Resisting the Grave: Memorialisation in Cyberspace

DYLAN GOODACRE-HALL

PHD

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

SOCIOLOGY

SEPTEMBER 2023

Abstract

The digital presence of the deceased in online spaces has prompted discussions on the emotional impact, ownership of digital data, and the ethical dilemmas associated with posthumous digital data utilisation. This research delves into the multifaceted landscape of individuals' online legacies, examining the processes of archiving the self in preparation for death, challenges with authenticity emerging in the digital afterlife, and the desire for a definitive closure of one's digital existence. Ethical concerns surrounding posthumous digital data usage and its implications on the grieving process have intensified. This study aims to comprehensively understand how individuals navigate issues of death, grief, and the digital legacy they leave behind, particularly in the context of virtual memorial spaces. Employing an interview-based approach, this research investigates the perceptions and experiences of social media users as they grapple with the interplay of mortality and online presence granted by personal digital data. By exploring the vernacular of virtual memorial spaces, the study offers valuable insights into the ethical dilemmas tied to posthumous digital data and proposes potential strategies to address these concerns from the perspective of the individual user. This research contributes to the fields of digital death and dying and continuing bonds, shedding light on the evolving dynamics of how individuals forge connections with the departed in a digitally mediated environment. This study therefore addresses research questions of how virtual memorials are emerging as a novel mode of memorialisation and how online memorial spaces transform notions of space and embodiment. By examining these questions, the research provides insight into the archival guidance granted by social medias, concerns regarding the authenticity of one's digital legacy, and the right to digital erasure. This research contributes to an enriched understanding of the interplay between mortality, digital legacies, and the evolving nature of social connections in an online era.

Keywords

Posthumous digital data, digital legacies, afterlife, digital memorialisation, continuing bonds, interview-based, grieving online, personal-archiving, post-mortem presence, digital body

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Table of contents

1. Introduction

The presence of the deceased in online spaces has significantly altered the landscape of memorialisation and its functioning within digital spaces. This shift has underscored how the legacy of individuals is now intricately interwoven with their online presence. The adoption of digital spaces for the purposes of enacting memorialisation practices has been widely discussed, from the potential emotional implications presented by the medium to questions of ownership and control over digital representations of the posthumous self. With the increasing accessibility of technologies such as AI, which can mimic or recreate individuals using their past data, ethical concerns have arisen around the use of posthumous digital data and its potential effects on mourning rituals and the pathologising of mourning behaviours. This research aims to understand the perceptions and experiences of social media users navigating death, grief, and the legacies they leave behind through the internet. In pursuit of this understanding, the research concentrates on the remedial impacts of social media and digital spaces on how individuals memorialise the deceased. This is attributed to various factors, including but not limited to shifts in accessibility to memorialisation spaces and the reconfiguration of what are deemed acceptable and authentic social behaviours within these spaces. Through an interview-based study, this research offers insight into the concerns surrounding one's digital legacy in relation to death through the vernacular of the digital memorial space.

Building on the this, the financial implications of traditional memorialisation practises further underline the importance of exploring virtual alternatives. As highlighted in Sunlife's (2023) *cost of dying report*, the escalating expenses associated with probate, memorial arrangements and wakes present a significant barrier for many families. As a result of this, it is becoming increasingly difficult for families of the deceased to afford the physical services that are offered when a loved one has died. In some parts of the world, those who wish to purchase a private grave can be expected to pay up to $30,000 whilst waiting lists for public graves can reach 5 years or more (de Sousa, 2015). Such costs, coupled with disruptions like the Covid-19 pandemic, have restricted the ability to grieve and memorialise in physical settings. *Virtual* or *online* memorialisation emerges as a complementary option alongside conventional

memorial practices, addressing these challenges by reducing financial burdens, bridging geographical divides and facilitating accessible spaces for collective mourning.

Online memorialisation practices involve the creation of internet pages where digital assets are stored. These can include photos, textual accounts, and are intermediated by the hosting platform they exist within. Online memorials can exist in the form of collaborative pages on Facebook, separate blogs and websites, or sometimes through subscription services that act as an assemblage of personal digital data - sometimes referred to as an individual's 'Digital Body' (Lupton, 2017). Structures such as online cemeteries have been noted to exist from 1996 (Roberts and Vidal, 2000), and often include features that are akin to a guestbook; where individuals are able to both anonymously and openly address the death of another (Roberts, 2004). Visual signifiers and cultural values differ when comparing online memorials to their physical counterparts as the lack of physicality must be negotiated by those invested with a memorial of either type. The virtual memorial can materialise in real-time, prompted by the sharing of data related to the deceased through a website. It can also involve the transformation of a space formerly owned by a living user into one dedicated to commemorating their life – exemplified, for instance, by a fan page for a musician who has passed away.

The proliferation of deceased individuals' profiles on platforms like Facebook is occurring at an astounding rate. Projections indicate that by 2100, the number of these profiles could soar to a staggering 1.4 to 5 billion, assuming that the ongoing expansion of social media users shows no signs of slowing (Öhman and Watson, 2019). To provide further context, as of 2013, Facebook alone had approximately 30 million deceased profiles coexisting with the living (Ambrosino, 2016). This situation underscores the pressing need for extensive research in the realm of virtual memorialisation and enduring connections between the living and the deceased. It's not just the sheer volume of posthumous data that's concerning; there are also complex social implications regarding data ownership (Lingel, 2013), historical preservation (Roland and Bawden, 2012), and a myriad of ethical quandaries that these developments bring to light.

Previous research in this field has identified the need for an understanding of the ethics surrounding commercialisation of the dead's social media data (Öhman and Floridi, 2017), and a reconfiguration of how we methodologically tackle these issues within research (Lingel, 2017). Research of this nature is essential for unpacking how social media's interactive legacy spaces function and the ways in which their digital architectures facilitate ongoing relationships with the deceased. These platforms, by design, offer users opportunities to engage with memories of the dead in deeply personal yet public ways. However, this duality introduces complexities, as individuals must navigate their mourning practises in the presence of an often-critical audience. Understanding how users interact and adapt to these public mourning spaces is crucial for comprehending the broader societal implications of digital memorialisation and its impact on contemporary expressions of grief. To do so, this research proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: How are virtual memorials emerging as a process of memorialisation?

RQ2i: What are the attitudes towards utilising digital spaces for mourning?

RQ2ii: Do individuals want a digital legacy?

RQ2iii: What influences the emergence of these views?

To address these inquiries, the data analysis in this research is structured into three primary areas of investigation. The initial analysis chapter delves into how individuals are guided through the processes of archiving their lives online and curating their digital legacies. The second analysis chapter delves into the issues raised by these practices, with a particular focus on individuals' concerns regarding authentic self-presentation in both archiving and memorialising the deceased in a public online context. The third and final analysis chapter explores the ethical considerations surrounding posthumous digital data that continues to exist within online spaces, as well as the thoughts and emotions of individuals who may encounter a lasting online presence after their death. This approach provides a comprehensive framework for investigating the emergence of virtual memorials and their integration with traditional mourning practises. It examines how individuals are introduced to and guided in using these digital memorialisation methods, explores the concerns they associate with

these practises, and considers how these concerns shape their broader need for closure and finality.

2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction

In line with the investigative assumptions and issues outlined in the introduction to this research, this literature review will explore a series of both theoretical and participant-led research projects. Over the past decade, research has evolved from theoretical considerations to participant-led inquiries, examining how private and public perceptions intersect with death, mourning and online spaces. This literature has been selected to provide a clear understanding of the historical and present understanding of how individuals interact with and navigate mourning the deceased in private and public contexts, both in physical and digital spaces, along with the interplay it creates in relation to issues of authenticity and the digital self. Accordingly, the review is structured into two main sections - '*Public, Private and Pathologized Mourning'* and *'Authenticity, Digital Mourning and AI'* – to frame how these concepts have evolved. These headings are split into three subheadings to properly position the discussion accordingly. Understanding the virtual memorial as an online extension of traditionally physical practices provides insight into how these digital spaces are used by diverse individuals to create and maintain legacies for themselves or others. These spaces serve as sites of mourning and remembrance, transposing established rituals into the digital realm. Such an exploration also lays the foundation for addressing the research questions, integrating both participants' responses and the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review. Hence, the research aims to investigate how digital processes alter memorialisation, focusing on individuals' varied perceptions of their value and authenticity – a theme that directly echoes the concluding discussions on participants' desires for control and finality. As such, the research questions are as follows. In particular, the second research question (RQ2) encompasses three sub-questions: RQ2i, RQ2ii, and RQ2iii:

RQ1: How are virtual memorials emerging as a process of memorialisation?

RQ2i: What are the attitudes towards utilising digital spaces for mourning?

RQ2ii: Do individuals want a digital legacy?

RQ2iii: What influences the emergence of these views?

The first section, '*Public, Private, and Pathologized Mourning'*, examines the multifaceted nature of mourning across different settings, focusing on distinctions between private and public expressions of grief. This exploration provides a crucial foundation for introducing the concept of virtual memorialisation, which mediates the boundary between these two domains. The section delves into how mourning practices shift when transitioning from physical spaces to digital platforms, uncovering the complexities of virtual environments. In addition, it investigates the role of group mourning and the influence of media in shaping collective grief, reflecting on how these dynamics evolve in online contexts. The section also addresses the pathologisation of mourning tendencies, considering the societal norms and expectations that frame how grief is expressed and perceived. Furthermore, it outlines the spatial and geographic aspects of mourning, tracing the evolution from traditional, location-based memorialisation to the increasingly prominent virtual methods. Taken together, this comprehensive approach sets the stage for understanding the intricate interplay of grief, space, and technology in contemporary mourning practices. The second section, '*AI and Digital Selves in the Virtual Memorial',* delves into the relationship between digital identities, legacy curation, and the expanding role of AI in online memorialisation. It investigates how individuals shape and manage both their own digital selves and the legacies of others, while exploring the impact this has on our conceptualisation of the afterlife and the nature of what we leave behind. The growing role of AI in shaping digital identities is highlighted, emphasising its significant effect on posthumous legacies within virtual memorials. Crucial to this is the matter of public visibility in online spaces, where the curation of identity and the performance of mourning are subject to the scrutiny of a social audience. Such a dynamic raises critical questions about authenticity, a key theme within this research. As chapters 4, 5 and 6 will show, participants' insights reveal the complexities of negotiating

perceived genuineness – versus potential misinterpretation – in both physical and digital mourning contexts. To provide a robust theoretical framework, this section reviews existing literature on authenticity in online identity formation and communication, linking these concepts to the practices of mourning and memorialisation in virtual environments. Additionally, this section introduces related concepts, such as *continuing bonds*, to enrich the understanding of virtual memorials. By examining how these bonds are sustained through digital means, the review offers deeper insights into the evolving nature of grief and memory in the context of AI and online spaces. This approach sets the stage for interpreting participant responses and situating them within the broader discourse on authenticity, identity, and technological mediation in mourning practices.

2.2. Public, Private and Pathologized Mourning

This discussion begins by examining how space shapes mourning practices, focusing on the interplay between public and private mourning processes. In particular, it explores how traditional contexts (e.g., cemeteries) intersect with spontaneous mourning sites and the public commemoration of high-profile deaths, illuminating the multifaceted nature of grief in both private and public arenas. Space occupies a pivotal role in this research, acting as both a framework for and a reflection of mourning practices. Whether in private settings accommodating public rituals or public spheres hosting deeply personal grief, the character of the environment shapes how individuals express and navigate mourning behaviours. Such interplay illustrates how spatial dynamics profoundly influence how individuals engage with mourning. Moreover, the absence of tangible spatiality in virtual environments drives significant transformations in how people mourn. Digital spaces reconfigure traditional mourning behaviours, often normalising new rituals and fostering novel expressions of grief. These developments open new sociological avenues for understanding how tangible and digital dimensions of space jointly inform loss and remembrance. Drawing on Maddrell (2016) and her ‘emotional deep-mapping,’ we see how death is often framed through spatial metaphors, such as ‘passing to the other side’ or ‘going to a better place,’ which evoke a sense of movement across boundaries. In contrast, Bondi

et al. (2016) emphasise that bereavement, grief, and mourning are not only spatial but also profoundly temporal experiences, tying 'embodied emotions' to specific sites and contexts. Building on Massey's notions of spatial fluidity, Maddrell underscores how engagements with death-related spaces can shift over time - whether individually or collectively, influenced by personal, cultural, socioeconomic, or political factors. Seasonal cycles, cultural traditions, and varying social positions all contribute to ongoing redefinitions of mourning practices in space. Modern practices surrounding death, and remembrance are superimposed upon historical frameworks, creating a layered relationship between past and present. Such layered dynamics are central to this research, which seeks to understand how both private and public mourning become reimagined in physical and digital spaces as mediated environments.

2.2.1. *Historical Geographies of Mourning*

Accordingly, the discussion first turns to prominent physical spaces for mourning, with the cemetery as an example. Sloane observes in *Is the Cemetery Dead?* (2018), '*As a historian, I believe strongly that trying to understand what is happening today is impossible without the context of the past'* (p. 18). highlighting the importance of grounding contemporary memorialisation practices within their historical framework. To appropriately investigate the evolving approaches to mourning and remembrance, one must examine the diverse history of mourning-related spaces. The spatial nature of cemeteries has historically been shaped by a complex interplay of religious practices, social doctrines, and anxieties about health and hygiene (Ariès, 1975). Social attitudes toward death have shifted significantly over the history of Western society, where the emphasis on individual experiences and self-appropriation has replaced earlier collective conceptions of mortality. Previously, death was seen as an expected aspect of life, framed by faith in divine nature. Over time, however, the focus shifted to *'the death of the self'* (Ariès, 1975), centralising individual emotional experiences, including anxiety and grief. Paradoxically, while there is an increasing avoidance of directly confronting one's mortality, a fascination persists when death is perceived as distant. Ariès (1975) calls this a '*far'* sense of death, visible in historical spectacles like public executions or the modern media fascination with celebrity deaths (Walter, 2010; Woodthorpe, 2010). This evolution of attitudes toward death and dying resonates with several participants of this research, who also express a tension

between an intrinsic fear or avoidance of mortality and a curiosity drawn from high-profile, public forms of death.

Funerary processes have historically been deeply tied to geographic locations, with associated architecture evolving alongside them. As noted by Worpole and Worpole (2011), the origins of architecture itself are often traced back to the tomb, highlighting the foundational role of death in shaping spaces. Traditionally, these rituals centred around the church and its adjoining cemetery grounds, with church interiors often reserved for higher-status burials, thus distinguishing between those buried within the church and those buried in the surrounding grounds (Curl, 1980; Finucane, 1981). As the quantity of the dead has grown, expanded burial spaces have become necessary, leading to architectural and societal adaptations (Eng, 2015). A major transformation in burial geography emerged during the medieval period. Burials far from cities gained prominence when notable individuals were interred there, sparking widespread desire for a similar posthumous fate (Etlin, 1984). The closeness of one's grave to the church thus became a key indicator of status, overriding concerns about the intactness of remains, so long as they occupied the desired space. Over time, taboos surrounding physical remains faded, transforming cemeteries into multifunctional locations where families might gather and children could play, thus bridging the living and the deceased (Ariès, 1975). By the 19th century, grave markers detailing age, status, and religion became important artefacts, reflecting broader cultural norms and social hierarchies (Maddrell and Sidaway, 2016). Not all burials, however, followed these ritualistic norms; mass graves used during large-scale killing events were purely utilitarian without customary rules or distinctions (Kolbuszewski, 1996). A further distinction exists in how ownership structures (Rugg, 2000; McManus, 2015) impacted the allocation of burial plots. Burial grounds often encompassed cemeteries, churchyards, and spaces for minority populations to conduct their own funerary practices (Rugg, 2000).

Among the many developments, the garden cemetery emerged as a purposefully designed space, integrating memorialisation and everyday social activities (Tarlow, 2000). Such sites were not only dedicated to mourning but also public venues that facilitated leisure, reflection, and engagement with nature. An illustrative example is St. George's Field in Leeds, originally a burial ground but now part of the University of

Leeds' campus. This integration demonstrates the adaptive nature of these spaces, balancing historical function with contemporary use. Similarly, cemeteries serve as essential spaces for public mourning, offering a green setting that becomes seamlessly woven into everyday life. In facilitating both daily experiences and communal mourning, cemeteries also highlight how the presence of grief and mourning can be normalised in public contexts. However, a growing shortage of land (Howard, 2021; McManus, 2015) complicates these spatial solutions. In response to urbanisation and limited space, alternative burial or memorial options are emerging, such as virtual spaces that may supplement or wholly replace traditional practices. By moving into the digital realm, these new options provide practical, cost-effective, and often highly individualised solutions for mourning in modern urbanised societies.

2.2.2. *Spontaneous Memorials and Emergent Mourning Sites*

While the garden cemetery offers a fixed space for the deceased and structured memorials, it represents just one approach to public mourning. Spontaneous memorials, often arising at sites of unexpected deaths (e.g., traffic accidents), serve as tangible focal points for mourning during the early stages of bereavement, channelling raw emotions into a public, symbolic space (Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti, 1998; Santino, 2016; Wylie, 2009). Like roadside memorials, these ephemeral markers confront passers-by with the ever-present reality of death, bridging the gap between personal loss and shared social spaces. A particularly striking aspect is how death in transit, such as road fatalities, emphasises the dislocation of mourning from familiar or anchored spaces (Klaassens, Groote, and Vanclay, 2013). Such memorials reflect the fluid interplay between public expression of grief and personal identity, transforming routine locales into poignant markers (Gibson, 2011). Senie (2016) highlights the defining immediacy of these rituals, noting their capacity to momentarily transform public spaces into sites of collective mourning and even protest. Meanwhile, ephemeral components may enter official archives, extending these memorials' lifespans and framing the deceased as victims, often fuelling narratives that underpin more permanent tributes. A further instance of the interplay between geography and memorialisation is the cenotaph. Unlike burial sites, cenotaphs serve as symbolic memorials that represent the deceased in the absence of physical remains (Bonney, 2013; Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti, 1998; Santino,

2016). By offering a communal locus for reflection, cenotaphs facilitate grief that transcends the constraints of burial sites. Participants in this research also reflect this tension between ephemeral and permanent: some favour more spontaneous, flexible memorial practises online, while others express concerns over longevity, archiving and authenticities that parallel the material/immaterial divide captured in spontaneous physical memorials.

The multitude of mourning spaces now available allows grief to be fluid, adaptable, and open to individual needs. Whether through places designed for continuous outpouring of public grief or those hosting brief symbolic acts of remembrance, memorials offer flexibility. Many recent forms of memorialisation, especially online, provide immediate expressions of grief and a sustained connection to the deceased. However, this prolonged engagement introduces the risk of mourning being pathologized. For example, prolonged grief disorder, as recognised in DSM-5-TR, categorises certain mourning behaviours as exceeding cultural or contextual norms. Such categorisations reflect the evolving interplay between society's shifting norms and the technological expansions that prolong or intensify grief.

2.2.3. *Pathologized Mourning and Cultural Norms*

Research into prolonged or complex grief and mourning habits has raised critical questions about the criteria that define this form of mourning and its association with negatively perceived behaviours. Cacciatore and Frances argue that prolonged grief disorder is defined by a '*remarkably easy symptom threshold to meet'*, raising concerns about its overdiagnosis. They state that this method of pathologising grieving and mourning by adding these behaviours to the diagnostic and statistic manual of mental disorders (or DSM-5-TR), it is '*an insult to the dignity of loving relationships'*. Shear et al. (2011) contend that around 10% of bereaved individuals develop complicated grief, characterised by symptoms that persist beyond what is culturally deemed an acceptable timeframe. This culturally acceptable timeframe functions as a criterion (specifically, criterion E) for diagnosing prolonged grief disorder and dictates that grief and mourning must not '*exceed cultural and contextual norms'*. In their 2017 study '*Is grief a disease*', Granek highlights this cultural intolerance for extended grief, noting, *'In our culture, if you are not over a loss almost immediately, a couple of weeks or a few months, you are made to feel like something is wrong with you'*. A formal

diagnosis, they contend, reinforces this stigma, enabling less tolerance for prolonged grief. Granek critiques modern psychology's framing of grief as something to be quickly and completely resolved, positioning those who deviate from this norm as requiring intervention. Granek further argues that this reflects a broader trend in which everyday experiences of distress are increasingly pathologized, transforming them into psychological disorders to be managed by mental health professionals. Although these studies primarily address medical and psychological dimensions, they remain relevant. Participants in this study articulate comparable concerns in digital mourning, where tributes, perceived oversharing, or language choice can prompt similar judgments.

As Doss (2015) highlights, spontaneous memorials raise questions about which events merit memorialisation. They also challenge standard timelines of mourning as a process to be quickly resolved. By highlighting continuity and collective storytelling, these newer modes underscore the dynamic evolution of grief in contemporary society. Moreover, they challenge traditional perceptions of pathologized mourning as a process to be resolved within a defined timeframe. In this landscape, disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989) emerges, outlining norms that dictate for whom grief is socially sanction and for whom it is not. Work from Durkheim (1915) emphasises communal mourning, noting that not all will share the same sentiments toward the deceased, but ritual participation often remains obligatory. These acts foster moral ties, building collective memory and identity (Walter et al., 1995). The array of practices demonstrates how space and geography intersect with memorialisation and are themselves reshaped by it. Through various acts of mourning, locations gain new significance, becoming landscapes of memory that unite individual grief and collective remembrance. The selection of a memorial type for the deceased often falls short of fulfilling mourners' needs. Hallam and Hockey's (2001) 'spatial fix' describes the desire for a named or marked plot that secures a physical space for mourning. From spontaneous roadside tributes to instantly created virtual memorials, individuals tailor mourning to specific contexts or personal preferences. This fluidity of memorial choices preludes the subsequent exploration of digital and virtual contexts.

Spaces beyond gravesites often serve similar functions. Parks or sculpture gardens can offer symbolic tributes rather than hosting physical remains, paralleling cenotaph-

like approaches. By balancing public accessibility with private reflection, these venues blend everyday life with acts of mourning (Tarlow, 2000). This perspective is echoed by participants in this research, many of whom gravitated away from rigid forms of memorialisation. Instead, some embraced highly personalised approaches, choosing spaces enriched with personal meaning. Wylie (2009) highlights the sociological emphasis on presence when examining the interplay between space, materiality, and emotive content. Wylie underscores the importance of physical items, such as the body, whether present or absent, in shaping the processes of memorialisation. In physical spaces, memorials like benches are often erected to signify an individual's passing. While the phenomenological meaning of a bench may not inherently relate to death, its presence transforms the surrounding environment into one of remembrance. Such structures facilitate public mourning by inviting interaction and reflection within shared, open spaces Wylie describes these memorials as '*eyes without bodies*,' emphasising their role in situating mourning not solely at the site of the deceased's memory but in framing the landscape through the lens of that memory. In public spaces, these modalities of mourning allow individuals to engage with the memory of the deceased collectively, yet in a deeply personal manner. By altering the meaning and function of the space, these memorials create a dynamic interplay between public and private mourning, bridging individual grief with communal acts of remembrance.

Contemporary geographies of death and dying extend well beyond traditional spaces like cemeteries or historically recognised sites. They encompass places such as hospitals, hospices, and homes (Hallam & Hockey, 2001), as well as virtual realms like online memorial pages or memorialised social media accounts (Kasket, 2012). Maddrell (2016) underscores that mourning is not restricted to singular places or fixed locations but is instead embodied and can emerge across various spaces and times, including virtual contexts. By recognising this mobility of relational and embodied grief, particularly online, we arrive at a deeper understanding of the nuanced spatialities shaping mourning, remembrance, and the experience of loss. High-profile celebrity deaths exemplify public, mobile mourning that redefines classical geographies of death. These widely broadcast losses often yield moments of collective grief that speak to broader cultural experiences, showing how mourning moves beyond traditional boundaries (Walter, 2010; Woodthorpe, 2010). Media coverage powerfully shapes how the public encounters and commemorates these notable losses

(Petersson, 2010). Public spaces, once confined to physical memorials and rituals, now extend into digital and media landscapes, reshaping how loss is experienced and expressed. These mediated spaces blur the boundaries between private and public mourning, creating new terrains where personal grief intersects with collective sentiment and cultural expectations. This intersection becomes especially relevant when exploring public mourning and its relationship with media narratives, as societal perceptions of authenticity and legitimacy are continually shaped by these evolving geographies. Walter's (2008) historical analysis of public mourning, for instance, underscores the differences between legitimate grief for intimate losses and publicly scrutinised mourning for celebrities or national figures. Media narratives significantly mediate this distinction by legitimising or casting doubt on the authenticity of public grief.

A recurring question in discussions of digital memorialisation is whether these online practices replicate or merely supplement their physical-world counterparts. On one hand, certain participants describe virtual spaces that intentionally mirror real-world rituals, such as digitised versions of Buddhist altars (Gould et al., 2019) and remediated headstones or shrines (Gibbs et al., 2015). These forms of replication suggest a desire to preserve the symbolic and material qualities of physical memorial sites in digital contexts - albeit without some of the constraints of time-based decay (Moncur & Kirk, 2014). On the other hand, digital platforms can introduce novel expressions of grief, including slideshows, podcasts, or even live-streamed funeral services (Moncur et al., 2012), implying a supplement to traditional practices rather than a straightforward substitute. Moncur and Kirk raise the question of how to encode 'decay' within virtual environments, pointing to Wallace's (2010) work on artificially programmed degradation, where content disappears pixel by pixel – in the form of a 'locket that can forget' – to mirror the physical deterioration seen in tangible keepsakes. Meanwhile, others point to a coalescence of physical and digital rituals, rather than simply one taking over the other. This ambiguity resonates with the broader literature on public mourning: some theorists see online mourning as an extension of place-based customs, whereas others argue that emergent digital behaviours are fundamentally reshaping how society perceives and performs grief. Thus, the question remains whether virtual commemorations - like instant tribute creation or real-time group gatherings - are bridging a gap left by spatial constraints or effectively

generating new categories of public mourning. This tension will be revisited when examining participants' views on whether digital interactions serve as a faithful mirror of physical practices or a complementary domain that transforms the very nature of grief. Participants in this study describe multiple strategies for integrating physical and digital commemorative acts, highlighting how they grapple with decay, presence, and the authentic representation of loss online – mirroring debates in the literature.

Mass media play a significant role in legitimising societal understandings of death and dying, often framing disaster and tragic events to reaffirm social structures. This heightened visibility can have profound effects, often mobilising societal change in response to widely shared tragedies. In the US for instance, the collective grief and public mourning following the September 11 attacks can be seen as laying the emotional and cultural groundwork for subsequent actions, such as the American invasion of Iraq (Lambert et al., 2009). Over the past century, the style and approach to reporting private deaths publicly have shifted dramatically, necessitating a careful analysis of how such narratives are constructed and disseminated in the media (Walter et al. 1995). In contemporary culture, the relationship between public identity and public memory has become deeply intertwined, often reliant on a recognisable face, personality, or character to anchor collective remembrance. The connection between mourning and memory is inextricable, in that it is difficult to grieve for those we do not know or cannot recall. The public mourning of celebrity figures in social spaces is dependent on the mechanisms of exposure and recognition; driven by ongoing media attention. In this mediated landscape, mourning transcends individual grief, becoming a performance shaped by the cyclical publicness of visual culture. Vande Berg (1995) introduces the concept of the '*living room pilgrimage'* to describe how the dissemination of dramatic and cyclical mourning content surrounding public figures plays out in modern media. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the recurrent revisiting of events such as the assassination of President Kennedy. Each anniversary of the event becomes an opportunity to rehash and relive the tragedy through broadcast media, transforming private spaces, like living rooms, into arenas for collective reflection and mourning. The rise of virtual mourning rituals owes much to early watershed moments in public grieving, notably the collective public and media response to Princess Diana's death - commonly referred to as the '*Diana event'* (Kear and Steinberg, 1999; Walter, 2020). This global outpouring of grief demonstrated the

power of collective mourning as a cultural force and marked a turning point in the intersection of media, grief, and public memory. It also laid the groundwork for the emergence of digital spaces as platforms for shared remembrance and emotional connection, setting the stage for a broader exploration of how virtual environments mediate mourning in contemporary society. Carlson and Hocking describe the repetition of messages in the media meant to evoke mourning as '*self-incantatory'*, proposing a particular interpretation of a potentially complicated public tragedy or event (1988) and act to mythologise this through retelling and revisiting the mourning process.

As technology has advanced, so too have the ways in which we interact with celebrity figures. The very possibility of interaction, enabled by the rise of social media, represents a relatively new development in the relationship between the public and celebrities. This accessibility, however, introduces unique challenges when a celebrity passes away, especially in the context of mourning. Bingaman's 2020 study offers an insightful perspective on this phenomenon by exploring how parasocial interactions in online spaces have evolved into a distinct mode of mourning within an emerging digital social framework. Through their analysis, Bingaman sheds light on the parallels between these parasocial interactions and traditional mourning practices, revealing how fans grieve in ways that closely resemble those mourning real, personal relationships. In these digital spaces, individuals publicly express their loss as if they had genuinely known the celebrity, creating an intricate interplay between mediated grief and authentic emotional engagement. Furthermore, they suggest that this style of mourning is not temporary but occurs over a long period of time, albeit within a virtual format. By blending the private and public dimensions of grief, online spaces offer unprecedented opportunities for connection and collective remembrance, while also introducing new forms of critique and performance. This duality reflects the evolving nature of mourning in the digital age, where expressions of loss are shaped by both individual emotion and communal frameworks.

2.3. Authenticity, Digital Mourning and AI

The concept of authenticity has been extensively explored across academic disciplines over the last century, often revealing itself to be an elusive and subjective construct. Authenticity is frequently dictated by the perceptions of an external observer

rather than being an inherent quality of the individual or object in question. its fluid has prompted scholars from various fields to examine its significance, as well as its counterpart, inauthenticity. One area where authenticity is scrutinised remains the sphere of education – particularly in language teaching, where it often becomes synonymous with notions of truth and the transfer of knowledge. Here, authenticity lends itself to qualities such as genuineness, realness, truthfulness, validity, reliability, and legitimacy (Tatsuki, 2006). In this context, authenticity describes language that reflects naturalness in form and appropriateness in cultural and situational contexts (Rogers & Medley, 1988). Contemporary literature examines authenticity in digital spaces across a wide range of topics, including digital public affairs (Gilpin et al., 2010) and power imbalances in the early days of the internet (Mitra, 2001). It can even be strategically 'manufactured', as with social media influencers who leverage authenticity for commercial or marketing purposes (Luoma-Aho et al., 2021).

2.3.1. *Foundations of Authenticity*

Authenticity has also been explored as a historical phenomenon. In '*Sincerity and Authenticity'*, Trilling (1972) traces the origins of the concepts of 'sincerity' and 'authenticity', suggesting that these ideas emerged approximately 400 years ago. He argues that the two have since interacted in a complex interplay - shaping and reflecting societal attitudes over time. He examines these traits as fundamental aspects of the human condition, proposing that modern society, defined by this historical span, has undergone a shift toward a heightened awareness of what constitutes sincerity, and by extension, authenticity. Perhaps the most pertinent (and relevant to this research) observation in Trilling's writing is his assertion that *'we play the role of being ourselves; we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgment may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic'*. Trilling suggests authenticity is tied to our 'true' self, which may not align with the persona we present to the outside world. In other words, a person can act insincerely in their words or actions yet *still* embody authenticity if insincerity is intrinsic to their true nature. This paradox highlights the complexity of authenticity, where the genuine self may diverge from societal expectations or performances of sincerity. Handler (1986), drawing on Trilling, frames authenticity in modern society as a response to an anxiety of 'being' and the struggle for one's identity to gain recognition. He examines how societies

confer authenticity onto their cultural artifacts while simultaneously situating the authenticity of other cultures within curated, often museum-like contexts. Such 'othering' allows groups to claim a sense of ownership and identity over their creations. Handler illustrates this dynamic: *'For those who cannot stomach art, or afford it, there is always the ethnic restaurant, where we can physically ingest the authenticity of others in order to renew our own*'. In this view, the consumption of another culture's 'authentic' products reaffirms one's identity, highlighting the complex interplay between cultural appropriation, identity, and the performative aspects of authenticity, offering a lens through which to consider how authenticity is consumed, curated, and contested in tangible spaces.

Trilling's work offers parallels to Goffman's (1963) theories on performativity and identity, particularly regarding how individuals curate and perform their identities in social spaces. Both scholars explore how public performances can lead individuals to feel disingenuous or inauthentic to themselves. in the context of virtual memorialisation, Goffman's concept of impression management helps us understand how individuals carefully craft an image of themselves as they engage in public expressions of grief. Even when mourning, social actors adapt their performances to align with audience expectations - masking certain details and highlighting others in order to convey an 'idealised' version of their grieving self. In online spaces, where cues are easily misread or hyper-visible, participants remain vigilant about the signals they inadvertently give off. Mistakes - ranging from stylistic slips to inconsistencies in tone - can undermine the credibility of one's grief performance. At the same time, a degree of sincerity still underpins most presentations, as participants navigate a continuum between the public face of mourning and more private feelings that remain 'back-stage.' Thus, while digital mourners may strive for authenticity, they must also manage how others perceive their sorrow, striking a balance between personal truth and social expectations in the performance of bereavement. These same dynamics emerge in the interviews conducted for this research: participants frequently invoke the need to maintain a certain face when posting memorial content or tributes, balancing genuine sentiment with concerns about how they might be judged by their online peers.

Erickson (1995) argues that the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society, alongside the evolving cultural values, has heightened societal interest in authenticity. This increasing focus on authenticity stems from the proliferation of services and technologies that substitute tangible, 'real' products with more ephemeral goods. Erickson illustrates this with the example of shopping catalogues delivering products to homes, marking an early shift from traditional production and consumption practices. Today, however, society has moved even further from the industrial framework Erickson described. Mass-replication of physical objects, once criticized for diminishing authenticity, has been overtaken by entirely digital phenomena like NFTs, which assert notions of ownership and authenticity without any physical form. Even more transformative is the rise of AI technologies and digital language models, which generate commodities and ideas that challenge conventional understandings of what is 'real' or 'authentic.' Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that concerns about authenticity have become more prominent than ever, reflecting a broader cultural effort to grapple with these rapidly evolving technologies and their implications. In the context of these rapidly evolving technologies, the enduring definition of authenticity becomes even more significant. While digital phenomena like NFTs and AI-driven creations continue to challenge traditional notions of what is 'real', the sentiment articulated by Beverland and Farrelly (2010) remains steadfast. As they observe, *'despite the multiplicity of terms and interpretations applied to authenticity, ultimately what is consistent across the literature is that authenticity encapsulates what is genuine, real, and/or true'*. Thus, even as creation and expression mediums transform, the fundamental baseline of what authenticity describes remains.

The concept of authenticity tied to tangible items is evident in participants' response, as initially anticipated. Rituals – like placing flowers at a grave – are steeped in sensory depth, prompting participants to question how such emotional gestures might be replicated online and whether skeuomorphic digital processes can ever be considered truly authentic. Previous research, however, shows online spaces as functioning as emotive, spiritual, and sometimes religious domains that parallel the physical world (Wertheim, 2000). Erickson's perspective on a fractured conception of the self likewise posits that discerning authenticity often hinges on interpersonal conflict - why some behaviours are deemed inauthentic, and others accepted. This resonates with

participants' accounts in this study, where underlying tensions prompt judgments of inauthenticity regarding mourning practices.

2.3.2. *Authenticity in Online Mourning Spaces*

When these questions of authenticity arise in the digital realm central to this research, they encounter numerous challenges due to the unique characteristics of virtual mediums. Social media platforms have effectively reshaped how individuals express grief, transferring private emotions into public forums. At the intersection of the personal and the communal, individuals strive to maintain authentic mourning practises, while negotiating the constraints of digital spaces (Klaassens et al., 2013; Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti, 1998). In response to potential inauthenticity, individuals curate online personas that conform to common expectations of empathy and positivity (Marwick and Ellison, 2012; Sabra, 2017). The coexistence of multiple perceptions of an individual's identity after death intensified these dilemmas, since many performances of the decreased can exist simultaneously (Brubaker et al., 2013). The phenomenon of misinterpretation in online communication, a longstanding area of study (Wagner, 2018), demonstrated how reduced cues can challenge the maintenance of authenticity. Users may tone down their emotions (Döveling et al., 2018) or even withdraw from digital spaces entirely to avoid the risk of being perceived as insincere or disingenuous (Sabra, 2017). Digital memorials, in particular, remain especially vulnerable to manipulation and misuse, with numerous recorded instances of mockery or harassment targeting both the deceased and the mourners (Phillips, 2011; Kern and Gil-Egui, 2017; Seigfried-Spellar and Chowdhury, 2017). Additionally, the tendency for such memorials to present an idealised or overly simplistic portrayal of the deceased has raised concerns among researchers (Silverman et al., 2014). This can obscure the complex realities of the individual's life and legacy, reinforcing the broader challenge of sustaining authenticity in digital spaces. At its core, authenticity concerns the unobstructed expression of oneself (Kernis and Golman, 2006). However, research indicates that online self-expression is often idealised, exaggerated, or unrealistic (Manago et al., 2008). Social media users typically act as curators of their digital identities (Hogan, 2010), shaping memorial interactions based on perceived authenticity and the nature of their social ties (Giaxoglou, 2014). While such curation can foster a sense of connection and shared meaning, it also raises

questions about the authenticity of these expressions. Despite these complexities, authentic self-expression online has been shown to have positive mental health benefits (Bailey et al., 2020). Yet, much of the existing literature relies on self-reported perceptions of authenticity, understood as a subjective state of feeling true to oneself (Sedikides et al., 2019). These findings highlight the delicate balance between the idealised self and the authentic self in digital spaces, particularly in the context of grief, mourning, and memorialisation. Participants in this study further illustrate these tensions – some admit to editing or deleting digital expressions of grief if they feel too personal, while others describe intentionally idealising the memory of the deceased for public view, conscious of how an online audience may judge them.

This same balance between connection and authenticity extends into how users navigate their emotional expressions in digital spaces, particularly during periods of mourning. In the context of grief, the social media user must contend with their perception of inauthenticity, both how it is defined and how to avoid it, when sharing sentiments about loved ones. Raun's (2017) research sheds light on this intricate navigation, particularly on platforms like Facebook, where mourners must balance between enacting a socially acceptable private public self and risking criticism for oversharing or displaying an overly intimate self. While digital spaces allow for personal mourning, they simultaneously impose expectations that dictate the appropriate extent and manner of emotional expression. For example, users must moderate how often and intensely they share grief to avoid accusations of excessiveness or insincerity. In another study, Harju (2015) examines the phenomenon of public mourning and disenfranchised grief following the death of Steve Jobs, focusing on the vernacular found within YouTube comments and the tributary messages left by his fans and supporters. In these digital spaces, grieving individuals are seen defending their right to mourn while facing criticism from non-fans who position themselves as arbiters, deeming such grief inappropriate or misplaced. This dynamic echoes once more the concept of 'grieving rules' (Doka, 1989), where societal norms dictate who is allowed to mourn and for whom under what circumstances. The tension between these perspectives highlights a central challenge in public mourning: the negotiation of legitimacy and the authenticity of grief expressions, particularly in virtual spaces. As the findings from this study will show, this discourse of appropriateness, especially in the context of online mourning,

resonates deeply with the responses from participants in this research. These digital interactions reveal how mourners within a collective public grieving group must navigate critiques while simultaneously working to make sense of the deceased's life. In doing so, they seek to reconstruct memory and affirm their emotional connection to the deceased, often in the face of external scepticism or outright dismissal. Harju's (2015) study shows us how online mourning necessitates a reimagining of traditional grief practices. Physicality is supplemented by digital forums, where mourners must contend with the constraints and complexities these spaces introduce. Harju advocates for expanding the notion of community in the context of disenfranchised grief to include non-traditional, contemporary forms of online interaction. Walter investigates a parallel concept in *New Mourners, Old Mourners* (2015), where he examines how a similar set of rules for mourning emerges in online spaces. In these virtual environments, mourners often navigate a complex duality: on one hand, they may enjoy greater freedom to express their authentic emotions, while on the other, they face heightened social pressures to conform to collective norms surrounding who should be mourned and how. As Raun (2017) notes, this often leads to users regulating the frequency and depth of their mourning posts to align with these emerging digital norms. This tension, and the way individuals adapt to it, is further explored in the analysis chapters of this research. Walter (2015) draws intriguing comparisons between the relational dynamics in pre-industrial societies, where digital reminders announce to groups of mourners when it is time to remember a lost friend or loved one, akin to the tolling of a bell. In both contexts, the act of mourning is not just personal but deeply social, mediated by unspoken rules and shared expectations. However, the affordances of social media amplify this dynamic by making death and mourning an inescapable part of the digital landscape. As such, social media's accessibility and ubiquity weave death and mourning into the fabric of everyday online life, creating spaces where mortality is continually visible and discussed.

The concept of authenticity in digital memorialisation is also linked to the varying levels of digital literacy among users. Digital literacy encompasses more than just technological skill, it includes access, usage, and self-perception, all of which shape how individuals engage with online services (Tinmaz et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2015). These disparities, driven by factors such as age, location, socioeconomic status, and education (Peng and You, 2022), can result in challenges for users

attempting to create or interact with digital memorials in an authentic and meaningful way. For instance, the ability to craft a digital legacy or curate a digital funeral requires a foundational level of digital competence. Bellamy et al. (2014) highlight how the bereaved often rely on digital tools to create biographical slideshows or other commemorative media, yet the process demands familiarity with archiving, presentation, and digital platforms. Without sufficient literacy, users may struggle to present their tributes authentically or may even encounter barriers to accessing relevant digital content of the deceased. Similarly, Maxwell (2020) identifies four tenets critical to digital literacy - technological access, authorship rules, representation rules, and online social responsibility - each of which influences the capacity to engage authentically with digital memorialisation processes. Compounding these challenges, disparities in digital literacy can result in users being unable to discern potentially harmful content, such as 'deepfakes' (false recreations that act to represent an individual), which can further erode perceptions of authenticity. Recognising and mitigating such risks requires an informed understanding of the tools and technologies employed, yet this understanding can vary widely across demographics. Moreover, the design and functionality of digital memorial platforms themselves can exacerbate authenticity issues. Research by Häkkilä et al. (2020) indicates that users find the navigation of virtual memorials suboptimal, detracting from the meaningful experience these platforms promise. Additionally, Lira et al. (2022) highlight that online memorial services often fail to address ethical or cultural diversity adequately, which can result in memorials that feel inauthentic or disconnected from the user's lived experiences. In Chapter 4, 'Guiding Archiving,' this research will examine how social media and memorial sites attempt to bridge these gaps by guiding and educating users on engaging with digital memorialisation.

2.3.3. *AI, Reimagined Bonds, and Ethical Dilemmas*

The phenomenon of mourning in digital spaces, while no longer as novel as it was when this study began in 2018, has evolved significantly alongside technological advancements. Over the course of this research, the emergence of AI technologies designed to recreate or reimagine the deceased has garnered increasing attention. One notable example is the 2020 Korean documentary *Meeting You*, in which a mother, Jang Ji-sung, interacts with a digitally reconstructed version of her late

daughter in a virtual space. Despite fully acknowledging the differences between this digital representation and her actual child, the encounter evoked genuine grief, underscoring the emotional power of these technologies. At the time, such technologies were still in their infancy compared to today's advancements, particularly in replicating voices and mimicking conversational styles. Early efforts, such as holographic performances by deceased musicians like Michael Jackson (Greenburg, 2014) and Tupac (Ganz, 2012), hinted at the potential for AI in preserving a sense of presence after death. However, these applications were largely entertainment-focused and had not yet made significant inroads into mourning practices. An often-cited example in discussions surrounding the recreation of the deceased and questions of identity (Morse and Birnhack, 2022; Panka, 2018) is Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* episode *'Be Right Back'.* This narrative follows a central character who confronts the ethical, emotional, and existential issues of interacting with an artificial recreation of her deceased boyfriend. While the episode offers a fictional and dramatized portrayal, it served as a prescient reflection on the potential trajectory of technology in this realm. Once considered speculative fiction, the ideas presented in here have become increasingly resonant as advancements in AI and digital memorialisation bring these concepts closer to reality. The current state of AI introduces profound implications for how we approach grief and memorialisation. By enabling the creation of digital representations that memorialise, or even simulate ongoing relationships with the deceased, these technologies challenge traditional understandings of grieving. They disrupt conventional narratives of moving on from loss, introducing new tools for mourning that blur the boundaries between closure and continued connection. The ethical, emotional, and psychological impacts of this shift warrant further exploration as these technologies continue to evolve. Although not the central focus of this study, these technological developments cannot be ignored, as they directly intersect with the concerns raised by participants regarding the finality of their data and the authenticity of their mourning practices. Participants' worries about maintaining control over how their data is preserved and represented after death reflect a broader tension between the permanence offered by these technologies and the desire for authenticity in expressing grief. Within participant interviews, multiple individuals explicitly voiced apprehension about AI-driven recreations, stating they worry about losing the real 'essence' of themselves or their loved ones if data is

endlessly recycled by algorithms, thus echoing prior literature that questions whether digital immortality is truly desirable.

Weiderhold (2024) highlights current applications of these technologies, particularly those blending physical and digital modes of memorialisation. Examples include QR codes on headstones, providing accessible archives of the deceased, and, in China, AI-generated avatars that replicate the voice of a lost loved one. While these innovations raise ethical questions, Weiderhold argues that they also hold therapeutic potential, enabling the bereaved to achieve closure - provided safeguards are in place to prevent misuse or harmful psychological effects. However, scepticism surrounding these technologies is understandable, particularly those that aim to recreate, rather than supplement, the memory of the deceased. Closure may be difficult to attain if the presence of the deceased is a continuous one that does not provide an end date in sight. Walter (2015) explains, however, that by enabling the continuation of relationships with the deceased, digital platforms have the potential to offer solace and a sense of presence even in their absence.

The theory of continuing bonds, introduced by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996), presents a framework for understanding the enduring emotional connections between the bereaved and the deceased. It challenges the notion that emotional ties are severed upon death, instead proposing that such bonds can evolve and persist in meaningful ways (Bennett & Bennett, 2000; Conant, 1996). This perspective has informed various therapeutic approaches, including Worden's (2008) reconfiguration of mourning tasks, which incorporates the ongoing relationality of continuing bonds into its structure. By emphasising the fluidity of these connections, the continuing bonds framework reshapes traditional narratives of grief, offering a more nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate their emotional attachment to the deceased. This approach recognises that maintaining these bonds can provide comfort and a sense of continuity, fostering resilience during the grieving process. It also allows for the integration of the deceased into the lives of the bereaved in ways that honour their memory and presence, rather than viewing such connections as obstacles to 'moving on'. This perspective aligns well with the complexities introduced by digital memorialisation, where online spaces provide new mediums for sustaining these bonds. In these environments, grieving individuals can engage with the deceased in

highly personalised ways, whether through static memorials, dynamic social interactions, or even AI-generated recreations. These evolving practices highlight the relevance of the continuing bonds theory in understanding how technological advancements influence modern grief and mourning. Traditionally, these bonds were expressed through physical acts of memorialisation - visiting graves, creating personal tributes, or observing anniversaries (Silverman et al., 1996). However, the advent of social media and emerging AI technologies have redefined how these relationships are enacted, moving from static remembrances to dynamic, interactive experiences. Social media platforms such as Facebook provide an example of this shift, offering posthumous digital presences for the deceased alongside the living (Bell et al., 2015; DeGroot, 2012). Upon death, an individual's online profile can transform into a legacy account or digital grave marker (Kasket, 2012), anchoring the deceased firmly within the digital realm. This creates opportunities for ongoing interaction with the deceased in what Irwin (2015) has termed a state of 'paranormal copresence'. Such platforms enable vibrant and malleable memorial spaces (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Foot, Warnick, and Schneider, 2005), allowing users to leave comments, share memories, or engage in virtual rituals that maintain emotional connections. This dynamic has significant implications for the grieving process. Research highlights both the benefits of these ongoing interactions, such as fostering emotional support and communal remembrance (Roberts, 2004; Walter, 2015; Forman, Kern, and Gil-Egui, 2012), and their potential drawbacks, including exacerbation of grief or privacy concerns (Phillips, 2011; Seigfried-Spellar and Chowdhury, 2017; Sabra, 2017). While these interactions have traditionally been one-way (messages or actions directed at the deceased), the integration of AI now transforms these continuing bonds into something far more complex. With AI-driven recreations of the deceased, interactions become two-way. Using vast troves of digital data, these technologies simulate lifelike conversations, behaviours, and emotional responses. Unlike static profiles, these AI recreations offer the possibility of dynamic, ongoing relationships that feel alive. Although these developments hold promise as therapeutic tools, they also raise profound questions about the authenticity of such interactions. The implications extend beyond authenticity to the emotional and psychological effects on the bereaved. Interacting with an AI recreation challenges traditional notions of grief, potentially disrupting the process of acceptance and closure. These technologies also force a reconsideration of the ethical boundaries around memorialisation, particularly when the deceased's

data is repurposed without explicit consent. The transformation of continuing bonds into a two-way dynamic mediated by AI complicates the grieving process, leaving society to grapple with how these relationships should be navigated in this emerging digital landscape.

Concerns about the ethical and societal implications of digitally recreating the deceased are widespread in media reporting. Deepfakes, intentionally inauthentic representations of individuals, raise significant ethical questions (Cuthbertson, 2024). Simultaneously, chatbots capable of mimicking speech or typing patterns challenge notions of authenticity and personal identity (Carballo, 2023). Protecting the dignity of the deceased has also emerged as a central issue, with debates about whether such recreations might violate personal or cultural norms (Hern, 2024). Additionally, the reuse of creative work from deceased individuals raises concerns about job displacement and the exploitation of intellectual property (Velasquez, 2023). Beyond logistical and ethical dilemmas, new complexities arise in forming relationships with virtual recreations of the deceased, further complicating mourning and memorialisation practices (Westfall, 2024). In response to these challenges, researchers have sought to propose solutions and frameworks to address these concerns, emphasising the need for ethical guidelines, regulatory measures, and a deeper understanding of how such technologies affect the living and the memory of the deceased. For example. Hurtardo (2023) introduces the concept of symbolic immortality, or a form of digital immortality made possible by AI algorithms and other technologies. He conceptualizes this as a "Virtual Digital Persona" (VDP), which is not necessarily a direct recreation of the individual but rather an entity shaped by the perceptions and memories of those who knew them. This notion shifts the focus from authenticity in the individual's self-representation to the collective perceptions of their personhood, a theme previously explored in the discussion of how authenticity is attributed in digital spaces. However, the idea of digital immortality faces challenges in practice. Online spaces and digital data are subject to decay; local storage media such as hard drives can degrade or become obsolete, and even digital platforms themselves may disappear over time. Several of the websites referenced during this research ceased to exist during the data gathering process, highlighting the fragility of digital preservation. Bassett (2018) and Kasket (2012) critique the notion of immortality in this context, instead proposing the term 'digital endurance' to describe the extended,

but not indefinite, lifespan granted by social media and AI driven processes. This reframing acknowledges the limitations and impermanence of digital afterlives while still recognising their potential impact on memorialisation practices.

Whether permanent or not, such recreations of oneself present significant risks, as the person being represented has no control over how their image or voice is reproduced algorithmically. Research has highlighted a general lack of awareness among individuals regarding the ownership and legislative rights tied to the digital media they create before death and the data generated post-mortem (Bellamy et al., 2014). This unawareness is particularly striking among 'death-aware' individuals, such as hospice employees, who encounter death professionally. Studies show that even these participants are often unaware of considerations surrounding their own digital identities after death (Waagstein, 2014). Interestingly, many of these individuals express intentions to change their personal practices concerning data privacy following participation in such studies. Reflecting on the ethical challenges posed by virtual memorials and digital legacies often serves as a catalyst for this realisation. This pattern is evident across various research efforts (Lira et al., 2022; Peoples and Hetherington, 2015) and was similarly observed among participants in this study. A recurring theme is a distrust of the systems managing digital data, rooted in a fear of losing agency over how one's identity is represented online after death. Kneifel's (2023) speculative design study proposes a collaborative use of AI in memorial practices, suggesting that bereaved individuals could use art generation tools to create and solidify new memories about the deceased. This approach encourages active participation, but it also raises critical questions: Can AI generated artifacts truly evoke authentic emotions? Can representations crafted through such processes be considered authentic to the memory of the deceased? Beyond the perspectives of the bereaved, the rights and considerations of the deceased must also be addressed. In an era where digital data can be used posthumously to recreate individuals, issues of posthumous privacy take on new urgency.

Several studies emphasise the need for individuals to maintain control over their digital data and posthumous identity, reflecting a widespread unease with the idea of losing agency to automated systems or AI. Researchers such as Morse (2024), Fordyce et al. (2021), and Harbinja (2017) contend that individuals must be given clear

opportunities to decide the fate of their digital presence, ensuring that their identity is managed in ways that align with their personal wishes. Acker and Brubaker (2014) highlight how social media profiles serve as personal archives but remain restricted by platform functionalities, which limit memorialisation options and ongoing access after death. They propose a 'platform perspective,' urging both archivists and individuals to preserve contextual integrity and clarify archival expectations for posthumous data. Further studies offer a similar insight - Bartholomew (2024) advocates for the development of new frameworks to protect the deceased's autonomy in a time when AI can reanimate them with lifelike precision. He notes the growing intersection of digital estates and legal systems, emphasising that while using the deceased for research has a historical precedent, reanimation through AI fundamentally challenges traditional boundaries. Unlike physical remains, which are unequivocally recognised as belonging to the realm of the dead, AI driven recreations blur the binary distinction between living and deceased, necessitating fresh ethical and legislative approaches. The call for legislative change is not limited to Bartholomew's perspective. Further studies underscore the urgent need to address the ethical and legal implications of AI technologies designed to recreate the dead. Roberts (2022), in *'You're Only Mostly Dead: Protecting Your Digital Ghost from Unauthorized Resurrection'* highlights the critical importance of establishing clear boundaries to prevent the unauthorised use of posthumous data. With the growing prevalence of phenomena like deepfakes, she argues that such technologies should only be deployed when the individual has provided explicit consent prior to their death. Holt et al. (2024) further emphasise the challenges posed by the vast troves of digital data individuals leave behind after death. They advocate for the development of systems and services to manage this data responsibly, ensuring that the digital legacies of the deceased are handled ethically.

This section of the literature review emphasises the role of AI in mourning and the digital afterlife because it challenges and redefines the concept of authenticity, a recurring theme throughout this research. Covering AI's effect on mourning and memorialisation also provides a new method of introducing and furthering the conversation surrounding continuing bonds with the deceased. As society moves toward the integration of AI in memorialisation and recreation of the deceased, we must examine how individuals perceive and navigate the authenticity of these digital selves. The question is no longer just about whether these recreations are

technologically possible, but whether they can truly represent an authentic extension of the individual who has passed. Authenticity in this context is multifaceted, involving the deceased's agency in shaping their digital legacy, the bereaved's interpretation of these recreations, and society's collective understanding of what it means to authentically memorialise someone. AI technologies, by their nature, create a paradox: They offer tools to preserve and reconstruct a person's identity through data, but they also risk reducing that identity to a set of curated or incomplete fragments. This raises the question of whether these digital recreations can ever genuinely capture the emotional depth, complexity, and nuances of the individual. While AI is not the primary focus of this thesis, it is an issue that is crucial to explore, as it represents a potential future trajectory of memorialisation. As digital technologies continue to evolve, particularly with AI's potential to recreate or reimagine the deceased, it is vital to understand how these advancements intersect with perceptions of authenticity, agency, and the digital self.

2.4. Conclusion

This literature review provides a comprehensive analysis of research spanning decades - exploring the evolving interplay between mourning practices, authenticity, pathologized grief, and the transformative influence of digital technologies, including AI, in memorialising the dead. The existing body of literature has offered significant sociological and legal insights into these topics. However, it reveals a critical gap: the perspectives of individuals actively engaged in digital memorial spaces remain mostly underexplored. Without understanding their lived experiences and nuanced views on mourning practices, the literature risks detachment from the realities of those navigating these rapidly evolving digital environments. Central to this research is the recognition that mourning practices in digital spaces are often shaped by questions of authenticity - both in how the deceased are represented and how grieving individuals perceive their own expressions of grief. Authenticity in digital memorialisation intersects with societal expectations, creating tensions between idealised portrayals of the deceased and the complex realities of their lives. Moreover, pathologising mourning, particularly in a digital context where prolonged engagement with the deceased is facilitated by AI and social media, further complicates these dynamics, challenging traditional understandings of 'healthy' grief. As AI technologies

increasingly enable two-way interactions with the deceased, they not only transform mourning but also blur the lines between authentic connection and artificial reconstruction. This raises ethical and emotional questions about the appropriateness of such technologies, as well as the potential for them to extend grief in ways that diverge from accepted mourning norms. Participants' perspectives on whether these advancements supplement or detract from physical mourning practices are crucial to shaping the future of digital memorialisation. The relatively recent emergence of online legacies and virtual memorials highlights their growing significance as the population of deceased individuals in digital spaces expands. Coupled with the rapid development of AI and algorithmic processes, this dynamic field demands ongoing scrutiny to address concerns about privacy, representation, and the role of technology in shaping posthumous identities. This research aims to bridge these gaps by engaging directly with individuals who navigate digital memorialisation spaces, offering insights into their experiences, perceptions, and concerns. These considerations form the foundation of the research questions guiding this study. The rapid advancements in digital technology make it essential to first understand how virtual memorials have emerged as a distinct process of memorialisation. This foundational understanding provides the basis for exploring individual attitudes toward these digital spaces - whether they recognise these developments, perceive a lasting digital legacy as a personal necessity, and identify the factors shaping their views on mourning and memorialisation within digital contexts. By focusing on these voices, the study seeks to inform a more inclusive discourse on managing posthumous data and memorial practices in the digital age. The insights gathered here will not only guide the methodology but also provide a foundation for actionable solutions that respect the authenticity of mourning while acknowledging the profound influence of evolving technologies.

3. Methods

3.1. Introduction

Social media websites have been examined as spaces for enacting networked mourning processes (Kern, Forman and Gil-Egui, 2013; Carroll and Landry, 2010), with individuals gradually opting into the available services (Irwin, 2015), offered by websites such as 'ForeverMissed', 'DeadSocial' or 'MuchLoved' whereby virtual memorials are erected, accessed & edited. This has created an almost liminality at the intersection where one's life ends & death begins – as the data the deceased leave behind within online spaces continues to play an active role in the lives of others after the physical self has departed. This research focuses on the emergence of online virtual memorials by researching the ways in which individuals are choosing to interact them, and therefore covers several areas of interest such as that of authenticity, the digital self and the presence of posthumous data in public spaces. Examining the way in which virtual memorials are emerging means asking questions to the individuals using these services. Understanding how individuals navigate death and mourning through this phenomenon requires examining both the appealing and discouraging aspects of these services. Equally important is analysing participants' perceptions of others' behaviours, which together shed light on how current attitudes and practises surrounding digital memorialisation have emerged.

Previous research into these online services and social medias state the individual has now transcended the limitations of time and space in order to continue bonds with the dead (Brubaker et al., 2013, allowing for a co-present relationship between the living and deceased (Bell et al., 2015; DeGroot, 2012; Irwin 2015; Bailey et al., 2015; Kasket, 2012) as a result of highly-malleable (Carrol & Landry, 2010; Foot et al., 2005) technological affordances offered at present (Hjorth et al., 2012). Understandably, the move from physical to virtual memorial spaces has drastically altered the processes that are enacted after the loss of a loved one & within the grieving process (Capitulo, 2004; Klaassens et al., 2013; Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti, 1998), with a new set of possible interactions that can now take place. This has been seen to bring with it several positives (Roberts, 2004; Forman, Kern and Gil-Egui, 2012; Walter, 2015; Caroll and Landry, 2010; Roberts, 2006; Brubaker et al., 2013; Klastrup, 2014), as well as negative aspects which derive from the effects of the virtual medium on what are potentially very sensitive and emotive topics (Phillips, 2011; Seigfried-Spellar and Chowdhury, 2017, Carrol and Landry, 2010; Walter, 2015; McEwen and Scheaffer, 2013; Sabra, 2017). In examining these bodies of work, a major contributing factor to

the reconstruction of mourning behaviors online centers around the lack of physicality, and as such the remediating effects of online virtual spaces for communication.

Previous research regarding phenomena such as online virtual memorialisation, posthumous data and digital legacies tends to examine existing data in the form of textual accounts, photographic examination, or in a single group's contribution to an event or topic. There have been as of recent however, several new studies that utilise participants and their experiences to offer improvements to services offered online for the purposes of memorialising a loved one or improving awareness to one's ability to create and maintain a digital legacy. This research sets itself apart by generating new data to address its research questions, specifically exploring the motivations behind creating or curating virtual memorials. It also examines the perceptions of behaviours and attitudes that surround this process, both from the perspective of the individual and the audience engaging with these digital spaces. This research will focus on the impact of online virtual memorial spaces on the individual interacting with them, as well as on those less familiar with the medium, as they still hold perceptions about others in these digital spaces. As such, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: How are virtual memorials emerging as a process of memorialisation?

RQ2i: What are the attitudes towards utilising digital spaces for mourning?

RQ2ii: Do individuals want a digital legacy?

RQ2iii: What influences the emergence of these views

This research will take a qualitative approach - drawing upon semi-structured interviews with social media users in order to examine the thoughts, feelings and experiences relating to death & dying where their digital self is concerned. Prior to participant interviews an analysis of online virtual memorial spaces themselves through a virtual-ethnographic approach in order to gain an understanding of features that may be eliciting certain responses within the sample group. Participant groups & the virtual-ethnographic analysis of online virtual memorial spaces will be further discussed within both the sampling & analysis section of the methodology chapter.

In order to operationalise RQ1 & RQ2, data pertaining to individual experiences of online virtual memorialisation will be gathered. These will include responses to questions designed to promote conversation surrounding how these individuals are subject to the remediating effects of online spaces where social processes (e.g., *mourning*) are being enacted. Conversations discussing the social processes related to death and dying in the physical world will be encouraged, as these help to frame the potential issues online virtual memorial spaces may introduce. Simultaneously, an in-depth analysis will be conducted on several websites that facilitate the enactment of these phenomena, aiming to provide valuable contextual insights to complement interview responses and discussions. By addressing RQ1 & RQ2 within this study, not only will the research bridge existing gaps in the literature, but it will also establish a foundational platform for further exploration in this specific domain. Given the continuously expanding population of social media users, it becomes imperative to comprehend the functioning of these emerging social spaces concerning their influence on remediating social processes. The implications of such understanding extend significantly, encompassing both the realm of hyper-connected social media business and broader inquiries into the role of virtual space and the displacement of physical signifiers from socially enacted processes.

3.2. Sampling Methods

3.2.1. Website Data

The internet is a space containing an abundance of social data (Holtz et al., 2012), something of which can be highly beneficial in the context of social research. One slight downside to this however is noted by Schneider and Foot, who indicate the often-ephemeral nature of data online and its tendency to be dissolved through events such as updates or automatic server requests (2004). The same issue was encountered twice within this study, as some listed or cached sites had since become defunct or now redirected to an extraneous source unbeneficial to the sample. This does however serve as a prime example of an existing duality between the many individuals who

presume posthumous data or what we post online to last ‘forever’ & online data’s proclivity to dissipate over time or simply be deleted.

One inherent challenge in conducting site-based research lies in the recursive nature of the medium itself. As the study progresses, new domains are likely to emerge, potentially impacting the sample in an ever-expanding fashion, leading to a seemingly endless space for the researcher to navigate. Certain topics, such as the exploration of death in the online realm, may transcend the boundaries of a single site, necessitating the inclusion of multiple sites in the investigation. Hence, it becomes crucial to establish a clearly defined boundary and methodological approach that effectively encapsulates the research objectives, thereby avoiding the need for continual extension into the sampling process or other stages of the research (Schneider and Foot, 2004). Consequently, the methodological considerations for sampling these sites become imperative and are conducted prior to the data collection phase involving interview participants. To facilitate this, the research seeks to identify the top 5 online memorial sites as the basis for this investigation. Determining the top 5 memorial sites based on popularity, however, was unfortunately not possible to calculate based on user count alone, as many memorial-style websites do not actively publish statistics such as this. As such, a differing approach was taken whereby sites would be sampled based on the frequency at which they appear in several online publications listed by search provider. Using the presumption that google is the most popular access point for sites such as these, the following search terms were used to scope for potential sites:

1. ‘Best online memorials’
2. ‘Top online memorials’
3. ‘Online memorials’
4. ‘Memorial for me’

The websites who were most frequently mentioned within the content of these searches were then ranked in order. In total, 18 websites discuss a variety of available online memorials, often citing the ‘Top Ten’ or a similar denomination as the site header. Any since defunct websites would be discounted from this list; however, this did not end up being the case within the highest-frequency results. The most frequently

mentioned websites (in order) are[1]:

1. ForeverMissed.com
2. Legacy.com
3. Tributes.com
4. Mykeeper.com[1]
5. Memories.net

[2]*Mentions of 'Queepr.com & 'Mykeeper.com' were consolidated as this is now the same service.*

The previously mentioned 'memorial examples' include 2 short advertisements detailing the available virtual memorialisation services. These were sources and selected through the examination of memorial websites. Upon sampling these sites, it became evident that regardless of the selection, common or highly similar features were prevalent across all five platforms. However, each site implemented these features in distinct ways. Despite this variation, it remains essential to ensure that the chosen sites for source material represent the most used and popular services at the present time.

3.2.2 Participant Data

I) Initial reasoning

The potential themes brought up by RQ1 & RQ2 are likely to be both very personal & emotionally driven, which creates the necessity to take an interpersonal approach to data gathering. For this reason, interviews have been selected to allow for the best opportunity to capture the qualitative data necessary to answer RQ1 & RQ2. As such, this research will include semi-structured interviews with participants, featuring questions based on experience with online spaces that offer the ability to create a virtual memorial as well as maintain a digital legacy for oneself. Semi-structured

[1] *'Queepr.com' & 'Mykeeper.com' were consolidated as this is now the same service.*

interviews provide an atmosphere where the researcher can take a reflexive approach, something of which will be required in order to delve into potentially sensitive participant data in an approachable manner (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews were held via online video chat (video meeting) using services such as Facetime, Skype and Discord, where participants are asked a series of questions relating to topics brought up by the subject material. A telephone interview was also offered should a participant not have access to the available video chat services. Initially, the intention was to conduct face-to-face interviews; however, this approach encountered several obstacles that impeded the progress of the research. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic further complicated matters during the design and implementation of the project. Consequently, individuals increasingly resorted to video chat services for various tasks that would typically be conducted in person throughout the duration of the pandemic. Considering this recent surge in the utilisation of video chat services and the characteristics of the sample under investigation (namely, their familiarity with online media), it can be inferred that the participants possess the necessary resources and digital literacy skills required to engage in video chat services effectively. This approach not only addresses the previously mentioned problem but also establishes a research methodology that can readily accommodate participants from nonlocal locations. Knox and Burkard (2009) emphasise the widespread use of telephone interviews in qualitative research, and the advantages they offer can be relevant to the selected interview method in this study. Moreover, it is evident that telephone interviews expedite the data-gathering process, reduce costs, and foster a safer environment for both the researcher and participant (Shuy, 2003) – a set of attributes that can be objectively associated with distanced video interviews as well.

Qualitative research methods are inherently prone to researcher influence, particularly when there is a deliberate attempt to steer discussions in a manner that could compromise the validity of the results. To mitigate this issue, the chosen research methods are designed to encourage participants to share their experiences with minimal interviewer effects, thereby increasing the likelihood of revealing valuable data (Shuy, 2003). Further details concerning the specific types of interview questions employed in this study are elaborated in Section IV, titled 'Interview Questions' (see appendix 7 for a full list). Ethical approval for the participant-based data gathering

process was granted by the University of York on Thursday 5th November 2020 by Tony Royle.

ii) Participant selection

At the outset, individuals engaging with social media and virtual memorial spaces were categorised into three distinct groups based on their varying levels of experience and familiarity with the subject matter. These classifications were derived from the previous analysis of online memorialisation websites presently available. The differentiation within the sample was deemed crucial, as data collected from these individuals would exhibit variations depending on the group to which they belong, ultimately enhancing the data pool for analysis by facilitating a comparative examination of shared experiences among users with diverse levels of familiarity. Additionally, this classification system would allow for the inclusion or exclusion of certain interview questions that may not be relevant or suitable for a particular group. The initial groups identified were as follows:

Group A – *Individuals who frequent social media sites; Those who own & and have maintained at least 1 active social media profile for the last 5 years.*
Group B – *Individuals who create memorials on social media sites; Those who have created a page/group as a memorial for someone who has died.*
Group C – *Individuals who create social media sites & the means to memorialise online; Those who have contributed towards the creation of a website for hosting memorial space in terms of its layout, features or content.*

It became evident that accessing the necessary individuals from groups B and C might present challenges. As a result, the research design was adapted to focus solely on utilising group A as the primary sample, even if it meant including a larger pool of participants than initially planned. The ultimate decision to proceed in this direction will be explored in detail in the subsequent discussion.

Group B presented a degree of accessibility for engagement. However, upon immersing oneself in multiple online groups and spaces dedicated to grieving and

support, it became evident that this approach was unsuitable for recruiting a sample group. The dissemination of a call for participants within these spaces ran counter to their intended purpose, which is to serve as sanctuaries for individuals to share their intimate experiences of losing a loved one. As research appreciative of the emotional importance of these spaces, conducting a call for participants within them would have been deemed irresponsible and lacking the reflexivity required for this topic. An alternative approach would have been to reach out to a group moderator and request their assistance in disseminating a call for participants. However, it became evident that each group, under the guidance of its respective moderator, had a distinct set of rules outlining appropriate reasons for communication. Unfortunately, a call for participants did not fall within the category of permissible interactions within these groups. Group C proved to be relatively accessible through the contact information of staff provided on sites such as mykeeper.com or forevermissed.com. However, the inability to establish a viable method of entry to sample group B rendered group C somewhat redundant, as the initial 3-tiered approach to sampling was no longer feasible. Additionally, the response rate from group C individuals was notably low despite the readily available contact information. These challenges, coupled with the difficulties encountered in sampling group B, ultimately led to the decision to concentrate on group A as the primary sample group.

The study therefore aimed to use an approximate **50** participants from Participant Group A and would ultimately complete the sampling process with a total of **46** independent interviews. Participants from group A **(a total of 50(+/-5) participants)** were selected with a call for participants via a combination of online & traditional media advertisement. This included utilising a university email list to send out a call for participants, advertisement in local print media, as well as contacting other large sample groups such as the following:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/398126720350723/
https://www.facebook.com/pg/sympathyandcondolences/posts/?ref=page_internal
https://www.facebook.com/GriefHowDoWeGoOn/

Groups such as these are typically managed by a key administration team, whose contact information is readily available through the page's info section. Prior to posting

any advertisements, permission is sought from these individuals. Employing a snowball sampling approach, recipients for Group A were encouraged to share the email contact for this research with others they believe would be interested in participating. Ultimately, snowball sampling proved to be the primary method responsible for recruiting most, if not all, of the sample group. After initially securing six participants, these individuals took on the role of contacting their friends and family, resulting in a final total sample group of 47 individuals from various locations. The geographical constraints that a diverse sample from different locations might pose were effectively circumvented through the implementation of digital interview methods – which also ended up becoming a necessity due to the timing of social distancing restrictions during the COVID-19 period when this study was conducted. The inclusion of a diverse group of participants introduces its own set of challenges, particularly as these individual hail from varied geographical locations, each shaped by unique cultural beliefs and societal norms regarding mourning and memorialisation practices. These differences influence their responses and the broader discussions during interviews. While conducting research digitally removes geographical barriers, it necessitates careful consideration of how this format impacts the data collected. For instance, participants' burial or memorialisation preferences often reflect their cultural contexts, which, in turn, inform their opinions on the mourning behaviours of others in online spaces. What may be perceived as authentic or appropriate in one culture might not resonate similarly in another. To address this complexity, appendix 1, 2 and 3 provide a detailed breakdown of participants' locations, specifying their cities or towns. The geographical and cultural distinctions is addressed within the concluding chapter of the thesis to ensure a nuanced and context-aware interpretation of the data.

Participants for group B were initially intended to be recruited using similar channels as those for group A. However, as previously discussed, this approach encountered challenges and was consequently excluded from the sample group. Participants for group C were to be selected by reaching out through various communication points within the infrastructure of public memorial sites, including press and general contact channels, with site administrators and architects being the targeted demographic. Nevertheless, this group did not ultimately contribute to the sample as originally envisioned.

Overall, participants are anticipated to be forthcoming in responding to interview questions if they volunteer to be part of this research. This inclination can be attributed to various reasons, including the potential for personal growth and rewarding experiences during the interview process (Bloom, 1996; Lune and Berg, 2017), as well as the opportunity to re-examine and discuss their experiences from a fresh perspective (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004). For a more comprehensive understanding of the interview procedures and specific questions, please refer to section III, where these intricacies are discussed in greater detail.

iii) Ethical Considerations

Participation in this research was entirely voluntary, with participants being fully informed of their rights and the nature of the study through comprehensive consent forms and a participant information sheet (See Appendices 4 and 5). Given the sensitive nature of the topic, focusing on death, loss, and bereavement, it was acknowledged that engaging with such material could potentially cause emotional distress. To address this, several safeguards were put in place. Participants were exposed to examples of memorialisation and related subject matter, and they were made explicitly aware of their ability to withdraw from the interview at any time without providing a reason. Furthermore, they were granted the option to request the removal of their contributions up to three months before the final submission of the study.

Emotional support resources were provided before, during and after each session to mitigate any distress. This included contact information for organisations such as Cruse Bereavement Care, NHS '*coping with bereavement',* The Samaritans and Child Bereavement UK. For participants residing outside of the UK, a tailored list of local support services specific to their country was supplied. Additionally, participants were informed, both in writing and verbally, that the research was not intended to serve as a form of emotional support or therapy. If a participant exhibited signs of distress during the interview and began to seek emotional support from the researcher, the interview would be respectfully terminated. In such cases, the participant would be provided with the previously outlined support contacts. These situations would be handled with

empathy, but with the clear communication that the interviewer's role was strictly academic, ensuring that professional boundaries were maintained throughout.

Participants of the study were afforded the opportunity to disclose sensitive information during the interview, a dynamic that presents both challenges and benefits. While the research depends on personal insights into sensitive topics to generate meaningful data, care was taken to ensure that participants felt no obligation to share beyond their comfort levels. This was explicitly communicated through informed consent forms (See Appendix 4), where it was emphasised that participants would not be pressured to disclose personal informational at any stage for the sole benefit of the study. To protect participants' identities, personal information was excluded from citations in the research findings. Initially, an alphanumeric system was employed to anonymously reference participants while maintaining continuity of the data. However, this approach was later replaced with the use of pseudonyms. The adjustment preserved confidentiality while humanising the participants' responses, providing the reader with a better sense of connection to the individuals behind the data.

No public announcements were made regarding the identities of participants once the sample was gathered. To foster transparency and a sense of involvement, participants were offered the option to request a finished copy of the research, which would be sent to them via email upon the project's completion. These measures ensured that the study maintained ethical standards and upheld the privacy and dignity of all participants.

iiii) Source Material

As mentioned earlier, the source material, or 'memorial examples', were planned to be distributed before conducting interviews with group A, which now constitutes the sole sampling group. The objective of this source material is to establish a baseline of understanding for the participants and ensure that they are well-informed about the subject matter to be discussed. Such awareness may entail the realisation that one is unfamiliar with the diverse aspects of virtual memorialisation and the management of

posthumous data online or simply serve as a prompt for those already involved in this phenomenon to comprehend the scope of our discussion.

The criteria for this source material were its public availability, as to reflect the ability for any individual to stumble across or access these sites with intent. This material pertains to a selection of the top 5 memorial pages (as discussed in the 'website data' section), in which the features to be discussed are as followed:

1. ForeverMissed.com
2. Legacy.com
3. Tributes.com
4. Mykeeper.com[2]
5. Memories.net

For example, the information to be disseminated to participant Group A through the viewing of these sources includes an overview of the following features:

- Photo albums
- 'Stories'/'Guest Book'/'Leave a Memory' that can be posted by any individual
- Biography
- 'Share this memorial/obituary'
- Planting memorial trees/Sending flowers/Sending food (Legacy.com/Tributes.com)

In order to frame the interview & provide context for participant group A (*see ii 'Participant selection'*), participants will be presented source material (or 'memorial examples') which include a brief explanation of an online memorialisation service that is offered at the current time. The memorial examples take the form of two short videos chosen in order to display their available features, design & user accessibility from the perspective of the service in question. Within the context of the study, this materials

[2]*'Queepr.com' & 'Mykeeper.com' were consolidated as this is now the same service.*

acts to create a baseline understanding of the services offered by these websites. In this sense, we can reference the responses from participants against the analysis of these memorial sites in order to better frame the thoughts and feelings presented. The dissemination of this source material holds importance, given that it has been originally produced by individuals similar to those in the original interview groups: namely, website designers and architects (originally belonging to group C). These memorial examples encompass an overview of the available virtual memorialisation services offered and presented by these websites, with the purpose of initiating discussions concerning individuals' experiences, or lack thereof, with these technologies.

To enhance ease of accessibility and to avoid burdening participants with extensive documents on virtual memorialisation practices and the industry, a decision was made to present participants with a multimedia approach as source material for the study. Therefore, participants were asked to watch two videos from different companies that offer virtual memorialisation services. These videos were chosen to encompass a wide array of services available online for the purpose of commemorating loved ones. Additionally, they represent the initial encounters individuals are likely to have when exploring such websites. Presenting the information in video format was a strategic choice, particularly for a distanced interview process like the one employed in this study, as it allowed for a simple link to be provided to participants. The selected videos serve as a visual guide to acquaint participants with various virtual memorialisation services. Through this approach, participants can grasp the essence of the interview at hand. Moreover, videos offer a more engaging medium to discuss and share their insights during the subsequent interview sessions, providing a prompt to conversing about their own experiences.

The two chosen videos were evaluated to ensure their alignment with the research goals and suitability for participants of varying backgrounds. The first selected video was produced by MyKeeper, a prominent player in the virtual memorialisation industry. This video offers a comprehensive overview of their services from a member of staff, providing insights into various aspects of memorialising loved ones in the digital realm offered by their website. Unfortunately, this video has since become unavailable to access via MyKeeper's website. The second video, titled '*Future Messages by Memories - Modern Day Time Capsule'*, (2020) was created by 'Memories_social',

hosted on YouTube, for their website Memories.net. This is another well-established provider of virtual memorialisation services. This video delves takes a more traditional advertising style, and compliments the information covered in the first video whilst offering another style to introduce prospective users. The strategic use of these videos ensures that participants are well-prepared for the subsequent interviews, facilitating a more in-depth and enriched discussion about their experiences, perceptions, and interactions with virtual memorialisation and archiving practices.

V) Interview questions

The study will involve administering a series of open-ended interview questions, carefully developed in advance of the interviews. These questions are designed to elicit valuable data from participants, shedding light on their experiences and perspectives related to the subject material, thereby enabling comparisons across different groups (Knox and Burkard, 2009). Initially, there were plans to tailor the questions for each group (A, B, or C); however, it was subsequently decided to maintain uniformity within each group. This decision was made to facilitate the comparison of findings within the respective groups (Kvale, 1996) and to accommodate potential emergent themes or valuable data that might arise from specific participants (Hill et al., 2005).

The interview questions have been deliberately framed to foster in-depth discussions, aiming to gain comprehensive insights into the reasons behind participants' responses and, thereby, validating their opinions and perceptions. Participants are encouraged to contribute freely and share personal memories or experiences when prompted by specific questions (Seidman, 2006). In this context, the sample interview questions serve as a roadmap for the discussion (Flick, 2002), anchoring it within the subject area and enabling a meaningful exploration of virtual memorialisation practices. These interview questions draw upon prior digital ethnographic research conducted on websites dedicated to memorialising the deceased. Informed by themes that emerged during this analysis, the questions encompass a wide range of topics, including the ways in which virtual memorialisation mitigates the impact of distance during grief, the digital archiving of oneself, and the dynamics of emotional authenticity in online

spaces. The construction of these questions allows participants to delve into their experiences, emotions, and perspectives concerning virtual memorialisation, enriching the qualitative data gathered during the interviews. Through this approach, the research aims to capture the complexities of individuals' engagements with virtual memorialisation practices and provide valuable insights into this evolving domain. See appendix 7 for a list of interview questions used in this manner.

As such, the data expected to be gathered from group A are experiences encountering material pertaining to memorialisation & death online. Thoughts & feelings regarding the services available for enacting the processes attached to death in the online (grief, memorialising, authenticity). Comparative experiences/thoughts regarding moving a typically physical process into the virtual realm. Experiences creating & erecting memorialisation pages online. Thoughts & feelings regarding their use of these services & how these have affected their relationship with the event (continuing bonds, mitigating physical presence, comparisons between online & offline activities).

This interview data is important as it will form the basis of analysis in combination with the researcher's understanding of these websites, in addition to services offered by social medias such as Facebook and Twitter. By utilising both these methods, a better understanding can be gained surrounding the storied experiences & opinions of participants in relation to the medium itself. This will be discussed further in the 'Data Analysis' section.

3.3. Data Analysis

3.3.1. Website Data

Website data is not the primary focus of the study, but instead acts to anchor the research in terms of providing a foundation to work within for interview group A. As such, analysis of the website data acts to shine a light on the features available within these sites and elucidate the differences & similarities between each. By examining & understanding the functions of an online memorial, appropriate interview questions

can be formulated in order to gather the data necessary to answer both RQ1 & RQ2. The data to be gathered from interviews can therefore be supplemented by our understanding of the websites themselves.

The websites chosen for analysis undergo a thematic content analysis employing a deductive approach, combining these methods to inform the research process. This integrated approach bears similarities to conventional User Experience (UX) methods, where participants are interviewed about a product or service while simultaneously examining the product or service itself. However, in this research context, the primary focus is not on enhancing these services but rather on addressing RQ1 & RQ2, delving into broader inquiries related to virtual memorialisation. By employing a thematic content analysis, the research aimed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the websites, bolstering the eventual choice of subject matter and interview questions selected for participants. The deductive approach ensures that the analysis remains aligned with the research objectives, allowing for a systematic exploration of the websites' content and design elements in relation to the specified research questions.

After becoming exceedingly familiar with both the memorial sites themselves & background theory relating to virtual memorialisation, the immersion with these spaces is used as a vernacular that one may sift through any data scraped from these websites. The next step involved using this analysis to generate codes relating to the topics surrounding RQ1 & RQ2. Once coding had been completed, codes were reviewed in order to locate & identify themes (see appendix 6). During the coding process, a recursive and iterative methodology was applied to refine and revise the codes, ensuring their accuracy and relevance in capturing the essence of the underlying data. This iterative process extended to the identification and refinement of overarching themes that emerge from the coded data. These themes play a pivotal role in structuring the data and fostering a comprehensive understanding of virtual memorialisation practices. Such iterative and non-linear analysis remains consistent throughout the entirety of the research project, enabling ongoing exploration and re-evaluation of the data from diverse perspectives.

As previously mentioned, irrespective of the sites selected as the top 5 most popular for the task of online memorialisation, the common features found across all tend to

be the same. Common features include the use of guest books, diary entries or leaving a 'memory' in textual form & posting photos – all of which allow for a high level of immediacy (Walter, 2015; Caroll and Landry, 2010; Roberts, 2006; Brubaker et al., 2013; Klastrup, 2014) with both the situation and deceased. By analysing online memorials in this manner, this research will gain insight into the way they are constructed. Information regarding the hypertextual elements and content of these digital spaces will therefore shine a light upon their users and creators' experiences & intent, be this for commercial gain or another reason that may reveal itself.

3.3.2. Participant Data

This data was analysed using content analysis in order to code the data generated by each research participant. Content analysis was selected on the basis that this is an 'exploratory work on the unknown phenomenon' (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) being that of the mitigating effects of the communication in relation to virtual memorial spaces and is intended to provide context to the processes it seeks to examine within its findings. Content analysis is therefore a suitable choice when interfacing large amounts of data generated by examining online-media based interaction (Krippendorff, 2018) in tandem with participant interviews.

Before data collection, this research operates under the assumption that online memorial spaces are, indeed, remediating the traditional notions of space and the body associated with physical memorialisation practices. By embracing this assumption, the study not only builds upon existing literature but also addresses a significant gap concerning digital memorialisation and online bereavement processes. This approach allowed previous assumptions about individuals' motivations for engaging with digital memorial sites to be considered and referenced in the data while addressing RQ1. Additionally, RQ2 can be answered by examining and coding the raw data generated from the participant interviews.

The interview data underwent transcription and subsequent coding during the analysis process, aiming to elucidate themes pertaining to virtual memorialisation as an emerging phenomenon and factors related to the notions of space and the body (see

appendix 6). Given the substantial volume of textual information encompassing personal experiences, employing coding as a method is appropriate as it establishes meaningful relationships among the numerous verbal accounts, facilitating the identification of patterns within the discourse (Mayring, 2004).

In the process of obtaining data that can be operationalised, the initial step involved familiarising oneself with the transcribed interviews. Subsequently, this analysis serves as the foundation for generating codes that pertain to the topics surrounding RQ1 & RQ2. Once the coding phase is completed, an essential aspect of this data analysis is to avoid creating themes solely based on their frequency of occurrence (Vaismoradi et al., 2013), as such an approach could potentially compromise the integrity of the overarching research inquiry. Throughout both the coding and theme identification stages, a frequent revision of codes and later themes was imperative to ensure they aptly capture the nuances of the data, thus facilitating a more comprehensive exploration within the write-up. The analysis employed throughout the project adheres to a recursive and non-linear approach, actively unfolding at every stage of the research. This methodological choice enables a continuous and flexible investigation of the data, empowering the research to discern meaningful patterns and novel insights that contribute to a deeper understanding of the emergence of virtual memorialisation processes and the attitudes and perceptions of online audiences who enact these.

3.4. Further points to note

3.4.1. Accessibility

Upon commencing the sampling process of the original three selected participant groups, this research had an expectation as to the ease of data gathering across the project. These expectations were based on similar bodies of research in my field and projected a declining ease of access through groups C -> B -> A. Almost immediately however, it became apparent that this was nearly entirely the reverse of the actual outcome. The unexpected findings unveiled during the data gathering phase brought

forth intriguing insights into the accessibility of participants within the selected groups. The unanticipated outcome challenges preconceived notions and demanded the initial re-evaluation of the research's sampling approach and participant recruitment strategies.

Despite transparency & willingness to communicate associated with the businesses & general industry that encompasses group C, facilitated by clear communication channels that are presented within each respective site's information or contact pages, these individuals would make initial contact but then fail to respond a second time. On the other hand, Group B's points of access were made up of voluntary administration groups across self-sufficient pages & groups – each serving to provide a necessary space for their users to express grief & condolences. It's for this reason then, that a clear contact channel is not available when accessing group B, and with this comes a level of potential insensitivity when entering these spaces for a purpose not originally intended by its creators & administrators. Further to the issue of access with group B, a series of messages would be received from moderators who contacted the researcher directly to enquire as to why they had failed to provide a standard reason for wishing to join the group. Within this message, moderators clearly stated their caution when accepting members to a sensitive space such as a grief support group – presumably due to negative activity from individuals who join with the sole purpose of 'trolling' or causing discomfort to others. This form of harassment or abuse within online spaces intended for memorialisation and grief has been documented in several recent studies (Phillips, 2011; Kern and Gil-Egui, 2017; Seigfried-Spellar and Chowdhury, 2017) and is evidenced in the caution displayed by these moderators. Questions proposed by the administrators of social media mourning groups ranged from requiring that the individual wishing to join the group acknowledge the existence of a higher power akin to a god & a level of spirituality within my life, to requiring that one identify as 'atheist, humanist or nonbeliever' whist agreeing not to reference supernatural content at any point. The one unifying requirement for entry relied on the personal experience of the loss of a loved one within one's life, creating an immediate issue and potential to be identified as a troublemaker within these spaces. This criteria would go on to be incredibly important to the group's moderators, who, if the one failed to complete the questions, would refuse to grant the ability to explain what the nature of contacting the group was. As frustrating as this might be from the position of the

researcher however, it offered a very real exploration into access & availability of information within these groups. Perhaps sensitive information disclosed to moderators & admins of these groups has the potential to be leaked or misused – however appears to be scope for further research. One example of a question to a group upon entry is as follows:

''gods, religion, spirituality (conventional or alternative) or any form of afterlife. We ask the following questions because we are careful about who we admit, to ensure a safe and secure experience for our members. GBBGroup offers support for people grieving without belief in God, religion, spirituality (conventional or alternative) or any form of afterlife. If this is right for you, can you tell us why? Please forgive the questions; we must be careful who we add. 1) Are you an atheist, Humanist or other nonbeliever (or in the process of leaving religion)? 2) Are you grieving a human loved one? Can you commit to not post ANY religious, spiritual or supernatural content -- including nothing about angels, Heaven, prayer, spirits, or signs?''

Group B's Facebook memorial pages exhibit a striking level of rawness and emotional vulnerability in certain instances. Upon observation, it becomes evident that many active participants have recently experienced the loss of a loved one, reflecting the deeply personal nature of the content shared within the group. The poignant and moving nature of the interactions among members is palpable, evoking a sense of emotional depth that the researcher must delicately navigate when entering these virtual online spaces. This results in one seemingly intruding a great deal by entering these virtual online spaces, especially when proposed with questions such as these.

3.4.2. Consent forms & response rates

An additional challenge faced during the research process was the delay in receiving returned consent forms from prospective participants. It became evident that once the communication with participants reached the stage where the form needed to be returned, a considerable delay occurred. Understandably, this action required voluntary effort from participants who were not obligated to comply, and they might prioritise other tasks in their daily lives, possibly leading to forgetfulness in returning

the form promptly. This issue highlights the need for effective communication and reminders to ensure the timely collection of consent forms, while being considerate of participants' time and commitments. This issue is mitigated when conducting face-to-face interviews, as participants who have already committed to the research project are less likely to let the physical signing of a consent form hinder their participation, given the straightforward nature of the process. However, in the context of virtual interviews, participants are required to possess the technological skills to download the email attachment, open it in the appropriate software for editing, and then attach and return the form to the researcher. This digital process may present challenges for some participants, underlining the importance of providing clear instructions and support to ensure seamless completion of the consent form in virtual settings. In retrospect, employing an encrypted service like Google Forms for consent sheets would have offered a more streamlined approach to obtaining consent from potential participants. This method would have simply entailed sharing a link with each participant, eliminating the need to edit a document and return it to the researcher manually. By leveraging automated web services, the consent process could have been expedited and made more convenient for participants, while maintaining a good level of security and data protection. Participants also displayed apprehension towards being on video calls, particularly when they believed that the calls would be recorded. This hesitancy led to non-cooperation among many participants. However, a significant shift occurred when it was clarified to them that they were not obligated to enable their video feed during the video chat, and solely their audio feed was required. Once participants understood that this was suitable, their level of cooperation significantly improved. An adjustment in communication and assurance of privacy alleviated participants' concerns further into the study, emphasising the importance of clear and transparent communication throughout the research process.

3.4.3. Memorial sites scoped for sampling

1. ForeverMissed.com

2. Gatheringus.com
3. iLasting.com *(Since defunct)*
4. Mykeeper.com
5. Mem.com
6. Memories.net
7. Never-Gone.com
8. Remembered.com
9. Tributes.com
10. YourTribute.com
11. Weremember.com
12. En.inmemori.com
13. Last-memories.com
14. Rememberme2020.uk
15. Virtual-memorials.com
16. Imorial.com *(since defunct)*
17. Memorialwebsites.legacy.com
18. Everloved.com
19. Memorialmatters.com
20. Memory-of.com *(since defunct)*
21. Heavenaddress.com
22. Beautifultribute.com

4. Guiding Archiving

4.1. Introduction

This first analysis chapter delves into the relationship between websites that offer virtual memorial spaces and their influence on archiving and data storage processes. Within the realm of digital archiving, numerous actions are enabled by the specific medium in use, yielding diverse effects on the data selected for preservation. Through this chapter, the research explores the multifaceted nature of archiving in a digital context, shedding light on the complexities and implications of the archival practices

facilitated by social medias and memorial websites. Our digital identities, which represent an individual's online persona or the online audience's perception of an individual in online spaces, play a significant role in shaping the way we preserve memories and legacies in the modern age (Van Dijck, 2007; Pitsillides et al., 2013). Expanding on this concept within the context of information archiving, Acker and Brubaker (2014) argue that one's identity on social networks, viewed as a personal digital archive, is not only shaped by the individual but is also co-created by the community of users through their contributions. It is a dynamic interplay of individual content creation and interactions within the broader community. This digital data discussed by the participants of this research encompass a wide array of items, including official personal records, photographs, text posts, and other elements akin to those found in physical archiving. Bassett (2015) introduces the concept of a '*digital legacy*', which encompasses posthumous information including digital data like passwords, social media details, and digital properties. Additionally, Bassett suggests referring to certain items, such as personal videos, news articles, photographs, blogs, and similar content, as *'digital memories'* within the broader construct of the digital self. In this research, these digital memories are considered to be an individual's digital archives, with passwords and social media details serving as the gateway to access them. These data items are intrinsically linked to the archival methods chosen by the individual, which, in turn, are influenced by the individual's perception of the nature of online data and the potential external audience. In essence, participants engage in archiving both their own data and that of others, with the aim of benefiting not only themselves but also other individuals who can access and view these archived data. The research explores the interplay between personal choices in archiving and the broader implications of sharing data within virtual memorial spaces, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play in the digital archiving processes.

This analysis chapter examines the behaviours and activities participants engage in with virtual memorialisation practices, focusing on their experiences with learning how to digitally archive for a digital legacy. By observing how individuals are introduced to and navigate these processes, the chapter beings to address RQ1, exploring participants' perceptions of emerging communication technologies and their impact on mourning and memorialisation. Simultaneously, it delves into the various aspects of

social media platforms that shape specific forms of archiving in digital spaces, as well as participants' views on the guidance they receive during these processes. Through their reflections, we uncover insights into the perceived benefits and drawbacks of these practises in relation to memorialisation and self-presentation, both in the present and for the future. By unravelling the mechanisms that guide individuals through the archiving process, whether inherent to the platform or shaped by established norms – the chapter seeks to uncover the underlying reasons for such guidance. This analysis also sheds light on whether individuals value a digital legacy, addressing RQ2 by exploring the personal motivations and benefits participants associate with engaging in archival practises. Furthermore, it raises critical questions about the factors influencing these perspectives and the role of platform design and norms in shaping individual agency. This exploration not only illuminates participants' awareness of the implication tied to these phenomena, but also paves the way for the subsequent chapter, 'Seeking Authenticity', which builds on these findings to further investigate the emergence of these views.

In order to do so, this chapter will use 3 sections titled 'Teaching Archival' – looking at the ways in which individuals are taught how to archive the self within a digital space, 'Continuous Archiving' – examining individual's need to continually archive in order to create a longitudinal story of oneself, and 'Archiving for Death' – which discusses the acknowledgement of one's death and the subsequent reconfiguration of activities in the present for the purposes of creating a suitable legacy for the future. In total, this chapter will explore participant's experiences with memorialisation, death & dying online and the archival processes which tend to accompany these. Many participants were keenly aware of the features available to them for the purposes of archiving online throughout these interviews. For instance, after viewing the memorial examples provided in this research, conversation with Bryce (age 25) would move to discussing one's identity existing online in a public space, and how he dealt with acknowledgement of this. When asked if he felt he'd been encouraged to place more of his life online in recent years, he provided the following response:

'The entire concept of this is a little off-putting. Eventually we're going to have to be forced to kind of archive ourselves online and use these services more and more often. Maybe it's just a resistance to this new way of living that's getting in the way.

But maybe in like years to come this will be normalised but it seems a little alien right now' – **Participant 14, Bryce**

To which he was asked why this is the case:

'I don't know… I guess it removes you from those kind of traditional rituals where you'd remember people without technology' – **Participant 14, Bryce**

This duality between *'resistance'* and acceptance, whereby individuals may feel *'forced'* to archive themselves within online spaces, emerges as a recurring theme in the responses from participants across the entire sample group. Many individuals express their observations that societal trends and external influences guide them and others towards embracing self-archiving in online spaces as a normalised practice. However, even as they recognise this evolving landscape, a discernible level of resistance remains present among these individuals, reflecting their ambivalence towards the changes they perceive. Participants voice a nuanced perspective, grappling with the tension between conforming to digital archiving practices and preserving a sense of agency and autonomy over their digital identities.

It is also important to acknowledge the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on this research, as it swiftly and dramatically reshaped various daily processes encompassing education, general social interactions, and professional life, shifting them to virtual platforms. Within the context of this study, numerous individuals experienced a sudden and unexpected inability to undertake customary physical and emotionally significant tasks associated with the loss of a loved one. Funeral services, wakes, visits to memorial sites, and offering in-person support to someone facing grief were among the essential activities disrupted by the pandemic, as noted by several participants during the interview processes. Memorial sites online, by their nature, are without physical contact & therefore sit as a solution in order to ensure these social processes are able to continue. Throughout the interviews, several individuals emphasised the pandemic's impact on their perceptions, prompting a growing trend towards communication styles that accommodate distance. There was a general acceptance of this transformative period, where traditional activities once confined to physical spaces underwent a shift towards digital alternatives within online spaces.

The pandemic acted as a catalyst for re-evaluating the significance of virtual memorialisation and the emergence of virtual spaces as meaningful venues for commemorating and connecting with others during times of loss and grief. As such, participants spoke with this in mind when referencing the affordances of social medias for the purposes of memorialisation. One such conversation with Kate would come about when discussing their thoughts on memorialisation methods present online. Their initial reasoning behind why an individual may utilise the digital realm for memorialisation purposes focused on the coronavirus pandemic and it's remediating effects:

'This has probably come to the fore with coronavirus with people not being able to attend funerals and that… I've heard of a lot of these digital funerals because of coronavirus… I can appreciate that for some people this would be really helpful like if numbers were limited… I know people's obituaries can go online and other people might want to add something to them. For some people it's a huge comfort isn't it.' –
Participant 7, Kate

Kate's perspective sheds light on the significant impact of the coronavirus pandemic, which has accelerated the individual's inclination towards digital services concerning death and dying, guiding her towards archiving as a means of documenting a life when traditional practices in the physical world are '*limited*'. This observation underscores the pandemic's role in driving individuals towards the utilisation of virtual memorials as a means of archiving oneself or others. The subsequent sections of this study, beginning with 'Teaching Archival,' will delve into the exploration of how online platforms play a role in instructing individuals on the process of archiving, illuminating the ways in which people are steered into embracing such digital practices for commemoration and preservation.

4.2. Teaching Archival

The first section, 'Teaching Archiving,' delves into the phenomenon of digital spaces that serve an instructive role in facilitating memorialisation processes, particularly concerning death, dying, and the dynamics of public personal data interaction after

one's passing. We discuss the capabilities of digital spaces and websites for the enabling of individuals to archive their data online based on their perceptions of its significance posthumously. The individual learns to manage both their own digital assets and those belonging to others, selecting and preserving aspects of their online identity for a time when such editing would not otherwise be feasible due to their own demise. This exploration provides insights into the ways in which digital platforms empower users to navigate the complexities of memorialisation and data management, offering innovative opportunities for perpetuating online legacies and influencing the ways in which one's digital identity is curated beyond their lifetime. In effect, social medias and websites created for the specific purpose of memorialisation teach one how to archive personal data in preparation for death. Whilst conducting a digital ethnography of the memorial websites selected for this research, it became clear that much of the content present had been written and published in a way that serves to educate potential users about not only the benefit of using said site to archive personal data, but also how to methodologically carry out the processes of digital archival themselves. These websites actively demonstrate a transformation of traditional physical archiving and record-keeping processes, employing various techniques such as organising data through a timeline of life events, geolocation, alphabetisation, and categorisation based on the nature of death in some instances. A good example of this is seen on Forevermissed.com, whereby the ‘Life’ section within an online memorial acts to provide a space where a chronological timeline of events and key happenings within a person’s life can be shared – as well as occasionally being used in an organisational fashion to promote events after one’s death that act to celebrate their life. This reconfiguration not only promotes the adoption of digital archiving practices but also empowers individuals to engage meaningfully with the process, ensuring the preservation and structured representation of their personal data in virtual memorial spaces. The deliberate educational approach evident in these websites emphasises the significance of digital memorialisation and the cultivation of a legacy that transcends traditional archival practices.

Participants engaged in discussions concerning the concept of digital record-keeping as a means of memorialising the deceased, expressing a spectrum of opinions that ranged from deep concern about the emotional implications of such practices to a very

positive outlook regarding the potential benefits, including easy access to virtual spaces and control over digital assets. Participants engaged in discussions that shed light on various aspects of the virtual memorialisation phenomenon, particularly regarding the visibility of teaching practices implemented by social media sites to educate users about conducting archival activities online. Participants specifically highlighted the presence of these teaching methods, emphasising their impact and role in guiding individuals through the archival processes present within digital spaces. By drawing from their own experiences, participants articulated their encounters as both observers and active participants in this educational phenomenon, providing invaluable insights into how social media platforms facilitate and instruct users in the management of memorialisation-related data. Given the timing of this research, many participants were influenced by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown's effect on digital communication throughout, and this therefore is reflected within the data gathered. In conversation with Jason (age 24), we discussed how he felt as if death was becoming more visible online, and he attributed this to social medias existing as *'the only method of communication during a pandemic'.* Jason was asked whether he saw this as a new norm, where he referenced back to the memorial examples to explain his position:

'Like think about a funeral with a zoom link during Covid and that kind of thing. I was thinking about like that would be a bit weird pre-Covid. People have their get togethers online like hanging out with friends or a painting party digitally you know, a get together? But I think Covid has made the idea of a digital funeral not sound like something so foreign or out of this world… it makes a lot more sense now, because of Covid. A year ago I don't think I would have really said this. These kind of engagements are encouraged now and you see it everywhere' – **Jason, Participant 18**

Jason's response highlights the shifting attitudes towards utilising social media platforms for activities traditionally associated with physical locales and in-person communication, exemplified by the concept of holding a digital funeral during the Covid-19 pandemic. He reflects on how, prior to Covid, such ideas might have seemed strange or foreign, but the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic have led to a greater acceptance and normalisation of virtual gatherings. Jason acknowledges

that these online engagements, including funerals, are now widely encouraged and prevalent in contemporary digital spaces, indicating the influence of social media platforms in guiding individuals towards embracing these novel ways of commemorating and connecting with others. This emphasises the agency of social media sites in redefining and facilitating virtual memorialisation, a process intricately tied to archival practices. Zoom, along with similar video streaming or conferencing platforms, has emerged as a pivotal tool for adapting traditionally physical funerary and memorial practices in the digital realm. Media coverage like that by Wood (2020) and research from Bitusikova (2020) highlights how these platforms are not only functional but also capable of fostering spaces that are spiritual, respectful, and intimate. The reflections made by participants like Jason align with the observations from the memorialisation websites examined in this research. For instance, Legacy.com exhibits a proactive approach to guide users during the Covid-19 pandemic by providing a dedicated coronavirus link on their website. This feature enables users to filter out deaths specifically related to this global event, facilitating the categorisation of memorials and obituaries under headings such as 'Their lives remembered: Coronavirus Memorial'. Such practices exemplify how social media platforms, including memorialisation websites, actively steer individuals towards activities that involve archival practices such as the categorising and ranking of data. Jason's perspective on social media systems as nudging individuals towards digital memorialisation is substantiated by these website practices, further supporting the notion that social media platforms play a significant role in shaping new modes of memorialisation during the pandemic and beyond. After further discussion with Jason, conversation reached the topic of his perspective on contributing deeply emotive content to online spaces. In response, he expressed the following:

'I suppose we have been trained in our generation to be a bit more expressive online. We've got in an elementary form of this emoji usage and we're trained how to deal with this style of communication, but I don't think people 10 years ago on myspace or Facebook would be comfortable with sharing quite what we share today so we are certainly more trained to this and really sharing ourselves online' – **Jason, Participant 18**

Considering individuals' experiences online, it becomes important to note how they feel they have been guided into their current activities of digital archiving over a larger longitudinal timescale than simply within recent times. Given his age, Jason's reference to *'our generation'* highlights individuals in their mid-20s who feel they have been *'trained'* to deal with a *'style of communication'* that focuses on digital archiving and the act of sharing oneself online. This acknowledgment by Jason sheds light on a potential generational disparity in how individuals have been prepared or conditioned for the practice of preserving personal content in digital spaces. It implies that individuals of different generations may have distinct approaches to and comfort levels with digital archiving, shaped by their respective experiences and technological upbringing. The insights shared by many older participants, who were not born into a time with immediate access to internet communication, reveal their ability to identify the progression from physical modes of interacting with one another to the digital alternatives, particularly in the context of dying and digital memorialisation. For instance, Linda (age 45) offered her thoughts on changing modes of communication while discussing the memorial examples. Her perspective exemplifies the recognition of how communication practices have transformed over time, as she navigates the shift from traditional forms of memorialisation to the utilisation of digital platforms for commemoration and preserving memories. As such, Linda was asked whether digital methods of memorialising the deceased could replace traditional methods:

'I think that this is absolutely the way it's going, the same way that communication has gone this way. I mean who has written a handwritten letter, like maybe because it's styling but it's just become a novelty thing now…and we're kind of pushed into it. just as we've regressed from writing to email to messages to whatever, this is how it's going to go with how we store memories and most people have digital photo albums of their children rather than physical one's so I wouldn't be surprised if this is the next natural step. I think that if it goes in the direction of holograms and that kind of making the person virtual reality or a recreation of a person I would find this very creepy.' – **Linda, Participant 40**

Linda shares her perspective on the evolution of communication and the storage of memories, noting the decline of traditional practices like handwritten letters as a perceived '*regression'* in favour of digital alternatives. She draws parallels between

the transition from physical to digital modes of communication and the changing ways we store memories, citing the prevalence of digital photo albums over physical ones as an example. Linda views this progression as an inevitable and natural development, indicating that many individuals are being guided towards digital archiving practices through the online platforms they engage with regularly. However, despite recognising the trend, she appears cautious about potential future advancements, expressing unease at the notion of recreating a person in a virtual reality or holographic form, which she finds '*creepy*.' This highlights Linda's perspective on the ongoing shift towards digital memorialisation and the potential implications it may have for commemorating the deceased.

We've observed this phenomenon within the entertainment industry, where technologies like holograms have been used for performances, such as the posthumous appearance of Tupac (Ganz, 2012). This trend is now extending into the realm of memorialisation, with AI technologies being employed to remember the deceased. Examples include the Korean Documentary *Meeting You,* which digitally recreated a mother's late child, and initiatives by Chinese companies that resurrect the dead in the form of interactive avatars (Westfall, 2024). For Linda, however, these advancements represent a step too far. Continuing the conversation on this topic with, she highlighted the very recent instance where individuals were compelled to utilise online services for memorialisation during the Covid-19 pandemic:

'It [social medias] was basically just a tool. When people have a Death during covid they're faced with the option of no ceremony or having one online… there is no judgement from my side. Just as you used to think your thoughts or look at old pictures, now you get it through an app. In a way it kind of maybe makes me think is this actually so bad? – **Linda, Participant 40**

Linda's response highlights a pragmatic view of social media as a tool for memorialisation. She acknowledges that during the Covid-19 pandemic, individuals were faced with the choice of either forgoing traditional ceremonies or embracing online platforms to commemorate their deceased loved ones. In this context, social media served as a practical solution, providing a means for people to process their grief and honour the departed through virtual ceremonies. Linda's acceptance of this

shift indicates a recognition of the evolving nature of communication and memorialisation in the digital age within the older participants of this study. Moreover, her perspective suggests that the affordances of social media for memorialisation should be understood as a tool that requires user education. By becoming familiar with these platforms, individuals can effectively navigate and utilise them to fulfil their commemorative needs. The concept of social media serving as the *'next natural step'* in communication and memorialisation underscores its increasing role in shaping contemporary grieving practices and preserving memories. This phenomenon is further supported by research from MacNeil et al. (2023) and Matsuda et al. (2021), who identified the Covid-19 pandemic as a catalyst for changing traditional mourning and memorialisation practises. The pandemic presented digital options that, in many cases, were the only viable means for families to honour their deceased loved ones. While these digital alternatives may not always be the preferred method for hosting a memorial service or a funeral, they play a crucial role in addressing issues such as disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989). By providing families with the opportunity to 'say a final goodbye' (Júnior et al., 2020) these digital spaces offer a meaningful solution.

The presentation of social media websites as educators of digital archiving methods is evident in their features and descriptions. Taking Facebook as an example, their legacy features are described as a method to 'memorialise' accounts of deceased individuals, implying the engagement of those connected to the online memorial in maintaining its presence. These spaces are denoted as zones for 'remembering', actively guiding users towards behaviours suitable for interacting with what effectively constitutes as an archive of an individual's life activities. These features, which serve as a means to preserve memories through the archiving of one's digital data have established a normative process linked to death and dying online. By identifying the concerns of the individual in relation to the future of their and loved one's digital assets or data as a whole, these features encourage users to partake in the act of archiving within a space intended for remembering. This process is transformative and changes the definition of a user's account into an archival space, ensuring the protection of the assets contained within.

Sites created for the purpose of memorialising the deceased inherently act to guide the individual through the process of archiving one's life. When examining these

spaces, it became very apparent that several of the features of each site were positioned in a manner to teach the individual the necessary knowledge in order to carry practises relating to archiving. These websites not only offer guidance to the individual on how to archive via their specific platforms but also to provide instructions in terms of how to navigate real-world situations with written articles, guides and instances where digital assets can be linked to physical events. Such is the case of the built-in guidance present on Legacy.com, who at the same time as offering a space to create a digital memorial for an individual, offer a plethora of articles and resources aimed to guide the individual as to how properly to proceed after the death of a loved one. In the 'Planning' section on Legacy.com, the user is encouraged and reassured as to the ways in which creating an online memorial facilitates a space that can become a *'place for everyone's favourite memories and photos'*, encouraging archiving and the storage of digital assets as a group activity. Legacy.com also features articles with titles such as 'how to write a eulogy' which provides information as to how to conduct yourself within these spaces under the guidance: '*What to say when someone dies'.* With sections detailing how *'It's never too late (to) hold the memorial service you couldn't in 2020'* by creating an '*online memorial'*, users are encouraged and taught how to engage in *'building a website in the deceased's honour… or turn(ing) their social media profile into a memorial… making it a place for everyone's favourite memories and photos.'*. Platforms of this nature highlight the differences between physical and digital memorialisation methods, with participants underscoring the emphasis of archiving of the deceased's life online through digital memorialisation methods as opposed to physical memorial services which are instead observed to serve the purpose of tying loose ends and providing a sense of finality to one's life. However, both physical and digital memorialisation methods act to reify the loss of someone both emotionally and legally and are an essential part of finalising someone's time on the earth. In the case of social medias specifically, finality is granted by the re-categorising of an account belonging to a living individual to one associated with the deceased. The analysis chapter titled 'Finalities' will go further into depth as to the implications of perceived futures and the issues that accompany situations where closure appears not to be granted.

Legacy.com implemented a specific COVID-19 feature on its website to filter deaths related to the global pandemic. This feature encourages users to tag memorials and

obituaries in a pandemic-specific manner, allowing for categorisation, such as ‘Deaths from Coronavirus 19’. Users can also browse obituaries based on various categories like ‘High School’, ‘College’, 'City’, or ‘Newspaper,’ facilitating easy access to memorials through effective tagging. This categorisation not only streamlines the archiving of digital assets but also addresses individuals’ concerns regarding the fate of these assets after their passing. Moreover, these online memorial spaces, such as Legacy.com, offer unique advantages. They are highly accessible, eliminating the need for physical presence or travel, as they operate in a virtual space. This accessibility, combined with features like non-geographical access and ‘cloud’ storage, simplifies the use of these platforms. Participants in the study found this familiarity with cloud-based services reassuring, as it eliminated the fear of losing data on physical hard drives. For instance, one participant stated, *‘It's like not going to get lost on a hard drive is something that interests me… a cloud storage of whatever you want’* (Melissa, Participant 3). Taking 'MyKeeper.com' as an example, these platforms use these features as selling points. They offer services like ‘Cemetery and grave maps’ for virtual navigation of physical spaces, ‘Virtual streaming options’ to attend services remotely, and a ‘Guestbook & tributes centre’ that allows for interactive and reflective engagement with tributes, condolences, and images. These features enhance the accessibility of spaces for remembrance and communal mourning, catering to the diverse needs of users. In terms of effort required for access, digital spaces for mourning and memorialisation have significantly lower barriers compared to physical spaces. The convenience and ease of use associated with these online platforms make them appealing options for archiving digital assets and commemorating the deceased.

Several participants would discuss their experiences utilising available online tools designed for memorialising the deceased. These digital platforms offer organisational mechanisms ser in place that facilitate not only digital activities but also extend to aiding the planning of real-world such as funerals. Beyond this organisational and technical aspect, these tools offered online educate the individual on conducting the required and necessary steps when someone close to them has died. Participants like Sarah (age 43) clearly recognise this. During conversation regarding the responsibilities following the loss of a loved one, Sarah provides insight into her own

experiences utilising digital services in order to effectively celebrate, grieve for, and memorialise the deceased:

'I think this kind of thing is helpful though because I've used something similar recently, you know you can see what's going on and arrange everything. Yeah, because I've had to do an online funeral and to be able to talk about someone or see someone because we can't have funerals, we can't have gatherings, we can't have wakes is really really a good thing at the moment.' – **Sarah, Participant 16**

Sarah was then asked how the arranging of this funeral service was carried out with the aid of an online service:

'I think it went well, everything was really well organised, and it felt quite, you know, easy? Apart from the internet signal being rubbish here for it. They website kind of walked me though everything I had to do… I had to use an app on my phone because my iPad wasn't working but nobody struggled to access the funeral. The website even gave the older ones lessons on how to get onto it. The company that did it they gave these little preview links out to make sure everyone could get onto a mock service before it happened and just to help everyone out in general. It was all umbrella'd under one company, and they kinda of do loads and just sort it out for us. It was quite nice not actually having to worry about it, and they store it all online with little photos and the full video so we can go back and watch or add something to it.' – **Sarah, Participant 16**

Sarah highlights the encompassing and centralised nature of online memorial services. In Sarah's case, this service not only facilitated the arrangement of the funeral service but also undertook the role of educating the family about the necessary procedures. Additionally, it provided a platform the funeral process, allowing for distance to be bridged. Furthermore, Sarah can recognise the technical aspects such as the storing of digital assets related to the funerary process – This encompasses revisiting archived versions of the funeral services and additional visual materials in the form of '*photos'.* Noted too is the educational component, in the form of '*lessons'*, in which older individuals are guided to access digital assets and services, ensuring their engagement during and after the event. While this example appears to be entirely

conducted within an online environment, outside the restrictions of Covid-19, many of these services extend and mediate both forms of physical & virtual distances during the grieving process by inextricably linking the two together through the process of guiding archiving. By acting as a one stop-shop for the grieving process, websites like Legacy.com position themselves as a remedy for the various administrative tasks associated with the passing of a loved one, whilst earning a small commission from transactions they facilitate with third-party vendors, or obituary publications through newspaper partners. Thus, these platforms guide individuals within their presented ecosystem in order to enhance engagement, user retention, and consequently their profitability.

Conversation with another participant, Mark (age 26), would also follow the same trajectory of discussing how services traditionally carried out in the physical world are increasingly becoming enacted within online spaces. He would share his thoughts about this and discuss the disconnect that technology can often bring to conversations social experiences conducted online. Mark shared a comparable perspective, recounting an instance involving a virtual wedding where online services were harnessed to enable to participation and contribution of family members – ultimately crating a collective archive of the event and memory formation. In this context, he highlights the guidance provided on effectively utilising the service to its maximum potential:

'We were taught how to do it by like the site and the people arranging it and it did the job… the bare minimal job. They had a guestbook and a page where we could all post their embarrassing photos… It looked really good, it sounded great, people were coming in from all over the world. Off the back of the sadness of not being there, comparatively it was nice, but it's really strange… these things are good substitutes though. It probably enables people who wouldn't be able to go… if I had disabilities or really bad social anxiety, I would be able to access this stuff, whereas someone may not otherwise.' **– Mark, Participant 32**

The instructional and directional aspects of these processes offer significant advantages, as evident from Mark's insights. He states how on this instance receiving guidance on arranging a virtual wedding extended participation opportunities to

individuals who might have been excluded otherwise. Furthermore, education prior to the event ensured that attendees were well prepared to engage with the service and contribute to the collective archive of the wedding. This example illuminates again the transformation of traditional physical events into digital formats, necessitating guidance for individuals navigating these new spaces. Although not mentioned in Mark's excerpt, the impact of Covid-19 on this shift is significant as it has accelerated adoption of services such as these. This Example holds significance in revealing the transformation of digital platforms to accommodate events that were traditionally physical in nature. It underscores the imperative for social media platforms to incorporate educational and instructional elements, ensuring individuals can effectively participate in archiving and memorialising experiences associated with an event.

There are examples where enhanced guidance or improved accessibility instructions on utilising memorialisation services could have positively influenced engagement with digital services a little better. In conversation with Tim (age 22), he shared his ease with openly sharing personal aspect of his life online, even expressing the intention during the interview that he'd like to nominate a person to continue posting on his behalf via his social media after his passing. Tim highlights an example where unfamiliarity with virtual funerary services lead to a situation where he felt uncomfortable in attending the event:

'Social media is now an everything tool… but having said that I was invited to watch my friend's mum's funeral. It would have been nice, but I don't think I could have done that. I wasn't in the right mental space and didn't really get how it worked' –
Tim, Participant 2

Considering Tim's experience and sentiment within his response, it is plausible to speculate that had he received the appropriate guidance and education through social medias or a relevant service, he might have understood the functionality and potential advantages of participating in an online-hosted funeral in understanding '*how it worked'*. However, it is important to recognise that even with the appropriate guidance from social medias, the concept of a digital funeral or online memorial space hosted online might not be suitable for everyone. In contrast, archival practices rooted in

physical domains necessitate not only the expenditure of time but also material resources like cameras or written documents to compile tangible fragments of information that can be preserved in order to chronicle an individual's life. Participants highlight this as a pivotal aspect, particularly due to the constraints of these archival records often being tied to a singular physical location. Daisy (age 45) expounds on the significance of tangible mementos in commemorating departed loved ones; however, she also highlights the challenge of accessibility associated with physical archives. This prompts consideration of the benefits inherent in digitally archiving records, such as photographs, which can play a pivotal role in facilitating memory recollection and collective remembrance for the deceased:

'I think with digitising photograph records that's a really nice idea, and a lot of people have big families and photo albums… when I lost my mum and dad, between four of us we split all the photo albums we had one each... but like will I ever get around to getting physical copies of those other pictures? when I went to New Zealand I got to see pictures that I hadn't seen for 20 years and that was really nice. So I think having that available online would be a nice idea. I was sharing them with my sister who I barely get to see. And it's more of an issue when these things become like a prop, don't they, to say 'do you remember when his happened?' It jogs memories. It's quite an emotive time… so I've been putting everything online now.' – ***Daisy, Participant 11***

Daisy identifies a specific scenario in which the absence of digitalisation, and consequently the limited accessibility of physical artefacts, hindered the facilitation of beneficial social processes linked to commemorating the departed. She likens these tangible objects to *'props'*, necessary to evoke a poignant remembrance of the deceased and catalyse grieving in some instances. Daisy envisions that if these artefacts were digitally archived then enhancing the memorialisation process could have been realised. In their research, Veale (2004) refers to the communal online memorialisation described by Daisy as a '*collective memorial landscape'* . This practice contributes to the formation of a collective memory surrounding the deceased. This scenario also underscores how individuals can be directed toward considering social media platforms as an archiving solution due to the geographical advantages inherent in the digital medium. Conversing with Jamie (age 29) revealed a perspective

on the digital archive that resonates similarly. Jamie highlighted how his interaction with social media has led him to come across advertisements for services catering to the memorialisation of since deceased individuals. In contemplating this experience, Jamie emphasises the accessibility of these features, offering an assessment of the capabilities provided by social media platforms for memorialisation:

'Yeah I've seen this advertised. This seems like a fairly pragmatic approach to what is going to be a long-term problem. You know if you want to have a memorial and people can't gather in large groups due to something like covid, or even like this kind of thing becoming the norm, it provides a mean to show you how to arrange stuff so people can have closure I guess.' – **Jamie, participant 13**

Participants like as Jamie recognise the organisational functionality present in online platforms designed for commemorating the departed. Many of these services or websites that facilitate the archival of one's life legacy also serve as hubs for coordinating events that accompany the passing of a loved one, such as funeral services. This observation echoes the experiences shared by other participants, such as Sarah, who as we discussed with earlier had engaged with a company providing the infrastructure for hosting a digital funeral first-hand. As the conversation continued, Jamie raises a pertinent concern associated with this form of digital archiving. Specifically, he identifies the potential challenge arising from an absence of adequate guidance or training when it comes to managing one's own digital legacy. This concern is particularly pronounced for older individuals who might not be as familiar with the tools provided by social media platforms and websites for the purpose of memorialisation, or even simply general use of social medias. Without proper guidance, such individuals may not only miss out on the advantages of these services but also face the unfortunate consequence of their digital legacies becoming inaccessible in the future:

I think this is going to be a much bigger issue in a few years time where people who have just become grandparents die. That section of people whose grandparents who have family who aren't quite double digits yet and are very active on Facebook…. That's gonna really become a topic of discussion. Like these people struggle to use

social media but still have accounts active, what's going to happen to them? **–**
Jamie, participant 13

Jamie's reflections highlight concerns about the lack of guidance in managing digital legacies, suggesting a future where social media platforms could become cluttered with inaccessible or restricted profiles of the deceased. Participants often framed this issue through the lends of differing social media literacy across age groups, however, responses from older participants in this study revealed a surprising familiarity with digital memorialisation services, challenging assumptions about generational divides. This familiarity could stem from older individuals' greater exposure to death, providing more time or motivation to consider digital legacy management, though this remains speculative and warrants further research. Irrespective of age, Jamie emphasises the need for better education on leveraging social media for self-archiving and legacy creation. Bellamy et al. (2024) support this notion, identifying digital legacies as essential for contemporary memorialisation and funerary practises. Addressing this gap could help individuals create and archive accessible, meaningful digital legacies and foster greater awareness of their significance in both personal and communal contexts.

Interviews with participants of this study have acted to illuminate the prevalent concerns of active social media users regarding the conservation of their digital assets. These concerns range from uncertainties surrounding data ownership upon their demise, to a desire to maintain posthumous control over one's data and self-presentation cultivated during their lifetime. In response to these apprehensions, the capabilities of social media platforms have emerged as a remedy, presenting services that allow tailored customisation of one's digital data archiving. These services encompass an array of preferences and settings, enabling individuals to decide what information is publicly archived for their audience and what remains privately held. Moreover, social media platforms, along with websites dedicated to memorialisation, are offering valuable resources designed to educate and guide prospective users in effectively utilising these tools. The participants in this study recognise this aspect within their discussions, although some raise concerns about differences across age groups. The education provided to social media users extends beyond the mere

mechanics of archiving personal data contributed over time. It encompasses an understanding of the motivations behind archiving and addresses potential concerns that can be alleviated through this process. Consequently, a clear pattern is emerging: social media platforms are solidifying the practice of archiving as an appropriate means for preserving digital assets and an individual's curated 'legacy', a legacy that the individual recognises will endure after one's death. This awareness of the motivations behind these actions is crucial, as it guides us in delving into the complexities and subtleties that emerge when one archives themselves within public online spaces. These intricacies will be explored in greater detail in the subsequent chapters, particularly focusing on themes of authenticity and the closure attributed to one's posthumous data in Chapters 6 and 7.

4.3. Continual Archiving

The second section will be discussing an element of archiving online that would be consistently brought up by participants – that being related for the need to engage with a continual process of archiving oneself as opposed to cataloguing a singular erstwhile version of the individual. Participants explain why this is an important practise and discuss the elements of social medias that act to guide the individual into a cyclical or continual process of archiving. This will lead discussion into the third section, which will examine how continual archiving places importance on the notion of how continuity functions where death is concerned, and how participants and social media users are archiving in direct response to the perceived inability to 'continue' their online activities after one's death. The archival of participants would range from islands of archiving, whereby smaller pockets of information would be catalogued sporadically over the life of the individual – an example being logging on to social media sites after a trip or holiday to upload photos and inform the audience about the time that had passed since the last life update. Alternatively, several participants would describe the constant process of utilising social medias to catalogue their lives through the creation of digital assets. Such is the case with Noah (age 30), who would discuss the type of contribution he enjoyed posting via his own social media channels regarding updating friends and family about his daily life and occurrences. This conversation would move

on to the topic of whether he felt what he posted online comprised of a digital legacy, and he was subsequently asked if he felt it important to leave one behind:

'If I'm dead I would love to leave some stories behind. I'd like different people to remember different aspects of me. Like for example right now some people would give me different comments online about my personality… some people think I'm cold or some people think I'm aggressive… but others might be like hey you're a really nice person. It's interesting to hear it, but still when I'm dead I'd want them to remember it in different ways and surprise each other. I love attention but I won't force them to pay attention to me. A legacy isn't important, but I love the idea of people coming together to piece it all up… and this is kind of what social media has done for us now. We all change over time… and you can see that with the things we post online too.' – ***Noah,*** **Participant 31**

Noah's response acts to illuminate the importance placed upon the act of creating a story through the data we choose to leave behind online after death. Albeit referencing the idea of a '*legacy'* lacking importance, He identifies the process of *'coming together to piece it all up'* as an important process which is allowed to function thanks to *'the things we post online'* as the individual is subject to *'change over time'*. The evolution of an individual's digital legacy hinges on these transformative shifts and the subsequent assembly by the online community, dependent on a sustained, long-term practice of archiving one's digital presence. Should there be a significant time lapse between these instances of online self-representation, the effectiveness of this process would be compromised. Following an individual's passing, their online profile frequently transforms into a lasting digital memorial, a space that the deceased's surrounding audience can continue to construct. This collaborative development of an online memorial, incorporating an individual's digital archive, introduces considerable complexities concerning ownership and access rights. It essentially delves into the concept of constructing multiple digital identities or roles within a single user profile on a social network (Acker & Brubaker, 2014). Therefore, this mode of archiving operates through the collaborative interaction between the individual's contemplation of their posthumous legacy and the audience's role in connecting the dots between each archived contribution, photograph, or informational fragment provided by the individual. As Noah highlights however, there's space for disparities to emerge. The

audience possesses the capability to interpret the archive in diverse ways, labelling an action as *'aggressive'* on one end of the spectrum, or as coming from a *'really nice person'* on the other. However, in the context of this individual's digital legacy, these divergent perceptions of the persona they project through their digital archive are recognised and embraced as a positive aspect by Noah.

Participants also raised concerns related to limited digital literacy among older generations and the need for more education on how to engage in the process of digitally archiving oneself, particularly within the context of continual archiving. Sam (Age 29) was questioned during his interview about his perspective on the potential benefits of a virtual funeral service in conjunction with a physical one. This inquiry led to a conversation exploring the advantages of both types of services. During this discussion, Sam delved into the nuances of physical keepsakes and digital data comparatively for the purposes of remembrance and memory preservation. He also shared his concerns about older family members who did not have the same technological resources available, leading to a lack of a digital archive of their life for surviving family members to explore:

'When my grandad passed, I was going through the house, and I came across this photo album, and we brought it back and there were all these photos of my grandparents that I've never seen before. As I've said I've never really looked into my family and oh gosh how much they look like me' mam and It got me thinking. Wouldn't it have been nice to have seen these photos online and have them explain them? Say for example my gran did some ballet, she could have left a little message explaining her ballet photo.' – **Sam, Participant 35**

Sam highlights the importance of digital archives in providing context and narrative to specific items, such as a '*ballet photo'*, which can enhance the understanding of one's past life and personal history. Through digital archiving, previously ambiguous yet sentimental physical items gain value. Instead of isolated individual photographs, a series of archived snapshots of one's life offers a deeper understanding of their life story, adding greater value to a particular life period. Sam was then asked about the value and insights that snapshotting his life would bring to his own digital archive online:

'Yeah, if I die in 10 years it's gonna be a different person with different experiences different ways of life different ways of thinking but I was to go I don't think there's anything wrong with snapshotting the current moment and having it out there for everyone to see. Ultimately it kind of needs to be done, like not need need but it should be done!' - **Sam, Participant 35**

The desire to '*snapshot'* one's life in its current state for public viewing reveals a compelling aspect for Sam. This involves preserving one's present existence in the digital realm, not only for the individual's future reflection but also for the consumption of the audience surrounding them. In *'10 years'*, Sam envisions the ability to revisit past moments, effectively constructing a narrative of personal growth and evolution. In this narrative, the online audience plays the role of the reader. The catalyst for this need to '*snapshot'* or archive one's life, particularly in the case of Sam, is a look towards one's own mortality. Sam provides a personal example of how these snapshots could have been instrumental in comprehending and constructing the life story of a deceased family member. In this instance, the presence of a continual archival process enacted by this participant's grandparent may have acted to provide the story to which led up to the ballet photo in question. The personal example shared by Sam offers a glimpse into the potential consequences faced by individuals who opt not to maintain an archived life story online. Consequently, this insight has prompted Sam to modify his own behaviours, ensuring that his life story is preserved within the digital archive after his passing. Tools to manage one's 'snapshot' exist present on memorial websites such as 'MyKeeper', who provide the feature 'Milestones' - described: *'Milestones which are a chronological, editable timeline of your loved one's life'.* This feature is focused on the longitudinal story of an individual's life, and the ability for loved ones to construct and curate this by selectively archiving notable moments & data pertaining to the individual who has died. Users of 'MyKeeper' are also encouraged to carry out the same activity for oneself so that *'When you pass away, your family can publish your life history'.* In essence, users are encouraged to create a timeline of the self by archiving what they feel is important personal data and presenting this as a chronological story of the one's life ready in-place for when you pass away.

4.4. Archiving for death

The final section will be examining individuals who are participating in archiving that is driven by factors related to death and dying. This refers to the individual's look towards the future at their own death, and as a result of this acknowledgement - the reconfiguring of their behaviours at the present time through use of methods of digitally archiving one's own activities. By moving to discuss this section last, this chapter has introduced the ways in which the individual is being educated to use online archiving tools, how these are implemented over a longitudinal timespan due to concerns over one's legacy, and now how they act to mitigate concerns that reach further now to an imagined timespan whereby the individual is no longer alive. Death signifies a phase during which individuals lose control over the destiny of their digital self-representation through data. Consequently, they grapple with this inevitability by actively participating in the digital archiving of their self and educating themselves on how to undertake these procedures.

One's own death raises certain questions for individuals as they contemplate how they may continue to be perceived online after they have passed away. Several participants in this study have noted factors that influence their view of the ability to digitally archive and curate themselves as beneficial for mediating these concerns. Throughout this research, it becomes evident that individuals are heavily influenced in their social media and memorialisation practices by the inevitability of death. Consequently, they are remediating their behaviours and social practices online in order to extend the presentation of themselves farther into an imagined future once they have passed away. In this sense, participants are keenly aware of their continued and effective presence after death and are familiar with this phenomenon due to the current presence of those who have died but are still situated within the same online spaces as the living. While discussing with Grace (Age 35), She would take interest in the notion of existing after death in the form of memories facilitated by digital spaces. Grace was uneasy about the prospect of using social medias and online memorial services to catalyse moments of remembrance, and would go on to state during conversation about public digital memorial spaces:

'Is this all a substitute for an afterlife? People get a chance to see how they live after they have died thanks to the prevalence of these memorials online. They can see how others live after they've died. You basically get to see where you end up from the perspective of another' – **Grace, Participant 25**

It is the presence of memorial spaces online, along with the increasing prevalence of legacy and 'remembering' accounts on social media, that serves as an incentive and normalises the process of archiving oneself in preparation for death.

Grace's reflections illustrate how technology enables her, as part of the audience, to observe the performances enacted when someone dies online. This aligns with Goffman's (1963) concept of identity as performance, elevated here by the affordances of the digital medium (Boyd and Heer, 2006). Through this lens, Grace gains the ability to manage her own digital identity by anticipating and interpreting how others might respond after her death, based on what she chooses to archive about her life. In essence, she is envisioning a future version of herself and the legacy she will leave behind. This perspective resonates with Derrida's *Mal d'Archive* (1995), which examines the 'question of the future' through the selective deletion and preservation of archival material, driven by the death drive. Similarly, Grace is engaging in a process of forward-looking self-curation, contemplating what aspects of her digital legacy to save or erase to shape how she is remembered. This interplay between performance, archival choice and future identity demonstrates the influence of digital technologies on how individuals curate and memorialise their lives.

Charlie (Age 22), for example, discussed the disparities between the level of detail available in records of family members memorialised through traditional physical methods and the information accessible through an online memorial. In doing so, Charlie highlighted the distinctions between having an archived digital legacy compared to not having one:

'In terms of legacy you might know your grandparents and you might potentially just know your great grandparents. You see a gravestone from the 1800's you're guaranteed not to know anything about that person. But this is the benefit that kind of digitally memorialising grants you is that you can put more things on, like add key

information for this legacy instead of just 'laid to rest at' but I don't know if I would break from tradition to do that… but then I guess I'm already doing that right on my own social media profiles by updating them and continuing to use them?' – **Charlie, Participant 15**

Charlie recognises his own process of archival as a beneficial for providing *'key information'* to his own potential '*legacy'*, albeit in a digital format as opposed to inscribed physically on a gravestone. The continual '*updating'* of one's social media profile by Charlie in this moment is contextualised as archiving one's legacy in a new format with the ability to house a much greater volume of information about an individual's life. Evidenced in this response therefore is the acknowledgement that key information that would help create one's legacy after death is lost when failing to carry out the process of continually archiving one's life online, specifically in the context of those who either chose not to or were unable to engage with this style of activity online. Here, the volumetric increase in data available online regarding a deceased individual acts to provide a real insight into a person's life. It is this dramatic increase of the data relating to a person who has died post-inception of the internet and subsequent social media spaces that facilitates and houses the potential for future individuals to '*know anything about (a) person'.* Charlie would then be asked to what extent he engages within practises that utilise social medias for archival purposes, and his thoughts on these:

'When people pass on Facebook has a feature where they can have a page that friends can visit which is like a memorial page… I suppose a lot of formats not as widely known or specialised as memories.com also utilise rudimentary posts online to facilitate these emotions. I've seen websites for people who have passed on, but the main thing I see happening is Facebook pages or groups… or the Facebook feature that allows someone to keep your page if you die as a legacy contact. On my settings I've put my brother in charge of my digital assets. Facebook has turned into an asset-driven medium. People who lose their Instagram or get locked out really do lose something and lose a lot of memories. I'd seen the legacy feature advertised on Facebook, and I'd kind of been aware that it existed, so the next time I came across the feature I decided it would be a good time to get it set up.'– **Charlie, Participant 15**

In Charlie's response, he demonstrates a keen awareness of the available services for memorialising the deceased online. Charlie specifically points out individual groups that have been established as spaces for memorialisation. He emphasises the need to curate one's Facebook account due to its role as an '*asset-driven medium'*, which necessitates safeguarding these assets in preparation for one's eventual passing. Consequently, Charlie has taken the initiative to educate himself on selecting an executor for his digital data, opting for a method that ensures the preservation of his digital legacy. This choice is driven by a desire to prevent the risk of being 'locked out' or losing valuable memories.

Referring to RQ2ii, Charlie's actions demonstrate an individual expressing a clear desire for a digital legacy, rooted in personal agency and a proactive approach to preserving his posthumous digital identity. By taking deliberate steps to determine the fate of his digital self after death, Charlie underscores the importance of maintaining control over one's online presence. This perspective resonates with the work of Morse (2024), Fordyce et al. (2021) and Harbinja (2017), who emphasise the necessity for individuals to have the autonomy to decide how their digital identity is managed after death, ensuring that it aligns with the preferences and intentions during their lifetime. Charlie's direct comparison between the loss of digital data and the loss of memories offers a fascinating insight into how he views digitally archives assets not only as valuable, but essential for memorialisation. It emphasises that for him, digital records are a legitimate and meaningful way to preserve memories and ensure that they remain accessible beyond death.

Charlie also alludes to the *'tradition'[al]* aspect of posthumous existence associated with the presence of a grave marker, typically in the form of a headstone. It's important to recognise the impact of available digital memorialisation methods on traditional practices like headstones, as we've witnessed a rise in the integration of digital technology in memorialisation processes. This shift highlights the evolving nature of how individuals choose to commemorate their loved ones and themselves in the digital age. For instance, companies such as 'Living Headstones' offer the ability to add a scannable QR code to a headstone in order to '*keep memories of loved ones alive for future generations'*, as well inversely as digital memorial sites such as mykeeper.com

providing the ability to '*Geotag the final resting place'* to provide a link between the physical burial and the '*life story'* shared by visitors to the respective online memorial. These features of online memorial spaces act to bridge the gap between the physical & digital worlds by allowing the individual to *'add key information'* through archiving. In doing so, sites such as these act to mitigate the concerns felt by individuals who wish to leave a legacy behind by allowing for intricacies regarding a person's life the ability to persist.

One intriguing insight was shared by John (age 66) during discussion regarding the data he considered important to leave behind online. John described a specific methodology he employs to ensure the preservation of family histories beyond John's own lifetime:

'I keep little books of everything important so we can always access them, and I've seen odd bits of apps around managing assets but because they track so they know what sort of things you're interested in. I'm part of a family history website… where if I do pop my clogs… my work will be there forever. So it never dies. My research doesn't die. My ancestry work and so all my data is open so people can access it and analyse it even after my death. I think that's important, isn't it? – ***John, Participant 6***

John describes his use of an online service to posthumously preserve archival work, emphasising the importance of keeping this data alive. While this differs slightly from previous discussions with participants about archiving the self, John's example highlights the preservation of archival work related to family histories. It showcases another scenario where physical representations of information, such as '*little books'*, have been transformed into digital formats to ensure their preservation after the individual's death.

websites providing digital legacy services leverage individuals' concerns about leaving behind a meaningful legacy after their passing. These platforms address the anxieties related to a lack of control over one's digital identity posthumously. They encourage users to proactively engage with these services, effectively archiving their digital selves in anticipation of death. Additionally, social media platforms introduce the

challenge of continually curating and archiving one's digital presence to construct a comprehensive and fitting legacy. However, they offer a unique solution by providing users with the necessary tools to manage their digital data over time. This approach guides individuals into a cyclical process of storing and maintaining their data online, ensuring their evolving legacy accurately represents their life story. These digital spaces not only facilitate the creation and preservation of digital legacies but also alleviate the associated concerns by empowering individuals to actively manage and curate their online presence. As technology continues to evolve, it is likely that these platforms will play an increasingly vital role in shaping how individuals remember and are remembered in the digital age.

4.5. Conclusion

Each of the three sections has elucidated various ways through which individuals are being directed by social media platforms to engage in the archiving process for the intention of establishing a legacy and consequently, a fitting digital memorial space for their posthumous presence. Individuals who actively use social media platforms are consistently exposed to the advantages of preserving and managing digital data related to themselves, and they are educated on how to participate in these archival activities. Whether it's through the encouragement to share life events in digital formats or by demonstrating the advantages of archiving through features that recycle data (such as 'timehop'), individuals are directed towards forming a digital archive encompassing their online and offline experiences. Consequently, individuals perceive the necessity to consistently engage in the process of self-archiving within the present context. This is vital to uphold their legacy or constructed narrative that they intend to present to their surrounding audience. A legacy essentially operates as a chronicle of events, prompting individuals to ensure that this narrative accurately represents their life. This addresses RQ1, as it examines how virtual memorials emerge as a process of memorialisation through the encouragement and guidance provided by social media platforms, highlighting the mechanisms behind their formation.

Exposure to other individuals' legacies that have transitioned into memorial spaces after their passing enables people to envision a future where their own archived data

assumes a similar role. This prompts the cultivation of a legacy that anticipates the inevitability of death. In this regard, individuals project themselves into a future version and shape their digital archives accordingly. This reflects RQ2ii, exploring whether individuals want a digital legacy and how the observation of others' memorial spaces influences this desire.

To exert control over the archive, individuals curate their public digital data strategically, aiming to project an authentic and narrative-rich depiction of themselves that will persist beyond their death. The process of archiving is instrumental in enabling this endeavour, facilitated by the tools provided through social media platforms and dedicated services focused on preserving and presenting posthumous data. This connects to RQ2i, revealing attitudes toward utilising digital spaces for mourning and showcasing how individual actively shape their digital presence with future memorialisation in mind. it can be concluded that individuals need more comprehensive training on how to effectively navigate the process of crafting and maintaining their digital archives, considering the eventuality of their demise and the subsequent limited access to social media.

As highlighted by the participants in this studies, concerns relating to disparities in digital literacy due to age was a recurring theme, albeit not directly demonstrated by the skillset of actual older participants. This addresses RQ2iii, as it investigates one of the factors that influence these emerging views. Without better training, there is a risk of accumulating numerous dormant profiles, lacking control by either family members or the original owner's intentions, thus underscoring the necessity for enhanced education in this domain. Individuals can be taught how to navigate websites and social media platforms for the purpose of digitally archiving themselves, but what happens when the language and features change, and the websites undergo updates? As we can infer from visiting websites such as the Internet Archive, which preserves multiple versions of a site's history, websites rarely remain the same for extended periods; Websites are like buildings that undergo renovations regularly, and it can be hard to keep up. This reality is reflected in our participants' responses; they either recognise that digital data can be here today and gone tomorrow or perceive this data as something permanent. So, beyond the basics, individuals need to be educated on how to adapt to these ever-evolving methods of memorialisation. It's not just about

learning the current process but also staying flexible and prepared for changes as they come. Nevertheless, challenges arise when determining what constitutes an authentic representation of the self within the digital realm. To put it differently, individuals are employing what they view as authentic digital archiving techniques to curate their personal data in a manner that guarantees the suitability and integrity of their legacy once they have passed away. Authenticity, which possesses the potential to be shaped by disparities in digital literacy, remains a concern for creating meaningful legacies, demonstrating the importance of user adaptability and guidance for evolving memorialisation practises. The subsequent chapter will delve into this issue of authenticity, as it has the potential to undermine the capacity to construct a meaningful digital legacy.

5. Seeking Authenticity

5.1. Introduction

Seeking Authenticity builds upon the concepts introduced in the initial analysis chapter, 'Guiding Archiving'. It delves deeper into the phenomena of archiving, specifically examining how individuals perceive and engage with the process of archiving their digital selves in the context of death, dying, and memorialisation. This chapter explores the multifaceted concerns and deeply emotional sentiments of individuals whose online presence is, or could potentially be, shaped by the capabilities of social media platforms to archive and curate the content we contribute to online spaces. In doing so, it directly addresses RQ1 by examining how social media platforms enable the emergence of virtual memorials through archiving processes. Within this exploration, this chapter will delve into the intricate web of perceptions and emotions held by individuals, which in turn influence their behaviours in the digital realm. A central focus of this chapter is the prominent theme discussed by participants: the definition and embodiment of authenticity in their online interactions and expressions. The concept of 'authenticity' is a central theme discussed by the participants of this research. In virtual environments, authenticity plays a pivotal role by conferring legitimacy upon the various social processes that unfold. This relates

back to RQ2i by illustrating how participants' attitudes towards digital spaces for mourning are shaped by their perceptions of authenticity. Authenticity allows for the realisation of complex social actions, such as the processes of grief and mourning, irrespective of the absence of a physical, bodily presence. Additionally, authenticity grants individuals a sense of control over their personal digital image. To gain a deeper understanding of authenticity, it is imperative to establish clear distinctions between what qualifies as an authentic experience and what is considered inauthentic within the realm of social media spaces and the individual as the audience. As Goffman (1959) suggests in his work on the presentation of the self, individuals engage in performances that align with the expectations of their audience. Similarly, Erickson (1995) highlights that authenticity is often intertwined with these performances, as individuals navigate the balance between genuine self-expression and socially desirable behaviour in mediated spaces. Trilling (1972) further contextualises authenticity as a cultural construct, shaped by modern anxieties over sincerity and self-presentation, which are demonstrated by the concerns held by participants of this research.

Inauthentic experiences, as identified by participants, are often characterised by activities that appear *'trite'*. Participants frequently discern inauthenticity when actions are perceived as insincere or driven by ulterior motives, diverging from the stated intentions of the individuals involved. For instance, posting condolences to a deceased person's family within an online space may be seen as inauthentic when it appears to be aimed at evoking an audience response rather than a genuine expression of sympathy. *Authentic experiences*, as highlighted by participants, are often characterised by the absence of concerns that would deem an experience 'inauthentic'. This informs RQ2iii by revealing how participants' perceptions of authenticity influence their behaviours and their views on others' actions in digital spaces. It can be presumed that online activities are considered authentic when individuals do not take issue with the actions being carried out. This implies the existence of a set of unwritten rules or norms within individuals regarding the appropriate behaviour in online spaces. In contrast, 'inauthenticity' tends to emerge when these norms are violated or contested. Therefore, an authentic experience is one that raises no objections or concerns for the individual.

Both forms of authenticity, as discussed with participants, are elucidated through conversations where topics such as public grieving emerge as explanations for feelings related to a loss of control. In line with RQ2ii, participants' strategies for avoiding inauthenticity reflect their desire to create meaningful and enduring digital legacies. This chapter posits that, in the process of digitally archiving the self, individuals are actively identifying and avoiding what is perceived to be inauthentic to bestow legitimacy upon their future posthumous data. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, we can interpret this act of curating digital archives as a form of impression management, where individuals consciously construct their online personas to align, in this instance, with their desired posthumous identities. To circumvent actions and experiences deemed inauthentic, individuals are actively employing mitigation strategies in three distinct forms. First, individuals express a yearning for physical presence in their social lives and daily experiences, leading them to actively seek or partake in activities rooted in physical spaces. Second, individuals are deliberately reducing their engagement frequency with social media and online activities. Finally, individuals are pursuing authenticity by curating their online selves through editing, archiving, and positioning themselves as authentic participants within social media spaces. Trilling's (1972) emphasis on the cultural anxieties surrounding authenticity helps contextualise these practises as responses to broader societal expectations regarding what constitutes a 'true' or 'real' self. These three identified processes underscore how individuals actively evade notions of inauthenticity as defined by themselves by adapting their behaviours and grant legitimacy to their digital archive. This chapter highlights these processes, drawing on the insights presented in the first analysis chapter, 'Teaching Archiving'. It subsequently extends its focus towards the final analysis chapter, 'Finalities', to elucidate the concerns and aspirations of individuals engaging with concepts of death, dying, and memorialisation in the online realm.

Within each section, this chapter will delve into concerns regarding authenticity in relation to the structure and mediation of our online habits by social media platforms. Participants' perceptions of these platforms will be examined. Additionally, the chapter will explore concerns about authenticity as they pertain to the public and performative actions of individuals in online spaces. This will be accomplished by analysing participants' introspective reflections on their own online activities, providing a

framework for assessing the authenticity of others' actions in the same social media spaces. These discussions will address RQ1 by exploring the role of social media in shaping memorialisation processes and RQ2iii by examining the influences on participants' views about authenticity and its importance in the digital realm. It will be argued that the perceptions of an online audience play a pivotal role in shaping guidelines for creating a suitable archive of the self or digital legacy which will be memorialised after one's death, influenced by what may be considered potentially inauthentic. During discussions about their social media activities, participants demonstrated a keen awareness of how the platform itself influences their behaviours and shapes their perceptions of authenticity in social media spaces. They reflected on the role of the medium in shaping their current ideological stance regarding the authenticity of social media use, particularly in the context of the absence of physical presence. Erickson's (1995) reflections on the fluidity of authenticity in social settings underscore how social media users constantly recalibrate their behaviours to meet evolving expectations, especially in emotionally charged contexts like mourning and memorialisation. In summary, this chapter will elucidate how individuals are actively pursuing authenticity by identifying inauthentic elements, thereby engaging in three distinct practices to moderate behaviours that might otherwise lead to inauthenticity.

Thanks to the affordances of social media, individuals can now position themselves within social processes related to death, dying, and memorialisation, often in parallel with their family, friends, and a broader audience (Gibbs et al., 2015). This phenomenon facilitates behaviours like grieving for a loved one in prominently public spaces, leading to the creation of groups and collective recognition of memories linked to significant events (Liew, Pang, and Chan, 2013). Social processes related to death and dying have shifted from traditionally private domains to highly public spheres due to the democratisation of communication technology, particularly the internet (Gibson, 2007). Consequently, elements grief that were once confined to intimate and private settings are increasingly mediated through public online platforms, such as social media. This transformation necessitates a reorganisation of the stages of grief as individuals navigate complex emotional situations, balancing the need for emotional expression with the digital medium's nuances (Jenkins, 2017). At the intersection of public and private grief, potential issues may emerge, prompting individuals to adapt their approaches to accommodate the digital medium (Klaassens et al., 2013;

Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti, 1998). These adaptations are often reflective of the inherent tensions between personal mourning practices and the public nature of digital spaces. This adjustment is essential to maintain the authenticity of the social processes unfolding in these digital spaces (Jenkins, 2017).

Due to the potential to be perceived as inauthentic, individuals engage in identity management and curate their online persona (Marwick and Ellison, 2012). They utilise platforms like Facebook and similar spaces to navigate around emotional concerns and present themselves in a more positive and empathetic manner (Sabra, 2017). This research argues that this curation doesn't only pertain to the present self but also extends to the envisioned future identity post-death, as multiple perceptions of an individual's identity coexist in a shared space after their demise. The dynamic nature of these shared spaces complicates the process, as they demand an ongoing negotiation of the self between public and private expectations. This complexity is heightened by the increased frequency of social interactions within online spaces (Brubaker et al., 2013). Hence, it is evident that the medium itself significantly influences users' perceptions of the appropriate levels of emotional expression and, consequently, what is considered an authentic presentation of oneself in these spaces. The following three sections will delve into the three methods employed by individuals to pursue authenticity and the control over their online presence that this research has brought to light.

5.2. Desire for physicality

In this section, we will delve into the first method employed by individuals in order to appear authentic, namely the active pursuit or alteration of their social activities in online spaces. Throughout the interview process, participants frequently adopted a comparative perspective when evaluating their own online activities and behaviours. They often raised concerns, particularly in relation to processes connected to death and dying, highlighting the absence of a physical component in online social media spaces where social processes such as grief can be enacted. Participants recognised that physicality fulfils essential aspects of communication that cannot be replicated in a digital environment. Most notably, they expressed a desire for tangible experiences

that facilitate touch, ownership, and the centralisation of spaces and assets significant to the individual. These individuals frequently attributed greater significance to activities occurring in physical spaces compared to their digital and online endeavours. They characterised physical experiences as more fulfilling and authentic. Upon reviewing the online memorial examples, Aaron (age 25) initiated a conversation about his frequent use of social media platforms and extensive time spent in online spaces, expressing concerns about the potential negative impact. When asked to elaborate on his feelings, he began to reflect on his involvement in emotionally charged events within online spaces. Aaron felt strongly about how the digital medium seemed to remove something they valued about physical experiences, and would go on to discuss this with reference to technology and its ability to host events, typically conducted in a physical space, facilitated in a virtual environment:

***'**Technology doesn't have a place in things as rooted as funerals and weddings. I find it strange when they manage to weasel their way in…nothing could ever actually replace human interaction'* – **Aaron, Participant 1**

Aaron's concerns seem to revolve around the intrusion of technology, particularly social media, into social processes where it may not be entirely appropriate. He specifically cites emotionally charged events like funerals and weddings. Aaron is troubled by the notion that '*human interaction'* is being supplanted by technology, which he believes distances individuals by eliminating the physical component and transforming these significant life events into digital experiences. This aligns with broader concerns about the erosion of authenticity, which, as Erickson (1995) posits, hinges on the ability of the individual to experience interactions rooted in sincerity and a shared understanding. It suggests that Aaron is apprehensive about the loss of certain elements from these experiences, elements that would otherwise contribute to their authenticity. Aaron would then be prompted as to why he felt this was, to which he continued:

'Relationships are pretty much the only thing. Human to human… makes it all worth it in the end... Everything else is just funneling into that. Everything I do is an attachment of those physical relationships. Being with a person is irreplaceable, like in a room with someone. I believe in spirit and technology separates that a bit

further. I savor real thing… it feels a bit more like a connection. I do hope that they never become the things itself, because of how valuable it is to be in the presence of someone else.' – **Aaron, Participant 1**

Aaron places significant importance on physical human interaction, considering it to be the embodiment of authenticity as opposed to something that could potentially be artificial. Aaron expresses a deep longing for physical proximity when communicating with others, believing that being '*in a room with someone'* is what grants the authenticity he seeks. This perspective resonates with Goffman's (1967) essays on face-to-face interaction as a performance, where authenticity is judged by its ability to reflect the actor's genuine intentions and feelings in real-time in a physical setting. In contrast, technology is seen as an intermediary that severs the '*spirit'* from social experiences, stripping away the essential elements needed to establish a genuine *'connection'* with another individual. Consequently, Aaron acknowledges his own concerns regarding the possibility of social media and digital platforms, in general, replacing the human interaction that he holds in such high regard. In Aaron's perspective, authenticity is intrinsically tied to tangibility, a quality that imparts a sense of value. Conversely, the use of technology, particularly in the realm of social media, diminishes this authenticity. When the physical presence of an individual is removed from the processes of grieving, memorialisation, and remembrance, social media and related platforms step in as arbiters, enabling these processes to occur without geographical constraints. However, Aaron perceives a loss of control when engaging in digital spaces, prompting a desire to regain control by participating in physical, face-to-face interactions. In this context, memorial sites and social media serve dual roles: as mediators and extensions of one's ability to engage with others in virtual environments. Many participants, including Aaron, express reservations about the capacity of digital media to facilitate complex emotions and interactions related to death and dying. For them, the digital experience lacks authenticity due to its reliance on online platforms. Consequently, physicality emerges as an indispensable component in determining what constitutes authenticity in the eyes of these individuals.

The advantages of physical methods of communication and memorialisation over their online counterparts raise essential questions: What unique attributes of the physical

realm contribute to a sense of authenticity that digital spaces lack? Early in the interview process, it became evident that communication through social media platforms or digital media, in general, had the potential to lead to miscommunication. This miscommunication often arose from the limitations of the medium itself, which struggled to effectively convey the emotional nuances experienced by individuals seeking to communicate with each other or a broader audience. This tension echoes Wagner's (2018) findings, which emphasise the barriers posed by digital media in replicating the depth and nuance of emotional expression in physical contexts. Participants in this study commonly expressed concerns regarding the potential for misinterpretation, especially in highly emotional topics such as private or public grieving conducted online. According to their perspectives, misinterpretations led to inauthentic displays of emotion, as the true feelings of the individual could not be accurately conveyed. These issues were believed to be less prevalent when grieving in physical spaces, and consequently, participants expressed a desire for tangible physical interactions to avoid the inauthenticity they associated with miscommunication in matters of personal significance. During the conversation with Aaron, the discussion shifted towards instances where he had encountered accounts belonging to individuals who had passed away in online spaces. Aaron expressed his difficulty in contributing to such spaces for remembrance or online memorials, citing challenges in correctly perceiving the tone of interactions conducted online:

'*Technology can give a second rate depiction of our tone… Texting or messaging is anyone's fucking guess what someone means… I cannot text people without sounding like an absolute maniac, honestly'* – **Aaron, Participant 1**

For an individual like Aaron, who is acutely aware of his own difficulty in effectively conveying emotions through text, the prospect of expressing intense feelings such as grief online seems daunting. Aaron's perspective is shaped by the absence of physical cues in online communication, expressing when it comes to online interactions, '*it's anyone's fucking guess what someone means'*. Individuals like Aaron may attempt to address these challenges by toning down the emotions he expresses in online spaces (Döveling et al., 2018) or by opting to completely remove technology from the equation. In conversations with John (age 66) a similar sentiment emerged. John emphasised the significance of written content on social media, particularly in the

context of what individuals leave behind after they pass away. Consequently, he was particularly concerned about the written word online and its susceptibility to misinterpretation. John discusses the following:

'Lots of other people can access your social media. Lots of people will see it when you're gone. I think with the written word you can put a message on social media that can be interpreted in a lot of different ways… or even passed on to another person and slightly altered. The entire meaning could be changed.' – **John, Participant 6**

John's perspective alludes to the complex nature of public domains like social media, where media or textual information can not only be mistakenly interpreted but also intentionally manipulated. John highlights that the potential for misuse or intentional alteration of the intent behind a piece of online text is significant, casting doubt on the effectiveness of online interactions and conversations in conveying '*meaning'* or truth effectively. In this context, misinterpretation poses a challenge to the authenticity of an individual's digitally archived data, particularly textual posts, in the eyes of both the individual and their audience. During an interview with Tim (age 22), he discussed an instance where he was offered to be an attendant at an online funeral intended for a friend's mother of whom he was previously close with. Tim expressed reservations regarding the unconventional nature of this online event and his own lack of familiarity with participating in such ceremonies within a digital space. The conversation then shifted to Tim's contribution to the online memorial set up for the same individual and their role in populating this newly created space for remembrance. In doing so, Tim highlighted a shared sentiment, echoing the experiences discussed by Aaron and John, by alluding to a specific methodology individuals employ for communicating about sensitive topics, particularly when contributing to a space of mourning in an online environment:

'I think when you're sharing on a space like Facebook certain updates of things it's just the way you deliver them and who the audience is… it's kind of like there's an unwritten path of how you've got to handle it… and everyone doesn't know the path but yes, they do... it's like just instinct. you know when people put a laughing emoji in place of a crying emoji, and this level of appropriateness… and they think lol means

lots of love… you know. It happens whether you're very well versed in social media or not' – **Tim, Participant 2**

Tim articulated an observation concerning the establishment of a tacit code of conduct governing communication within social media and other non-physical online spaces. Drawing parallels to Doka's concept of grieving rules (1989), Tim identifies these unwritten norms as instinctual for some reflecting shared societal understandings of appropriate mourning behaviours, albeit within a digital framework. According to Tim, participants of the online sphere are classified into two categories: those who are adept at navigating an *'unwritten'* but widely understood etiquette for delivering life updates to their digital audience and those who lack this fluency in the symbolic language of social media. Tim highlighted that individuals who possess a heightened proficiency in this virtual dialect can convey authenticity to their audience, whereas those who deviate from these accepted online behaviours risk projecting inauthenticity, potentially compromising their digital archive. This concept of individuals being *'well versed'* in the conventions of online communication highlights the perception individuals hold regarding of unwritten rules within the digital realm, adherence to which is essential for preserving the authenticity of one's digital archive. Departures from these established norms in reduced-cue social environments, as observed by Sabra (2017), can engender perceptions of insincerity or disingenuousness, particularly when emotional expressions are involved. This tension addresses RQ2i, exploring individuals' attitudes through how they perceive and negotiate digital spaces for mourning. Notably, Tim contemplates the idea that this expected mode of online communication is seemingly *'instinct'[ual]* for some individuals. Those well-versed in these grieving rules harbor an awareness of the potential for authenticity in virtual spaces. This insight emphasises the ongoing negotiation between the need for authenticity and the digital medium's limitations (RQ2iii). For those who share Tim's awareness of the potential for inauthenticity in virtual spaces due to the challenges of miscommunication, the imperative arises to seek interactions in the physical world. These face-to-face interactions are perceived by participants like Tim as free from the constraints of the online medium, offering a more reliable means of conveying authentic emotions and avoiding potential misinterpretations.

Miscommunication within online spaces, with its potential to breed inauthenticity, emerges as a concern when individuals engage in highly emotional public expressions, particularly in the context of grieving for a loved one. Despite the recognition of this miscommunication risk and the expressed desire to relocate these emotional interactions back into the physical realm, individuals continue to frequent social media platforms, where they engage in a diverse range of emotive displays. This complex dynamic was a topic of awareness among participants, who demonstrated perceptiveness in navigating this nuanced terrain by adhering to their own set of rules or what Tim referred to as an '*unwritten path'*. For these participants, the physical realm holds allure because it offers respite from the potential pitfalls of miscommunication and the subsequent emergence of emotionally inauthentic experiences. Within physical spaces, individuals can exert a higher degree of control over how they project themselves to others. This heightened control over one's self-presentation carries significant importance, particularly when the subject matter revolves around discussions or interactions related to death, dying, grieving, and the intricate processes of remembering and recounting memories of someone who has passed away. Participants conveyed a strong preference for physical spaces when engaging in conversations of this nature, emphasising their desire for an environment where authentic emotional expressions could unfold without the encumbrances of miscommunication, which were perceived to be more prevalent in online social media spaces. This preference highlights the pivotal role of physical spaces in facilitating authentic emotional interactions, especially within the context of sensitive and profound life experiences like mourning and remembrance. We've established that the recognition of inauthenticity prompts this desire for change. So, what kind of interactions do these individuals aspire to engage in instead? The phrase '*being in a room'* with someone, signifies a longing for physical proximity to other individuals. Therefore, these individuals yearn for activities that necessitate physical presence, such as in-person social gatherings, memorial events held at significant locations, and other tangible, real-world interactions. This preference toward physical interactions suggests that individuals find a unique authenticity in face-to-face encounters. The authenticity they seek is rooted in the sensory experiences, emotional depth, and nuanced interpersonal communication that are inherent to physical spaces. For them, these in-person interactions offer a level of genuine emotional connection and understanding that transcends the limitations of the digital medium.

During a conversation with Daisy (age 45), she delved into her preferences regarding the handling of her body after death. This discussion led her to reflect on the burial place of her parents. As she described her process, which includes regular visits to her parents' grave, Daisy arrived at a realisation that she found it challenging to convey her grief through a digital medium by contributing to and engaging with an online memorial:

'I don't think I could do any of this online. Sometimes I'll buy flowers and put them next to a picture of the person… I've always struggled to get across to them. I realised I can do it how I want. I can just go for a walk and think about them.' –
Daisy, Participant 11

Daisy's perspective highlights the crucial role of physical spaces in her personal grieving process, a dimension that cannot be adequately replicated in a virtual medium. For Daisy, the physicality of the experience is paramount. Actions like placing flowers at a grave or engaging in purposeful walks hold deep significance, contributing to what she perceives as an authentic and somewhat private expression of grief. In Daisy's view, the physical elements associated with these actions serve as a conduit for her emotional experience. The act of physically placing flowers or deliberately walking in a particular space becomes an integral part of her grieving ritual, imbuing it with authenticity and personal meaning.

Daisy's account align with RQ2i by illustrating their negative attitude towards using digital spaces for mourning, expressing a preference for physical actions and spaces to communicate grief effectively. This authenticity is intrinsically tied to the sensory and tangible aspects of their actions - elements that they find difficult to translate into the virtual realm.

Furthermore, their resistance to online grieving practises touches on RQ2iii, as it reflects the influences of personal rituals and the sensory connection they feel are missing in virtual environments. Daisy's perspective highlights the irreplaceable role of physical spaces and actions in shaping the authenticity of their grieving process, reinforcing the idea that certain aspects of mourning and remembrance are deeply

intertwined with the sensory and tangible experiences, making them essential components of their authentic expression of grief.

In essence, the physical world offers more than just physical proximity for interpersonal connections and the expression of complex emotions. It also provides the opportunity to engage with tangible objects, such as personal belongings, for memorialisation and remembrance purposes. These tangible elements contribute to a sense of authenticity and control in commemorating and connecting with loved ones, a dimension that participants find lacking in digital communication and virtual spaces. The desire for physical experiences, whether in personal interactions or engagement with tangible objects, aligns with participants' pursuing authenticity. They seek the emotional and sensory richness that physicality affords, which can be challenging to replicate in the digital realm.

5.3. Attenuating online habits

This section will investigate the strategies employed by individuals to identify and mitigate potential inauthenticity within online spaces. To do so, we'll begin by shedding light on a phenomenon observed among social media users, as evidenced by the responses from the participants in this study. Early in the interview process, it became evident that participants were actively considering frequency and access when framing their online activities. Many participants discussed their efforts to either reduce or increase their online engagement, driven by various motivations. Through conversations with participants about the frequency of their social media usage, it becomes apparent that individuals tend to categorise certain usage patterns as aligning with authenticity. This exploration highlights how individuals are critically assessing their online behaviours and choices in terms of how they perceive authenticity in the context of social media usage and contributions to their digital archive.

In general, participants tended to perceive activities conducted on social media as less authentic when individuals spent more time using technologies that granted access to these platforms. This phenomenon is closely linked to the concept of the physical

realm, as reducing online activity often translated into an increased frequency of face-to-face social interactions. This perspective not only applies to individuals' reflections on their own behaviours but also to their observations of others' actions in their social circles. During the interviews, participants were asked about their social media use habits, including the frequency and specific patterns of engagement with social media platforms. While responses varied widely regarding usage habits and where participants directed their attention, a consistent theme emerged: many participants voluntarily shared that their extensive time spent on social media was viewed as a negative aspect of their daily routines. This excessive online engagement led to situations where they believed they were being portrayed in a negative light. Maisie's (age 27) perspective sheds light on the issue of frequent online activity and its relation to authenticity. During the interview, Maisie was questioned about her online habits, specifically whether she considered herself to be someone who spent a significant amount of time online or very little. Her response demonstrated introspection regarding what she perceived as a negative aspect of using social media extensively:

'I'm using it every day, fuckin' hell. I keep deleting my Instagram because I'm sick of it though… I use it way too much. But I don't really have an issue with other people. it's sick, most of my friends post a lot I think it's great to be able to share that kind of stuff, it provides a fantastic platform for people to become noticed artistically' –

Maisie, Participant 5

Maisie's insights provide a glimpse into the intriguing allure that social media platforms hold for individuals. Despite expressing a desire to delete her profile, Maisie finds herself repeatedly recreating accounts and, as she puts it, *'using them way too much'*. This pattern highlights a compelling nature of social media and its power to draw individuals back into the cycle of creating and curating their digital archives. Interestingly, Maisie's perspective seems to focus more on her own negativity associated with social media usage rather than passing judgment on others. She acknowledges the positive aspects of others becoming noticed in online spaces while simultaneously desiring to distance herself from such potentiality. Maisie's actions reflect an attempt to avoid inauthentic behaviours by removing her online presence, but she also reveals an attachment to these digital spaces and the relationships and interactions they contain. This contradiction highlights the complex relationship

individuals have with social media platforms, where the desire for authenticity often conflicts with the allure of online engagement. The desires expressed by individuals to cease their online presence through account deletion will be thoroughly examined and elaborated upon in the upcoming analysis chapter titled Finalities. This chapter will delve into the motivations, implications, and complexities surrounding the act of account deletion as a means to achieve closure and control over one's digital legacy. The conversation with Maisie regarding this topic continued, and she was further probed about the reasons behind her recurring cycle of account deletion on social media platforms. This line of questioning aimed to uncover the specific aspects of social media interaction that she sought to avoid or mitigate. She would go on to state the following:

'I hate posting things online but now I'm like don't see me please' 'I don't know, I think putting yourself in a public platform like that should be viewed as terrifying. It's the audience factor maybe, knowing that there's this many people looking back at your life, fuck that' – **Maisie, Participant 5**

Maisie's perspective reveals a concern regarding the visibility of her online activities, particularly the idea of being observed by a large audience. She perceives the presence of a substantial online audience as potentially diminishing the authenticity of interactions within these spaces. In response, she takes measures to disengage from social media, emphasising her desire not to be '*see'[n]* online. This move is aligned with Maisie's effort to reduce inauthenticity in her online interactions, redirecting her focus toward physical world experiences to achieve a greater sense of authenticity. In contrast to the general trend among participants to reduce online activity as a means of avoiding perceived inauthenticity, an exception was noted. This exception pertained to online activities oriented toward artistic or creative expression. Within participants' responses, a notable distinction emerges between a high frequency of communication-based online activities, which are often viewed negatively, and creative endeavours utilising social media for artistic expression or promotion. Participants regarded content generated through creative pursuits, such as art creation and promotion, as suitable components to leave behind in one's digital archive after death. In this context, authenticity is ascribed to these creative activities that represent the individual through their artistic work. Maisie, for instance, acknowledged

that social media offers an excellent platform for artistic recognition. Consequently, authenticity in this context is not primarily influenced by the frequency of engagement but rather by the perceived creativity and positive impact of these activities. This distinction highlights that individuals may grant authenticity to specific online endeavours, particularly those related to creative expression, regardless of how frequently they engage in them. During the discussion on this topic with Tim, he articulated his reasons for not deleting his social media profiles. Instead, Tim explained how he had adapted his online behaviours. Tim's approach involved careful curation of his social media profile. He actively selected who could view specific content, as to ensure this content was still archived in a selective manner and reduced the frequency of sharing personal information. Tim's rationale for this approach was as follows:

'I'm kind of attached to my Twitter and Facebook. I wouldn't think of deleting my Facebook and making a new one because I've got so many friends, things and memories that I can't get rid of… I've got a lot of things that are only visible to me, and I don't want people seeing old pictures of me… We overshared when social media started because we didn't know how to use it' – **Tim, Participant 2**

It is important to differentiate Tim and Maisie's strategies for curating their online presence from Goffman's (1959) concept of mysticism in identity curation and creation. While Goffman posits that individuals reduce contact and increase social distance with their audience to create a sense of awe, Tim and Maisie instead employ limited contact with their digital audience to foster sincerity and truth in what they choose to share. This approach, influences by their observations of others' oversharing online, underscores their desire for authenticity and helps to explain RQ2i and RQ2iii, as it reflects the factors shaping their attitudes towards digital expression in these spaces whilst highlighting oversharing as an influence on the emergence of this view. Tim, much like Maisie, grappled with the notion of visibility and its impact on authenticity within social media spaces. Tim expressed concerns about being seen in a broad and undefined audience, finding the prospect daunting and the resulting sense of vulnerability detrimental to the authenticity of his online interactions. To address this, Tim limited the visibility of his content and deliberately reduced the sharing of personal information to regain control over his digital identity.

This strategy illustrates how individuals adapt their online behaviours in pursuit of authenticity, not only by reducing their overall online activity but also by employing privacy settings and curating content selectively. Tim reflected on the issue of oversharing, particularly prevalent during the early days of social media, and noted how these experiences have contributed to the development of unwritten rules or norms for digital interaction. These adaptations, seen through Tim's lens, further reinforce the idea that social media users critically assess their digital practices to align with personal and societal perceptions of authenticity. This aligns with RQ2iii, highlighting how individuals' online behaviours are influenced by their evolving understanding of appropriate digital communication and their desire to maintain authenticity in an increasingly public digital realm. Deleting social media accounts is not a viable option because of their significant investment made in curating this digital archive. Tim's experience underscores the idea that oversharing is viewed as inauthentic behaviour within social media spaces. By actively limiting what is visible during periods of high social media usage, Tim seeks to avoid behaviours that might be perceived as inauthentic, thus adhering to the evolving unwritten rules of social media conduct in order to avoid negatively impacting the digital archive he continues to curate. Mark's (age 26) introspective exploration of his social media usage frequency continues to highlight a complex relationship with users and these platforms. He maintains a firm stance that high-frequency social media use is a negative aspect of his activities, despite acknowledging its necessity:

'I don't like it about myself that I seem to go on it (social medias) a lot… As a human being it kind of just seems like you have to. It's a necessary evil' – **Mark, Participant 32**

Mark's perspective aligns with the consensus among participants that using social media extensively is considered an inauthentic behaviour and a detrimental habit. However, Mark introduces a nuanced perspective by highlighting the necessity of social media for communication. He points out that individuals like Tim and Maisie struggle with the idea of deleting or ceasing to use social media because it has become a crucial means of contributing to their digitally curated archives. In Mark's case, this conflict leads to feelings of resentment toward his own behaviours. He likens the inauthenticity associated with frequent social media use to possessing '*evil'* properties.

This characterisation suggests a complex relationship with social media, where its perceived inauthenticity clashes with its practical utility for communication and archiving, evoking strong negative emotions in individuals like Mark. In conversation with Bryn (age 28), he would also give an overview as to his social media use. Bryn's perspective on frequent social media use and its impact on his digital archive aligns with the idea of necessity, albeit with a slightly different nuance. He describes his engagement with social media as a constant and habitual process, emphasising that it's something he feels compelled to do. This compulsion appears to be driven by both personal habit and the involvement of an audience who are active participants in this ongoing digital interaction and archiving of the self:

'I don't think consistent engagement with anything is healthy… I particularly use it when I shouldn't be using it (social media). I'd like to change that. It's more of like an algorithmic check that I do, like a sweep, like a routine… Habitual as opposed to obsessive. Everybody's involved, you know?' **– Bryn, Participant 4**

Bryn provides a comprehensive overview of the sentiments shared by many participants regarding their engagement with social media. The high frequency of social media use is portrayed as a problematic and potentially unhealthy activity, particularly when it distracts individuals from other important aspects of their lives. Bryn characterises these behaviours as part of a '*routine'*, highlighting the habitual nature of social media engagement, where individuals may find themselves repeatedly following familiar patterns, often driven by algorithms and notifications. This insight reflects an awareness of inauthentic tendencies within his own social media use, coupled with a desire for change and a need to act in a more authentic manner.

This sentiment aligns with the broader observation that, while participants recognise the inauthenticity of frequent social media use, they often struggle to break free from these habits. Bryn's reflection underscores the interconnectedness of social media users and their audiences, suggesting that the dynamics of these online spaces can create a sense of obligation, where maintaining an online presence feels like an ongoing task. These experiences reveal how deeply ingrained social media has become in daily life, further reinforcing its role in shaping digital identity. As social media becomes more embedded in everyday routines, it naturally extends to other

aspects of social life, including mourning and memorialisation. This transition speaks directly to RQ1, as the emergence of virtual memorials illustrates how practices of remembrance have adapted to digital platforms. Walter et al. (2012) highlights how the internet began in the mid 2000's to reshape mourning practices, making them routine and deeply integrated into the medium of social media. Participants like Bryn reflect on the challenges of maintaining authenticity in these spaces, navigating the tension between their digital presence and the desire for genuine emotional expression.

Participants not only recognise and mitigate their own inauthentic behaviours within online spaces but also perceive high-frequency social media use itself as an inauthentic practice. Consequently, they take steps to disengage from these spaces, either gradually or completely. Those who identify past instances of oversharing can reflect on their previous activities, enabled by the affordances of social media technologies, and modify their behaviours to achieve a frequency of social media use that they consider authentic. As Bryn aptly puts it, they aim to change their '*routine'*. This section highlights a key theme: reducing participation within social media spaces as a strategy to address authenticity issues. While subsequent sections delve into the curational methods used to mitigate authenticity concerns related to data contributed to online spaces, it's evident from the responses here that an alternative approach to tackling authenticity challenges posed by social media is to decrease involvement in these spaces.

5.4. Authenticity through curation

This section will delve into the practice of curation, particularly in the context of constructing and maintaining a personal digital image within an online space through one's digital archive. The objective here is to explore how curation mediates the authenticity ascribed to an individual's social conduct. In this context, curation refers to the capabilities provided by social media platforms that enable individuals to shape their online presence over an extended period. This is done with the aim of presenting a carefully cultivated image to their perceived audience or those in their digital social sphere. Curation involves a series of deliberate choices regarding what content, both textual and visual, is shared with the online public. It also encompasses an

understanding of how interactions with others within these spaces may be interpreted. Consequently, individuals engage in actions that either attenuate or seek to enhance social encounters to avoid coming across as disingenuous or inauthentic. Throughout this research, participants demonstrate awareness of these curation processes, leading to the creation of a complex social landscape where even efforts to appear authentic can be perceived as mundane or clichéd. Goffman's (1959) concept of identity management provides a valuable lens through which to examine this process. He described identity curation as a performative and ongoing act, whereby individuals carefully manage their interactions to curate a specific image of themselves. In the context of social media, this act of curation extends to how individuals construct their digital legacies – whether to preserve, alter, or delete their digital presence. This addresses RQ2ii, as participants reflected on the value and meaning of maintaining a digital archive that they could share with their chosen audience. Furthermore, this ongoing negotiation also pertains to RQ2iii, as participants grapple with external influences, such as platform affordances and social expectations, in shaping their curation practises.

Importantly here, curation extends beyond the immediate present; it is also used to craft and manage a version of oneself that can serve as a representation of their life after death, effectively functioning as a digital memorial. Through participant interviews, we aim to gain insight into how individuals perceive the affordances of social media platforms concerning the act of remembering and memorialising the deceased. These perceptions encompass both the outward perspective, directed at those who have passed away, and the introspective view as individuals reflect on their own digital legacies. Participants' perceptions encompass a wide spectrum of experiences, often recounting how their interactions with social media platforms have triggered diverse emotional responses, ranging from positive to negative. The capability to edit and archive one's digital self in an online space has bestowed upon individuals the responsibility of curation. This responsibility has emerged as a consequence of the technological affordances of media on the internet. Therefore, we will delve into participants' thoughts and emotions regarding this ability to curate, exploring how this phenomenon is being employed to imbue authenticity within the realm of online spaces.

During participant interviews, when the topic of encountering grief online was broached, whether through their own personal experiences with these emotions or as observers witnessing others engage in public displays of grief, a wealth of intriguing responses emerged. These responses frequently segued into discussions concerning participants' perceptions and individual experiences when it comes to observing the active management of one's digital persona online. This, in turn, led to reflections on how this image management was intertwined with the authenticity attributed to their actions in the online sphere. In a conversation with Mark, the dialogue shifted toward their perspective on technologies that enable individuals to archive their online personas. Mark elaborated on how curation and the documentation of oneself, facilitated by digital technologies, serve to position and present an individual's life over an extended timeline:

'Everything is so well documented these days… the ability to take a picture or record things – I'm excited to be able to share all of this in my older age. It's a much more thorough and well-rounded representation of what our lives looked like. I'm an ever-changing thing!' – **Mark, Participant 32**

Mark's reflections highlight how technology's affordances within online spaces have enabled the meticulous documentation of personal experiences, resulting in a comprehensive and well-rounded representation of the self. This process reflects Trilling's (1972) concept of authenticity, which emphasises Mark's presenting himself in a way that feel true and genuine to his own identity. Mark's desire to share his curated digital archive 'in [their] older age' highlights the notion of a deliberate and ongoing identity construction, where digital spaces allow for an individual to create a narrative of their evolving self. Goffman (1959) provides an additional layer to understanding Mark's perspective – Marks acknowledgement of being 'an ever-changing thing' reflects the fluidity of this performance, as his digital identity evolves in response to personal growth and external influences. This process of continuous documentation, combined with deliberate choices about what to share and with whom, contributes to a sense of authenticity that is both deeply personal and mediated by the structures of online platforms. By constructing a life story that unfolds over time, Mark attributes authenticity to his digitally archived identity, viewing it as a dynamic and evolving portrayal of who they are.

The following perspective from discussion with Sam resonates with Mark's approach to digital archiving, as he also emphasises the significance of looking into the future when considering the act of curating and preserving one's online identity. Sam recognised the importance of utilising online platforms not only as tools for present-day expression but as repositories of personal history. His viewpoint suggests that, like Mark, he anticipates revisiting his digital archive as a means of reminiscing about his life's journey:

'I think it's important to snapshot all these moments. You know if I die tomorrow I've got who I was the day before. Yeah, if I die in 10 years it's gonna be a different person with different experiences different ways of life different ways of thinking but I was to go I don't think there's anything wrong with snapshotting the current moment and having it out there for everyone to see. Ultimately it kind of needs to be done, like not need need but it should!' – **Sam, Participant 35**

Sam's perspective emphasises the necessity of utilising snapshots and curating digital content as a means of providing an authentic depiction of oneself over time. He recognizes the transient nature of personal identity, which drives the need to capture and share snapshots of his life at specific points. His approach to curation carries an awareness of mortality, as evidenced by the explicit reference to the possibility of death and the importance of preserving a record of the present self.

This perspective aligns with Derrida's *Mal d'Archive* (1995), where he asserts that archives are not merely repositories of the past but are deeply entwined in the future, as they shape how identity and memory are preserved and accessed. For Sam, curating a digital archive reflects this dual function: snapshots of his identity are not only records of a transient self but also intentional acts of legacy curation, anticipating how they will be remembered posthumously. This curation process serves as a way for Sam to address his concerns about the uncertainty of death and ensures that what he considers his true and authentic self is visible to others. In the event of his unexpected passing, Sam's digitally curated archive would stand as a poignant and lasting representation of who he was, carrying significant emotional value for him. Sam views the act of constructing a life narrative and achieving an authentic representation

through curation in a positive manner. When questioned about the importance of consistently maintaining this up-to-date and snapshotted experience of his life online, Sam offers a straightforward response:

'It's like you can be like oh my god I used to be like this, how cringe, and look at this person I've become now' – **Sam, Participant 35**

The use of terms like *'cringe'* or trite is a common thread among participants when critiquing either their own online activities or those of others, particularly when they appear incorrect or disingenuous. In this context, curation serves as a tool for individuals to present their past online persona as a previous version of themselves at that specific time, demonstrating to the audience that they have since evolved and grown in a more positive light, striving to become a better person. This retrospective curation aids in constructing a narrative of personal growth and authenticity in the eyes of the audience. The concept of snapshotting one's life and archiving these snapshots to construct a curated digital archive of the self is explored through Nathan's perspective. Nathan (age 30) presents a unique viewpoint, comparing this process to the experiences and records of three different yet distinct versions of the self. Unlike some others, Nathan doesn't perceive these actions as actions that will grant a digital presence after death. Instead, he views this curation process as a celebration of his lived experiences that will exist posthumously. For Nathan, it seems to be about capturing and curating the moments and versions of the self that have evolved throughout his life's journey:

'Online you can talk about your childhood, your adulthood and your old age as 3 different people. It's all a celebration of someone's life, not their afterlife, that would be like seeing a ghost. Some people are more interested in living on.' – **Nathan, Participant 28**

Curation, facilitated by the ability to select, edit, and delete snapshots from various points in one's life, enables the creation of a narrative that tells the story of who they are. Through careful curation, individuals can navigate authenticity and present the best version of themselves, both in the present and for the future, including after their death.

For Nathan, however, this process isn't about creating what he has perceived as a ghostly digital version of himself that will persist in digital spaces. Instead, it's a way to memorialise the different stages of his life and celebrate what he has chosen to contribute to his digital archive. In this way, curation serves as a means of commemorating personal growth and the meaningful moments in one's life. Sam shares a similar sentiment when it comes to the content he's contributed to online spaces. He views this digital archive as a form of commemoration that can be utilised by his children in the future to celebrate his life. For Sam, this digital archive represents not only a means of personal expression but also a way to leave a lasting legacy for his family. It's a way for him to curate and preserve the meaningful moments and aspects of his life that he wants to pass down to the next generation, emphasising the importance of this digital narrative for future generations to remember and celebrate his life:

'I bet if I died my kid would love it, to go back and be like ah dad's old videos, he'd love it, that's just life' – **Sam, Participant 35**

For some participants, the act of curation serves as a means to navigate authenticity in the digital realm even after death, enabling them to craft a narrative of their life that they find presentable to their chosen audience. However, it's important to note that not all participants viewed these curation practices in a wholly positive light. Some participants adopted the perspective of an audience member within online spaces and were critical of how others engaged with these technologies and shared content. By identifying the behaviour of others as inauthentic, these individuals used criticism as a tool to reframe and position their own activities as more authentic in comparison. In essence, they leveraged these critical assessments to validate their own digital presence as genuine.

In a later conversation with Daisy, some of these critical attitudes toward online curation practices became evident. Initially, when asked if she had encountered memorial spaces online, Daisy confirmed her exposure to such pages and shared her observations and reactions to them. However, when discussing her own contributions

to online spaces and her digital archive, Daisy spontaneously delved into their perspective on what aspects of digitally archiving oneself seemed inauthentic:

'I think some people want a huge fanfare when they die, and they want everyone to you know do set things… you all must wear this colour you all must attend this place and it's always the same people who want massive weddings and this and that and want to post photos of their breakfast on Facebook and I am not that person. I've never posted my breakfast on Facebook. Nobody is ever really interested, are they? Nobody cares.' – **Daisy, Participant 11**

Daisy strongly opposes the idea of excessively public self-sharing, particularly when it seems purposeless or lacking in meaningful content. Daisy's response indicates an awareness that the audience plays a role in determining which attempts at curating a specific online image may come across as superficial and lacking authenticity. In this context, Daisy's perspective implies that individuals with a tendency to meticulously curate their digital archives may also be the ones more likely to share trivial or uninteresting content with an audience that isn't genuinely interested. Importantly, this still reflects a form of curation, but it's centred around what Daisy considers inauthentic to share online. Thus, Daisy's behaviour is influenced by her perception of authenticity, leading her to shape her online presence accordingly.

This resonates with Toma et al.'s (2008) findings, which showed how individuals often tailor their online identities based on assumptions about what their audience wants to see. These assumptions can lead people to be disingenuous or even misrepresent themselves to appear more likeable or socially acceptable. Daisy's resistance to oversharing trivial content reflects an awareness of this dynamic, as she rejects the performative aspects of online self-presentation that feel inauthentic or overly contrived. Furthermore, Raun's (2017) research highlights the challenges of navigating socially acceptable boundaries on platforms like Facebook, particularly in contexts such as mourning. Users must carefully balance between presenting a private-public self that adheres to social norms and avoiding the perception of oversharing or excessive emotional output.

If social media platforms are intended at times to function as spaces for the deceased and grieving, the proximity of activities considered inauthentic, like sharing mundane images of breakfast, to more complex social processes can present challenges when authenticity is a primary concern for individuals or communities. This suggests that the presence of seemingly trivial or superficial content within these spaces may disrupt the desired authenticity of the environment, potentially affecting the perception and experience of those participating in mourning and remembrance and causing individuals to mitigate their behaviours. When asked to continue, Daisy would further delve into her analysis of others' contributions to online spaces, particularly focusing on what she perceives as inauthentic behaviour:

'I think people who do that are maybe not the most intelligent people and are the sort of people that use Facebook to... not have a go at other people. but post things like "thank you to all who wished me well for my hospital visit, you know who you are, you're true to me" and I just think oh piss off… I just can't be doing with that catty… the sort of people that will tag themselves in A&E with no explanation and when asked they'll publicly say "I can't talk about it hun, dm me" or they'll post all the time that they're depressed and post photos with a sunset about how nobody understands them. Now the people who. And this gets me because I've suffered things like this throughout my life... but when you genuinely feel that way you don't put it on Facebook. You don't proclaim it. I just think they're not the most intelligent people and just want attention. They want attention.' – ***Daisy, Participant 11***

Daisy raises several concerns related to what she considers genuine and authentic behaviour in online spaces. These concerns revolve around what she perceives as disingenuous public conduct, where individuals seek attention by engaging in practices solely to attract the interest of their online audience. Daisy finds this behaviour to be insincere and describes it as '*catty'*. She suggests that genuine emotions are typically not accompanied by the desire to share them publicly online. Daisy's ability to identify and critique behaviours she deems disingenuous is a part of her own strategy to maintain authenticity in her online interactions. Consequently, she adapts her own online behaviours to avoid the issues she has observed in the actions of others in online spaces. Daisy would continue:

'Cringe is massive… they're not doing anything wrong but yeah. It's like nobody really cares what you write on Facebook and everyone is so concerned with their own problems. Everyone thinks everyone else is so bothered but they're not. Everyone who is posting on there is just trying to keep up with some image that they think they should have... you know. I just can't be arsed with that. Sometimes you look at a photograph and think… you don't look like that? Maybe there's a bit of me that's macabre and finds it amusing. The people that remember you when you pass away are the people that love you. In 30 years' time they're not going to think about you. But it's like we're all going to die one day and there's nothing you can do about it so why carve a fake persona? It's just editing your life to look better. Maybe I have a distrust of the digital because it's just too easy for people with no knowledge to manipulate it. What is it. deep fakes? It's so easy to make things look real. I dread to think what it does to young kids.' – ***Daisy,*** **Participant 11**

Daisy's viewpoint does not advocate for the abandonment of the practice of curating one's online presence. Instead, it highlights her introspection into online behaviours and activities that she perceives as lacking authenticity. This reflective process serves as a foundation for modifying her own behaviours, allowing her to contribute to her digital archive in a manner that aligns with her personal notion of authenticity. In essence, Daisy has not only pinpointed behaviours she regards as inauthentic but has also taken deliberate steps to preserve authenticity in her online interactions and contributions. This insight highlights the variability in identifying authenticity in online spaces among different users. It also highlights the development of intricate, context-dependent rules by both individuals and their audiences when determining what qualifies as authentic. Some individuals leverage the affordances of social media technologies to carefully construct a more favourable digital identity. Conversely, others actively scrutinise and critique what they perceive as inauthentic presentations of the self by others. In both cases, the practice of curating oneself online is forward-looking, with an eye on potential future audiences who can view what will eventually account to a posthumous memorial of the self in the form personal data left behind online. Individuals aim to use their digital archives to convey authentic snapshots of their lives, providing a multifaceted perspective on the past for both present and future observers. This is the interplay between digital curation, authenticity, and the anticipation of future audiences.

An intriguing dimension of authenticity curation, as revealed by this research, pertains to the public interactions between living users and the deceased in social media and memorial spaces. In these virtual realms, the presence of online accounts belonging to deceased individuals poses unique challenges and opportunities for those who are still alive and navigating the same digital environment (Bell et al., 2015; DeGroot, 2012). To engage with these posthumous digital personas, individuals often find themselves in the position of continuing their interactions with the deceased within a shared virtual space, necessitating behaviours that may cast them in a favourable light in the eyes of the surrounding audience. These online platforms and social media channels enable individuals to directly communicate with those who have passed away, whether through legacy accounts or repurposed profiles serving as spaces for mourning and remembrance. This facet of authenticity curation in the context of posthumous digital interactions adds a layer of complexity to the ongoing discourse on online identity and memorialisation. During the interviews, all participants were queried about their encounters with accounts belonging to deceased individuals in online spaces and asked to recount their experiences in such encounters. In the case of Melissa (age 35), she acknowledged her familiarity with and multiple instances of encountering online accounts belonging to the deceased. However, Melissa revealed that she had refrained from actively engaging with these accounts, some which had since become spaces for memorialisation. Nonetheless, Melissa provided her opinion regarding those who do choose to partake in this form of online memorialisation and remembrance:

'I've never written anything to the deceased person themselves, but you just comment something like you're in my thoughts on the posts. Towards the grieving. It's the whole thing of like those people writing directly to the person are probably doing it for themselves, but it depends on the relationship to the person themselves'

– **Melissa, Participant 3**

Melissa, while personally choosing not to participate in this process, acknowledges the accepted method by which individuals address the deceased directly within an online space. She discerns that these interactions or posts by individuals are driven, to some extent, by a personal need or sentiment, but she is often guided by the

relationship with the deceased. Melissa's perspective hints at the existence of a set of unspoken rules or norms governing these online interactions. Furthermore, Melissa offers a specific example of how she perceives this process by stating, '*you just comment something like you're in my thoughts on the posts'*. This illustrates how individuals navigate these digital spaces while being mindful of how they represent her interests and relationships with the deceased to avoid coming across as inauthentic. This indicates that people actively shape their interactions in digital memorial spaces based on the perceived authenticity of their contributions, and based on their social ties (Giaxoglou, 2014). In essence, individuals are engaging in a form of self-curation when they involve themselves in digital spaces for the purpose of remembering and commemorating the deceased, as these contributions act as a digital record. Daisy raises an additional dimension of online memorial spaces, centring on their aesthetics, which she finds unappealing and somewhat discouraging when considering engaging with or contributing to these digital mourning environments:

'I know people have like memorial sites on Facebook, I might have come across one or two. They put everything in black and white like kind of a as a weird symbol, like a vignette… It all seems very tacky to me' – **Daisy, Participant 11**

Daisy's perspective sheds light on her interpretation of aesthetic choices made within these online memorial spaces. Daisy perceives these choices as somewhat unusual or '*weird'*. In particular, she takes issue with the symbolic representations, such as vignettes, that individuals use to designate these spaces as dedicated to memorial purposes. Daisy's viewpoint suggests that there isn't a universally accepted or authentic way to curate these online memorial spaces. While a vignette may be a suitable and meaningful choice for some memorial owners, it may not resonate authentically with all members of the online audience. This observation highlights the diversity of perspectives and preferences that individuals bring to digital mourning practices, illuminating the need for a nuanced understanding of how people curate and engage with these spaces. This will be discussed further in the concluding section of this chapter.

Authenticity is a powerful force in shaping our online interactions. Individuals have the ability to discern what they consider inauthentic and, in response, carefully curate how

they present themselves to their online audience. This curatorial process isn't limited to the present moment; it's often driven by a concern for how they will be remembered after they've passed away. Authenticity also influences how individuals engage with digital memorials and spaces of mourning online, with some choosing to disengage completely to maintain their sense of authenticity.

5.5. Conclusion

In the first analysis chapter ‘Guiding Archiving’, this research delved into how individuals are taught and acquire the skills necessary for effective archiving to navigate social media and similar online spaces, aligning their actions with the platform's objectives and their personal goals. However, when individuals put these archiving processes into action, such as curating a public social media profile, their activities become subject to evaluation by the audience, who determine their authenticity. Throughout this chapter, we have explored how individuals actively seek authenticity within the realm of social media, driving behavioural changes and specific online interactions aimed at avoiding what may be perceived as inauthentic. This aligns with RQ2iii, as participants’ actions are influenced by social and cultural norms, as well as their personal values regarding online activity.

Authenticity, as expressed within these practises, takes on different meanings depending on individual experiences and cultural contexts. The participants in this chapter, primarily from the UK, along with individuals from Germany (Nathan) and New Zealand (Daisy), reflect a predominantly Western cultural framing of authenticity and the rules deemed appropriate for navigating these digital spaces. While there are variations between these cultural contexts, this study does not account for perspectives from other regions, such as East Asia or South America. This limitation points to a broader gap in understanding how cultural differences influence digital mourning practises. This research has identified that individuals employ a distinct set of rules to manage their digital identities and the authenticity associated with them, however it raises questions about how these rules might vary across cultures, prompting the need for future research in this area. For example, would mourning

practises in digital spaces differ between Paris and Ghana? Or might these digital practises be absent altogether in certain cultural or regional contexts? Exploring these questions would deepen our understanding of how cultural frameworks shape the way individuals construct and express their digital identities in the context of mourning and memorialisation.

Drawing from Goffman's (1959) framework on identity curation, participants in this study demonstrate how this process is now extended into the digital realm. Similarly, Trilling's (1972) focus on sincerity as a form of authenticity, as well as Erickson's (1995) examination of authentic performativity in creating the self, provides context for understanding the tensions between public and private identities in social media spaces. These theories highlight the significance of audience perception in shaping digital interactions, particularly in contexts like mourning and memorialisation. This also directly relates to RQ2ii, as individuals consider their digital legacies as a key component of their curational practises online.

Individuals are safeguarding the authenticity of their digital legacies through three distinct strategies. Firstly, individuals have a strong inclination toward physical interactions, especially during emotionally charged experiences like grieving, weddings, or funerals. This connects to RQ2i, reflecting participants' attitudes toward utilising digital spaces for mourning, which they perceive to have the potential to lack the depth or authenticity of physical spaces The physical world is seen as a paragon of authenticity, offering a genuine backdrop for these rituals without the risk of miscommunication that digital spaces might pose. Walter et al. (2012) emphasis how mourning practises have shifted online, yet participants in this study show a preference for the perceived authenticity of physical spaces when feasible. This preference arises from a desire to avoid the perception of inauthenticity, particularly in contexts where nonverbal cues are limited, such as the online realm. This reliance on physical interactions serves as a means of preserving authenticity, using the physical world as a buffer against the challenges of representing oneself genuinely online. Secondly, Participants acknowledge the potential for excessive social media use to compromise their authenticity, primarily due to the phenomenon of 'oversharing.' They actively moderate their engagement with social media platforms, transitioning from high-frequency use to a more mindful approach. This gradual recalibration is viewed as an

effective strategy to reduce the volume of their digital archive, safeguard authenticity, and mitigate the risk of overexposure and perceived inauthenticity. This reflects Doka's (1989) concept of disenfranchised grief, where individuals must navigate societal rules and expectations in their expressions of mourning, particularly when they feel certain emotion or actions are not socially validated online. And thirdly, Individuals leverage social media technology's malleability to shape and refine their digital identities, striving for authenticity aligned with their personal narratives. They curate their public digital personas meticulously, maintaining coherence and meaningfulness throughout their online journey. This relates to RQ1, as it highlights how virtual memorials and other forms of online curation emerge as a process of memorialisation. This heightened sensitivity to authenticity prompts them to discern and adjust their online conduct in response to perceived inauthentic behaviours by others. These interactions are curated to remain congruent with their perceived authenticity within their online community, recognising that every interaction contributes to their enduring digital archive. As Derrida's *Mal d'Archive* (1995) suggests, this act of archiving inherently reflects a 'question of the future', where individuals must navigate decisions about what to preserve and what to delete to align their digital legacies with their values. This approach reflects an awareness that digital interactions are intricately linked to their identity's narrative, ultimately shaping the legacy they intend to leave behind.

Evident within these three outlined modes is a common thread: the apprehension of losing control over one's perceived identity and therefore digital archive in the eyes of their audience. This loss of control is closely associated with the fear of being labelled as inauthentic by those within their social circles and online spaces. Consequently, the pursuit of authenticity reflects a desire for control over one's image and prompts corresponding actions to maintain a genuine and truthful appearance. This reflects RQ2ii, as individuals carefully curate their digital legacies with the future in mind, balancing the tension between preserving their authentic selves and managing audience perceptions. Importantly, this desire for control transcends the present moment; it extends to encompass an individual's past and stretches far into the future, even after their passing. Individuals aspire to authenticity throughout their entire life journey, both in the present and in the realm of posthumous existence. In the forthcoming chapter titled 'Finalities', we will investigate how these processes, employed by individuals to seek authenticity, identify inauthenticity, and curate their

digital selves, unfold on a broader temporal scale. This research will explore their desires, concerns, and perceptions regarding the digital data that constitutes a significant portion of their online contributions, offering further insight into RQ1, RQ2i, RQ2ii and RQ2iii.

6. Finalities

6.1. Introduction

The third and final analysis chapter, ‘Finalities,’ delves into a fundamental aspect inherent in the subject of this research and in the insights provided by the research participants. ‘Finalities’ explores the pivotal transitions individuals’ data will undergo when someone has died and the consequential impact of this transformation within a medium that blurs the boundaries between the presence of the living and the memory of the departed in online spaces. Online platforms, including memorial websites and social media, create a unique arena where the permanence of our digital contributions and, consequently, our digital legacies, comes into question. This chapter directly addresses RQ1, exploring how virtual memorials emerge as a process of memorialisation, and RQ2ii, examining whether individuals desire a digital legacy and what this entails in posthumous contexts. This chapter will examine the multifaceted issues arising from these transitions. It will do so by drawing upon participants’ responses and further elucidating the effects of these online platforms on social interactions. In essence, ‘Finalities’ will provide an exploration of the intricate dynamics at play when it comes to the digital footprint we leave behind and how this evolves in the context of memorialising one’s data. The first section, ‘Digital Permanency,’ explores participant’s perceived eternal existence of data in the online realm, coexisting with the inherently ephemeral nature of the internet. This sections responds to RQ2i, addressing participants’ attitudes toward using digital spaces for mourning, as well as RQ2iii, considering what influences these views. Participants critically

examine the contrast between traditional physical methods of remembering the deceased and the digital alternatives. This exploration raises profound concerns regarding the enduring nature of digital data and the implications it carries for posthumous legacies. The second section, ‘Managing Imprints,’ builds upon these discussions by directly addressing participants' perceptions of the lasting quality of online data. It introduces and explores the concept of 'imprints' within both digital and physical domains, shedding light on the challenges posed by the medium when individuals seek to modify or exercise control over their digital imprints. This exploration aligns with RQ2ii, investigating how individuals perceive and manage their digital legacies, and highlights the implications for RQ2iii, particularly how societal, technological and personal factors influence these practises.

Both sections will immerse themselves in the intricate realm of individuals’ perceptions concerning the data they share in online spaces. They will shed light on how the acknowledgement of the transition from the living to the deceased influences the way we curate our online social behaviour. Participants will engage in thoughtful discussions about the lasting impact of digital data compared to physical items, and how these distinctions shape the memorialisation processes, both in virtual and offline realms. As we navigate through this chapter, our focus will initially revolve around the perceptions of physical versus virtual modes of memorialisation, followed by an exploration of the notions surrounding the presence of data itself. This journey will culminate in an examination of what these perceptions mean for our online social interactions. Participants will express their concerns about the seemingly endless and indestructible nature of digital data, adding depth to the discourse surrounding digital permanence.

So, what does ‘finality’ entail in the context of this research? At its core, finality indicates a juncture where a shift in visibility occurs through one’s data. Often, it exists as a result of an individual's perception of an endpoint. In this context, finalities can be products of an individual's imagination, where they envision the termination of either their own or another person's visibility online or offline. This discussion intersects with RQ2iii, as participants’ imaginings of these endpoints reveal the broader social and cultural influences that shape their digital practises and beliefs. It's essential to emphasise that the absence of this acknowledgment can foster a perception of

permanence or eternal presence/visibility, especially where one's digital archive is concerned. For instance, an example is the individual's perceived belief that their social media content will eventually cease to be viewed by others. What makes these finalities significant, however, is that they are typically products of the average social media user's imagination. Consequently, these imagined finalities exert a mediating influence on their current online activities based on their anticipation of future events such as one's death. This mediating influence ties back to RQ1, as participants envision how their virtual memorials will be perceived and constructed, and RQ2ii, reflecting their concerns about the durability and authenticity of their digital legacies that they value. The data within this research substantiates the prevalence of this phenomenon. Therefore, this discussion will delve into several perceived finalities and their impact on participants' social lives. These perceptions raise concerns about the most appropriate way to manage one's digital archive in the online sphere.

6.2. Digital Permanency

This section will examine individuals' perceptions of social media's perpetuity and its potential to establish an enduring presence through one's digital archive online. Participants frequently expressed concerns or desires related to the seemingly indefinite existence of online data, encompassing both their own social media usage and that of their peers. Given the intangible nature of the digital medium, varying interpretations and beliefs concerning the longevity of content in online spaces emerged. Conversely, participants emphasised the tangibility of physical items and media as vehicles for commemorating the deceased. Consequently, this section endeavours to probe how individuals perceive online data's role in remembrance relative to physical modes of commemoration. It will achieve this by examining attitudes and emotions surrounding physical and digital artefacts, as well as preferences concerning one's body after death. participants investigate the internet's role as a medium for preserving and perpetuating one's presence, particularly within the context of memorialising their lives in virtual spaces. When addressing the concept of 'finalities', the notion of an infinite or indefinite existence in the form of data emerges, challenging the possibility of achieving a sense of finality in one's online presence.

This chapter builds upon previous discussions about the desire for finality, including the act of deleting one's online presence, which was briefly touched upon in the preceding analysis chapters. It aims to delve deeper into individuals' sentiments concerning digitised items, digital data, and their perceptions of digital infinity.

Individuals who have been active on social media platforms throughout their lives inevitably accumulate a substantial amount of personal data, leaving behind a digital legacy upon their passing (Öhman and Watson, 2019; Lingel, 2013). This data encompasses a wide spectrum, ranging from public contributions like textual posts and shared content to private messages exchanged solely between the individual and the recipient. In some instances, it may even extend to encompass digital assets within video games (Harbinja, 2014). When asked about their preferences regarding the management of their digital footprint after death, participants in this study provided insights that underscored their awareness of the vast volume of data associated with their online presence. Throughout the interview process, participants were prompted to share their experiences and thoughts on whether they had encountered or envisaged creating an online memorial or commemorative space for someone else's life. These discussions frequently delved into the capabilities of storing, managing, and digitising assets as a means of preservation. In a conversation with Melissa, for instance, the focus shifted to physical photographs that held deep sentimental value. Melissa expressed concerns about the possibility of losing these tangible items and, by extension, the cherished memories they embodied. This led to a comparison with online spaces, as Melissa remarked:

'I like the idea of being able to digitise these things… older pictures can degrade. Having them digitally takes the risk of that away, like disintegrating. It's a way of preserving memories. The idea of having a database where I can put all these family photos, where it's like not going to get lost on a hard drive is something that interests me… a cloud storage of whatever you want.' – **Melissa, Participant 3**

Melissa's sentiments highlight the importance she attributes to a digital medium that safeguards memories from the risk of '*disintegrating'*. This resonates with discussion around 'digital endurance' (Bassett, 2018; Kasket, 2012), where digital storage systems, such as cloud platforms, are perceived as mechanisms for extending the

lifespan of memories. She emphasises that this risk is virtually eliminated when dealing with digital data, particularly through the utilisation of decentralised '*cloud storage'* service to house data pertaining to the deceased. However, as noted by Kasket (2012), promises of permanence is tempered by the fragility of digital infrastructures, with Melissa's view reflecting an optimism that doesn't fully account for potential platform obsolescence or data degradation. For Melissa, the use of digital technologies to preserve memories in the form of data serves as a means of risk mitigation, rendering online memorial spaces seemingly everlasting in her view. Given Melissa's positive outlook toward digitising physical assets, she was subsequently asked whether she believed this digital preservation could serve as a replacement for the physical items she held dear. In response, Melissa expressed:

'Not really… there's a thing of flipping through a physical [photo] album… it's the smell for me. It's a sensory experience. It's all about the experience of it all. Sitting with someone going through the photos and memories of them [the deceased]. Having said that, my generation has both digital media but also our parent's photos. It's rare to get them out, but it's a big thing to look at them all together and reminisce. Getting them out, scanning them in and all that.' – **Melissa, Participant 3**

For Melissa, digitising media for remembrance primarily serves as a method to prevent the loss of important photos, rather than a complete replacement for the physical artefacts that trigger memories. This insight intersects with RQ1, as Melissa's reflections suggest that virtual memorials are not necessarily perceived as standalone solutions but as complementary tools within the broader process of memorialisation. Physical photographs provide a significant sensory experience that cannot be replicated in an online space. This underscores the limitations of digital preservation and the need for a balanced approach that values the tangibility of physical artefacts while leveraging the accessibility of digital tools. In this context, digital copies of physical photos function alongside physical keepsakes to offer a form of risk mitigation and accessibility when physical items are inaccessible. While they may lack the same emotional weight as physical items, they enable the processes of grief and remembrance to unfold when physical items are unavailable. This perspective aligns with the broader theme identified in this research, where virtual memorials are seen by participants as complementing, rather than replacing, physical modes of

remembrance. Discussion with Tim on this matter revealed a similar conversation about the transformation of emotionally significant physical items into digital form and the perceived immortality associated with digital data. Tim's perspective aligns with the idea that digitising these items doesn't necessarily replace their physical counterparts but offers a sense of continuity and risk mitigation:

'I love to physically hold photos and to physically touch things. I love to see a photo and hold it close to my face and stare at it and know it was developed. But if you have an old photo you can digitally restore and upload it and it will be there forever and won't ever decay' – **Tim, Participant 2**

Tim's perspective resonates with the significance of the physical sensory experience and its role in preserving memories. He reflects on the notion of granting physical items a form of digital immortality by uploading them online. Many participants, including Tim, frequently compare physical items, which are susceptible to '*decay'*, with digital assets stored online, which he perceives as being '*forever'*. This perception of permanence associated with online data storage contrasts with the potential vulnerability of physical media. Moreover, Melissa's reference to the superiority of '*cloud storage'* over a hard drive highlights the shift in preferences towards online data storage for preservation. For some, carrying a digital version of important assets on a physical device like a hard drive is no longer sufficient. The act of '*uploading*' these items to the digital realm is seen as a more suitable and reliable means of preservation. This echoes proposals made by Locasto et al., who propose a shift to a cloud-based storage of one's posthumous data in order to counter issues of security and how to pass on one's digital legacy (2011). The recurring theme of '*decay'* runs throughout the discussions with participants, particularly when considering social media as a mode of remembrance. The fear of digital data decay and the desire for perpetual preservation emerge as key considerations in the context of managing one's digital archive and memorialising the deceased. However, as highlighted by Bassett (2018) and Kasket (2012), the promise of permanence is not without complications, as digital infrastructures remain subject to obsolescence and degradation over time. The perceived permanence of digital data, while often viewed positively for the purposes of digitally archiving the self and memorialising the deceased, isn't universally seen as advantageous by participants. Some participants, including Bryn (age 28), express a

different perspective. He highlights that the inability of digital data to naturally '*decay'* over time can serve to diminish the emotional weight and significance of the item. In this view, the enduring nature of digital data, purposed for remembrance in a virtual memorial, can render it unsuitable for fulfilling its intended purpose:

'Having something that would decay… something real or physical would be so much more important. This lie that people ask themselves that we can keep things going forever is not a good sentiment. There is beauty in something that could be discarded and was instead looked after with care' – **Bryn, Participant 4**

Bryn**'**s sentiment aligns with the idea that the impermanence and decay of physical items contribute to their emotional value. These physical items, such as old photographs or letters, naturally deteriorate over time, but this very process is what imbues them with a sense of history, nostalgia, and sentimental value. In contrast, digital data's eternal existence can, for some, strip it of these qualities, making it less effective as a tool for memorialising and evoking emotions associated with memory. Bryn's views resonate with RQ2ii, raising questions about whether individuals truly desire a digital legacy or prefer the organic nature of physical keepsakes. This viewpoint contrasts the alternative to decay, which Bryn characterises as a '*lie'*. He expresses the sentiment that the idea of '*forever'* is not necessarily a positive one. Bryn's comments shed light on a nuanced perspective. While digital data's perpetuity is often praised for its ability to preserve memories, there is an undercurrent of desire for impermanence, decay, or even forgetting. This echoes concerns raised by Fordyce et al. (2021) and Harbinja (2017) regarding the importance of maintaining personal control over digital legacies to align with individual preferences and emotional needs. In the context of remembrance and memorialisation, this may suggest that some individuals value the ephemerality of memories or a natural fading of remembrance over time. This complex interplay between permanence and impermanence in memory preservation is a recurring aspect of individuals' relationships with their digital archives and memorials within this research. Perhaps, here, participants would be more receptive should ideas like that from Moncur and Kirk (2014) – employing a sense of digital decay to online media – were implemented. Physical record-keeping, as observed in the discussions with participants, holds significant emotional value when it comes to memorialising individuals or specific events. This sentiment indicates that

the tangible, physical aspect of record-keeping carries a deeper emotional resonance compared to digital methods. During the interviews, some participants grappled with the concept of tangibility concerning physical assets designed for remembering the deceased. They contemplated how these physical items compared to digital assets stored online for the purpose of memorialisation and were actively evaluating their perspective during conversations. One such example coming from Sarah, where she states:

'I like having something tangible that I can touch. Collecting pictures, records, leaflets I've collected you know? Just real things. But also, what's not real about digital stuff, I guess? It's a headache. The convenience is great, and we live in a culture where convenience is the most important, but it just feels off to me' – **Sarah, Participant 16**

Sarah's perspective reflects a complex struggle regarding the perceived authenticity and '*real'[ness]* of digital items compared to their tangible physical counterparts when used for remembrance. This internal conflict leads Sarah to question the basis of her feelings about this matter. Sarah's reference to digital items for memorialisation as '*convenient'* suggests that she acknowledges the practicality and accessibility of digital media in preserving memories. However, the tone suggests that Sarah doesn't necessarily view this convenience as entirely positive. The experiences shared by Tim, Melissa, and Sarah collectively emphasise the unique value of physical items in the memorialisation and remembrance processes. These individuals highlight how physical items provide a sensory dimension, such as touch and smell, that adds depth and authenticity to the memorial experience. There would also be other methods in which physical items seemed to provide a memorialisation experience that digital spaces could not. Will tells a story in which physical items acted to catalyse remembrance in a way that would not have been possible solely within a digital medium:

'I remember my grandad like…we found his old photo album and it was so cool. It was so cool finding this box and going through all these things relating to someone's life. It would have been a lot more snazzier if it was online… but it was just really nice. If this was on like a tablet it wouldn't be the same. Me and my brother were

looking through the photo album and we were just flicking through the pages… but there's one photo we got out and its weird… when my grandad was like my age it was his dog at the time, and it was just such a fat dog and it was really funny…and you know for me and my brother it was great holding that photo. You know if that was online, they probably would have never included the dog. Like finding stuff like that means you can be like 'oh mum did grandma have a dog?' and like it starts a conversation. Like we saw that dog and I asked me mum about it… and we just started talking about this dog and we were just enthralled with it.' - **Will, Participant 12**

Will's account underscores the spontaneity and emotional richness associated with physical items, which serve as catalysts for memory-sharing and storytelling. This aligns with theories of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992) and highlights how tangible artefacts often foster shared experiences and intergenerational connections. For Will, physically exploring and discovering items becomes a meaningful journey that elicits remembrance and encourages familial conversations. This process engages multiple senses and is imbued with ritualistic significance, contrasting sharply with the often-passive interaction in digital media. The act of physically retrieving these items, such as climbing into the attic, mirrors the ritualistic bodily engagement discussed by Walter (1996) in his analysis of mourning practises Stories like Will's demonstrate that, for many, digital data perceived as permanent can fall short in creating the rich, storied experiences that physical items can evoke. Participants in this study recognise the convenience and permanence of digital data, yet they consistently emphasise that digital media cannot rival the emotional significance embodied by physical items and their ability to decay over time. This aligns with Bryn's earlier sentiment that impermanence and decay can imbue objects with meaning.

The perception of online data as existing permanently in a digital realm led some individuals to resist actively contributing to their digital archives. They expressed concerns about losing control over their online presence, particularly when they couldn't delete or remove themselves from an online space. Unlike our physical bodies and belongings, which naturally decay over time, digital data contributed online lacks the same sense of closure or finality. This concern reflects the findings of Fordyce et al. (2021), Morse (2024) and Harbinja (2017) who argue for stronger frameworks that

allow individuals to exercise control over their digital legacies. In a conversation with Nikki, the discussion shifted towards her digital footprint and the data she had contributed to various online spaces, including social media. Nikki had, over time, developed an aversion to archiving her life online. This aversion stemmed from the belief that digital data had a permanent existence and would be accessible to anyone indefinitely. Nikki expressed this sentiment by stating her apprehension about online presence:

'I mean it's just not healthy, is it? When you put something online, it's there forever. That's why I now teach my children never to post photos of themselves online' **– Nikki, Participant 34**

When asked about her reluctance to contribute to online spaces due to the perception of data existing indefinitely, Nikki elaborated on her reasoning with the following response:

'I honestly just don't like it… it's creepy, isn't it? Anyone can look at that and do what they want with It… you can't get rid of it once it's there' – **Nikki, Participant 34**

Nikki's response highlights a significant concern regarding the permanence of digital contributions in a very public online environment. She seems to perceive sharing permanent content in such a space as relinquishing control over her own data once published. This sentiment reflects documented issues of manipulation and mockery within digital memorial spaces, as observed by Phillips (2011), Kern and Gil-Egui (2017). Nikki's apprehension extends beyond loss of control, encompassing a fear of exploitation by malicious actor, a concern well-supported by the findings of Seigfried-Spellar and Chowdhury (2017), who detail instances of online harassment targeting grieving individuals. This perception of data permanence has driven Nikki to disengage from social media platforms to the extent that she encourages her children not to share photos that would be stored in their digital archives. This perspective resonates with the broader theme observed in this chapter, where individuals recognise social media as a space where digital data gains a kind of infinity by eliminating its natural tendency to decay and reach a final state. Nikki's response reflects the notion that individuals are acutely aware of their inability to completely remove or erase their data, even when

they feel it belongs to them. This perceived lack of control over their own digital archive can be a significant factor in their decisions to limit their online engagement.

While some previous research suggests that the perception of data permanence, even after death, can be empowering for individuals (Basset, 2015), the responses from participants in this study offer a more complex picture. Some participants, like Nikki and Bryn, express reservations about this perceived permanence. This divergence in perspectives highlights the nuanced nature of individual attitudes towards the digital afterlife. Recent research has explored various facets of the individual's desire for digital immortality and its cultural implications. This includes examining our fascination with digital immortality in modern media (Carden & Gibson, 2021) and tracing the cultural shift from the concept of imagined immortality to digital immortality (Wertheim, 2000). These studies shed light on the evolving nature of our relationship with digital legacies and the ways in which they are perceived. However, it's essential to note that despite the perceptions raised by some participants regarding the permanency of the digital data they contribute to their digital archives, digital information is much more volatile and far from permanent.

The notion of digital permanence is a topic that requires careful consideration due to the ever-changing nature of the digital landscape. Hyperlinks, file formats, browser extensions, and website structures are all subject to constant evolution and, in some cases, obsolescence. The internet's architecture is dynamic, much like a lizard shedding its skin, with changes occurring for various reasons, including the withdrawal of access to digital spaces, physical media degradation, or the closure of data storage companies (Ronchi, 2007). This rapid transformation of the internet can result in the unexpected loss of online content (Gaur and Tripathi, 2012). Foot et al. (2006) also highlight the high level of technological upkeep essential for the sustainability of memorial websites. Consequently, these spaces of memorialisation exhibit a paradoxical nature, being *'simultaneously durable and fragile'* (Foot, Warnick & Schneider, 2006, p. 78). This phenomenon is evidenced here, wherein during the digital ethnography conducted as part of this research; instances were found where memorial websites had become defunct. This is similar to a situation faced by much previous work into this field, such as Caroll & Romano (2010), who's listed websites for examination are mostly inaccessible now. The phenomenon of link rot is often to

blame, where the data still exists but the pathways or links to it have been severed, a problem common in web-based research (Zhou et al., 2015). It's therefore important to understand why participants in this study appear to perceive their online data and visibility as somewhat permanent. It may occur as a product of this paradox described by Foot et al. or reside elsewhere. Despite the reality of the digital landscape's volatility, individuals may hold onto the idea of permanence as a way to cope with the uncertainty of the digital afterlife and the potential loss of their digital legacies. Research indicates that social media platforms have an incentive to preserve the data of deceased users (Karppi, 2013), shedding light on the social and commercial aspects of handling these digital assets. Interestingly, these platforms do not specify a fixed timeframe for the retention of a user's data, leaving users uncertain about when or if their data will be deleted. Attempts to delete one's account on many social media platforms often trigger persuasive messages aimed at convincing the user to stay, sometimes citing reasons from friends or family who will miss them if they leave. For instance, consider Facebook's approach, which has evolved over the years. Initially, Facebook would remove accounts 30 days after an individual's death. However, the current policy involves creating a 'legacy' contact who can assume control of your digital data in the form of an account after your passing. If this step is not taken, your data remains locked in place with no option for formal archiving, editing, or deletion, both in public and private spheres. This approach essentially means that your rights to access your data persist beyond the grave, while ownership remains with the website itself. Many participants in this study had not fully considered the potential emotional implications and complexities surrounding posthumous social media access (Hjorth and Hinton, 2019). While some have plans to address their digital legacy after they pass away, many do not feel an immediate urgency to do so. Participants' attitudes toward the perceived permanence of digital data vary: some embrace it as a means to create a lasting digital legacy, while others see it as a reason to disengage from platforms that keep their data alive long after they're gone. Clearly, these perceptions of permanence in the digital realm influence how individuals engage with online spaces, often envisioning a future where their data endures indefinitely. The following section will delve into the strategies individuals are employing to counteract this lack of closure for their digital presence, often seeking ways to ensure the deletion of their posthumous digital archive.

6.3. Managing imprints

This section explores the themes introduced in the first section, notably focusing on the persistence of digital data, its perceived refusal to 'decay,' and the resultant implications for the digital archive. Participants in this research exhibit a heightened consciousness regarding the enduring nature of their online activities, cognisant of the fact that these actions are recorded and subject to external scrutiny by an online audience. This heightened awareness assumes significance as participants grasp the inevitability of a future moment when their capacity to curate and oversee their online content will cease after one's death. Consequently, individuals are prompted to engage in a nuanced process of self-regulation, wherein their present online behaviours are significantly influenced by considerations related to the management of their digital identity The focal point of this contemplation lies in how their personal data, encapsulated in the form of a digital archive, will be present posthumously. Within this context, participants were encouraged to disclose their preferences as to the handling of their digital data accounting to one's 'digital footprint'. This encompasses a diverse array of content, spanning from social media posts and forum interactions to multimedia materials disseminated through platforms like YouTube, all of which contribute to the mosaic of one's online presence.

The responses in this section can be categorised into three main modes. First, some participants expressed a desire to create a digital legacy after their death using the content in their digital archive. Second, some participants wished for the complete deletion of their online data that represented their online identity upon their passing. Third, there were participants who accepted that their online data's fate after their death was not worth worrying about, adopting a more resigned attitude towards it. These three modes provide insight into how individuals approach the management of their digital presence in the context of their own mortality. The responses provided by participants in all three categories demonstrate a common theme: the recognition of the longevity attributed to data once it's uploaded to the internet. This section will investigate these responses and delve deeper into the reasons behind these opinions and desires, particularly in the context of continuing bonds. It's worth noting that these responses often consider social media spaces as more than just self-expressions; they

are also shaped by the participants' perceptions of the audiences that will continue to engage with their data after their death. This audience perspective plays a significant role in understanding the participants' motivations and wishes regarding the management of their digital presence posthumously.

A key development complicating the discourse around digital persistence is the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) systems capable or recreating individuals in lifelike digital forms. These technologies, which range from chatbots trained on personal data to a hyper-realistic avatars offer a form of 'digital immortality' that can perpetuate interaction with the deceased's digital presence (Morse, 2024; Bartholomew, 2024). This potential for AI to 'resurrect' individuals challenges the traditional boundaries of continuing bonds – as Stroebe et al. (2005) argue, continuing bonds must balance emotional connection with the reality of loss; AI systems risk disrupting this balance by perpetuating an illusion of presence, potentially hindering the grieving process. For some, the idea of eternal digital presence is not inherently appealing. Participants such as Bryn (Participant 4) argued that decay and impermanence imbue items with emotional weight, a sentiment AI recreations may struggle to replicate. Although not a direct focus of this study, it's important to acknowledge the potential that contemporary AI systems have for recontextualising how we approach the finality attributed with death.

Drawing on prior research into continuing bonds (Brubaker et al., 2013; Carroll and Landry, 2010; Stroebe et al., 2005), it's evident that online social processes can persist even after an individual's death. This phenomenon is facilitated by the unique affordances of digital mediums (Bell et al., 2015; DeGroot, 2012; Öhman and Floridi, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2012). Deceased individuals' digital data often undergoes recycling and redisplaying in online spaces. Features such as notifications play a pivotal role, unexpectedly resurrecting the digital presence of the deceased or rapidly disseminating information about them (Lingel, 2013). This immediacy inherent in digital communication introduces a unique challenge: it can spring feelings of grief and unintended mourning upon people without prior notice (Meyer, 2014; Lingel, 2013). Importantly, it challenges the conventional notion of a perceived finality, using notifications as a means for ongoing interaction with the digital remnants of the deceased.

Online visibility after one's death was a recurring theme in the discussions with many participants. Their conversations covered a spectrum of desires, including the wish for a lasting connection to the physical world, the aspiration to maintain a presence in the digital realm, and, conversely, the desire for closure through the removal of their online presence after death. Throughout these discussions, participants delved into various aspects of their digital archives, highlighting elements that held particular significance or were pivotal in shaping their perspectives and preferences. During the interview with Maisie, the conversation revolved around determining which data she considered authentic and worthy of preservation within one's digital archive. This discussion naturally extended to include her preferences regarding the fate of the data they had shared in public online spaces, as Maisie states:

'Fucking hell, someone delete it, god, get rid of it. Imagine like my family down the line end up finding my twitter profile and it's tweets like 'pee is stored in the balls' I'd be like oh god you're great grandmar was a freak.' - **Maisie, Participant 5**

In Maisie's response, we can discern a projection into the future when she is no longer present. She envisions an audience, possibly her descendants, having access to her current public Twitter content. This contemplation leads to a sense of embarrassment in the present, stemming from the potential social implications of her current online activities in a future context. Consequently, Maisie expresses a desire for her complete digital archive to be erased and no longer visible. Maisie was then asked why this was the case, to which she gave the following short response:

'I don't want to leave an imprint… on one hand it would be kind of funny but no.' – **Maisie, Participant 5**

Maisie's swift statement highlights the conceptualisation of a digital footprint as an *'imprint'*. Many participants express a desire to erase their digital footprint upon their death. This sentiment connects to RQ2ii, as it elicits the question of whether individuals truly want a digital legacy and the extent to which they perceive such a legacy as beneficial or burdensome. So, how is an *'imprint'* defined in this research? An imprint is understood as an individual's perception of their own digital footprint,

existing in a state of uncertainty. Like an imprint created by a shoe in the sand, it can be preserved, altered, or erased. in the first section, we observed how participants generally regard their digital data as indelible and permanent, reflecting RQ2iii by showing what factors influence these views – particularly the belief that data, once online, can be hard to remove or control. Consequently, the inevitability of death becomes a critical juncture for the individual. They must take action to delete their digital archive before the opportunity to curate and remove these elements disappears. This perspective arises from the belief that the digital data constituting one's archive will endure indefinitely. It involves looking towards the future after one's death, necessitating present-day actions to preserve one's digital archive and potential digital memorial space as an authentic representation of the self. Such considerations also tie back to RQ1, illustrating how virtual memorials and online footprints emerge through individuals' proactive or reactive approaches to data management. The same question was presented to Daisy, who offered an alternative perspective on what she desired to occur with her data after her passing:

'This sounds horrible, but I don't really care. Like genuinely I don't care. There'll be some pictures on there on Instagram of like cats or a chicken or like more lifestyle oriented but I've just… I've not put much on Facebook like maybe band's I've watched but I just don't really care. I'll be dead… if there was something on there that could upset someone then I'd do something about it because I wouldn't want to upset anyone. That's all that really matters when you die isn't it. The people who you leave behind that you love. other people can edit it as long as other people don't put photos of me in a bad light'- **Daisy, Participant 11**

Daisy seems to challenge her initial indifference in the latter part of her statement, particularly concerning the potential for the external audience to perceive the individual's content in a negative light. When probed further about this, she responded as follows:

'Ah that I do mind then! I guess I'm vain then but I'm not in charge of what they pick or what happens, so it hits a nerve. Even though I am dead maybe there's a little bit of me that's like I don't want my great grandkids to see a photo of me with 12 chins' – **Daisy, Participant 11**

Daisy's initial response aligns with individuals who seem to accept the fate of their digital data with indifference, assuming that its management posthumously is beyond their control. However, her subsequent contemplation reveals a deeper layer of consideration. She raises a valid concern regarding the potential control exerted by the audience over her digital presence after her death. This shift in perspective highlights once again the juncture that occurs at one's death, where one loses control over their digital archive, effectively entrusting it to others who determine its fate. This resonates with RQ2iii, demonstrating how social norms, audience perceptions and personal worries collectively shape attitudes about posthumous data management. Daisy's insights revolve around the relinquishment of control over one's digital persona, allowing external forces to shape how they are remembered in the online sphere after their passing. Such reflections also relate to RQ2i, where Daisy's attitudes toward utilising digital spaces for mourning or remembrance hinge on her comfort level with how others might reinterpret or mishandle her content. This shift in perspective highlights the need for individuals to actively consider and manage their digital presence in the present, to avoid potential misrepresentations or unfavourable portrayals in the future. Daisy's specific concern about their image in photographs underscores the desire for individuals to exert some degree of control over their posthumous digital legacy – a theme discussed in 'guiding archiving' where participants sought strategies for data curation. Participants who express indifference regarding their digital data after death may exhibit a contradictory stance when it comes to managing their online imprint posthumously. Their apparent initial indifference may stem from a lack of urgency or understanding regarding how to effect change in this regard. Reflecting on the insights from the first section, this apparent indifference might be linked to the widespread perception that once data is contributed to an online space, it becomes indelible. Consequently, any efforts to modify or delete this data might be seen as futile. This perspective highlights the need for individuals to be informed about the malleability of their online imprints and the potential for managing their digital archives more proactively. By doing so, they can gain greater agency over their online identities both during their lifetime and after their passing, similarly to what we have discussed in the chapter titled 'Guiding Archiving'. Bryn was also asked about his preferences regarding the fate of his digital imprint, and his

response delves into the specific reasons behind his desire to erase a significant portion of his online presence:

'I'm quite an impulsive person. I don't think these (posts) are accurate depictions of who you are. I would not like 50% of stuff I've wrote remaining. The word ashamed would be too far…. I don't really get embarrassed… but I wish I hadn't said some stuff I have online…I think the mistake that we all get caught up in is that our story isn't important. Nobody's really is. You're remembered for what you do that impacts other people – social media does not do this. Just having your mundane life on social media for everyone to see isn't a legacy of any kind. It's other people's memory that means something. I'm not gonna go track down an old tumblr account. Neither would you.' – **Bryn, Participant 4**

Despite Bryn's initial assertion that he don't easily get embarrassed, it becomes evident that he is indeed contemplating the implications of his digital imprint, reflecting on how it will appear to a future audience. This consideration aligns with Bryn's recognition that memory, and potentially one's digital imprint, is constructed by the audience surrounding him. He emphasises, '*it's other people's memory that means something*,' which resonates with Van Dijck's (2007) discussion on how others perceptions significantly shape one's digital legacy. Consequently, Bryn expresses a desire to remove about half of the content he's posted online. This sentiment also corresponds to RQ2iii, illustrating how participants' views on curating their digital identity is influenced by concerns over social judgement and posthumous reputation.

Bryn's statement suggests a form of self-consciousness or embarrassment influencing his decision regarding the future of his digital assets, taking precedence over any aspiration for a continued online presence or legacy after death. It also somewhat touches on RQ2ii, in that Bryn actively rejects the idea of an enduring digital legacy if it consists of content he deems '*mundane'* or inconsequential. Data in the form of social media posts, left online indefinitely, can become an embarrassing reflection of one's past, particularly as individuals evolve over time. When asked to elaborate, Bryn added:

'We all change and we tend to want to destroy our old selves.' – **Bryn, Participant 4**

Bryn acknowledges that individuals are fluid beings, continuously reinventing himself as time progresses. The challenge arises when participants perceive their digital imprint as permanent, lacking the element of '*decay*' that would allow for regrettable content to fade away. As a result, the only means of asserting agency over this unchanging online persona is by deleting one's social media presence – a strategy informed by the anticipation of losing control post-mortem, where death removes any final say over their digital archive. This perspective aligns with RQ2iii, illustrating how the perceived permanence of virtual memorials (and online footprints in general) influences participants' decisions and behaviours when it comes to managing these. In contrast to Bryn, certain participants perceive the content within their digital archive as valuable depictions of an individual's life. They perceive digital technologies as enabling future generations to access historical information, affectively embracing the concept of an active digital legacy. Mark, for instance, envisions a future where his online audience uses digital technologies to reminisce about him. He elaborated on this perspective during a conversation about his perceptions of the digital data He'd contributed to his digital archive:

'This is where technology becomes a beautiful thing. It's this cool manifestation of memories. I hope I'll be missed… I'll be pissed If I'm not! So it'll be nice dare I say for the people who do miss me to go back and see what I posted… everything is so well documented these days… it's a much more thorough well-rounded representation of what our lives looked like.' – **Mark, Participant 32**

Mark's perspective significantly differs from Bryn's. Where Bryn questions the value of a mundane social media presence, Mark celebrates the archival potential of these platforms, highlighting RQ2i: the attitude that digital spaces can be a positive tool for remembrance. While many participants aim to either delete or manage their digital imprint to present themselves in a better light, Mark appreciates what he describes as technology's '*manifestation of memories'*. Therefore, Mark doesn't seek to erase his digital presence. Instead, he allows what he perceives as an authentic representation of himself to remain accessible for a future audience. Mark desires to be remembered and utilises his digital archive to fulfil this desire, extending from the present into the future. Despite their differences, all participants converge on the notion that their digital identity should be managed in a manner that aligns with their personal or ethical ideals.

Even those who initially profess indifference, such as Daisy, eventually articulate a preference for how their data should be handled posthumously. Whether individuals opt to delete, refine, or preserve their digital imprint, these decision are consistently informed by the idea that the data uploaded online can appear indelible, again reflecting RQ2iii in how personal experiences and social norms shape these perspectives. The phenomenon can be conceptualised as an imagined expectation of a future audience – participants anticipate how they will be remembered and tailor their actions accordingly.

In the early stages of the interview process, it became evident that participants were contemplating the existence of a non-physical or ephemeral aspect of an individual, brought to life by the social processes associated with posthumous online interaction. This notion was later encapsulated by one participant, Mabel (age 44), who referred to it as a person's '*essence'*. Additionally, this phenomenon appeared to operate as a constituent of an individual's imprint. This facet of a person's imprint, embedded within their digital archive, is manifest through the medium's capacity to eliminate physicality in digital spaces. Participants conveyed the idea that this '*essence'* and, by extension, one's imprint represents an individual's identity, albeit within a digital realm, and thus merits a similar level of consideration as their physical self. This concern seems to be intrinsically linked to an ethical dilemma experienced by individuals when contemplating the ongoing posthumous presence of themselves, a presence facilitated by the enduring nature of data in digital spaces. In the course of the discussion with Mabel, these concerns were explored through the framework of how she envisioned the management of one's digital archive after her passing:

'People make a fuss these days about when they die. Like don't connect me to the machine, don't keep me online… make sure nothing happens to me… disconnect me. I would definitely agree with this. Don't you dare.' – **Mabel, Participant 9**

Mabel expresses her desire to disassociate herself from posthumous processes of remembrance and memorialisation in online spaces. She metaphorically highlights this intention by stating *'disconnect me'*, conveying the notion that her digital presence must be severed or deleted after she has died. This response aligns with RQ2ii, as Mabel rejects the idea of a digital legacy altogether, preferring that their imprint be

removed. During the conversation with Mabel regarding her strong stance against having a posthumous online presence, she was further questioned about the reasons behind her beliefs concerning the role of digital spaces in memorialising an individual. In response, Mabel articulated her perspective on the extent to which digital spaces should be involved in this process:

'The question shouldn't be whether the digital has the same emotional impact as the physical, it's whether it should… whether we should reach the same effect. It's the same question we should be asking ourselves about many things. Forget the feeling and the ethics around it – what respect does this show to the sanctity of life. We all deserve some form of protection of what we are. What our essence is. And our essence is something that exists on this world while we are alive. Our essence as human beings on this planet is limited to the time that we are here. If you have a Facebook page that people maintain with images of you that's fine. If they speak in your name, in your voice – not fine, that's what I'm saying. Because you're dead. You know! And death, I think that death should be taken seriously.' - **Mabel, Participant 9**

Mabel's perspective on the posthumous online presence is grounded in her belief that it undermines the seriousness of death. She expresses concern about how social media and memorial pages might potentially misrepresent a deceased individual's identity, tarnishing their memory and the essence of who they were in life. This speaks to RQ2iii, illustrating how personal values about respect, '*sanctity'* and authenticity shape participants' attitudes toward online memorialisation. To avoid this, Mabel strongly advocates for being '*disconnect'[ed]* from these spaces after death. It echoes concerns raised in previous literature (Kasket, 2012) about whether extended digital presences might conflict with culturally held beliefs around closure and finality. Mabel's view is rooted in the idea that digital platforms, by prolonging an individual's presence through data, diminish the sanctity of life and the essence of the human experience. She contends that once someone has passed away, their participation in online spaces frequented by the living should come to an end. In Mabel's view, maintaining a continued online presence after death lacks closure and disrupts the natural progression of life and death. However, Mabel does acknowledge the potential benefits of hosting photos of a deceased individual, suggesting a nuanced approach

to the issue. Perhaps In Mabel's ideal scenario, digital platforms could indeed host data belonging to the deceased, but within newly designated areas clearly marked as spaces for remembering the departed. These spaces would be separate from those frequented by living users, essentially resembling a digital cemetery. This approach would seek to eliminate the potential for the misuse of such data and, in Mabel's view, ethically handle the digital archive that once represented a living individual. By segregating these digital memorial spaces, it becomes possible to continue processes like '*maintaining images'*, which Mabel regards as an appropriate way to remember and honour the deceased. One aspect of Mabel's response warrants further examination however, particularly regarding why the idea of a continued online presence after death might diminish the seriousness of death. Mabel's response to this question was as follows:

'You should respect your own finality; sadness should have a place. You should sit there and try to construct him [the dead] from memory because we're human and this is what humans do.' – **Mabel, Participant 9**

Mabel's stance becomes more apparent as she rejects the idea of technology playing a role in the processes of grief and memorialisation. Instead, she emphasises the importance of these actions occurring within a physical or '*human'* setting. This stance suggests that Mabel views the continued existence of an individual's digital imprint as erasing the sense of 'finality' associated with death. This perspective resonates with the broader critique of digital immortality (Bassett, 2018) which questions whether prolonging an individual's online presence truly honours their memory or instead detracts from the culturally significant boundary between life and death. In line with RQ1, Mabel's reflections also highlight how virtual memorials can emerge in conflict with traditional forms of mourning. Conversation with another participant, Jamie, showcased a perspective that aligns with this idea of disengaging from digital spaces after death, echoing the sentiments expressed by Mabel. Discussion during the interview process covered Jamie's current online presence and his online activities. When queried about his preferences for handling his digital archive after death, he responded:

'You shouldn't cling on to ideas about participating after you've died, it's not for the dead to do. I have a document with all my passwords and logins and such… when I die my family have instructions to log in and just delete everything.' – **Jamie, Participant 13**

Mabel and Jamie both express a strong desire for finality, as evident in their concerns about when an individual's digital imprint should end. They have made plans to act on this desire during their lifetimes, aiming to counteract the sense of permanence that social media platforms afford to data. Grimm and Chaisson's work would similarly find that the majority of participants polled for their study house a preference for the deletion of one's digital data after death (2014). In Mabel's view, death signifies the cessation of participation in both digital and physical realms. Just as the physical body can be removed from sight through cremation, burial, or other means, these participants believe that the digital data they've contributed to online spaces throughout their lives should similarly be removed from view, effectively ending their participation through deletion. This perspective links to RQ2ii, as it reflects on an explicit decision regarding one's digital legacy – participants who opt for erasure rather than preservation.

Jamie suggests that merely existing posthumously within an online space occupied by the living constitutes a form of participation, and he firmly believes that such participation is not the role of the deceased. This reflects RQ2iii, highlighting how personal values and social norms influence decisions about posthumous digital presence. This perspective reflects a set of rules or principles that Jamie has established to manage his own digital imprint. It's important to note that these sentiments do not appear to be rooted in religious beliefs, as participants did not mention religious factors when discussing their wishes for or rejection of the idea of finality regarding their online presence. Instead, his viewpoint seems to be more focused on seeking a more '*human'* experience, emphasising the importance of human agency and control. The sentiments expressed by participants in this study seem to highlight the idea that one's digital data can pose an ethical dilemma, particularly in terms of the emotional weight associated with one's digital archive.

The importance placed on one's imprint appears to be a key factor driving the imperative to remove oneself from digital spaces, granting a finality to one's presence online. In line with RQ1, this highlights how virtual memorials and legacies emerge in tension with participants' desires for closure. Participants may feel that these digital spaces lack the necessary mechanisms to handle their digital data in a respectful and ethical manner, as judged by their own standards. This raises questions about the ethical responsibilities of digital platforms and the need for more robust mechanisms for handling posthumous digital legacies according to individual preferences. Stokes' research also ascribes an ethical significance to one's digital data or '*digital remains'*, drawing a parallel with the ethical considerations surrounding a physical corpse (2015). This perspective takes on added significance when considering the responses of participants, who discuss the disposal and deletion of their digital data in a manner akin to the preferences often expressed regarding the disposal of a physical body. It highlights the evolving ethical dimensions of our digital lives and the need for a nuanced approach to handling posthumous digital data.

How do we use these responses to further define the 'imprint'? To shed light on this question, we can draw comparisons between the individual's online imprint and the significance of the physical body in traditional funerary services. However, unlike the physical body, which is typically viewed as inherently tied to a specific physical space and presence within the physical world (Wollan, 2003; Casey, 2013) or as the medium through which we engage with the physical world, the online imprint operates differently. Participants in this study do not seem to conceive of the imprint as a singular object like a body or a physical item that occupies space. Instead, the imprint represents the narrative of the deceased individual as perceived by the audience in an online space. This aligns with RQ2i insofar as participants' attitudes toward digital mourning spaces hinge on how these narratives (or imprints) are constructed and received by others. An imprint is thus constructed through a combination of the digital data an individual contributes to their online identity (such as sharing photos, textual data, and contributions) and the data generated by those who interacted with the individual online. Moreover, the online individual anticipates an imagined future from the perspective of the surrounding audience. This means that their actions, aimed at shaping preserving, or deleting their imprint, are based on assumptions about how they will be viewed by others in the future. This perspective aligns with the work of

Öhman and Floridi, who argue that our data functions as our informational bodies and represents a digital manifestation of our physical selves (2017). Similarly, Lupton's concept of the '*digital body'* refers to the assemblage of content associated with our social interactions online (2017). In essence, an imprint encompasses what an individual's lived online experiences signify to the audience around them.

The notion that the authenticity and significance of one's imprint are determined by an imagined future audience is a concept that participants in this study appeared acutely aware of, as underscored by Bryn's statement: '*it's other people's memory that means something'*. In this context, the 'other people' refer to an online audience with the capacity to express their thoughts and emotions concerning the impact of a loved one's death, as previously explored by Carrol and Landry (2010) within the context of social media spaces. It is worth noting that this phenomenon appears to be distinct from religious influence, although it bears certain similarities to the idea of a 'digital soul' discussed to varying degrees in several studies (Wertheim, 2000; Black, 2013; Paul-Choudhury, 2011). This concept revolves around the idea that a digital representation or existence persists beyond physical death, resonating with the views expressed by participants in this study regarding the enduring nature of one's online imprint and the impact it leaves on the imagined audience. These ideas seem to align with Mabel, who provided an example of their perspective on using online spaces for memorialising the deceased. She drew a comparison between a physical shoebox that contains pictures and items triggering memories of a deceased person and the online medium as a platform for storing information, with one's digital archive serving as the basis for an online memorial. In this context, Mabel stated the following:

'Let's take a shoebox… [for preserving memories] it's so meaningful. Whereas when it's part of the online world… all these distractions… you're putting someone's souls in the same level of adverts, as talkbacks on posts and all the other horribleness that goes online. Please please please let me have the shoebox!' – **Mabel, Participant 9**

Mabel's perspective on posthumous data and its ability to create an online imprint draws parallels to the concept of a soul. However, what causes contention for Mabel is the environment in which this imprint exists. It coexists with elements like '*adverts'*, '*talkbacks on posts'*, and the general features of social media, which, in Mabel's view,

diminish the purity of the imprint and make it an unsuitable space for preserving the story of a deceased person's life. This critique echoes concerns observed in previous discussion on digital spaces being prone to trivialisation or commercialisation (Kasket, 2012), highlighting how participants perceive the loss of solemnity in online memorial contexts. This response suggests that this issue arises from the inherent contrast between bodily presence and the digital realm. When utilising digital media for social interaction and as a memorial space, the interactions that occur on social media platforms can be somewhat ephemeral or fleeting. The general notion emerging here highlights the significant impact of online spaces which, by nature of the medium, remove the physical body from experience. If we consider that one's online contributions over time constitute an imprint, having the imprint of the deceased exist within the same digital space as those who are alive, and thus actively shaping their imprint, leads to discomfort. Such discomfort aligns with RQ2i, illustrating participants' attitudes toward digital spaces for mourning, especially when confronted with the perceived mixing of the living and the dead in a public, accessible environment. This unease is especially pronounced when we take into account individuals like Mabel, who liken the composition of an imprint to a *'soul*.' Drawing a comparison between an online imprint and the physical body, we observe that bodies are managed according to clearly outlined protocols and are treated as integral components of ceremonial funerary processes. In contrast, the same cannot be said for one's online imprint in the form of digital data, which lacks a formal procedure to separate it from the accounts of the living. This absence of protocol reflects the findings of Acker and Brubaker (2014) regarding the ad hoc nature of digital memorial management, raising questions about whose responsibility it is to handle the data and how best to do so.

Participants would frequently discuss the phenomenon of online accounts belonging to the deceased continuing to exist within spaces used by the living. Instances like these may contribute to the perception that data posted in online spaces is permanent because individuals witness the posthumous effects of this through the continued presence of the deceased online. During the interview process, participants were asked whether they had encountered or created pages memorialising individuals who had passed away while using social media platforms, such as Facebook fan pages, and to share their thoughts on these experiences. These user-driven memorials can be viewed as a form of DIY mourning (Lingel, 2013), reflecting how individuals take

ownership of the grieving process online. Consequently, participants were encouraged to discuss their own encounters with profiles originally created by and belonging to the deceased. This approach allowed the research to gain insights into how individuals perceive data belonging to those who have passed away which is often unexpectedly coexisting within the same digital space as the living. Several individuals found the continued presence of the deceased in the same online spaces used by the living, facilitated by their digital archive, to be unsettling and generated feelings of uneasiness. For instance, during a conversation with Joel (age 21), He shared an encounter with a social media account associated with someone who had passed away. This encounter struck him as odd and raised questions about how these accounts are managed by the platform to address such situations:

'They, like you know a dead account just shouldn't be here, something feels entirely odd about it. I've come across a couple of times where it's their page but obviously it's just sat there now because they've passed away… I don't know but it's definitely weird to me. What actually happens to those?' **– Joel, Participant 21**

Joel found it challenging to explain why the continued presence of data related to deceased individuals in online spaces felt unusual. However, Joel clearly expressed confusion regarding why accounts belonging to the deceased were allowed to remain within the same online spaces used by the living. The transition of a social media account from being owned by a living user to a deceased one changes its role and significance within the space it occupies, as perceived by the living users. Consequently, the same data that would otherwise be considered a normal feature of a social media account becomes unwelcome when it continues to exist in spaces shared with the living. These observations relate to RQ2i: participants' attitudes toward digital mourning spaces can become apprehensive when they witness the ongoing presence of an account that once belonged to a living person. These feelings of uneasiness regarding the ongoing online presence of the deceased were amplified by two participants. Daisy expressed concerns about how this persistence could be potentially harmful to those still living. In this context, Daisy drew a comparison between the continued presence of the deceased in online spaces shared with the living and the following analogy:

'It seems quite selfish of the person who has died to stay on social media. It's as if they're ghosts inside the machine. Like I can understand why keeping someone online after they've died might help someone, but isn't that ultimately really bad for everyone involved?' **– Daisy, Participant 11**

Daisy echoes the sentiment that it feels peculiar for an imprint of an individual to linger within a digital space after their passing. On the other hand, Bryn likens the continued presence of the deceased in an online space to a desire for immortality:

'Coming into contact with a dead person online…It's like you've seen a ghost... it's like they're [the deceased] more interested in them living on. They shouldn't be there.' – **Bryn, Participant 4**

The concept raised by Daisy and Bryn of a continued presence within a virtual space resembling a '*ghost'* resonates with Basset's notion of 'Digital Zombies' (2015). Moreover, it aligns with the frequent use of the term '*ghost'* to describe the lingering presence facilitated by data in social media spaces (Cann, 2014; Stokes, 2012; Steinhart, 2007). The reference to *'ghost(s) in the machine'* in this context does not seem to allude to Ryle's analysis of Descartes's mind-body dualism (1949). Instead, it quite literally likens '*ghosts'* to deceased individuals and online spaces to the '*machine'*. Through the capabilities of the digital archive and the medium in which it operates, a complex situation emerges wherein digital data allows the afterimage of a deceased individual to coexist with the living. This scenario sheds light on RQ1, illustrating how virtual memorials or digital remains are emerging as a process of memorialisation that coexist alongside living accounts in the same space. In simpler terms, participants recognise that this coexistence shouldn't occur within social media spaces, leading to feelings of unease. Participants suggest a straightforward solution: the suspension of accounts belonging to the deceased within social media spaces. In essence, there should be a point at which a deceased individual stops participating in online social interactions within the same space as living accounts. Such desires point to RQ2ii, wherein participants question the nature of a digital legacy and whether it should persist within active social environments. Some participants view any form of continued digital identity as a degradation of the individual's imprint, believing that their story, as perceived by the audience, should conclude at the time of their death. In

conversation with Will (age 27), a distinction was drawn where posthumous data is concerned. Will illustrated this differentiation through a personal experiences, where individuals came together online to memorialise a lost friend. He then provided an examination of accounts that had transitioned from belonging to a living person to one who is now deceased, providing a comparative analysis of these two instances of existing posthumously in online spaces:

'It's a bit of a weird one. Oh god how many years ago was this, I'd say three or four. I was just up and coming at that point and what happened was a big member of our community died of cancer. And all these fan made little groups on twitter and all sorts of things where they were cataloguing their life popping up and we didn't want to get too involved, but yeah I've seen those kind of things and I think it's really nice. You see I can get behind that because it's like everyone came together to kind of remember someone. But I find it really strange that… like there's accounts belonging to dead people still there very public and aren't put elsewhere. It's just a bit wrong. Like don't get me wrong you do you whatever helps and that but surely we can't all end up like that.' **– Will, Participant 12**

Will effectively conveys an event of collective remembrance where individuals congregated in an online space to create a platform for mourning, which he perceives as a notably positive manifestation of the sharing of posthumous data. However, Will also scrutinises instances in which an account established while an individual was alive persists within the same digital space after their death, finding it disconcerting and even morally questionable. This stems from the inadequate demarcation of data associated with an account and their digital archive as belonging to a deceased individual, which allows the account to continue functioning as if it belongs to someone alive. These observations speak to RQ2iii, where personal and communal standards for managing the deceased's data significantly influence comfort levels and ethical perceptions. In contrast, pages and groups formed by friends to commemorate a deceased person are expressly designated as positive spaces for remembrance in Will's perspective. The failure to accurately label accounts belonging to the deceased as spaces for mourning contributes significantly to the discomfiture expressed by many participants. Will anticipates a future scenario in which numerous accounts remain in this static, deceased state, a situation he feels must not be allowed to occur.

This narrative also ties back to how participants envision the long-term management of posthumous data – extending the discussion to RQ1 about how memorials actually 'emerge' and persist, often unintentionally, within standard social media infrastructures.

Many participants share the sentiment that the continued presence of a deceased individual within online social media spaces evokes a sense of unease. Frequently, data associated with an individual who has passed away persists online in the guise of a static social media account. An active example of this issue lies in the medium's proclivity to recycle old data through notifications, including birthday reminders, suggested contacts, and resurfaced user posts presented as memories. These features inadvertently enable a deceased person's profile to maintain a semblance of activity within a social media environment still actively utilised by the living. Consequently, these profiles fail to be relocated to a separate area or relegated to inaccessibility. For some individuals, these posthumous data hold profound significance in the context of grieving and remembrance. They offer a unique avenue for individuals to revisit and cherish memories of a departed loved one. This sentiment is illustrated by Rose (age 25), who elaborates on her use of messaging history with a friend. In this case, the deceased friend's social media account remains active, and this digital correspondence serves as a reminder of her friend's voice and manner of speech. Rose's perspective is encapsulated as follows:

'When I'm looking back at our old messages or even old posts, I can read what we wrote and hear him say it. I can hear how he'd say those things in his voice. I don't want to lose that.' – **Rose, Participant 17**

Rose's account highlights the peculiar situation where a departed friend, due to the persistence of online data, maintains a presence within the digital realm, albeit in a static form. The emotional impact of this scenario underscores RQ2ii, as Rose implicitly values a digital legacy that preserves her friend's essence. The emotional impact of this scenario is evident as Rose attributes human-like qualities, such as the friend's distinct '*voice'*, to these digital remnants. Previous research has explored how online spaces can function as emotional, spiritual, and sometimes even religious domains that parallel the physical world (Wertheim, 2000). However, the current

research highlights the need for a reconfiguration of these spaces to address the discomfort that emerges when the deceased occupy the same digital environments as the living. This tension also aligns with RQ1, illustrating how virtual memorials and ongoing digital traces emerge as processes of memorialisation that may lack a clear finality. According to several participants, the absence of a clear mechanism for finality in death leads to a situation where the deceased are either too closely intertwined with or remain within the same spaces as the living. Moreover, the notion of one's posthumous online presence seems to challenge the fundamental concept of human existence by negating the finality of death.

This section has examined the thoughts and concerns of individuals regarding the enduring presence of social media data. The research indicates that regular social media users tend to perceive data contributed by themselves and others as having a sense of permanence within online spaces. Consequently, these individuals adjust their social media behaviours based on their beliefs about how they will be remembered after their own death. Essentially, this phenomenon revolves around the concept of death and its capacity to halt an individual's ability to modify, archive, or amend their online imprint. Many individuals are choosing to disengage from social media platforms due to this phenomenon, as they find the notion of their online presence persisting after their death unsettling, considering it as detracting from the human experience. While the creation of memorial spaces for individuals after their death can be viewed positively, allowing for the continuation of their legacy, the absence of clear demarcation for these spaces, pages, or accounts as sites of memorialisation or remembrance can lead to discord and feelings of unease concerning one's posthumous presence. In other words, participants struggle with whether digital memorials, as they currently function, truly respect the deceased or inadvertently blur the lines between the living and the dead.

6.4. Conclusion

This research highlights a complex interplay within the digital realm, exploring how individuals perceive data permanence in online spaces and the implication this raises

where one's digital legacy is concerned. Participants often perceived their contributions to online spaces as eternally preserved, extending beyond their lifetimes. Consequently, they tailor their actions in the present to shape their posthumous identities in the future. This aligns with RQ2ii, as individuals consciously decide whether they want a lasting digital legacy or prefer to avoid one altogether. It also connects to RQiii, highlighting how personal values, social norms and platform affordances influence these decisions. The phenomenon hinges on death as a pivotal disruptor, terminating an individual's control over their digital imprint. As a result, many individuals are choosing to disengage from social media platforms due to concerns about the enduring online presence post-mortem, which they see as diluting the authenticity of human experience. Diverse attitudes emerge regarding the perceived permanence of digital data. Some embrace it as a tool for crafting lasting digital legacies, while others use it as a reason to distance themselves from platforms that immortalise their data. These perspectives profoundly influence how individuals engage with online spaces, often with a view of one's data persisting indefinitely. Such attitudes reflect RQ2iii, revealing how comfort or discomfort with posthumous visibility shapes opinions on using digital spaces for mourning. Creating digital memorials for deceased individuals is viewed positively by some, offering a means to perpetuate their legacy. However, ambiguity surrounds these spaces, pages, or accounts meant for memorialisation, leading to discomfort regarding one's posthumous presence online. This relates back to RQ1, demonstrating how virtual memorials emerge as a process of memorialisation in need of clearer boundaries and designations. Deceased individuals' digital footprints often coexist with the living, blurring the boundary between the two states of existence. The research sheds light on the social and commercial aspects of handling digital assets linked to deceased users. Social media platforms lack definitive guidelines for data retention, leaving users uncertain about data preservation. This research underscores the intricate relationship between individuals, their digital legacies, and online spaces. It reveals how individuals adapt their behaviours and attitudes in response to data permanence beliefs, shaping their digital afterlife management in the present. Clearer delineation and management of digital online memorial spaces are needed to alleviate the potential discomfort that accompanies notions of posthumous presence, reflecting a broader call for ethical frameworks that can reconcile enduring digital data with the finality of human life.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, themes pertaining to the enduring presence of the deceased through their data in online spaces have consistently emerged during conversations with participants and subsequent analysis. The concerns raised by this phenomenon have been a focal point of this research. Virtual memorials have become a significant aspect of modern memorialisation, but they raise issues due to the persistence of posthumous data in online spaces. Individuals often manage their own digital legacies, which may later serve as memorials after their death, but this poses a challenge because control over one's digital legacy can be lost upon passing. To address this, social media platforms should adopt a more thoughtful approach to handling users' digital data, recognising its value for grieving and memorialisation. This requires improved education on data management after death. Many participants only realised the importance of this through the interview process, highlighting the need for increased awareness and education. The presence of friends or loved ones who have passed away and remain memorialised within social media spaces is recognised as a valuable and beneficial resource for participants to facilitate grieving and remembrance. However, this positive sentiment contrasts with a reluctance to have their own digital data persist online. Such reluctance stems from the perception that digital data is permanent and lacks a sense of finality that participants associate with closure. This tension highlights the complex interplay between the desire for continued bonds offered by digital memorials and concerns regarding the perpetual nature of online data.

While composing this thesis, it is worth noting that significant advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) have rendered the ability to mimic or recreate an individual using their posthumous data increasingly accessible. Developments such as these raise pertinent ethical concerns regarding the utilisation of posthumous digital data (Morse, 2024; Bartholomew, 2024). Once such concern revolves around the potential use of this data to construct digital representations of deceased individuals. These technologies underscore the notion of 'digital endurance' (Bassett, 2018; Kasket, 2012), wherein

data may persist indefinitely, reshaping how we perceive memorialisation. These ethical considerations accentuate the need for careful examination and regulation of such technologies in the context of digital memorialisation and posthumous data usage. The responses from interview participants in this research consistently highlighted concerns over their digital legacies and the spaces of memorialisation that these legacies have the potential to become. Consequently, participants adapt their online behaviours and contemplate their own mortality in the context of their online activities. This collective response indicates a heightened awareness among social media users regarding the significance of their deliberate and unintentional contributions to online social spaces. These contributions accumulate to form a digital legacy or 'imprint' that endures after one's death. This research proposes that individuals desire for a finality and as such, seek a sense of closure within their own digital data stored online after death.

As individuals gain more comprehensive understanding of how to navigate digital services that extend virtual existence beyond physical death (Harbinja, 2017; Fordyce et al., 2021), questions about control and authenticity prompt them to regard social media as an inadequate repository for a life legacy. Online environments are perceived by individuals within this study to erode agency and control over this data. Since individuals aspire for a concept of digital data closure similar to that experienced through culturally accepted finalities, the current memorialisation services and legacy features provided by social media platforms fall short of these aspirations. Consequently, virtual spaces offering the means to establish a digital archive or legacy for oneself necessitate a revision of how posthumous digital data is managed. This revision should encompass more user guidance and education, surpassing current levels of instruction, to empower users to preserve or delete their digital legacies with confidence. This directly related to the question posed by RQ2iii, where personal and societal factors (including a desire for privacy, dignity, and clarity) influence how individuals feel these platforms must evolve. Such an approach ultimately aims to afford individuals greater agency in managing their potential future digital memorial spaces (Walter, 2015)

During the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews for this research were necessarily conducted digitally, meaning both sampling and the interview process were adapted

to a remote format. Many of the participants proved highly responsive and quick to engage – presumably due to the flexibility and ease of communication provided by the digital medium. This flexible approach allowed for in-depth discussion often taking place during later hours or from different locations, though it remains difficult to ascertain how this format impacted the openness or emotional depth of participants. Moreover, the pandemic intensified public awareness of topics related to death and grief in a digital context. Suddenly, more individuals were compelled to use social media to cope with loss, a shift that resonates with RQ2i's focus on attitudes toward digital mourning. Furthermore, this research recognises that the participants' experiences reflect predominantly Western attitudes toward digital memorialisation, revealing a limitation in the study's cultural scope. Mourning practises, both physical and virtual, are profoundly shaped by cultural customs (Young et al., 1997; Rosenblatt, 2008), indicating that any proposal for altering online technologies to facilitate digital mourning must account for diverse traditions and norms. For instance, what might be viewed as 'oversharing' in one culture could be understood as a deeply respectful act of collective remembrance in another. Conversely, certain communities may prefer official or religious-based online memorials that differ significantly from Western social media conventions. Consequently, future research would benefit from a broader, cross-cultural investigation into how various groups negotiate the permanence, authenticity, and ethical considerations of posthumous data. Understanding these cultural nuances is essential if online services are to implement truly reflective policies, ensuring that digital mourning practices can accommodate the values and beliefs of different communities worldwide.

This research ultimately emerged in response to the complex interplay between posthumous data on social media and its capacity to elicit unintended mourning in spaces not entirely designed for such purposes. Additionally, it stemmed from an interest in online spaces, particularly virtual memorials, which function as both a means to facilitate memorialisation and a central hub where data relating to the deceased can be shared. By employing an interview-based approach with real social media users, this research extends our understanding of continuing bonds and digital death literature (Brubaker et al., 2013; Cann, 2014). Participants' first-hand accounts reflect the lived experiences of grieving, memorialising and even hosting funerals in

online spaces. These accounts provide valuable insights into the concerns surrounding posthumous digital data and its management after death.

As a result, the study focuses on the virtual memorial. To answer RQ1 ('How are virtual memorials emerging as a process of memorialisation?'), the research reveals the methods by which dedicated services for post-mortem data serve as beneficial tools for grief and memorialisation while also acknowledging their limitations. Through a combination of digital ethnography, and participant interview, it posits that social media users actively engage in a process of digitally archiving the self (Acker and Brubaker, 2014; Marwick and Ellison, 2012), guided by platform structures and user-driven resources. Not only do participants consider the present implications of their actions, but they also manifest an 'imagined future' in which today's archiving efforts coalesce into a posthumous representation of the self in memorial form.

Similarly, in addressing RQ2i, RQ2ii and RQ2iii ('*What are the attitudes towards utilising digital spaces for mourning*?' / '*Do individuals want a digital legacy*?' / '*What influences the emergence of these views?*'), this research uncovers how participants weigh digital media's ability to preserve or erase content, how they determine the value of an enduring online presence, and how personal and societal factors converge in shaping these decisions. Findings demonstrate three key developments: (1) participants mediate their archiving activities with an eye toward the posthumous self, actively curating data to preserve an 'authentic' identity after death. (2) Many participants remain vigilant about oversharing, believing that unregulated or inauthentic data can compromise their archive, or worse, extend a distorted legacy into the future. (3) While some embrace digital legacies as resources for future generations, others express a discomfort with the concept of perpetually accessible data, resulting in calls for deletion or finality to maintain control over their imprint. Hence, the research highlights a range of responses to posthumous data, from preserving it to erasing it altogether, reflecting divergent attitudes on digital immortality.

By understanding these processes, it becomes evident that individuals' perceptions of their digital legacy hinge on both the architecture of social platforms and cultural expectations around grieving. This is where RQ2iii holds particular relevance: participants' choices are significantly influences by the perceived permanence of data,

the perceived social norms of authenticity, and the structural limitations of the digital medium. The tensions around continuing bonds (Brubaker et al., 2013) highlight how being remembered can conflict with the desire for finality. Consequently, this research argues that the digital imprint is a distinct entity requiring proactive navigation. Digital platforms serve as facilitators, expanding memorialisation beyond geographic constraints while simultaneously introducing new ethical and emotional complexities. The digital legacies – comprising data posted online – carry significant emotional weight for participants, leading many to request some closure for their digital data. In doing so, participants mirror physical rituals, emphasising the need for an analogous sense of ending in digital contexts (Walter, 2015). This research proposes that a similar level of respectful due process be afforded to posthumous digital data, which can linger online much like a headstone in the physical world. Such data continues to affect those who encounter it, both emotionally and algorithmically, as social media's reminders and notifications can unexpectedly reintroduce memories of the deceased. Several participants likened these experience to an eerie sense of intrusion; in some cases, they believed these algorithms to be manipulative. In Mabel's (Participant 9) words, *'They are not continuing your being, they are manipulating your memory.'*

Without processes that mirror the care we afford physical remains; many participants wish to see their extant online presence online removed post-mortem to maintain privacy and avoid misrepresentation. Just as failure to respect the post-mortem wishes of the deceased have the potential to enact harm physically (Belliotti, 2011), so too can disregarding digital preferences enact harm online (Morse & Birnhack, 2020). Yet the trove of social data left behind also serves as a potential resource – historically valuable and culturally significant. In line with RQ2ii, participants weigh the tension between preserving these troves for the collective memory and eliminating them for personal dignity. Social media companies therefore face an imperative to introduce ethical methods for preserving or deleting data, guided by transparent protocols that reflect a respectful due process. As discussed, we must confront the imminent reality: what becomes of post-mortem data when our social media platforms themselves transform into digital graveyards? If digital legacies are imbued with such emotional value, a compelling framework must delineate the fate of this data at an account's creation or at least pre-emptively. Users deserve well-defined choices – be it memorialisation, deletion, or curation – that align with RQ2iii's emphasis on personal

and societal values. Accounts belonging to the deceased could be relocated to dedicated memorials spaces with a clear boundary from the living. Here, a digital funeral paradigm emerges, proposing a method of respectfully retiring one's data and granting closure to the digital self.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that participants across diverse contexts, despite having varied preferences for memorialisation, consistently express an underlying desire for agency over their digital legacy. Social media platforms that fail to provide a robust, reflexive, and ethically grounded approach to post-mortem data management risk alienating users who reject the notion of an unending online presence. If virtual memorials are to serve as a truly beneficial process of memorialisation, they require systematic rethinking – a carefully designed blend of user education, platform policy, and rituals that enable closure (RQ1, RQ2i, RQ2ii, RQ2iii). Until these measures are implemented, the horizon of digital afterlives remains as uncertain as it is poignant, with users left to navigate the evolving landscape of data permanence, posthumous identity, and the essential quest for finality.

8. References

Acker, A. and Brubaker, J.R. (2014) Death, memorialization, and social media: A platform perspective for personal archives. Archivaria, 77, pp.1-23.

Ambrosino, B. (2016) Facebook is a growing and unstoppable digital graveyard, BBC Future. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160313-the-unstoppable-rise-of-the-facebook-dead (Accessed: 15 August 2021).

Ariès, P. (1976) Western Attitudes Toward Death purity

Bailey, L., Bell, J. and Kennedy, D. (2015) Continuing social presence of the dead: Exploring suicide bereavement through online memorialisation. New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia, 21(1-2), pp.72-86

Bartholomew, M., (2024). A Right to Be Left Dead. Cal. L. Rev., 112, p.1591.

Bassett, D. J. (2018). Digital afterlives: From social media platforms to thanabots and beyond. In Death and Anti-Death, 16: 200 Years After Frankenstein.

Bassett, D.J. (2015) Who wants to live forever? Living, dying and grieving in our digital society. Social Sciences, 4(4), pp.1127-1139.

Bell, J., Bailey, L. and Kennedy, D. (2015) '"we do it to keep him alive": Bereaved individuals' experiences of online suicide memorials and continuing bonds', Mortality, 20(4), pp. 375–389.

Bellamy, C., Arnold, M., Gibbs, M., Nansen, B. and Kohn, T. (2014) Consumer Issues for Planning and Managing Digital Legacies [Leading Edge]. IEEE Technology and Society Magazine, 33(3), pp.26-31.

Belliotti, R.A. (2011) Posthumous harm: Why the dead are still vulnerable. Rowman & Littlefield.

Bennett, G. and Bennett, K.M., (2000). The presence of the dead: An empirical study. Mortality, 5(2), pp.139-157.

Berg, L.R.V., (1995). Living room pilgrimages: Television's cyclical commemoration of the assassination anniversary of John F. Kennedy. Communications Monographs, 62(1), pp.47-64.

Beverland, M.B. and Farrelly, F.J., (2010). The quest for authenticity in consumption: Consumers' purposive choice of authentic cues to shape experienced outcomes. Journal of consumer research, 36(5), pp.838-856.

Bingaman, J., (2022). "Dude I've never felt this way towards a celebrity death": Parasocial grieving and the collective mourning of Kobe Bryant on Reddit. OMEGA-Journal of death and dying, 86(2), pp.364-381.

Bitusikova, A., (2020). COVID-19 and Funeral-by-Zoom. Urbanities. Journal of Urban Ethnography, pp.51-55.

Black, D. (2013) The digital soul. In Handbook of Research on Technoself: Identity in a Technological Society (pp. 157-174). IGI Global.

Bloom, L.R. (1996) Stories of one's own: Nonunitary subjectivity in narrative representation. Qualitative Inquiry, 2(2), pp.176-197.

Bondi, L., (2016). Emotional geographies. Routledge.

Boyd, D. and Heer, J., (2006), January. Profiles as conversation: Networked identity performance on Friendster. In Proceedings of the 39th annual Hawaii international conference on system sciences (HICSS'06) (Vol. 3, pp. 59c-59c). IEEE.

Braman, J., Thomas, U., Vincenti, G., Dudley, A. and Rodgers, K. (2014) Preparing your digital legacy: assessing awareness of digital natives. In The Social Classroom: Integrating Social Network Use in Education (pp. 208-223). IGI Global.

Brubaker, J., Hayes, G. and Dourish, P. (2013) Beyond the Grave: Facebook as a Site for the Expansion of Death and Mourning. The Information Society, 29(3), pp.152-163.

Brubaker, J.R., Dombrowski, L.S., Gilbert, A.M., Kusumakaulika, N. and Hayes, G.R. (2014) Stewarding a legacy: responsibilities and relationships in the management of post-mortem data. Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 4157-4166).

Byrd, G. (2016) Immortal bits: Managing our digital legacies. Computer, 49(03), pp.100-103. C1880±1914. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Liverpool.

Cacciatore, J. and Frances, A., (2022). DSM-5-TR turns normal grief into a mental disorder. The Lancet Psychiatry, 9(7), p.e32.

Cann, C.K. (2014) Virtual afterlives: Grieving the dead in the twenty-first century. University Press of Kentucky.

Carballo, R. (2023) Using A.I. to talk to the dead, The New York Times. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/11/technology/ai-chatbots-dead-relatives.html (Accessed: 01 June 2025).

Carden, C. and Gibson, M. (2021) Living on beyond the body: The digital soul of Black Mirror. The Moral Uncanny in Black Mirror, pp.141-152.

Carlson, A.C. and Hocking, J.E., (1988). Strategies of redemption at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. Western Journal of Communication (includes Communication Reports), 52(3), pp.203-215.

Carroll, B. and Landry, K. (2010) Logging On and Letting Out: Using Online Social Networks to Grieve and to Mourn. Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society, 30(5), pp.341-349.

Carroll, E. and Romano, J. (2010) Your digital afterlife: When Facebook, Flickr and Twitter are your estate, what's your legacy?. New Riders.

Casey, E. (2013) The fate of place: A philosophical history. Univ of California Press.

Cerrillo-i-Martínez, A. (2018) 'How do we provide the digital footprint with eternal rest? Some criteria for Legislation Regulating Digital wills', Computer Law & Security Review, 34(5), pp. 1119–1130.

Cheung, C., Chiu, P. and Lee, M. (2011). Online social networks: Why do students use facebook? Computers in Human Behavior, 27(4), pp.1337-1343.

Christensen, D.R. and Sandvik, K. (2016) Sharing death: Conceptions of time at a Danish online memorial site. Taming Time, Timing Death (pp. 99-118). Routledge.

Christensen, D.R., Hård af Segerstad, Y., Kasperowski, D. and Sandvik, K. (2017) Bereaved Parents' Online Grief Communities: De-Tabooing Practices or Relation-Building Grief-Ghettos?. Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 61(1), pp.58-72.

Church, S. (2013) Digital Gravescapes: Digital Memorializing on Facebook. The Information Society, 29(3), pp.184-189.

Conant, R.D., (2014). Memories of the death and life of a spouse: The role of images and sense of presence in grief. In Continuing bonds (pp. 179-196). Taylor & Francis.

Crabtree, B.F. and DiCicco-Bloom, B. (2006) The qualitative research interview. Medical Education, 40(4), pp.314-318.

Cushing, A.L. (2013) A balance of primary and secondary values: Exploring a digital legacy. International Journal of Knowledge Content Development & Technology, 3(2).

Cuthbertson, A. (2024) Ai that simulates dead people risks 'haunting' surviving relatives, The Independent. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/ai-dead-chatbot-deadbot-deepfake-b2542107.html (Accessed: 01 June 2024).

de Sousa, A.N. (2015) Death in the city: What happens when all our cemeteries are full? The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/jan/21/death-in-the-city-what-happens-cemeteries-full-cost-dying (Accessed: 03 May 2020).

Degroot, J.M. (2012) ‘Maintaining relational continuity with the deceased on Facebook’, OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying, 65(3), pp. 195–212.

Doka, K.J., (1989). Disenfranchised grief. Bereavement care, 18(3), pp.37-39.

Doss, E., (2006). Spontaneous memorials and contemporary modes of mourning in America. Material Religion, 2(3), pp.294-318.

Durkheim, E., (2016). The elementary forms of religious life. In Social theory re-wired (pp. 52-67). Routledge.

Döveling, K., Harju, A. and Sommer, D. (2018). From Mediatized Emotion to Digital Affect Cultures: New Technologies and Global Flows of Emotion. Social Media + Society, 4(1).

Döveling, K., Harju, A.A. and Shavit, V. (2015) Researching digital memorial culture and death online: Current analysis and future perspectives. Medien Und Altern, 6, pp.76-81.

Edwards, L. and Harbinja, E. (2013) “'what happens to my Facebook profile when I die?' : Legal issues around transmission of Digital Assets on death,” SSRN Electronic Journal [Preprint].

Eng, K. (2015). Design for dying: A TED Fellow thinks deeply about the architecture of death. [online] TED Blog. Available at: https://blog.ted.com/the-architecture-of-death-ted-fellow-alison-killing-rethinks-design-for-the-dying/ [Accessed 20 May 2019].

Erickson, R.J., (1995). The importance of authenticity for self and society. Symbolic interaction, 18(2), pp.121-144.

Etlin, R. (1984) The Architecture of Death, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Flick, U. (2002). Qualitative research in psychology: A textbook.

Foot, K., Warnick, B. and Schneider, S. (2005) Web-Based Memorializing After September 11: Toward a Conceptual Framework. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 11(1), pp.72-96.

Fordyce, R., Nansen, B., Arnold, M., Kohn, T. and Gibbs, M., 2021. Automating digital afterlives. Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection, pp.115-136.

Forman, A., Kern, R. and Gil-Egui, G. (2012) Death and mourning as sources of community participation in online social networks: R.I.P. pages in Facebook. First Monday, 17(9).

Foster, T., Gilmer, M., Davies, B., Dietrich, M., Barrera, M., Fairclough, D., Vannatta, K. and Gerhardt, C. (2011) Comparison of Continuing Bonds Reported by Parents and Siblings After a Child's Death from Cancer. Death Studies, 35(5), pp.420-440.

Future Messages by Memories - Modern Day Time Capsule (2020). 25 September. Available at: https://youtu.be/_pqcnDTGpEY?si=NsPPUkf1qL13f7Pj (Accessed: 25 November 2020).

Galvão, V.F., Maciel, C., Pereira, R., Gasparini, I., Viterbo, J. and Bicharra Garcia, A.C. (2021) Discussing human values in digital immortality: towards a value-oriented perspective. Journal of the Brazilian Computer Society, 27(1), pp.1-26.

Galvão, V.F., Maciel, C., Pereira, V.C., Garcia, A.C.B., Pereira, R. and Viterbo, J. (2021) Posthumous data at stake: an overview of digital immortality issues. In Proceedings of the XX Brazilian Symposium on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 1-8).

Ganz, J. (2012) How that tupac hologram at Coachella worked, NPR. Available at: https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2012/04/17/150820261/how-that-tupac-hologram-at-coachella-worked (Accessed: 01 June 2024).

Garde-Hansen, J., Hoskins, A. and Reading, A. eds. (2009) Save as... digital memories. Springer.

Gaur, R.C. and Tripathi, M. (2012) Digital Preservation of Electronic Resources. DESIDOC Journal of Library & Information Technology, 32(4).

Giaxoglou, K., (2014) 'RIP man... u are missed and loved by many': entextualising moments of mourning on a Facebook Rest in Peace group site. Thanatos, 3(1), pp.10-28.

Gibbs, M., Meese, J., Arnold, M., Nansen, B. and Carter, M. (2015) #Funeral and Instagram: death, social media, and platform vernacular. Information, Communication & Society, 18(3), pp.255-268.

Gibson, M. (2007) Death and mourning in technologically mediated culture. Health Sociology Review, 16(5), pp.415-424.

Gibson, M. (2011) Death and grief in the landscape: Private memorials in public space. Cultural Studies Review, 17(1), p.146.

Gilpin, D.R., Palazzolo, E.T. and Brody, N., (2010). Socially mediated authenticity. Journal of communication management, 14(3), pp.258-278.

Gonçalves Júnior, J., Moreira, M.M. and Rolim Neto, M.L., (2020). Silent cries, intensify the pain of the life that is ending: the COVID-19 is robbing families of the chance to say a final goodbye. Frontiers in psychiatry, 11, p.570773.

Gould, H., Kohn, T. and Gibbs, M., (2019). Uploading the ancestors: Experiments with digital Buddhist altars in contemporary Japan. Death Studies, 43(7), pp.456-465.

Granek, L., (2017). Is Grief a Disease?: The Medicalization of Grief by the Psy-Disciplines in the Twenty-First Century. In Handbook of the Sociology of Death, Grief, and Bereavement(pp. 264-277). Routledge.

Greenburg, Z.O. (2014) Man in the translucent material: How virtual Michael Jackson came to be, Forbes. Available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2014/06/24/man-in-the-mirror-how-virtual-michael-jackson-came-to-be/ (Accessed: 01 June 2024).

Grimm, C. and Chiasson, S. (2014) February. Survey on the fate of digital footprints after death. In Workshop on Usable Security (USEC), Internet Society.

Gulotta, R., Odom, W., Forlizzi, J. and Faste, H., (2013) Digital artifacts as legacy: exploring the lifespan and value of digital data. In Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 1813-1822).

Handler, R., (1986). Authenticity. Anthropology today, 2(1), pp.2-4.

Harbinja, E. (2014) Virtual Worlds-a legal post-mortem account. SCRIPTed, 11, p.273.

Harbinja, E., (2017). Legal aspects of transmission of digital assets on death.

Harju, A. (2015) Socially shared mourning: construction and consumption of collective memory. New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia, 21(1-2), pp.123-145.

Hern, A. (2024) Digital recreations of dead people need urgent regulation, Ai Ethicists Say, The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/article/2024/may/09/digital-recreations-of-dead-people-need-urgent-regulation-ai-ethicists-say (Accessed: 01 June 2024).

Hill, C.E., Knox, S., Thompson, B.J., Williams, E.N., Hess, S.A. and Ladany, N. (2005) Consensual qualitative research: An update. Journal of counseling psychology, 52(2), p.196.

Hiller, H.H. and DiLuzio, L. (2004) The interviewee and the research interview: Analysing a neglected dimension in research. Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie, 41(1), pp.1-26.

Hjorth, L. and Gu, K. (2012) The place of emplaced visualities: A case study of smartphone visuality and location-based social media in Shanghai, China. Continuum, 26(5), pp.699-713.

Hjorth, L. and Hinton, S. (2019) Understanding social media. Sage.

Hjorth, L., Wilken, R. and Gu, K. (2012) Ambient intimacy: A case study of the iPhone, presence, and location-based social networking in Shanghai, China. Studying Mobile Media (pp. 51-70). Routledge.

Hogan, B., (2010). The presentation of self in the age of social media: Distinguishing performances and exhibitions online. Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society, 30(6), pp.377-386.

Holt, J., Nicholson, J. and Smeddinck, J.D. (2021) From personal data to digital legacy: Exploring conflicts in the sharing, security and privacy of post-mortem data. Proceedings of the Web Conference 2021 (pp. 2745-2756).

Holt, J., Smeddinck, J.D., Nicholson, J., Vlachokyriakos, V. and Durrant, A.C., (2024). Post-mortem information management: exploring contextual factors in appropriate personal data access after death. Human–Computer Interaction, pp.1-36.

Holtz, P., Kronberger, N. and Wagner, W. (2012) Analyzing internet forums. Journal of Media Psychology.

Howard, J. (2021) Here's what will happen when we run out of space to bury the dead, BBC Science Focus Magazine. Available at: https://www.sciencefocus.com/the-human-body/deal-with-the-dead (Accessed: 05 March 2024).

Hurtado Hurtado, J., (2023). Towards a postmortal society of virtualised ancestors? The Virtual Deceased Person and the preservation of the social bond. Mortality, 28(1), pp.90-105.

Häkkilä, J., Colley, A., Kalving, M. and Forsman, M.T. (2020) Exploring pervasive displays for cemeteries and memorial sites. Personal and Ubiquitous Computing, pp.1-11.

Irwin, M. (2015) Mourning 2.0—Continuing Bonds Between the Living and the Dead on Facebook. OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying, 72(2), pp.119-150.

Jansson, I.M. and Huvila, I. (2019) Social tagging and commenting: theoretical perspectives. InParticipatory Archives: Theory and Practice, sous la dir. de Alexandra Eveleigh et Edward Benoit, 3, pp.33-44.

Jenkins, S. (2017) A lesson from Grenfell Tower: mourn in public, but grieve in private | Simon Jenkins. [online] the Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/22/lesson-grenfell-finsbury-park-public-mourning-private-grief-live-lived-forward [Accessed 19 May 2019].

Jiménez-Alonso, B. and Brescó de Luna, I. (2022) "Griefbots. A new way of communicating with the dead?," Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science [Preprint]. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-022-09679-3.

Jonsson, A. and Walter, T. (2017) Continuing bonds and place. Death studies, 41(7), pp.406-415.

Jorgensen-Earp, C. and Lanzilotti, L. (1998) Public memory and private grief: The construction of shrines at the sites of public tragedy. Quarterly Journal of Speech 84(2), pp.150-170.

Kaleem, J. (2017) What happens to your Facebook profile after you die? HuffPost UK. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/death-facebook-dead-profiles_n_2245397 (Accessed: 28 May 2019).

Karppi, T. (2013) Death proof: on the biopolitics and noopolitics of memorializing dead Facebook users. Culture Machine, 14.

Kasket, E. (2012) Continuing bonds in the age of social networking: Facebook as a modern-day medium. Bereavement Care, 31(2), pp.62-69.

Kern, R., Forman, A. and Gil-Egui, G. (2013) R.I.P.: Remain in perpetuity. Facebook memorial pages. Telematics and Informatics, 30(1), pp.2-10.

Kern, R.L. and Gil-Egui, G. (2017) Women behaving badly: Negative posts on Facebook memorial pages. Information, Communication & Society, 20(11), pp.1756-1770.

Kernis, M.H. and Goldman, B.M., (2006). A multicomponent conceptualization of authenticity: Theory and research. Advances in experimental social psychology, 38, pp.283-357.

Klaassens, M., Groote, P. and Vanclay, F. (2013). Expressions of Private Mourning in Public Space: The Evolving Structure of Spontaneous and Permanent Roadside Memorials in the Netherlands. Death Studies, 37(2), pp.145-171.

Klass, D. (2006) Continuing conversation about continuing bonds. Death studies, 30(9), pp.843-858.

Klass, D. and Walter, T. (2001) Processes of grieving: How bonds are continued.

Klastrup, L. (2014) “I didn't know her, but…”: parasocial mourning of mediated deaths on Facebook RIP pages. New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia, 21(1-2), pp.146-164.

Kneifel, J., (2023). Memento Flori: Speculative design approaches to memorials of the future.

Knox, S. and Burkard, A. (2009) Qualitative research interviews. Psychotherapy Research, 19(4-5), pp.566-575.

Kolbuszewski, J., (1996). Cmentarze.

Krippendorff, K. (2018) Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology. Sage publications.

Krueger, J. and Osler, L. (2022) Communing with the dead online: chatbots, grief, and continuing bonds. Journal of Consciousness Studies, 29(9-10), pp.222-252.

Kvale, S. (1994) Interviews: an introduction to qualitive research interviewing. Sage.

Labrecque, L.I., Zanjani, S.H. and Milne, G.R., (2012). Authenticity in online communications examining antecedents and consequences. In Online consumer behavior (pp. 133-156). Routledge.

Lambert, A.J., Scherer, L.N., Rogers, C. and Jacoby, L., (2009). How does collective memory create a sense of the collective?. Memory in mind and culture, pp.194-217.

Lapper, E. (2017) How Has Social Media Changed the Way We Grieve? (pp. 127-141). transcript.

Leon, H. (2020) Deceased sightings on Google Street View take creepy to a new level, Observer. Available at: https://observer.com/2020/01/google-street-view-deceased-sightings/ (Accessed: 15 January 2023).

Liew, K., Pang, N. and Chan, B. (2013) New media and new politics with old cemeteries and disused railways: advocacy goes digital in Singapore. Asian Journal of Communication, 23(6), pp.605-619.

Lingel, J. (2013) The Digital Remains: Social Media and Practices of Online Grief. The Information Society, 29(3), pp.190-195.

Lingel, J., 2013. The digital remains: Social media and practices of online grief. The Information Society, 29(3), pp.190-195.

Lira, M.F., Maciel, C., Trevisan, D., Barbosa, S.D.J. and Bim, S.A. (2022) Mine, yours, ours: family discussions on digital legacy. Proceedings of the 21st Brazilian Symposium on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 1-12).

Locasto, M.E., Massimi, M. and DePasquale, P.J. (2011) Security and privacy considerations in digital death. In Proceedings of the 2011 New Security Paradigms Workshop (pp. 1-10).

Lune, H. and Berg, B.L., 2017. Qualitative research methods for the social sciences. Pearson.

Luoma-Aho, V., Pirttimäki, T., Maity, D., Munnukka, J. and Reinikainen, H., 2021. Primed authenticity: How priming impacts authenticity perception of social media influencers. In Social Media Influencers in Strategic Communication (pp. 119-132). Routledge.

Lupton, D. (2017) Digital bodies. In Routledge handbook of physical cultural studies (pp. 200-208). Routledge.

Maciel, C., Pereira, V.C. and Sztern, M. (2015) 'Internet users' legal and technical perspectives on Digital Legacy Management for post-mortem interaction', Human Interface and the Management of Information. Information and Knowledge Design, pp. 627–639.

MacNeil, A., Findlay, B., Bimman, R., Hocking, T., Barclay, T. and Ho, J., 2023. Exploring the use of virtual funerals during the COVID-19 pandemic: a scoping review. OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying, 88(2), pp.425-448.

Maddrell, A. (2013). Living with the deceased: absence, presence and absence-presence. cultural geographies, 20(4), pp.501-522.

Maddrell, A. (2016) Mapping grief. A conceptual framework for understanding the spatial dimensions of bereavement, mourning and remembrance. Social & Cultural Geography, 17(2), pp.166-188.

Maddrell, A. and Sidaway, J. (2016). Deathscapes. London: Routledge.

Manago, A.M., Graham, M.B., Greenfield, P.M. and Salimkhan, G., 2008. Self-presentation and gender on MySpace. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 29(6), pp.446-458.

Marwick, A. and Ellison, N.B. (2012) “There isn't wifi in heaven!” Negotiating visibility on Facebook memorial pages. Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 56(3), pp.378-400.

Marwick, A.E. and Boyd, D. (2011) I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. New media & society, 13(1), pp.114-133.

Marín-Cortés, A., Acosta, S., Gómez, F., García, A. and Quintero, S. (2023) Identification and validation of grief in Facebook groups on mourning. Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 17(1).

Matsuda, Y., Takebayashi, Y., Nakajima, S. and Ito, M., 2021. Managing grief of bereaved families during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan. Frontiers in Psychiatry, 12, p.637237.

Maxwell, L. (2020) Digital Literacy and Digital Legacy. Library Technology Reports, 56(5), pp.7-11.

Mayer, E. (2014) Inadvertent Algorithmic Cruelty. [online] Meyerweb.com. Available at: <https://meyerweb.com/eric/thoughts/2014/12/24/inadvertent-algorithmic-cruelty/> [Accessed 18 September 2021].

Mayring, P. (2004) Qualitative content analysis. A companion to qualitative research, 1, pp.159-176.

McEwen, R. and Scheaffer, K. (2013) Virtual mourning and memory construction on Facebook: Here are the terms of use. Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 50(1), pp.1-10.

McManus, J. (2015) The world is running out of burial space, BBC News. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31837964 (Accessed: 05 January 2025).

McManus, J. (2015) The world is running out of burial space. [online] BBC News. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31837964 [Accessed 19 May 2019].

Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, 'Of Other Spaces', Diacritics, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, p. 25.

Mitchell, L.M., Stephenson, P.H., Cadell, S. and Macdonald, M.E. (2012) Death and grief on-line: Virtual memorialization and changing concepts of childhood death and parental bereavement on the Internet. Health Sociology Review, 21(4), pp.413-431.

Mitra, A., 2001. Marginal voices in cyberspace. New media & society, 3(1), pp.29-48.

Moncur, W. and Kirk, D., 2014, June. An emergent framework for digital memorials. In Proceedings of the 2014 conference on Designing interactive systems (pp. 965-974).

Morehouse, K.J. and Crandall, H.M. (2014) Virtual grief. Communication Research Trends, 33(1), pp.26-28.

Morse, T., & Birnhack, M. (2020). The posthumous privacy paradox: Privacy preferences and behavior regarding digital remains. New Media & Society.

Morse, T., 2024. Digital necromancy: Users' perceptions of digital afterlife and posthumous communication technologies. Information, Communication & Society, 27(2), pp.240-256.

Nagy, A. and Kiszl, P. (2021) Personal digital legacy preservation by libraries. Journal of Librarianship and Information Science, 53(3), pp.382-397.

Nansen, B., Kohn, T., Arnold, M., van Ryn, L. and Gibbs, M. (2017) Social media in the funeral industry: On the digitization of grief. Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 61(1), pp.73-89.

Neimeyer, R.A. and Noppe-Brandon, G. (2012) Attachment at a distance: Grief therapy in the virtual world. Dying, death, and grief in an online universe: For counselors and educators, pp.103-118.

Odom, W., Sellen, A., Harper, R. and Thereska, E. (2012) May. Lost in translation: understanding the possession of digital things in the cloud. In Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on human factors in computing systems (pp. 781-790).

Panka, D., 2018. Transparent Subjects: Digital Identity in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Charlie Brooker's "Be Right Back". Science Fiction Studies, 45(2), pp.308-324.

Paul-Choudhury, S. (2011) Digital legacy: the fate of your online soul. New Scientist, 210(2809), pp.41-43.

Peoples, C. and Hetherington, M. (2015) 'The cloud afterlife: Managing your Digital legacy', 2015 IEEE International Symposium on Technology and Society (ISTAS) [Preprint].

Phillips, W. (2011) LOLing at tragedy: Facebook trolls, memorial pages and resistance to grief online. First Monday, 16(12).

Phillips, W. (2011) Meet the trolls. Index on Censorship, 40(2), pp.68-76.

Pitsillides, S., Jeffries, J. and Conreen, M. (2012) Museum of the self and digital death. Heritage and social media, pp.56-68.

Pitsillides, S., Waller, M. and Fairfax, D. (2013) Digital Death: What Role Does Digital Information Play in the Way We are (Re) Membered? Digital Identity and Social Media (pp. 75-90). IGI Global.

Powell, M., Hockey, J., Green, T. and Clayden, A. (2011) I bury boxes, not bodies': identity, emotionality, and natural burial. ASA Online, 1(3), pp.1-18.

Prates, R.O., Rosson, M.B. and de Souza, C.S. (2015) Making decisions about digital legacy with Google's inactive account manager. In Human-Computer Interaction–INTERACT 2015: 15th IFIP TC 13 International Conference, Bamberg, Germany, September 14-18, 2015, Proceedings, Part I 15 (pp. 201-209). Springer International Publishing.

Raun, T., 2017. " Talking about his dead child, again!" Emotional self-management in relation to online mourning. First Monday.

Recuber, T. (2012) The prosumption of commemoration: Disasters, digital memory banks, and online collective memory. American Behavioral Scientist, 56(4), pp.531-549.

Refslund Christensen, D. and Gotved, S. (2015) Online memorial culture: An introduction. New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia, 21(1-2), pp.1-9.

Reynoso, R (2021) Facebook Using AI to Stop Notifications about Dead Friends. [online] Learn.g2.com. Available at: <https://learn.g2.com/facebook-using-ai> [Accessed 04 November 2021].

Rinvolucri, B. and Freedland, J. (2017) One tragedy after another – what's this summer doing to us? | Jonathan Freedland. [online] the Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/video/2017/jun/21/one-tragedy-after-another-whats-this-summer-doing-to-us?CMP=twt_gu [Accessed 20 May 2019].

Roberts, P. (2004) Here today and cyberspace tomorrow: Memorials and bereavement support on the web. Generations, 28(2), pp.41-46.

Roberts, P. (2006) From my space to our space: The functions of Web memorials in bereavement. In The Forum (Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 1-4).

Roberts, P. and Vidal, L.A. (2000) Perpetual care in cyberspace: A portrait of memorials on the web. OMEGA-journal of Death and Dying, 40(4), pp.521-545.

Roberts, P., 2004. The living and the dead: Community in the virtual cemetery. OMEGA-journal of Death and Dying, 49(1), pp.57-76.

Roberts, R.J., 2022. You're Only Mostly Dead: Protecting Your Digital Ghost from Unauthorized Resurrection. Fed. Comm. LJ, 75, p.273.

Robinson, L., Cotten, S.R., Ono, H., Quan-Haase, A., Mesch, G., Chen, W., Schulz, J., Hale, T.M. and Stern, M.J., 2015. Digital inequalities and why they matter. Information, communication & society, 18(5), pp.569-582.

Rogers, C.V. and Medley Jr, F.W., 1988. Language with a purpose: Using authentic materials in the foreign language classroom. Foreign Language Annals, 21(5), pp.467-478.

Roland, L. and Bawden, D. (2012) The Future of History: Investigating the Preservation of Information in the Digital Age. Library & Information History, 28(3), pp.220-236.

Ronchi, A. (2007) Digital fragility and our legacy to future generations. In Establishing Memory: Building an Archive for our Great Grandchildren (pp. 1-13). KHM.

Root, B. and Exline, J. (2013) The Role of Continuing Bonds in Coping With Grief: Overview and Future Directions. Death Studies, 38(1), pp.1-8.

Rosenblatt, P.C., 2008. Grief across cultures: A review and research agenda.

Rothenberg, J. (1995) Ensuring the Longevity of Digital Documents. Scientific American, 272(1), pp.42-47.

Rugg, J., 2000. Defining the place of burial: what makes a cemetery a cemetery?. Mortality, 5(3), pp.259-275.

Ryle, G., (1949) The concept of mind. Barnes & Noble.

Sabra, J. (2017) “I Hate When They Do That!” Netiquette in Mourning and Memorialization Among Danish Facebook Users. Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 61(1), pp.24-40.

Saco, D. (2002) Cybering democracy. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Saffer, A., Sommerfeldt, E. and Taylor, M. (2013) The effects of organizational Twitter interactivity on organization–public relationships. Public Relations Review, 39(3), pp.213-215.

Sanderson, J. and Hope Cheong, P. (2010) Tweeting prayers and communicating grief over Michael Jackson online. Bulletin of science, technology & society, 30(5), pp.328-340.

Santino, J. (2016) Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Saunders, Rutkowski, Genuchten van, Vogel and Orrego (2011) Virtual Space and Place: Theory And Test. MIS Quarterly, 35(4), p.1079.

Schneider, S.M. and Foot, K.A. (2004) The web as an object of study. New media & society, 6(1), pp.114-122.

Sedikides, C., Lenton, A.P., Slabu, L. and Thomaes, S., 2019. Sketching the contours of state authenticity. Review of General Psychology, 23(1), pp.73-88.

Seidman, I. (2006) Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences. Teachers college press.

Seigfried-Spellar, K. and Chowdhury, S. (2017) Death and Lulz: Understanding the personality characteristics of RIP trolls. First Monday, 22(11).

Senie, H.F., 2006. Mourning in protest: Spontaneous memorials and the sacralization of public space. In Spontaneous shrines and the public memorialization of death(pp. 41-56). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.

Shear, M.K., Simon, N., Wall, M., Zisook, S., Neimeyer, R., Duan, N., Reynolds, C., Lebowitz, B., Sung, S., Ghesquiere, A. and Gorscak, B., 2011. Complicated grief and related bereavement issues for DSM-5. Depression and anxiety, 28(2), pp.103-117.

Shuy, R.W., Holstein, J.A. and Gubrium, J.F. (2003) Inside Interviewing. New Lenses, New Concerns. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Silverman, Phyllis R., Dennis Klass, and Steven L. Nickman, eds. Continuing bonds: New understandings of grief. Taylor & Francis, 1996.

Steinhart, E. (2007) Survival as a digital ghost. Minds and Machines, 17(3), pp.261-271.

Stokes, P. (2012) Ghosts in the machine: do the dead live on in Facebook?. Philosophy & Technology, 25(3), pp.363-379.

Stokes, P. (2015) Deletion as second death: the moral status of digital remains. Ethics and Information Technology, 17(4), pp.237-248.

Stroebe, M., Schut, H. and Boerner, K. (2010) Continuing bonds in adaptation to bereavement: Toward theoretical integration. Clinical psychology review, 30(2), pp.259-268.

Stroebe, M., Schut, H. and Stroebe, W. (2005) Attachment in Coping With Bereavement: A Theoretical Integration. Review of General Psychology, 9(1), pp.48-66.

Sudan, A., Sabharwal, M., Ismail, W.K.W. and Kumar, Y. (2020) Privacy Rights for Digital Assets and Digital Legacy Right for Posterity: A Survey. In Advances in Data and Information Sciences: Proceedings of ICDIS 2019 (pp. 521-529). Springer Singapore.

SunLife. (2023) Funeral costs in the UK, SunLife. Available at: https://www.sunlife.co.uk/funeral-costs/ (Accessed: 03 June 2023).

Tandy, C. (2003) Unburying the dead: Posthumous harms and posthumous benefits—A solution to the missing subject problem. Ann Arbor: Ria University Press.

Tarlow, S., 2000. Landscapes of memory: the nineteenth-century garden cemetery. European journal of archaeology, 3(2), pp.217-239.

Tatsuki, D., 2006. What is authenticity. The language teacher, 16(5), pp.17-21.

Tinmaz, H., Fanea-Ivanovici, M. and Baber, H., 2023. A snapshot of digital literacy. Library Hi Tech News, 40(1), pp.20-23.

Toma, C.L., Hancock, J.T. and Ellison, N.B., 2008. Separating fact from fiction: An examination of deceptive self-presentation in online dating profiles. Personality and social psychology bulletin, 34(8), pp.1023-1036.

Trilling, L., 2009. Sincerity and authenticity. Harvard University Press.

Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H. and Bondas, T. (2013) Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. Nursing & Health Sciences, 15(3), pp.398-405.

Van Dijck, J. (2007) Mediated memories in the digital age. Stanford University Press.

Veale, K. (2004) online memorialisation: The web as a collective memorial landscape for remembering the dead. The Fibreculture Journal, 3, pp.1-18.
Velasquez, S.J. (2023) How ai is resurrecting dead actors, BBC News. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20230718-how-ai-is-bringing-film-stars-back-from-the-dead (Accessed: 01 May 2024).

Waagstein, A. (2014) An exploratory study of digital legacy among death aware people. Thanatos, 3(1), pp.46-67.

Wagner, A. (2018) Do not Click “Like” When Somebody has Died: The Role of Norms for Mourning Practices in Social Media. Social Media + Society, 4(1),

Walter, T. (2015) New mourners, old mourners: online memorial culture as a chapter in the history of mourning. New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia, 21(1-2), pp.10-24.

Walter, T., 1996. Ritualising death in a consumer society. RSA Journal, 144(5468), pp.32-40.

Walter, T., 2008. The new public mourning.

Walter, T., 2010. Jade and the journalists: Media coverage of a young British celebrity dying of cancer. Social science & medicine, 71(5), pp.853-860.

Walter, T. ed., 2020. *The mourning for Diana*. Routledge.

Walter, T., Hourizi, R., Moncur, W. and Pitsillides, S., 2012. Does the internet change how we die and mourn? Overview and analysis. Omega-journal of Death and Dying, 64(4), pp.275-302.

Walter, T., Littlewood, J. and Pickering, M., 1995. Death in the news: The public invigilation of private emotion. Sociology, 29(4), pp.579-596.

Walter, T., Littlewood, J. and Pickering, M., 1995. Death in the news: The public invigilation of private emotion. Sociology, 29(4), pp.579-596.

Wertheim, M. (2000) The pearly gates of cyberspace: A history of space from Dante to the Internet. WW Norton & company.

Westfall, C. (2024) Chinese companies use AI to bring back deceased loved ones, raising ethics questions, Forbes. Available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/chriswestfall/2024/07/23/chinese-companies-use-ai-to-bring-back-deceased-loved-ones-raising-ethics-questions/ (Accessed: 03 October 2024).

Wollan, G. (2003) Heidegger's philosophy of space and place. Norsk Geografisk

Wood, P. (2020) Lockdown-era zoom funerals are upending religious traditions-and they may change the way we grieve forever, Prospect Magazine - Britain's leading monthly current affairs magazine. Available at: https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/ideas/philosophy/40126/lockdown-era-zoom-funerals-are-upending-religious-traditionsand-they-may-change-the-way-we-grieve-forever (Accessed: 03 March 2024).

Worden, J.W., 2018. Grief counseling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner. springer publishing Company.

Worpole, K. and Worpole, L. (2011) Last landscapes. London: Reaktion Books.

Wylie, J. (2009) Landscape, absence and the geographies of love. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 34(3), pp.275-289.

Young, B., Parkes, C.M. and Laungani, P., 1997. Death and bereavement across cultures. London: Routledge, pp.191-205.

Zhang, C. and Lin, Y. (2015) Exploring interactive communication using social media. The Service Industries Journal, 35(11-12), pp.670-693.

Zhou, K., Grover, C., Klein, M. and Tobin, R. (2015) No more 404s: predicting referenced link rot in scholarly articles for pro-active archiving. In Proceedings of the 15th ACM/IEEE-CS Joint Conference on Digital Libraries, pp. 233-236

Öhman, C. and Floridi, L. (2017) The political economy of death in the age of information: A critical approach to the digital afterlife industry. Minds and Machines, 27(4), pp.639-662.

Öhman, C. and Floridi, L. (2018) An ethical framework for the digital afterlife industry. Nature Human Behaviour, 2(5), pp.318-320.

Öhman, C. and Watson, D. (2019) Are the dead taking over Facebook? A Big Data approach to the future of death online. Big Data & Society, 6(1),

9. Appendix

Appendix 1: Participant geographical spread

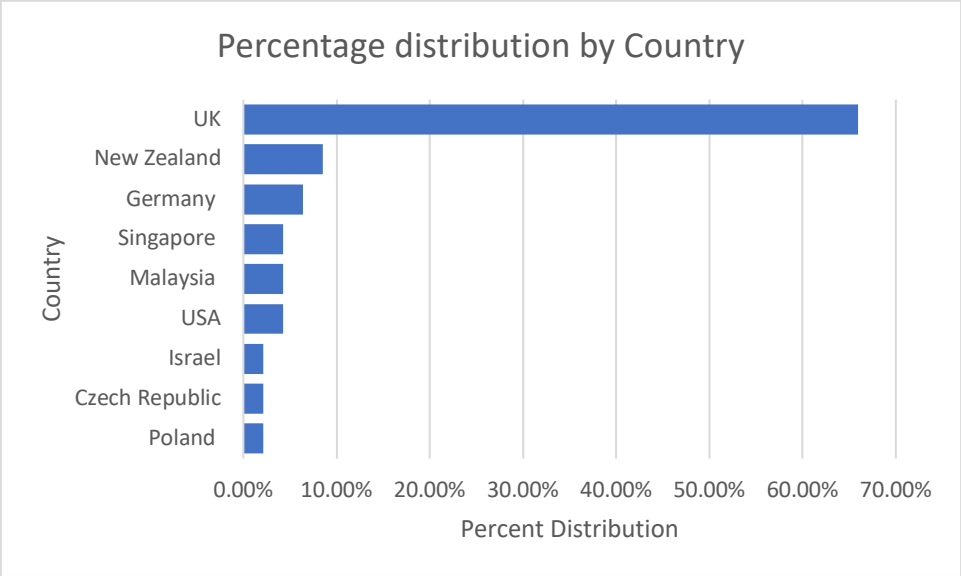
Participant Name	Participant Number	Country	City
Aaron	1	UK	Sheffield
Tim	2	UK	York
Melissa	3	UK	Leeds
Bryn	4	UK	Retford
Maisie	5	UK	Durham
John	6	UK	Retford
Kate	7	UK	Retford
Ali	8	UK	York
Mabel	9	Singapore	Serangoon
Lucia	10	UK	York
Daisy	11	NZ	Christchurch
Will	12	UK	Hull
Jamie	13	USA	Texas
Bryce	14	UK	Harrogate
Charlie	15	UK	York
Sarah	16	Malaysia	Seremban
Rose	17	UK	Worksop
Jason	18	UK	York
Miles	19	Czech Republic	Brno
Kelsey	20	UK	Manchester
Joel	21	Singapore	Serangoon
Anya	22	Malaysia	Johor
Omar	23	UK	Retford
Isaac	24	UK	Retford
Grace	25	UK	Derby
Mia	26	UK	Derby
Luke	27	UK	Grimsby
Nathan	28	Israel	Tel Aviv
Tom	29	New Zealand	Auckland
Alice	30	UK	Durham
Noah	31	UK	Worksop
Mark	32	Germany	Bremen
Claire	33	UK	Worksop
Nikki	34	USA	Texas

Sam	35	UK	Sheffield
Archie	36	UK	Sheffield
Poppy	37	UK	Worksop
Elina	38	UK	Leeds
Rowan	39	UK	Leeds
Linda	40	Poland	Warsaw
Shaun	41	UK	Middlesbrough
Ivor	42	New Zealand	Christchurch
Renata	43	Germany	Berlin
Stuart	44	Germany	Berlin
Freya	45	UK	Manchester
Kailani	46	UK	Saundersfoot
Art	47	New Zealand	Christchurch

Appendix 2: Participant geographical spread by percent

Country	**Count of Country**
UK	65.96%
New Zealand	8.51%
Germany	6.38%
Singapore	4.26%
Malaysia	4.26%
USA	4.26%
Israel	2.13%
Czech Republic	2.13%
Poland	2.13%
Grand Total	**100.00%**

Appendix 3: Participant percentage distribution by country



Appendix 4: Informed consent form

UNIVERSITY of York

Informed Consent Form

This informed consent from is for those who frequent social media sites (group A) who are participating in the research project titled '**Resisting the Grave: Memorialisation in Cyberspace'**.

Researcher: Dylan Goodacre-Hall
Email: Dgh512@york.ac.uk
Tel: 07376 225697

Head of Department : Professor Paul Johnson
Email: Paul.Johnson@york.ac.uk

You will be given a copy of the *full* informed consent form & project information sheet.

To be completed by the participant

I have been invited to participate in research about social media & online memorialization. I therefore consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and the following:

Declaration	Agreement
1. **I have read the foregoing information provided on the project information sheet, or it has been read to me.**	☐
2. **I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction.**	☐
3. **I understand that the information collected about me may be used to support other research in the future, and the results will be shared after the study has completed.**	☐
4. **I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my contribution at any time up to 3 months after the date of interview.**	☐
5. **I understand that anonymity cannot be guaranteed in every case and consent to take part on this basis.**	☐

Print Name of Participant_____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____
Day/month/year

Email Address _____

Choice of Interview	*Please place a cross in the appropriate box*
1. **FaceTime**	☐
2. **FaceTime**	☐
3. **Discord**	☐
4. **Google Hangouts**	☐
5. **Zoom**	☐

To be completed by the researcher/person taking consent

I have confirmed that the potential participant has read and understood the informed consent form, project information sheet and all information contained within.

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of Researcher/person taking the consent_____

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____

Date _____
Day/month/year

Appendix 5: Participant information sheet

Project Information Sheet

Resisting the Grave: Memorialisation in Cyberspace

Introduction

My name is Dylan Goodacre-Hall and I am a PhD researcher at the University of York. I am currently engaging in research pertaining to social media interaction and the spaces these interactions are contained within. Specifically, my research is looking at how we engage with memorials & those who have died.

Purpose of this research

In the last 13 years, the cost of dying has risen by 103%. Costs attributed to memorialization and burial have overtaken general inflation by more than 16 times, and as a result, individuals are increasingly unable to afford the physical services that are offered. Some who wish to purchase a private grave can be expected to pay up to $30,000, whilst waiting lists for public graves can reach 5 years or more.

Virtual memorialisation appears therefore to be a potential alternative option to those unable to engage in traditional funerary practises. Virtual practices involve the creation of internet pages where digital assets are stored. These can include photos, textual accounts, and are also mediated by the hosting platform they exist within.

My research attempts to understand how these virtual memorials are emerging as a process of memorialization, as well as the effects this may be having on our notions of space and our bodies. You are being invited to take part in this research because your experience interfacing with social media has the potential to contribute greatly to our understanding of social processes.

Type of Research

This research will involve your participation in a 1 on 1 interview with the researcher, expected to last between 30 minutes to one hour.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and it is therefore your choice whether to participate or not. This means that you have the right & ability to remove contribution from the research up to 3 months prior to submission of my thesis, and simply need to contact the researcher (myself) to do so.

Procedures

I am asking you to help further the research into death and the way we interface with social media. If you accept my invitation, you will be asked to participate in an interview with myself. I will sit down with you in a comfortable place at the University of York or another place you deem suitable. It is understood that this may not be suitable for many participants, so this

interview can take place via video or audio chat to your preference (Skype, Facetime etc.).

If you do not wish to answer any of the questions during the interview, you may say so and I will move on to the next question. No one else but the myself will be present unless you would like someone else to be there. The information recorded is confidential, and no one else except my supervisory staff (2 personnel) will have access to the information generated during your interview.

The interview will be digitally audio-recorded & stored in an encrypted location. You will only be identified with an alphanumeric number or pseudonym.

Duration
The research takes place over a total of 6 years, with interviews taking place over 24 months. Your interview will last from around 30 minutes to one hour.

Risks
I am asking you to share what is potentially very personal and confidential information, which I understand may make you feel uncomfortable when discussing the topics brought up in your interview. You do not have to answer all/any question or take part in the interview if you do not wish to do so. Further to this, you do not have to provide a reason for not responding to a specific question or refusing to take part in the interview.

Benefits
You will likely not directly benefit from this study, however your participation aid in furthering research about how social processes are enacted via social media.

Reimbursements
You will not be provided any incentive to take part in the research.

Confidentiality
I will not be sharing any named information about you, and the information collected from this research will be kept private. Your responses may be used or quoted during the dissemination of my findings once my research has been published. All information about you will be referred to via an alphanumeric system (E.g. 'B3'), or via pseudonym (a name different from your own) and it will not be possible to decipher which participants are who from this. This information will be stored on an encrypted SSD drive, meaning that it can only be accessed with a password known to myself.

Sharing the Results
No identifiable information will be shared with anyone but myself, and nothing will be attributed to you by name. This means that identifiable information such as names will be redacted, but events you discuss may be used to help our understanding of social processes (E.g. how we deal with death). Results of my research will be published at the end of my PhD in 2024, and you will have the option to request a copy via email once completed.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw
You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so. You may stop participating in the interview at any time that you wish and do not have to provide a reason for doing so. You have the right to withdraw your contribution up to 3 months prior to submission of my thesis.

Who to Contact
If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact myself at:

Dylan Goodacre-Hall
Email: Dgh512@york.ac.uk
Tel: 07376 225697

Head of Department : Professor Paul Johnson
Email: Paul.Johnson@york.ac.uk

Appendix 6: Coding Framework:

Website data

Frequently mentioned terms:

Forever, tool for loved ones, tribute, leave a flower, plant a tree, access, control, share memories, community, online memorials, unlimited storage, virtual memorial, tributes, privacy, moderation, headstone, geotag, consultation

Codes:

Communal mourning, data privacy, links to physical spaces, centralising posthumous data, catering to funerary processes, legacy/archival management tools, ethical reassurance for users

Overarching themes:

Providing an all-in-one tool for posthumous data
Educating potential users archiving techniques and digital funeral processes
Preventing loss of access to personal and emotional data

Participant data

Frequently mentioned terms:

Trite, cringe, authentic, control, covid, gravestone, imprint, weird, ghosts, Facebook, physical, shoebox, memories, trust, legacy, presence, death, pictures

Codes:

Physical memorabilia, audience perception online, bodily presence, autonomy in death, data ownership, authenticity, control over one's online presence, data permanence, digital archiving

Overarching themes:

Presenting oneself authentically online
Anticipating the future posthumous self
A desire for finality and/or objects that can decay
Digital archiving

Appendix 7: Interview Questions:

1. How often do you feel you interact with social media sites? Daily? Hourly? Weekly?

2. When using social medias, do you tend to post content frequently (status updates/photos/comments) or browse content created by others?

3. What were your first impressions of the services you've been shown? Be this positive, negative, or anything that may have popped into your head.

4. Have you encountered any of these websites before? (if yes, how did this happen?)

5. Which features, if any, stand out to you either positively or negatively? (Why, why not?)

6. Have you ever contributed to a memorial online? (Why? And lead on to the next question). Have you ever payed respects to a physical memorial? (Why?)

7. Do you feel you would benefit from opting-in to a service such as that offered by X? -> (Why, why not?)

8. Given the chance, could you see yourself being memorialised in this way? Would you opt-in to this over more traditional funerary services? (Examples given).

9. Have you considered what happens to your online footprint when you pass away?

10. Have you considered what you'd like to happen to your body when you pass away?

11. Have you payed respect to someone you know in a physical setting such as a cemetery or gravesite?

12. How did you come across the idea of creating a memorial page online?

13. What made you choose X website for your memorial?

14. How was your experience as a user creating the page itself? (From both an ease-of-access & emotional perspective)

15. Do you regularly contribute to the page?

16. What kinds of contributions do you tend to add? (photos/textual contributions)

17. Did you share the memorial or make your memorial public? In this sense, would you like your memorial to be easily accessible by the general public?

18. Is there anything you'd like to see added to the website?

19. Do you also memorialise X with more traditional (physical) methods? (Such as laying flowers at burial sites etc.)