Inforgs*, mutually connected informational organisms and part of an informational environment, the infosphere, which they share with other informational agents, natural and artificial, that process information logically and autonomously. Finally, Floridi (2014) points out that digital technology is not just a tool we use but an integral component of our living environment, redefining how we interact with the world and with others. The fourth revolution, which involves the continuous delegation of our memories and memories to artificial agents, offers new solutions and opportunities to our complicated relationship with the end of life and the passing of time.

In today's hyper-connected society, therefore, the experience of mourning has progressively detached itself from physical and temporal boundaries, moving to a virtual dimension where time seems suspended, and the geography of affection can extend infinitely. Consequently, the practice of digital commemoration, such as the *Digital obituary*, is a phenomenon that goes beyond a mere reaction to the death of an individual, taking the form of an actual social ritual that reinvents the way we process grief, adapting it to the rhythms and codes of the digital society.

3. THE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The spread of the digital society opened up the possibility of a different experience of mourning, as many deceased people possessed a social media account or digital identity. This exploratory research work analyzed the changes and aspects of imagery related to death throughout the different stages of the funeral and mourning experience.

Specifically, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: How has the announcement of a loved one's death changed with the spread of social media and various digital tools?

RQ2: What are the effects on funeral rituals and the funeral experience of the digitization of society?

RQ3: How is the sendoff, ritual of remembrance, and commemoration experienced through the use of social media and interactions with the deceased person's digital identity?

RQ4: Is it possible to identify the common traits of users in their use of social media and digital spaces for the funeral experience? Is it possible to arrive at a typology of users?

To answer the research questions, a research design with a qualitative approach was constructed, and in order to appreciate deeper aspects related to the emotional, psychological, social, and imaginative system of the mourning and funeral experience-in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 people aged between 22 and 45 years, residing in different regions of Italy (Tab. 1), who voluntarily responded to an expression of interest to participate in the research spread through the leading social media (Facebook, Instagram, and Whastapp), in a second phase, a digital ethnography experiment was conducted, in overt mode and with the authorization of the administrators to access the field of observation, which analyzed the posts, shared images and arguments of users registered in different groups whose unifying theme was the experience of mourning and the death of loved ones that occurred suddenly or as the unfortunate outcome of a long illness.

In particular, 256 posts and interactions with posts from users subscribed to the Facebook group "Elaborazione del lutto" (Grieving) from March to November 2023 were analyzed.

Region	Genus	Age	Partial by gender	Total Region
Campania	Female	24, 21, 21, 31, 22, 27	6	7
	Male	30	1	
Latium	Female	23, 23, 21, 22, 24	5	8
	Male	28, 41, 28	3	
Sicily	Female	30, 32	2	2
	Male	-----	0	
Piedmont	Female	20	1	1
	Male	----	0	
Calabria	Female	21	1	1
	Male	----	0	
Emilia-Romagna	Female	39	1	2
	Male	43	1	
Apulia	Female	22	1	1
	Male	----	0	
Brands	Female	22, 23	2	2
	Male	----	0	
Liguria	Female	22	1	1
	Male	----	0	
Tuscany	Female	----	0	1
	Male	41	1	
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	Female	----	0	1
	Male	45	1	
Lombardy	Female	30	1	1
	Male	----	0	
Veneto	Female	29	1	1
	Male	----	0	
Sardinia	Female	20	1	1
	Male	----	0	
Subtotal by gender		Female	23	
Male		7		
GRAND TOTAL				30

Tabel 1. Geographical, gender, and age distribution of participants

3.1. ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS
3.1.1. ANNOUNCING DEATH ON SOCIAL MEDIA: THE DIGITAL OBITUARY

From the analysis of the data and interviews, it was possible to highlight how the digitization of experiences has profoundly changed the experiences of daily life, even when these involve death. When an individual loses a loved one, to the classic physical obituary - the one traditionally printed and posted on the streets of the city or neighborhood and in front of the residences of the various loved ones and family members - the custom of announcing the death and the details of the funeral procedure (church, time, possible address to be able to visit or follow the funeral procession) has also spread widely on the leading digital platforms and through the various apps used by individuals in their daily lives.

The analysis reveals three major digital tools to spread digital obituary: 1) Facebook, 2) Instagram, and 3) WhatsApp, with different functions and modes of expression functions and modes that change according to the channel's unique characteristics.

Taking as reference the concept of *level of social proximity* (Altman & Vinsel, 1977), which sees a classification of physical, social space into *intimate* for immediate relationships with direct and ongoing emotional sharing; *personal* for stable relationships with emotional involvement without re-entering the intimate sphere; *social* for significant and stable social relationships without necessarily emotional involvement; *public* for the other relationships and interactions that do not precede direct interaction and without a substantial emotional and relational level; will be declined to virtual and online reality as benchmarks for analyzing the use of social media and different apps for the communication of the death of one's spouse and the remembrance and memory management.

Facebook, being a social network with a fair amount of textual components, represents the platform that best matches the typical characteristics of the physical obituary: it is possible to collect information without limitation of textual space; it is direct. It reaches a target audience of close and related people immediately. The following post is an example of a digital obituary, which fully fulfils the function of the traditional obituary.

> Goodbye my beloved mother. Now you can be free from so much suffering.

> My mother's funeral will be held tomorrow XXXX at XXXX Church on XXXX Street. Please do not buy flowers but do charity as my mother (woman, 23, Rome) would have wanted.

The post tends to open with the announcement of the death of the loved one, rarely mentioning the word "death" but paraphrasing it with expressions that serve a function of sweetening—such as goodbye, you are gone, good riddance, etc.—and a photo of the deceased person is posted—alone or with the person announcing the death—follow logistical directions of the funeral rite.

Instagram, on the other hand, because of its peculiar characteristics, which focus on the main potential of the visual dimension, tends to enhance the sharing of photos and memories by giving space to emotions and feelings, cleaning up communication—compared to Facebook's digital obituary—from logistical communications (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Parent et al., 2011).

The following post highlights the substantial differences between announcing the death of a loved one on Instagram versus the posts used on Facebook.

> Finally, you left. I want to remember you like this, like in this picture, always smiling with us and in watching us grow. Safe travels dad. We will never be too far away (man, 28, Rome)

The communication that takes place on WhatsApp, on the other hand, seems to mirror that of Instagram exactly, i.e., it tends to leave out the emotional part, of memories and feelings felt at the time and tends to share and disseminate, instead, logistical and organizational information, often replacing the phone calls announcing the departure of a loved one, phone calls that would seem to be a mode of communication reserved only for people who are family members or have a profound degree of intimacy with the deceased (Tab. 2).

Medium	Emotional aspects and memories	Information logistics	Level of social proximity
Facebook	Yes	Yes	Social
Instagram	Yes	Not always	Social
WhatsApp	No	Yes	Staff
Voice call	Yes	Yes	Underwear

Tabel 2. Characteristics and levels of proximity concerning the medium used to announce the death of a loved one

The following post represents a WhatsApp message that an interviewee shared with the research team to highlight its merely logistical characteristics:

> I wanted to inform you that unfortunately my beloved father passed away this morning. The funeral will be held tomorrow XXXXX at XXXXX Church at XXX hours. Thank you very much. Have a good day.

The experience of M., a 23-year-old girl from Rome who lost her father during the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic, allows us to substantiate the different ways in which she used social media and the various mediums with which she was able to announce the death of her spouse to a wide and disparate audience of social actors present in the different strata of her social life.

My father died in early June 2021. We were in the midst of a pandemic, and so it was not possible to see him except at set times.

I announced his death to people in different ways, and or even allowed me to relive those moments, they were choices dictated by a number of factors.

I called my sister, my mother and my best friend by phone. The former obviously out of emotional and familial closeness to my father, you can't break such news by text. Choosing words is not easy, and in retrospect I wouldn't even know how to repeat them. Instead to my best friend I called her because I needed it myself, I wanted at that moment to have someone to take care of me, to tell me that I was not alone to that I could cope.

Then I wrote a series of very concise WhatsApps: announcing the death and indicating the funeral arrangements. Since we were in a complex pandemic phase, I didn't want the crush either in the hospital or in the church.

The rest of the people related to dad found out from Facebook, I wrote a post with some information for the funeral but with a personal introduction, because many did not even know dad was sick, I did not want to shock them with the impersonal news. I have to say that to share the emotions and memories, I still use Instagram, because with photos you can say a lot more things than with words.

3.1.2. THE FUNERAL EXPERIENCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE: SHARING POST-FUNERAL THOUGHTS AND MEMORIES

While the announcement of a loved one's death has been profoundly altered by the digitization of society, the funeral experience, understood as the "wake", as the farewell of loved ones in the funeral parlor and as the funeral rite in church or places of ritualized passing, remains private and unencumbered by social sharing.

What would emerge, however, as the subject of sharing and storytelling through mainstream social media are the memories and emotions immediately following the conclusion of the funeral rite, when the loved one comes to terms with the absolute absence of the relative.

It is not unusual to see the sharing of long thoughts and stories of life episodes in posts featuring photos and videos of moments spent with the lost loved one. As highlighted earlier, the social media that best match these needs and functions are mainly Facebook, Instagram, and recently TikTok, which are also involved with this specific need for emotional experience. Finally, posts and sharing on Facebook and Instagram post-funeral can also act as a thank-you to the people who participated—at different levels—in the funeral experience and the grief of the deceased's family and friends.

The following posts were written immediately following the funeral of a loved one.

I wanted to thank those who have been close to me during these difficult days.

I am very tried, and I have a hard time thinking. Now I will have to think about my life without my mother, without the most important person in my life. It comforts me that now she is no longer in pain and no longer has to spend her days in bed.

I will keep within me all his strength and in his teachings. I hope to live up to her idea of me. I already miss you mom (girl, 22, Turin).

My beloved wife. I hope to see you again soon. I dedicate this poem to you. Whenever I read it, I will think of you.

I went down, giving you my arm, at least a million stairs

And now that you are not there is emptiness at every step.

Even so, our long journey was short.

Mine endures to this day, nor do I need any more

the connections, the reservations,

the traps, the scorns of those who believe

That reality is what you see.

I went down millions of stairs giving you my arm

not already because with four eyes maybe you can see more.

With you I went down them because I knew that of the two of us.

The only true pupils, though so blurred,

were your own.

Thank you all for saying goodbye with me to my beloved XXX (man, 46, Rome).

The experience of Cristina, a 39-year-old woman from Bologna, highlights—as previously noted—the persistence of a private and utterly intimate connotation of the funeral experience, creating a clear separation from the world of social media until the occurrence and conclusion of the rite of farewell and passing, in all its phases. Social media becomes, therefore, the place to experience the farewell in the moments immediately following the end of the funeral and burial.

After telling everyone about my partner's death, I did not use social media until the fu-

neral was over. Honestly, those were intimate and private moments, and I had no desire to "stain" those moments with photos or thoughts. After the burial, however, yes, I must admit that I felt the need to share the grief with the world and to thank everyone who had been close to me at that very difficult time. My partner died after a short but terrible illness. In the months of the cancer fight, I often shared on social media the struggle and the hope until it was clear that the battle was lost. But I think that today, with social media, the concept of "loneliness" has also changed. I must say that I have felt less lonely than when my mother died 20 years ago. Even just reading the comments under a photo somehow can provide companionship.

3.1.3. THE NARRATIVE OF GRIEF AND REMEMBRANCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA: THE CONCEPT OF THE DIGITAL GRAVESTONE

The digitization of society and the advent of the Internet and social media have profoundly changed human activities and people's individual and social experiences, including the experience of death and the relationship with grief. An analysis of the observed Facebook posts and interviews conducted would reveal an entirely unexpected function of the profile and account that individuals have created at the time they signed up on one or another social media: the account—once the person has passed away—will serve as a veritable digital tombstone. Let's get more specific.

When a person dies, in addition to leaving behind a wide range of tangible and tangible memories in offline society, they leave behind an essential amount of digital traces through the various *digital identities* created over a lifetime through major social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, etc.). These traces and the deceased's digital identity can be used by loved ones, relatives, and friends as a "digital space" to experience remembrance, grief, and farewell. In this way, the digital identity would become the virtual grave of the deceased, a meeting point for the thoughts and emotions of those who survive (Pasquali & Bartoletti, 2020).

As is usual for rituals around physical graves, flowers, cards, and (digital) thoughts are also placed on digital tombstones in the form of posts to share memories by loved ones and by those who want to keep the memory alive and manifest this will in a way that is "socially visible". From the interview of L. (a 32-year-old man from Tuscany), who lost his wife after only three months of marriage who died from an aggressive form of melanoma, it is possible to observe how even the WhatsApp account becomes a way to be able to experience grief and maintain a bond with the deceased person. He, in fact, says that punctually, every day and every night, he sends a good morning and good night voice message on his wife's number and that he listens to a voice message stored in his memory as a response.

Since M. left with her WhatsApp number, I keep texting and telling me about

the daily routine. We have been together for over 10 years and now it seems absurd, unnatural, not to tell her my things or hear her voice. Fortunately, social media exists and having kept her voice reassures me. Every morning and every night I greet her with good morning and good night. I tell her about myself, and I listen to the voice as a response. I know it should not be done, but for me it is like going to the grave, only I can pick up the phone and feel close to her.

G. (a 43-year-old man from Campania, Italy) also describes experiencing the same connection and feeling with his dead friend's digital identity as he does with the grave, the tombstone of a dead person: he collects thoughts, pictures, and memories. He shares them from time to time on his friend's bulletin board.

I was in this place today and how can I not think of you! My friend how I miss you, how I would like to call you and tell you what I am experiencing, to ask your advice and instead life has snatched you from me, from all of us who love you with undying affection.

3.2. THE DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY EXPERIENCE

In the second phase of the study, a netnographic research was conducted in an overt manner and with the authorization of the administrators to access the field of observation. This analyzed the posts, shared images, and arguments of users registered in different groups whose unifying theme was the experience of mourning and the death of loved ones that occurred suddenly or as the unfortunate outcome of a long illness.

In particular, 256 posts and interactions with posts from users registered in the Facebook group "Elaborazione del lutto" from March to November 2023 were analyzed.

This community was created 10 years ago and is a very active self-help group, with just over or just under 30 new messages a day.

This virtual context was selected based on a reasoned choice based on the criteria of theoretical sampling, which suggests a "maximalist" selection of the cases that can provide the best and/or most significant opportunities for the transposition, collection, and selection of the information necessary for the investigation and that can represent a sampling that is close enough, even if not representative, to the characteristics of the population under study (Masullo et al., 2020).

The Facebook group was selected for the following aspects:

1) relevance, as it answers the questions posed by the research design;

2) attention to the focus of the research;

3) heterogeneity, as it includes different categories of participants;

4) richness of information (data-rich), as it contains valuable information on the problem under analysis.

This online community is set up as a private (closed) group in the sense that only members can see who posts and what they post. Still, it is visible in the sense that anyone can find this group, which has 40,608 members, and anyone who feels the need to join by applying to do so.

The process of analyzing and interpreting the data was hermeneutic; that is, it sought to valorize the subjects' points of view (Masullo et al., 2021) through the interpretation of their statements in the posts.

3.2.1. THE MOTIVATIONS AND EMOTIONS THAT DRIVE COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP: BETWEEN RELIEF AND THE NEED FOR IDENTIFICATION

From the analysis of the posts and interactions examined for this research, it was possible to identify three main motivations that drive users to join the *Grief Processing* community.

The first motivation, which seems to be the one most shared by users who join the community, is the *search for relief*, or instead, finding emotional fulfilment and meaning through reading and understanding stories similar and comparable to their own.

The following post is the story of M., a 23-year-old girl from Rome who tells about her experience and explains in no uncertain terms the meaning of her belonging to the community:

> Good morning, my name is XXX and I'm 23 years old, I'm from Rome. Two weeks ago I lost my mother to breast cancer. The ordeal lasted about 10 months. The worst time of my life. I'm trying to make sense of it all but I can't. My mother was young and didn't deserve to die like that. I signed up here because none of my friends have lost someone so important, maybe talking to someone can ease my pain.

A second motivation that emerges from analyzing the digital material is the *search for similar stories for understanding or identification*. This motivation emerges in those users who interact only and exclusively with people who have lost loved ones to similar illnesses or situations, *de facto* creating thematic subgroups: *cancer patients*, *victims of road accidents,* or *sudden deaths*. The following post clarifies:

> I'm V. and I'm writing from Naples. My brother died a few months ago in a fight outside a nightclub. I, too, feel a deep anger and a sense of isolation. I wish I could talk to someone who has lost a family member in similar circumstances. (V., 21 years old, Naples).

A third motivation, common to the various users, is the need to *make themselves useful to others*. This identifies the need—in an advanced stage of mourning—to put one's experience at the service of other users to create an inclusive and supportive community. It represents the altruistic sphere of the community, as can be seen from the following post:

> I put my story at the service of others. My name is XXX and I'm from Verona. I had been married to XXX for a few months when he took his own life by throwing himself off a balcony. He had never shown any signs of psychological distress and everything seemed to be normal, on the contrary, we had made plans and had many things to do together. Only a week before, we had bought tickets for Athens. It's now been two years since his death and I can say that I have at least partially processed the pain and dismay. I am available to interact and talk with other people who are experiencing the same emotions, even with different stories. We are a community and helping each other is the first step towards a civilized society (N., 33 years old, Verona).

3.2.2. DIGITAL USERS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF MOURNIN

The analysis of posts, interactions, and comments on posts has made it possible to identify two reference criteria found in most of them: The first criterion—followed by the semantic label digital socialization—refers to the degree (high or low) of social involvement and iteration through digital media, where high is a level that involves constant and significant participation in narration and social activities through cyberspace, while low would represent a low propensity to express oneself and manifest one's thoughts and experiences through social media.

A second criterion, which we identify with the semantic label of processing the experience of grief, refers to the emotions and the degree—high or low—of emotional processing of grief, loss, and the emotional and social changes this experience has generated in one's life.

Four typical types emerged from the intersection of the two criteria, reflecting many different ways of experiencing grief through cyberspace, as illustrated in Table 1.

The **"trainer"** type, i.e., the user who presents a high level of digital socialization and a high level of emotional processing of the experience of mourning, represents the real driving force of the group, promoting topics, interacting with the posts of other users, sharing their own knowledge and their own experiences to actively help other users in the complex and delicate process of processing the loss of a loved one. Very often, they take on the role of group administrator, or if they are not among the founders of the community, over time, they assume a central role in the virtual life of the group.

The post of G., a 32-year-old girl in Rome, is an example of sharing by a user trainer:

Hi everyone, how are you? Today I wanted to share with you a dream I had last night. I dreamed of my mother, she was still healthy and she asked me if and when I had solved the problem of the house in XXXXXX. However, I already solved this problem a few months ago. I wanted to share with you the emotion I felt in still in shape and still attentive to me, do you think it's nostalgia? Or do I simply miss her and want to be in touch with her? I'm not worried about it, but I wanted to know your opinion. Have a nice day, guys.

The **memorialist** user—that is, the person who has a high degree of digital socialization but a low emotional and cognitive processing of grief—tends not to comment on other posts and does not interact with other users except through their posts and their own narration of the pain and experience of grief. These users are more likely to express the pain level in the acute phase; they are probably people who have recently lost a loved one and who, by sharing their experience in cyberspace, hope for—and seek—answers and comfort. The experience of L., a 54-year-old mother who recently lost her daughter to a rare and aggressive form of cancer, is an example of a post by a memorializing user:

My daughter, why did you leave so soon? Why didn't you live your years as you should have? Why did you do this to me? You wonder why I'm angry with you? Because a daughter doesn't die before a mother, it's unnatural to outlive your children. Every night I ask God to let me die too, and in the morning when I wake up I drag myself out of bed to survive a pain that I don't think will ever go away. It's not fair.

		Digital socialization	
		Low	High
Processing the bereavement experience	High	***Supporter*** These are the users who are enrolled in the group or platform who have a fair level of grieving and personal experience but do not share their own experiences only participate in the experiences of others and residually	***Trainer*** They are the people who have positively processed the experience of grief, have a high degree of digital socialization, and are active promoters of the group, sharing experiences and proposing the topics and themes of the group
	Low	***Viewer*** They represent the silent figures in the group. They do not interact with comments and never share their experiences; their presence is limited to likes to posts	***Memoirist*** Users with a high level of digital socialization but low awareness and emotional processing of the grieving experience, tend to share memories and thoughts dedicated to their loved ones without ever really using this space as a possible area of processing

Table 3. Typologies of users

The analysis of users with a low level of digital socialization appears much more complicated as they express their experiences and emotions in a residual way compared to the other two typologies analyzed previously, leaving many aspects to interpretation and the conceptual anchors present in the scientific literature on grief processing. In this analysis, the user we will call **viewer** or observer corresponds to the person who, despite being registered in the group and the community, only shows their presence by liking other people's posts without commenting or interacting with other users. One could hypothesize that the spectator user presents a low level of mourning processing combined with a low propensity to share, talk, and interact with others through digital media. Finally, the **supportive** user would represent the user who—by processing and positively resolving the mourning experience—having a low level of digital socialization, tends not to talk about themselves in the first person or to share their emotions and experiences but limits themselves to commenting in a supportive way on the experiences of others, once again restricting interaction to simple motivational or circumstantial phrases, leaving communication at a superficial level, as demonstrated by the following response from a user to a post by another user.

> Hi everyone. I wanted to ask your opinion. After my husband's death, I almost completely cut off contact with my sister-in-law, my husband's sister. The day after tomorrow it will be 4 years since my husband's death and I wanted to organize a secular gathering for. My sister-in-law is very Catholic, I am not and this was also a topic of discussion a few years ago, I wanted to know if you think it's a good idea to invite her or should I deny her this opportunity to remember him. Thank you, A. (Woman, 55 years old, Rome).

> Answer: Do what your heart tells you (Woman, 32 years old, Florence).

4. CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory study aimed to analyze an emerging and profoundly significant phenomenon in our contemporary society: grieving in the digital age.

Death understood as an inherently human and inevitable event, has always represented an existential challenge for the individual and the community. However, the digitization of society has introduced new ways of confronting and managing this event, redefining the boundaries between the public and the private, the intimate and the shared.

"Digital obituary" and "Digital gravestone" reveal to us a complex and articulated fresco of society, which, in the overwhelming embrace of digitization, has not left untouched even the most intimate and traditionally private experiences, such as mourning and commemoration of the dead. Once relegated to the margins of everyday life and often silenced in the public sphere, death finds a new expressive dimension in the digital world, capable of bringing online communities together around grief and remembrance in an

ongoing dialogue between presence and absence, memory and oblivion (Church, 2013).

In this hyper-connected society, the experience of mourning has progressively disentangled itself from physical and temporal boundaries and moved into a virtual dimension where time seems to be suspended. The geography of affection can extend infinitely. As a result, digital memorial practices, as well as "digital obituary", represent a phenomenon that goes beyond a mere reaction to an individual's death, taking the shape of a proper social ritual that reinvents the ways of grieving, adapting them to the rhythms and codes of digital society. Social media, which initially might have appeared to be extraneous or even unsuitable tools for hosting the solemnity of the farewell, have gradually become elective places for the expression of collective and personal grief. Moreover, the differences among social media in their use to announce a loss or to remember a deceased person reveal how each social offers a different symbolic and semiotic language to represent mourning: Facebook, with its vocation for textual narrative, becomes a space for digital obituary; Instagram, with its visual aesthetics, takes on the guise of a scrapbook of memories; WhatsApp, with its immediacy, becomes a channel for more intimate and direct communications.

This phenomenon bears witness to an ongoing hybridization between online and offline, between traditional rituals and new digital practices, testifying to how death is no longer an event relegated to the private sphere but becomes an occasion for sharing, public reflection, and sometimes the construction of new forms of community. The emergence of the "Digital Gravestone" concept represents one of the most significant developments in this transformation. The social profile of a deceased person is no longer just an archive of personal memories but becomes a sacred space, a virtual tomb where remembrance is cultivated and nurtured by those who remain. This virtual space, while lacking the materiality of traditional graves, acquires a profound symbolic value: it is a place of digital pilgrimage where friends and family members can gather to deposit their thoughts, virtual flowers, images, and memories, thus keeping the presence of the deceased alive in a world where death no longer marks a final separation, but a continuous interaction between life and its memory.

In conclusion, the study of the digitization of the experience of mourning offers us valuable insight into how contemporary society is renegotiating its relationship with death and memory. The shift from traditional to digital mourning does not represent a mere technological transposition but a profound transformation of the affective, social, and cultural dynamics accompanying death. In this new scenario, the Web becomes not only a means of communication but a true ritual space, where the past and the present, the tangible and the intangible, merge in an incessant dialogue that redefines the meaning of loss and memory in the digital age. Thus, mourning becomes communal, remembrance becomes shared, and death, instead of being relegated to the shadows, finds new light in cyberspace, in an eternal present that embraces the past, preserving and transmitting the value of lives lived.

The transformation of the mourning experience, then, reflects our age, characterized by an unprecedented acceleration of communication and an increasingly pronounced interconnection between the real and virtual worlds. As society continues to evolve, we must develop a critical and profound reflection on these new practices to understand their implications on how we live and die fully. Only in this way can we affirm an ethical and cultural awareness capable of guiding future generations in an ongoing dialogue with their digital heritage and the unfathomable mystery of death.

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