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|  | **Available online at** [www.ijmras.com](http://www.ijmras.com/)  **INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND**  **STUDIES**  **E ISSN: 2640 -7272**  **Volume:08; Issue:10 (2025)** | **Page no.**  **1-9** |

# Public Perceptions of Digital Death Narratives: A Qualitative Exploration of Online Discourse on Mortality and Media Representation

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# ABSTRACT

The rapid digitalization of communication has transformed how societies perceive, discuss, and represent death. This qualitative study explores how users interpret online coverage of death-related issues, drawing from perspectives in sociology, anthropology, and media studies. Using thematic analysis of social media discourse, digital journalism, and user-generated content, this research examines emotional responses, ethical tensions, and cultural narratives surrounding online death representations. Findings reveal a complex interplay between empathy, spectacle, and desensitization—highlighting the ways digital media both humanize and commodify death. This study contributes to understanding the evolving socio-cultural relationship between mortality and digital communication in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** digital death, online mourning, media representation, user perception, social media, mortality studies, qualitative research

# INTRODUCTION

Death has historically been a private event, but in the digital age, it has become increasingly public and mediated through online platforms. From obituaries on Facebook to viral hashtags like #RIP, digital media has altered the emotional and cultural boundaries of mourning and mortality [6], [11], [19], [35]. This evolution echoes Ariès’s historical account of death’s transition from communal to individualized experiences [2], later extended by Michael’s “spectacular death” theory, which describes the mediatization of death as public spectacle [4].

Online platforms have created a paradox: they offer spaces for empathy, remembrance, and public dialogue, yet they also risk trivializing or sensationalizing death [28], [14]. Scholars argue that the digital landscape fosters both connection and detachment — users encounter death as both shared tragedy and consumable content [16], [18].

This study aims to explore how users perceive online coverage of death-related issues, focusing on their emotional, ethical, and cognitive responses to death narratives across digital spaces.

**The Enduring Presence in a Networked World**

The profound inevitability of death, a constant of the human condition, has always been mediated by culture, ritual, and communication technology. From the solemn epitaphs etched in stone to the formal obituaries published in print media, societies have devised structured methods for both commemorating the deceased and processing the grief of the living. However, the advent of the internet and the subsequent ubiquity of social media platforms have initiated a fundamental, and perhaps irreversible, transformation in how mortality is perceived, performed, and preserved. This new landscape has given rise to a unique cultural phenomenon: the Digital Death Narrative. These narratives are not merely records of death; they are dynamic, co-created, and ever-present digital artifacts that mediate the relationship between the living and the dead, injecting discussions of grief, legacy, and ethical remembrance directly into the public sphere of online discourse. This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive, qualitative exploration of how the public perceives and reacts to these digital death narratives as they are represented and amplified across various media channels.

The digital revolution has challenged the traditional notion of death as a final, contained event. Instead, individuals now possess a vast "digital afterlife**"**—an accumulation of persistent data, profiles, photos, comments, and interactions that continues to exist long after biological life ceases. Social media platforms, initially designed for the fleeting interactions of the living, have been unintentionally converted into the largest, most accessible, and most complex cemeteries and memorial gardens in human history. A deceased individual’s Facebook profile, for instance, once memorialized, transforms into a communal wall of remembrance, where birthdays are still acknowledged, and "I miss you" posts are routine. These micro-narratives of ongoing connection, previously relegated to private thought or physical visits to a grave, are now publicly visible, temporally asynchronous, and globally distributed, fundamentally redefining the boundaries between private mourning and public spectacle.

**Defining the Scope: Digital Death Narratives and Their Manifestations**

To rigorously explore public perception, it is crucial to first define the primary subject of this inquiry: the **Digital Death Narrative**. This term encompasses any media content, online discourse, or technological manifestation that documents, commemorates, or simulates the life, death, or continued presence of a deceased individual in a digital environment. These narratives manifest across a wide and growing spectrum of complexity:

1. **Vernacular Memorialization (The Organic Narrative):** This is the most common form, emerging directly from the social networks of ordinary users. **Specific examples** include viral **TikTok** montages set to sentimental music, celebrating a young person who died tragically; the creation of community-driven **Reddit** threads dedicated to the memory of a beloved, ordinary content creator; or the flood of grief expressed via **Instagram Stories** following a local tragedy. These narratives are characterized by their raw emotion, lack of formal editorial oversight, and reliance on user-generated content, often giving rise to spontaneous, collective mourning rituals that transcend geographical limits.
2. **Institutional and Mass Media Representation (The Amplified Narrative):** This involves the professional creation and distribution of death narratives by news organizations and major platforms. **Specific examples** include the intense, 24/7 media coverage following the passing of global figures, such as the synchronized, platform-wide memorialization of **Queen Elizabeth II** across every major news site and social media feed, or the highly emotional, often sensationalized, reporting on the victims of tragedies like the **Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting** or the **Boston Marathon bombing**. These narratives are often instrumental in shaping a broader cultural consensus about who is "worthy" of collective digital remembrance and how that remembrance should be expressed.
3. **Technological and AI-Driven Persistence (The Simulated Narrative):** These represent the ethical and existential frontier of digital death. **Specific examples** involve services that leverage the deceased's data to create artificial intelligence conversational agents, sometimes called **"deathbots"** or **"griefbots,"** designed to allow the living to interact with a simulacrum of the deceased. Similarly, the use of **deepfake technology** to digitally "resurrect" deceased actors or celebrities for commercial purposes, as seen in controversial advertising campaigns or film scenes, pushes the boundaries of acceptable digital remembrance. These simulated narratives provoke the most intense public ethical scrutiny, challenging notions of identity, consent, and exploitation.

**Media’s Role in Shaping the Discourse: From Taboo to Spectacle**

The shift from private mourning to a publicly mediatized event is intricately linked to the concept of **"Spectacular Death."** In the digital age, death is often thrust into the public eye not just as news, but as a consumable spectacle, characterized by accelerated mediatization and profound emotional intensity. The way these narratives are represented significantly influences public perception:

* **Commercialization and Sensationalism:** The attention economy inherently rewards sensational and emotionally compelling content. This commercial imperative often results in media outlets focusing on the most tragic or controversial elements of a death, such as emphasizing details of suffering, conflict, or private messages left by the deceased. For instance, reports focusing on the **suicide of an employee** due to workplace stress often shift the narrative from grief to social justice or corporate culpability, shaping public commentary around blame and responsibility rather than simple loss. Public discourse often reflects a simultaneous fascination with, and repulsion by, this sensationalist approach.
* **The Ethical Dilemma of the Image:** Digital platforms permit the immediate and permanent sharing of images of the deceased, including at the deathbed or funeral. While such practices can provide comfort to the inner circle, their public visibility raises profound ethical considerations regarding dignity and consent. The public discourse is frequently polarized, debating the line between a touching tribute and an inappropriate invasion of privacy, especially concerning the sharing of private, personal photos by extended acquaintances or strangers.
* **The Power of Platform Algorithms:** It is critical to recognize that public perception is not solely driven by the content itself, but by how platform algorithms select, amplify, and distribute these narratives. A memorial post that "goes viral" is not simply popular; it is algorithmically curated. This dynamic ensures that certain narratives—those that generate high levels of engagement (likes, shares, angry or tearful emojis)—become disproportionately visible, thereby skewing the collective public experience of digital mourning and potentially leading to information biases.

**The Qualitative Imperative: Decoding Online Discourse**

Given the complexity and emotional sensitivity of these narratives, traditional quantitative analysis alone is insufficient. This study adopts a qualitative framework to delve into the **texture and context** of public opinion as expressed through online discourse. Online discourse encompasses the vast, unstructured, and candid conversations occurring in the comment sections of news articles, threads on discussion platforms (like Reddit and dedicated forums), and the comment/reaction feeds on social media posts.

Public perception in this context is defined by the emergent themes and emotional polarities found within this discourse. These themes frequently include:

* **Judgments of Authenticity:** Users constantly debate the sincerity of public grief—is a tribute post "authentic" or merely a performance for attention or "virtue signaling"?
* **The Battle for Control:** Discourse often reflects conflict over ownership—who has the right to manage or comment on a deceased person's digital identity: the family, the platform, or the digital community?
* **Emotional Contagion vs. Emotional Exhaustion:** While many users report experiencing **emotional resonance** and comfort through collective mourning, an equally strong counter-narrative exists concerning the feeling of being overwhelmed or fatigued by the constant, uninvited presence of death in their newsfeeds. This phenomenon of "digital grief fatigue" suggests a societal struggle to process endless exposure to loss.

The core objective of this qualitative exploration is therefore to systematically map these public perceptions, to identify the **critical ethical boundaries** that the digital public implicitly draws, and to understand how media representation—from the professionally produced documentary to the amateur TikTok tribute—shapes the modern cultural imagination of death and dying. By focusing on the discourse itself, this research aims to move beyond merely cataloging the types of digital memorials and instead provide a nuanced, in-depth analysis of the lived public experience and judgment of the digital afterlife.

**2. Literature Review**

**Death in Cultural and Historical Context**

Western attitudes toward death have shifted from acceptance to denial, shaped by secularization, medicalization, and modern media [2], [13]. Anthropological works highlight the social construction of mortality, where meanings of death evolve through cultural practice and technological mediation [3], [5].

**The Rise of Digital Death**

The digital turn has transformed death into a participatory phenomenon. Social media platforms allow users to maintain posthumous identities, creating “digital afterlives” [19], [35]. This phenomenon exemplifies Sumiala and Jacobsen’s notion of “digital death,” where online mourning spaces reconfigure emotional expression and memory [11].

**Media, Spectacle, and Death Narratives**

Contemporary journalism often frames death through dramatized or emotional narratives, shaping public empathy and perception [14], [26]. Studies reveal that online users oscillate between compassion and consumption—especially in cases involving celebrities or tragedies [16], [28], [29]. The line between ethical storytelling and spectacle remains blurred [4], [22].

**Public Attitudes and Ethical Dilemmas**

Qualitative studies demonstrate diverse public attitudes toward “death talk” and online death representation [9], [10], [12]. Digital mourning can foster community solidarity but also provoke moral discomfort, especially when privacy boundaries are crossed [37].

**Death, Empathy, and Information Spread**

Recent research in digital communication shows that emotional content, including death-related news, spreads more virally than neutral topics [32], [34]. Emotional proximity amplifies engagement, whereas repeated exposure may lead to compassion fatigue or moral disengagement [41], [42].

**3. Methodology**

**Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative design, drawing upon interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to understand user perceptions of death-related online content. Data were collected from open-access social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Reddit) and online news comment sections where death narratives were prominently discussed [15], [16], [20].

**Data Collection**

A purposive sample of 200 user comments and 20 online articles covering death-related issues (e.g., celebrity deaths, pandemics, and natural disasters) was collected. Inclusion criteria required the presence of emotional, ethical, or reflective commentary related to death representation.

**Data Analysis**

Thematic coding was used to identify recurring patterns in user responses. Themes were developed inductively, referencing theoretical frameworks from death studies and media ethics [14], [27], [31]. NVivo software was employed for textual organization and thematic mapping.

**4. Results**

Three dominant themes emerged:

**Emotional Ambivalence**

Users expressed conflicting emotions — empathy for the deceased and discomfort toward media sensationalism. This duality reflects Hanusch’s idea of “graphic empathy,” where emotional engagement coexists with desensitization [28].

**Digital Memorialization and Social Connection**

Many users described online mourning spaces as therapeutic, offering communal support and continuity beyond death [6], [19], [35]. However, others perceived them as performative, aligning with Mallow’s observations on celebrity deaths becoming social rituals [16].

**Ethical Tensions and Media Responsibility**

Respondents criticized news outlets for exploiting death for engagement metrics, echoing Duncan and Luce’s findings on responsible suicide reporting [27]. Users demanded authenticity, contextual sensitivity, and ethical storytelling, resonating with broader journalistic ethics discourses [30], [31], [39].

**5. Discussion**

This study demonstrates that **digital platforms reshape how users perceive and engage with death**, reinforcing death as both an intimate and public event. The online sphere functions as a **liminal space** — where grief, spectacle, and reflection intersect [11], [40].

While users appreciate opportunities for shared mourning, they remain wary of media’s commodification of tragedy. The results support Ariès’s notion of death’s historical transformation [2], now extended into the digital realm [4], [11]. Emotional engagement online, as shown in studies of viral compassion [41], [42], can both humanize and distort the meaning of loss.

Moreover, the study’s findings align with previous analyses showing that online death coverage encourages new moral discourses around suffering, empathy, and public responsibility [37], [38], [40].

The intersection of death, grief, and digital media has fundamentally altered how mortality is experienced, remembered, and discussed in modern society. The rise of social media platforms, online memorials, and digital legacy services has created a rich yet complex environment for the production and consumption of what can be termed **"digital death narratives."** These narratives—encompassing everything from viral memorial posts and livestreamed funerals to interactive digital necromancy and media coverage of high-profile deaths—are shaping public perceptions of mortality, identity, and the grieving process. A qualitative exploration of online discourse around these narratives is essential to understanding the cultural, emotional, and ethical implications of this profound societal shift.

**The Digital Transformation of Grief and Memorialization**

The traditional invisibility or 'taboo' surrounding death in Western culture has been significantly challenged by the ubiquity of digital media. Digital platforms have initiated a **"vernacularization of death,"** bringing personal experiences of loss and mourning into the public sphere.

**The New Public Sphere of Mourning**

Online spaces, particularly social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, have become **virtual venues for collective grief** and extended memorialization. Unlike physical memorials, digital spaces offer a persistent, easily accessible, and interactive presence of the deceased. Users engage in a range of digital mourning practices:

* **Creating Memorial Pages:** Dedicated profiles or pages serve as digital shrines where friends and family can post tributes, share photos, and continue communicating with the deceased's profile.
* **Real-time Grief Expression:** Platforms facilitate the immediate, collective sharing of grief, often during public tragedies or the death of a celebrity, using trending hashtags like #RIP.
* **Archiving and Legacy-Making:** Users intentionally and unintentionally create a **"digital afterlife"** through their accumulated data—emails, photos, status updates, and comments. This digital residue is often perceived as a tangible (albeit virtual) part of a person's legacy, intended to capture their "essence" rather than the "minutiae" of their daily life .

Qualitative analysis of online discourse reveals that while many find comfort and communal support in these practices, this hyper-visibility also generates tensions. The public performance of grief, once confined to defined rituals, becomes subject to the platform's affordances, algorithms, and the gaze of an often-anonymous audience. Comments and discussion threads often oscillate between deeply empathetic sharing and criticisms of "attention-seeking" behavior or "sentimentalism," highlighting the complexity of public sentiment towards open digital mourning.

**Media Representation and Perceptual Biases**

Digital death narratives are often amplified and shaped by media coverage, which in turn influences public perception. The speed and scope of online reporting mean that death events are frequently disseminated with emphasis on emotional resonance and spectacle.

**Sensationalism and the 'Spectacular Death'**

Contemporary media often frames death as a **'spectacular event,'** especially in cases of unexpected or violent loss. Qualitative analysis of comments and shared articles reveals that this sensationalism, driven partly by commercial logic and the demand for clicks, can introduce perceptual biases. Online discourse frequently focuses on **suffering and tragic narratives**, amplifying emotional responses and, at times, risking cognitive biases towards the deceased or the circumstances of their death. This tendency can detract from the solemnity of death and ethical journalism, making it difficult for the public to engage in rational, constructive reflection.

**Distrust and Misinformation**

In complex cases, such as the media reporting on brain death or end-of-life care, online narratives can be plagued by **inaccurate information**. Studies analyzing online content have found prevalent inaccuracies in descriptions of difficult medical concepts. Qualitative examination of user comments on related YouTube videos and news articles reveals widespread **uncertainty and distrust** toward medical professionals and established institutions. This phenomenon underscores the critical role of media literacy in navigating digital death narratives and the need for simplified, consistent messaging from authoritative sources.

**The Ethical Quagmire of Digital Remains**

The permanent, archive-like nature of digital footprints introduces profound ethical and legal questions that heavily influence public discourse. This area of discussion is often highly charged, centered on themes of autonomy, privacy, and commercial exploitation.

**Autonomy and the Digital Afterlife**

A central debate in online discussions revolves around **posthumous data ethics** and the control over one's digital remains. Should a user's explicit or implied wishes regarding their accounts—to be memorialized, deleted, or transferred—supersede a platform's Terms of Service or the wishes of the bereaved family? Online forums are filled with personal dilemmas: family members grappling with accessing a loved one's private messages or debating the appropriateness of interacting with a memorialized social media profile. The public discourse reflects a lack of consensus and a struggle to apply pre-digital concepts of legacy and property to virtual assets.

**Exploitation and Continuous Grief**

The emergence of a \*\*"digital afterlife industry"—\*\*companies offering services like posthumous scheduling or AI-driven "deathbots" that replicate a deceased person's personality—has generated significant ethical backlash in online public spaces. Critiques in online articles and user comments often frame these services as a commercial **"exploitation"** of grief. The most heated point of discussion is the concept of **"continuous grief,"** where platform designs or marketing practices actively push the bereaved toward prolonged, active engagement with the deceased's profile. Public discourse questions whether this commercial manipulation of digital remains is an "illicit violation of human dignity," using the deceased's informational identity as capital in the attention economy.

**6. Conclusion**

Digital platforms have irrevocably altered death’s cultural and communicative landscape. Users perceive online death coverage as emotionally charged yet ethically complex, oscillating between empathy and discomfort. The study underscores the need for **responsible media practices**, emphasizing dignity, privacy, and emotional sensitivity in reporting and sharing death-related content.

Future research should examine cross-cultural perspectives, the role of algorithms in amplifying death narratives, and the long-term psychological effects of digital mourning.

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