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DIGITAL DEATH: METHODS AND COLLABORATION TOWARDS A SHARED ANTHROPOLOGY

ABSTRACT

This paper reflexively unpicks digital ethnographic methods employed during ongoing online fieldwork on 'digital deaths'. To do so, this research delves into the digital afterlife, exploring the fate of online traces and social media profiles after death, and how social media has changed our relationship with death and grieving. Anthropological studies of online death and grief faced new challenges even before COVID-19 moved research projects online. These include shared vulnerabilities and the ethnographer's position, online field sites, omnipresent online traces and posthumous personhood, and ethical algorithms and duty to the dead. By transparently detailing my research methods whilst conducting research with Facebook and Instagram users navigating loss, this article contributes an honest and extensive debate on processes, challenges, ethics, and research collaboration. Guided by visual and media anthropology, I advocate for a set of methods rooted in shared anthropology (Rouch 1995) which fosters ongoing dialogue with participants. Thus, this article offers a new perspective on digital death, rooted in collaborative storytelling and reflexive methodologies, facilitating discussions on a still-contentious subject in certain societies. Leveraging the benefits of digital ethnography's multi-sited nature, the research widens its geographical reach and comments on the sociocultural impacts of digital death.

Keywords: *digital afterlife, digital death, digital ethnography, social media, reflexive ethnography, shared anthropology, grief, methodology*

INTRODUCTION



FIG 1: Screenshot of Chadwick Boseman's announcement from his X (formerly Twitter) account on 29 August 2020. Screenshot taken on 31 August 2023.

In August 2020, the announcement of actor Chadwick Boseman's passing via his X (formerly Twitter) account became the most-liked X post to date, currently, with 6.8 million likes (Boseman 2020). Add 1.9 million reposts and a stream of comments, the post became not only an announcement of the news, but also a site of remembrance for friends and fans—a form of what has been termed *parasocial grieving* (Bingaman 2022 [2020]; Akhther and Tetteh 2021).¹ The benefits to this kind of communal grieving online stem from various opportunities presented by *internetworks* (Sofka 1997), including the removal of physical obstacles and temporal limitations, and the alleviation of isolation through collective support. In the case of a celebrity death, which likely reaches

a wider audience, mourning in this publicly communal form on social media can allow distant users to cope with disenfranchised grief (grief unacknowledged by societal norms), and potentially remain anonymous as they do so (Sofka 1997). Yet, with the ever-changing nature of the internet and the blurred lines between public and private, challenges arise, often related to grief's unexpected shift online and hastily developed technologies. In addition, the 2019 outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing deaths globally at a time of physical separation, exacerbated many of these underlying notions. Added to that too came the viral spectacle of Black death following the 2020 murder of George Floyd and the resurgence of #BlackLivesMatter, unveiling

a pressing need for further studies within the field of digital death and the digital afterlife across sociocultural differences.

The internet is changing the way we interact with death and grief (Sofka 1997; Walter, Hourizi, Moncur and Pitsillides 2011; Lapper 2017). Clumsily, unexpectedly, and often paradoxically ubiquitous to the loss of a physical presence, encounters with a digital death are proliferating. Here, ‘digital death’ refers to the passing of an individual, the subsequent loss of an online presence, and the digital afterlife. This article first details scholarship into death online and digital ethnography before interweaving several methodological challenges with findings from ongoing research with Facebook and Instagram users navigating loss. By transparently detailing my research methods, I aim to contribute an honest and extensive debate on processes, ethics, and challenges, bringing learnings from visual and media anthropology (Rouch 1995) to the digital realm to explore forms of online collaboration (Pink 2017). After reading a draft of this paper, one participant—Peru-based Maria who lost her father—noted that the importance of such research is its ability to open the dialogue in response to ‘our society being very evasive and dodgy about death.’² She hopes this will lead to a more fluid protocol and procedure when someone passes, or even a digital will. As research findings fed back directly into my methods, the article describes an attempt to bridge the gap between the two. In doing so, I seek to contribute to research on the impact of our digital remains after we pass away and increase accessibility through storytelling (Narayan 2020), whilst also exploring the ethical challenges faced by researchers in this field. How can a reflexive approach assist future scholars and methodologies? Is collaborative storytelling of grief possible via the internet?

SCHOLARSHIP

Scholarship into online grief and mourning are widespread, proliferating, and diverse. For instance, Harju and Huhtamäki (2021: 4) note the richness of approaches in this multidisciplinary research field ‘from post-mortem data privacy and data governance to explorations of digital memorials and symbolic immortality.’ Death is social (Walter et al. 2011); thus, much research has focused on the communication of a death online across various platforms, from blogs and social media sites (DeGroot and Carmack 2012; Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish 2013) to dedicated grief forums (Hastings, Musambira and Hoover 2007) and the discussion on *parasocial grieving* as mentioned previously. There is no doubt that online environments afford new possibilities for managing grief (Kasket 2019), and my previous research with England-based Facebook users found that the technological shield offered by social media helps people grieve online in ways they would not face-to-face, masking our vulnerability (Lapper 2017). Online memorials allow the bereaved to continue their interactions with the dead (Refslund Christensen and Gotved 2015), leading to what has been coined *continuing bonds* (Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996). Such ongoing interactions extending after death can create a *posthumous personhood* and allow the bereaved to maintain meaningful relationships (Meese et al. 2015), even to the extent that chatbots resurrect the dead, termed *thanabots* (Henrickson 2023). Technological interventions maintain the dead’s online persistence, but also expose their vulnerability, which necessitates a moral duty towards them on behalf of the living (Stokes 2021), questioning their right to privacy. Platform-specific research has allowed scholars to delve deeper into how sites such as Facebook enable

the expansion of public mourning—temporally, spatially, and socially—rather than disrupting tradition (Brubaker et al. 2013). However, Facebook’s intermingling of unexpected encounters (such as learning of a death, grief itself, and algorithmic prompts) with more casual everyday content can be jarring (Ibid.). This can also be applied to other social media platforms. Caring for digital remains can be viewed as a form of embodied labour (Kneese 2023), extending the idea of digital presences as collaboratively crafted entities after death, which also invites opportunities from outside services to manage afterlives (Savin-Baden and Burden 2019). However, due to the hasty unravelling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the aggravation of physical distance, recent memorialisation techniques have often been implemented employing a ‘make do and mend’ approach (Pitsillides and Wallace 2021). This method resulted in unsatisfactory functionality, further adding to the ‘bad deaths’ COVID-19 has come to symbolise regarding the discomfort of the deceased, especially at a time of isolation, which also placed subsequent distress on the bereaved (Carr, Boerner and Moorman 2020). As Mason-Robbie and Savin-Baden (2020: 20) state, ‘Most current research merely focuses on grief and mourning, with little research exploring the sociocultural and sociopolitical impacts.’ Applying critical race theory in combination with digital studies (Noble 2018; Tanksley 2022) offers a valuable lens via which to examine an often-overlooked area in the digital afterlife field regarding the racialised and oppressive landscape of the internet and the viral spectacle of Black death (Sutherland 2017). This also points to the need for a greater interrogation of the wider sociopolitical and sociocultural context, particularly amongst marginalised groups.

Ethnographically researching digital death across the vast expanse of the internet is a colossal task and one that is constantly evolving with the development of digital technologies. Even prior to COVID-19’s impact, which forced many projects online, anthropological studies into death and grief via the internet faced new challenges, both to explore as a researcher and to reflect upon methodologically. With increased online living, the digital death phenomenon is not slowing down. As a result, methodological tools needed for research must keep up. The *digital environment* (Frömming et al. 2017) is one shared by researchers and participants. Thus, ethnographies of digital worlds must engage with new forms of collaboration; re-think traditional anthropological ideas of the field site, researcher, and participant(s); and develop new theoretical tools to understand the *digital materiality* of our environments (Pink, Horst et al. 2016; Pink, Ardèvol, and Lanzeni 2016). As Frömming et al. note, this demand for reciprocity often allows digital ethnographies to become ‘journeys into the self’ (2017: 16). Consequently, the reflexivity presented in this article is important. Moreover, as we co-inhabit the digital world with our research participants (Pink 2016 Frömming et al. 2017), I place emphasis on a methodology based on *shared anthropology* (Rouch 1995)—borrowed from a filmmaking technique introduced by Jean Rouch in which through ‘feedback screenings’ protagonists become active and regular participants. To date, methodology scholarship has largely focused on research results over research processes (Kaufmann and Palmberger 2022); thus, I have chosen to transparently detail my research methods and interweave methodological approaches with stories and findings.

SHARED VULNERABILITY AND THE ETHNOGRAPHER'S POSITION

Anthropologist and writer Ruth Behar's (1996) call for reflexivity in ethnographic storytelling, embracing personal revelations by the ethnographer, challenged traditional objectivity in anthropology. The right to tell participant stories is intertwined and should engage with our own issues of representation. Considering this, my research and paper are intentionally reflexive. This aside, my interest in the digital afterlife stems from my personal experience of losing my father in 2015. To underpin my research, I have employed Alisse Waterston and Barbara Rylko-Bauer's (2006) concept of *intimate ethnography*—a method of situating family stories at the centre of ethnographic enquiries and expanding outward. Over the years since my father's passing, much akin to his physical belongings, I have continued to notice ways in which his digital presence seeps through. Even as I write this, I am trying to sort out his HSBC bank account because he had

not responded to their emails. These physical, bureaucratic, and digital presences should be easy to solve, but often prove challenging. Chuck the shoes away, remove the account holder, delete the Facebook page. Sounds simple. But the emotional ties, the ubiquitous nature of the latter, and complicated procedures leave room for human error. The rise of digital media introduces elements beyond human oversight; yet, often, without human intervention, omnipresent data can become 'immortal'.³

As an ethnographer, I questioned whether I could access intimate participant conversations without sharing my own misfortune. In my call for participants, I candidly stated that my personal experience of loss had driven my motivation, hoping that this would ensure trust, understanding, and establish a common ground of vulnerability. Moreover, as someone outside of academia, this has become my personal research project, shared in both academic and non-academic circles, in various formats.⁴ To ensure accessibility, I have maintained a colloquial tone, both here and throughout the research.⁵

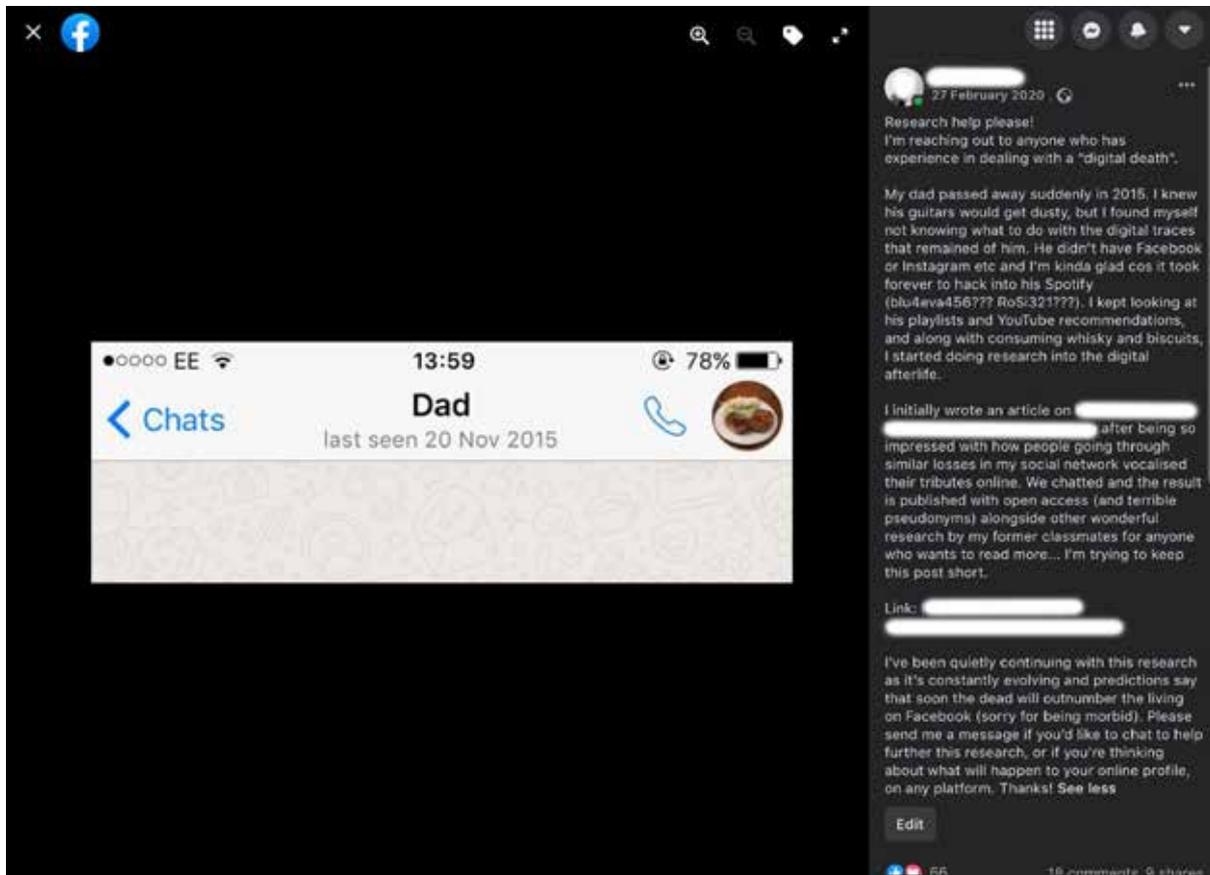


FIG. 2: Figure of open call posted on my personal Facebook profile, February 2020.

I publicly posted an open call on my personal Facebook and Instagram profiles, inviting people to contact me directly. Roser Beneito-Montagut et al. (2017: 676) advocate for the use of personal social media accounts for online ethnographies, ‘since this would allow for a symmetric relationship that places both the researcher and the participant on the same level of reciprocity.’ However, could this ensure trust? Traditional ethnographic methods in anthropology emphasise the importance of ‘hanging out’ (Jovicic 2022). What happens when this shifts to online-only encounters with strangers? Given the mix of respondents from my social networks—both people I knew personally, and those I did not—a combination of approaches were needed for effective trust-building.

KEEPING UP WITH AN ONLINE FIELD SITE

I’m overwhelmed. Some people have left comments, others have sent me direct messages on Instagram and Facebook. There are tags too, supportive comments, friends have shared the post and people have expressed ‘interest’ in my research. A friend responded, people in my network but am no longer in contact with responded, even people I don’t know have ended up in my ‘request’ message box on Facebook. I’m very grateful, just overwhelmed at how to stay on top of the various channels of communication. (Fieldnotes, February 2020)

Navigating an online field site is simultaneously a treasure trove and a minefield. Benefits include the *temporal* and *spatial proximity* (Hine 2000), yet, unlike traditional fieldwork, online

field sites lack clear entry and exit points due to technology’s permeability—one rarely logs out. Anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (1932 [1922]) stressed the importance of maintaining distance between one’s everyday culture and that under study, yet this is now virtually (excuse the choice of word) impossible with online fieldwork. Ethnographers of virtual worlds fit data collection in-between other tasks (Boellstorff et al. 2012), causing burdens. We talk about learning from and getting closer to our participants in the field, but little thought has been placed on digital *distance* and the need for the online ethnographer to adjust to two different rhythms at once (Bengtsson 2014).

To circumvent the fatigue of an online field site, I planned to meet participants in-person, if possible, yet when I hit ‘post’ in February 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck Europe, forcing digital-only ethnography. The pandemic-induced intensity to which people spent time online, and the heightened death count worldwide, affected traditional approaches to grief and mourning. New coping mechanisms became prevalent, funerals were held online, and I struggled to remain responsive and open to the ever-changing, unprecedented discourse. Employing Pink, Horst et al.’s (2016) use of indirect research questions in ethnography, I invited participants to broadly share digital death experiences and allowed them to guide the discussion (Brubaker et al. 2013). From their responses, I refined and shaped my questions—both on the spot and subsequently, including throughout the writing of this article. Sustaining participant–researcher contact is often easier online than with a physical field site (Frömming et al. 2017), and this study became a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), spanning global platforms, with participants united by their dislocation and experiences. However, I encountered pros and cons to this approach.

Unrestricted by a geographical location, I welcomed all 39 initial responses to my posts, via both the comment function and direct messages on Facebook and Instagram.⁶ Between February 2020 and September 2021, extensive Skype/Zoom/Facebook video interviews were conducted with seven people from China, Egypt, Mexico, Peru, Poland, the UK, and the US. All of these participants identify as female.⁷ The initial call lasted between one to two hours, and verbal consent was obtained to record the conversation (video and audio), with assurance of private use only for this research. Regular contact has been maintained wherever possible to involve the participants in the research process, detailed later under shared anthropology. Whilst incredibly enriching, I was unprepared for the vast cultural differences and approaches to death. However, having grown up in the UK, where death is often an uncomfortable subject, I was pleased to learn about more open outlooks.⁸ Plus, pandemic restrictions aside, the cost-effective, rooted nature greatly benefits self-funded, independent researchers. Whilst the internet's role regarding its wider social context must be considered—such as worldwide disparities impacting access—digital ethnographies help shift anthropology away from physical, colonial-style explorations by white men, overcoming its earlier failures.

OMNIPRESENT ONLINE TRACES AND POSTHUMOUS PERSONHOOD

In May 2021, Chadwick Boseman's X (then Twitter) account posted again (Boseman 2021). I scrolled through the comments: short videos, heartbreak emojis, plenty of 'miss you' comments, and many sentiments of shock at this resurrection—'This tweet scared the shit outta me for a sec lol.' What happens to our

social media accounts after passing is a complex and contested matter. For some users, there appeared to be no issue in interacting with a late profile and the tributes continued. For others, the unsettling nature of this post after death proved difficult to handle, plainly highlighting grief's diversity and the individual and personal responses to loss.

Intervening using a dead user's account is one of the many ways the dead can maintain a posthumous personhood and 'some sort of social life after death' (Meese et al. 2015: 413). James Meese et al. consider two other areas for posthumous personhoods: autonomous and semi-autonomous software, and by using artificial intelligence (AI) services. They suggest that each questions our existing boundaries between life and death, with the flatness of the screen adding to the blurred lines. This activity can prove tricky for less familiar engagers to decipher if the user is dead or not—even more so when they do not have celebrity status and a quick internet search cannot verify their suspicions. UK-based Daisy shared her experience of losing her father in 2016. He was a highly active Facebook user who enjoyed uploading photos; 'He was like my biggest fan,' liking and commenting on everything. After his passing, she mentioned there might be 'people out there who were his Facebook friends who will never know [he died] as well because we didn't memorialise it. So that's kind of a bit awkward.'

Notions of a posthumous personhood arose with several participants. Jenny, a US-based Facebook and Instagram user who lost her active Facebook-using mother in 2017, knew the password of her mum's account and logged in after she passed.

I didn't realise that she had her status to be visible to people when she would log on.

So, I logged in, and this was soon after she passed away, and people were like, what the hell. (...) They were freaked out, they really thought it was her...

Echoing the startled responses of Chadwick Boseman's following, unchanged profiles might not reveal a user's passing if others continue to use the account. Jenny's intervention was short-lived, disturbed by the disturbance. Yet, others shared different experiences, further revealing the ambivalence towards posthumous personhoods. Spain-based Ana, whose family lives in Romania, spoke of the large funeral culture back home, and the difficulty of being away when someone dies. Her teenage cousin passed away in 2018, and his mother continues to use his Facebook account. Ana shared:

I cringe every time she likes a post of mine from his profile and his name appears (...) It really makes me uncomfortable to see his name pop up on a regular basis, have it like my pictures and posts and knowing it's not actually him. I think it's a mixture of sadness, awkwardness, and discomfort that I feel every time my aunt interacts with me through his name. As for her, it might well also be a refusal to let go, but probably also a great comfort.

Although Ana is aware of the user behind it—unlike Jenny's mum's network or some of Chadwick's followers—a level of discomfort remains. Yet, for her aunt, it points towards the continuing bonds theory (Klass et al. 1996), reminding others of her son. The difficulties and uneasiness arise when people are misaligned on their views towards the dead online. I exchanged Instagram messages with Filippo, a UK-based user who lost his friend and his grandad. Compared to my other participants, he

had stronger feelings towards the 'immortality' of a digital presence:

In all honesty there's something about someone's digital presence I really push against after people die

I think part of my grieving process is really trying to accept the reality that the person isn't there anymore

And getting that to sink in as fast as possible

And I found that those online things they left behind give the idea that a piece of them is still around, but it doesn't feel tangible or real and for me just muddled that water of mentally adapting to the reality

Does that make sense? It's kinda like when they prepare a body to be buried and from a distance, they look normal but when you look closer it's an imitation of what they were.

Filippo's final comment underscores how others, intentionally or not, can alter the identity of the deceased, whether that is through embalming or the upkeep of their social media profile. Much like the mortuary care he describes, it also touches upon how 'caring for digital remains is a material, embodied practice, most certainly a form of labor even if it is also an act of love, undergirded by structures of obligation and kinship ties bound by affective bonds' (Kneese 2023: 95). The complexities and demands of posthumous care can have varying impacts on the bereaved; Filippo admitted to unfollowing a friend as it was causing him more pain to see the profile displaying 'remembering Steve'. He explained, 'And I feel guilty for doing it cause rejecting his profile felt like a rejection of him I guess?' Similarly, another UK-based participant, David, regretfully deleted the phone

number and text messages of his late brother shortly after his passing, thinking the reminders would be too painful and it would remove the possibility of an unexpected encounter (Brubaker et al. 2013). Actions driven by intense emotions may seem irrational, and, particularly with grief, when our feelings change over time; we may not be able to read their correspondence at first, as Peru-based Maria explained about her late father's emails, or opposingly, we may incessantly check their Facebook profile, and then perhaps our engagement dwindles.

At the outset of my research, I searched for the late profiles participants told me about, but I quickly stopped doing so, feeling intrusive and wrong. Yet, without the knowledge these people had passed, would I have had the same reaction if I were stalking a supposedly living profile? The anthropology of social media activity often involves lurking and passive observation, offering unbiased data (Ugoretz 2017), yet raising ethical concerns, with some scholars claiming it is deceptive and full consent should be obtained (King 1996). With this in mind and in an effort to evade online field site fatigue, I 'lurked' only at the beginning; primarily, I engaged via a more active means (video calls).

ETHICAL ALGORITHMS AND DUTY TO THE DEAD

Melanie, an active Facebook user from the UK, was one of the first to respond to my post. She began, 'My mum passed away and her two Facebooks are still going as we don't have the passwords. People forget she died and still wish her a nice day on her birthday etc.' I reflected on this unexpected encounter (Brubaker et al. 2013): Does this mean her mum's perpetual existence online is more convincing than her offline void, at least to her Facebook network? Or are we becoming increasingly reliant on

digital reminders as means to remember to the extent that it overrides our own judgement? In this instance, wishing a deceased person a happy birthday on Facebook just because a push notification tells us to and their page is still active becomes an automatic, often unquestioned gesture—and one that can have ongoing consequences for grief. This could be a form of automation bias (Bridle 2018), which, with the advent of artificial intelligence, raises worrying concerns—remembering is becoming optional. Furthermore, we are already becoming the automated bots: wishing a dead person happy birthday because they are still on Facebook—we are making the mistakes for which algorithms are criticised. Melanie's mum's unchanged profile makes it more difficult for her Facebook friends to come to terms with, or even remember, their loss. Perhaps at some point the realisation will arrive that this person is no longer active, yet for close friends or relatives like Melanie who have not forgotten their loss, it becomes another burden. Do you interfere and correct the well-wishers or let it continue at the risk of others seeing and joining in the birthday greetings? Such beliefs are reminiscent of Filipino's muddled realities, yet potentially stronger before a profile has been memorialised.

The trauma associated with death can carry heightened consequences when it is out of our hands and/or algorithmically triggered online. On the spectacle of Black death and its shift to the internet, Tonia Sutherland (2017: 34) remarks how the 'repetition of (re)membering and rituals of memorialization reinscribe racist ideologies and the trauma of the death event.' The documentation of violent deaths circulate, live on through a Google Image search, and reinscribe the systemic racism present in society. The automated content moderation of social media giants relies on algorithmic biases which traffic Black death for profit through virality and

hyper-circulation (Tanksley 2022; Noble 2018), with little respect for the individual, the people involved, and recipients' mental health.

In February 2023, Brianna Ghey, a 16-year-old transgender girl, was tragically murdered in Warrington, England. Several UK media outlets used her deadname and, due to age restrictions in the Gender Recognition Act (GOV.UK 2023) in England preventing Brianna from legally identifying as female, she will remain misgendered on her death certificate. The power of others to misconstrue and deliberately alter the identity of the dead are especially prevalent in the digital era where information spreads rapidly. Although they can be successfully used as tools in the fight for justice, Instagram and Facebook also serve as breeding grounds for hate crimes, and circulating information has the power to hijack crafted narratives. Applying this idea to a social media profile as a curated digital presence of an individual, what happens when that persists after death and others have the potential to imperceptibly overwrite it (Stokes 2021)? Daisy recounted the tale of an acquaintance whose mum had difficulty preserving the memorialised account of her late daughter because her daughter had uploaded several photos of herself in skimpy outfits. However, her daughter had chosen to portray herself this way, and her mother felt guilty for both denying her late daughter any privacy and trying to alter the way she wished to be seen. Actions such as this raise interesting questions such as the dead's entitlement to privacy. Jenny's curious 'hacking' (as she called it) of her late mum's Facebook profile revealed private conversations, causing upset: 'I went in thinking, like, this will be a good thing for my grieving. But then I didn't realise maybe this will make me angry at people when this is not my place to be.' Daisy thought it would be 'weird' if she had her dad's password, acknowledging that sometimes

there are things you really want to see, but maybe you should not. Whilst there are laws in place to govern the privacy of living persons, the data of the dead are less clear-cut (Kasket 2019)—and this extends beyond social media.⁹ Kim Kardashian (2020) received a hologram of her late father for her birthday, from her then-husband, Kanye West. Not only did her father not consent, but West manipulated the deceased's voice to flatter himself—prompting a viral spectacle that challenges our memories.

I contemplated these incidents from a research perspective. How can we safeguard the deceased's identity against alterations, detect this hijacking, and navigate algorithmically triggered content? What new complications develop regarding the privacy rights of the dead given the increase in digital personal data? Instances like Melanie's mum's posthumous birthday wishes and Ana's cousin's interactions underscore how others can inadvertently perpetuate their 'immortal' presence. Like Kanye West's hologram or Brianna Ghey's gender alteration, at times, 'multiple and conflicting narratives of the deceased exist' (Brubaker et al. 2013: 153), highlighting our moral obligations towards their digital remains (Stokes 2021). Taking Safiya Umoja Noble's application of critical race theory scholarship, which requires additional attention in digital afterlife research, 'we need to interrogate how the spectacle of social media often swallows whole the story, and spits back little to dismantle systems of violence' (Umoja 2018: 159). The internet is not neutral, and, as researchers in this field, we must remain vigilant against manipulation, consider the algorithmically oppressive and racialised landscape of the internet as well as its offline context, and respect personal boundaries regarding the dead online. Consequently, engaging in deeper ethnographic research outweighs passive online observation.

FAITH IN TECH GIANTS

Dealing with tech giants is an unavoidable task for social media anthropologists. Since I began this paper, Facebook and Instagram merged into Meta and Elon Musk transformed Twitter into X, underlining the changing and contested space within which this research takes place—and ultimately proving how our data are not owned by us. In relation to digital death and the potential loss or preservation of sacred assets, I explored various options with participants.

In 2007, Facebook introduced the memorialisation for user profiles if alerted to a death, and in 2015 they announced a Legacy Contact feature, allowing the pre-passing appointment of a profile manager (Facebook 2023a). Melanie, despite being an active Facebook user, was unaware of this possibility; others often viewed it as an additional hassle, with unclear procedures and outcomes. Jenny revealed, ‘No. I haven’t done it [memorialise mum’s profile] because I... I think it freezes the account. No, you can’t post on it.’ Jenny reflected on other family members who had passed away; the family thought it best to leave all accounts open. She continued, ‘Yeah, I don’t think you would [access it] in the same way, and I think it may delete the messages. Maybe it deletes the feed...’ Jenny’s uncertainty and hesitation are tied to the potential risk memorialising may pose to her mum’s Facebook data. In fact, Facebook (Facebook 2023b) claims to preserve the content that the user shared and depending on the account’s privacy settings, friends can continue to write on the memorialised timeline. Of course, this requires putting trust in the hands of a tech giant. Unlike other bureaucratic fuff involved when someone passes (for example, my ongoing dispute with HSBC), there is an emotional attachment to a Facebook page as a (collaboratively) crafted

identity of an individual, possibly full of images and memories. As a result, there is more at stake if something becomes inaccessible or lost, and I found elements of this insecurity shared across several participants.

Facebook and similar platforms were built for the living, not the deceased. As a result, the space can become contested through ad-hoc memorials (Pitsillides and Wallace 2021). Daisy spoke of her late father’s sudden void in Facebook activity and her ambivalent feelings towards the reminders left behind—his profile remains unchanged. She found solace in the photos he shared, albums he created, and could not imagine deletion—this personal archive amounts to a huge digital footprint and ongoing place of exchange for them. She elaborated, ‘they come into your head just randomly, quite lovely memories. But they’re usually linked to that sort of media, like photographs or some kind of post or something,’ highlighting the command digital media has over our memories and the way his online presence continues to dictate her offline memories. However, algorithmic prompts like ‘send a message to [dad]’ mirror Melanie’s mum’s birthday prompts, challenging the sanctity of the grieving process.

Daisy felt there was a ‘clinical’ nature to Facebook’s memorialisation procedures, and the term struck me. Whilst her father’s profile holds personal memories and an emotional attachment, Facebook sees it as just another profile—one participant in the world’s biggest social networking platform, which boasted almost three billion monthly active users in the second quarter of 2023 (Statista 2023). Despite clinical interludes, whilst dealing with HSBC (with around 39 million customers worldwide (HSBC 2023)), I spoke personally to an advisor from their bereavement team—an impossibility with Facebook. The complete lack of human interaction for a site purporting to connect

people, where reporting a death requires you to cast a form into the ether, can only be described as clinical. The intimate, emotional value of data stored on Facebook is arguably higher than any banking data, yet the procedure is far from being personally tailored. Why should it be the profit-driven tech giants who decide our fate?

At another point, Daisy said, 'I think we would have to memorialise it at some point, but when you're dealing with grief (...), I didn't really want to deal with things.' Unlike banking, notifying Facebook of a death is deemed less urgent. Melanie and Daisy highlight how it is possible, although not ultimately desirable, to delay it until a better time in the grieving process due to the emotional investment and procedural uncertainty. Similarly, Jenny prefers her mum's profile unchanged as the family often write to her mum and tag her in photos, reflecting the theories of continuing bonds (Klass et al. 1996) and posthumous personhoods (Meese et al. 2015).

With the growing prediction that deceased profiles on Facebook will eventually outnumber the living (Öhman and Watson 2019), a bereavement team for Facebook's vast user base would prove challenging. Now, the new ruling class, termed the *vectorialist class* (Wark 2019), owns and controls information—they are the ones profiting from our willing submission of data. Are the growing number of un-memorialised dead profiles, and their valuable insights, in danger of deletion? After all, who will pay for their upkeep?

My participants' experiences and my position as a researcher highlight our lack of power against the tech giants. The vast amount of stored data holds emotional significance for individuals like Daisy and indispensable insights into our current means of interacting for future anthropologists and historians. How do we, as researchers, navigate this collective history left

behind by the dead online before it is too late? What are the dangers of leaving responsibility to the tech giants considering the biases already present in society (Sutherland 2017; Noble 2018; Tanksley 2022)? There is 'a heightened need for a critical surveillance literacy in social media' (Noble 2018: 152), necessitating a close collaboration between researchers, participants, and technology developers to best harness digital technologies for everyone involved.

DATA STORAGE

As communication increasingly occurs through smartphones on social media platforms, the transition to a mobile online field site is almost inevitable (Goggin and Hjorth 2014). This portability is challenging to the researcher, and, amidst the various forms of communication—Facebook comments and private messages; Instagram comments and private messages; and recorded video calls—I began to lose track. Fuelled by the content of my conversations—the risk of deletion and data preservation—it made me realise how quickly our digital trace can mount, if, even I as a conscious researcher, was struggling to keep up with my own footprint. I manually extracted and updated my ongoing conversations for analysis into a Word document, alongside fieldnotes. From here, I was able to begin coding and extracting themes from the emerging data following a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014), allowing previous literature to inform—but not be forced upon—the research. This process, whilst basic and cumbersome without qualitative research software, was crucial given the similar conversations I was having with my research participants.

Li was one of the first participants with whom I had a long Facebook call. Having grown up in China, she is now based in Europe and uses

several different social media platforms, noting a difference between China and Europe. After losing her father, she discovered his account had vanished from the Chinese social media platform QQ, and changing her computer led to the loss of their chat history.

This is also a sad part in that digital era that you just can't keep this data forever. Otherwise, you have to do it earlier, like you have to save and download or whatever. But if you didn't pay attention, they will be gone (...) you don't even notice.

A separate analysis is required to delve deeper into platforms such as QQ. Nonetheless, Li's comments remain applicable to the broader issues of data storage. Her reflections challenge the notion of digital 'immortality'; data are not always permanent, rather they are subject to decay (Harju and Huhtamäki 2021). The *vectoralist class* (Wark 2019), mega-corporations, and larger entities are inconsiderate towards individual sensitivities like bereavement. Yet, with their ubiquitous nature and slippery intangibility, digital presences require us to react quicker; they can be quickly suppressed. Paradoxically, their characteristics also make them effective lurkers, hidden in areas you were not aware of, waiting to catch you off guard; 'persist[ing] without such decay' (Brubaker et al. 2013: 158). The fix, then, is not always quick or easy. Welcome or unwelcome, comforting or disturbing, these ambivalent feelings are akin to offline life, only the speed at which technology races ahead is unforgiving towards grief.

Daisy expanded on the emotional attachment to her dad's Facebook:

There was a time (...) when I realised how many messages I actually had on Facebook

Messenger, and it was actually really lovely. They were actually better than some of the physical things I had. The Facebook Messenger messages were like letters (...). It's very rare to be sending letters.

Once the initial pain had subsided, Daisy found comfort in these messages as time passed, although she revisits them less frequently now. This sentiment was shared across numerous research participants. As Josefina, a Mexico-based Facebook and Instagram user, said about her late father,

It's tiny, tiny gifts. I think sometimes you are strong enough to go through it and sometimes it's just... I think it's been like two or three years that I haven't checked his Facebook account because, I don't know, I don't feel maybe strong enough to see if it's... because if it's not there then you will feel super bad.

Daisy spoke of these tiny gifts as 'nuggets', envisioning the anticipation of discovering new things about her father in the future. However, will these nuggets remain reliably available given they are at the mercy of tech giants? Elon Musk's (2023) announcement in May 2023, revealing X's plan to delete inactive accounts with vague intentions of archiving, intensifies the fragility of preserving our digital legacies. Josefina inserted a poignant realisation, after reading a draft of this paper in November 2021, adding another layer of complexity to this narrative: 'I'm not friends with my dad on FB [Facebook]. I didn't remember that, and the other day I went to his profile and I realise that I can't post on his wall or do anything and that we can never be friends on FB anymore, and this is quite a feeling.' Unable to interact, this sentiment encapsulates the emotional weight

of confronting the limitations imposed by the platform and those in control.

Li's experience of losing her late father's QQ chats prompted her to adopt a proactive approach in preserving moments with her living relatives. She takes screenshots whenever she calls her grandma and stores them offline. Jenny also recorded her mother's voice before her passing and has since continued recording her father. As my fieldwork progressed, I realised the importance for anthropologists to consider data storage as an inherent research method. Ethical advice on internet research extends beyond the participants themselves to include researchers' storage and dissemination of gathered data (Boehlefeld 1996). Thus, each of my videoed conversations were recorded and stored on an external encrypted hard drive for confidentiality, just as I did with my fieldnotes.

PUBLIC VS PRIVATE

With the availability and accessibility of a vast amount of information, it is unclear whether the internet is a public or private space, necessitating careful consideration when employing digital methods, especially in sensitive areas like death and bereavement research (Carmack and DeGroot 2014). Moreover, a user's ability—normally, the author of a post—to change Facebook post visibility settings, in spaces other 'friends' believe to be private, introduces an additional layer of complexity.

The way some users feel comfortable sharing personal information online can relate to a phenomenon called the privacy paradox. Broadly speaking, the privacy paradox describes how quite often people's intentions concerning privacy do not align with their behaviour (Kokolakis 2017; Kasket 2019). Previous research revealed that some Facebook users were critical of sharing grief online, certain that

it was attention-seeking (Lapper 2017), which correlates with Spyros Kokolakis's (2017: 1) research on the phenomenon: 'individuals reveal personal information for relatively small rewards, often just for drawing the attention of peers in an online social network.' However, my previous research (2017) simultaneously revealed that several participants found sharing grief online to be a comfortable outlet as it helped elicit consoling responses and share memories of a late individual, as can also be seen here. Daisy found solace in her father's Facebook friends (ones she had not met in person, but who had become aware of his passing) offering condolences to her and her sister via his friends list due to their shared surname. Grief sharing online was common amongst active users, aligning with Brubaker et al.'s (2013) conclusion that users' attitudes to Facebook in other contexts influence its suitability for mourning.

Social media breaks down the barriers between the public and the private. Research demonstrates that these blurry boundaries create spaces where the set-up of isolated exchanges in front of a computer, or a smartphone, masks the publicity shared information; people aim for privacy yet underestimate Facebook's public nature (Barnes 2006). Adhering to digital media research ethics often involves pseudonyms and anonymising any recognisable identity markers (Bruckman 2002), but this becomes problematic when research is conducted in a public and traceable space (Markham 2012). Annette Markham proposes *fabrication* to protect participant privacy, reframing its negative connotations as an ethical method for researchers to embrace their agency. In this paper, I employed minor fabrication, pseudonyms, and identity disguising to ensure confidentiality. Each time I had a public discussion on Facebook and Instagram, I thought I should point out the public visibility, in case users were not aware of

the exposure; but, at the same time, I did not want to appear patronising. Those with whom I engaged via comments were mostly users who I had observed as being active in my network. I also observed mutual support amongst users; a user I did not know reached out to another in my network (it appears they were not friends) to provide advice on Facebook's page memorialisation. Whilst I did not want to deter the growing support network, I was wary of the visibility of personal information, and suggested we could talk via Facebook's private Messenger function. Occasionally, I also initiated Messenger conversations, leading to fruitful exchanges at times, whilst other times yielded no response. Perhaps I was delving in too deeply, too quickly, or perhaps the arena of visibility and sharing with other users was more comfortable. Regardless, this experience spurred contemplation on my methods and the tools we use to interact.

Twice, conversations with less familiar participants dwindled. Both were keen to share written thoughts via Facebook Messenger, and I was cautious not to force a video call, so I mirrored their Facebook messages, adapting my approach as I built trust. Nancy K. Baym (2015) talks about the importance of the temporal structure of online communication and the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous communication. The latter involves a delay, and can be seen in instances such as emails, Facebook wall posts, and Instagram comments. This stands in contrast to video calls on Zoom or via instant messaging—although delays can also occur in the latter, and rapid interactions can speed up traditionally asynchronous methods. For one participant, our asynchronous exchanges resulted in quick yet poetic reflections, solidifying the written formulation's ability to compose ourselves better. But I was keen to

delve deeper, especially given that we did not know each other personally; I longed for the surrounding informal conversation. However, a delay at my end broke the conversation and trust. This incident influenced my methods and raised unresolved dilemmas about response times and setting boundaries within the online field site.

Here, I briefly include a comparative discussion on Zoom. Whilst there are advantages in Zoom's wide-reaching ability, Baym (2015) goes on to discuss real-time media's failure in hosting large groups. Maria's experience with a Zoom memorial service underscores the challenge of creating privacy and intimacy within large group settings. She called it, 'a weird interaction', but one that was also emotional. She explained that, whilst it was great that everyone could join, even unexpected guests like a half-brother with whom they were not close, its weirdness lay in the fact that everyone was otherwise talking at the same volume, to everyone or to no one. Sometimes people forgot their microphones were on, everyone was chatting at once, and it was impossible to have side conversations; if you wanted to speak, you turned your microphone on and announced to all. Of course, Zoom offers the private messaging function and breakout rooms, but engaging with these creates formality and removes spontaneity from interactions.

In contexts where public and private boundaries are blurred, researchers face the challenge of weighing potential benefits against the risk of exposing participants in traceable spaces (Carmack and DeGroot 2014). A smaller-sized ethnography can mitigate these challenges, allowing deeper engagement with clearer participatory dynamics and individual variations. Careful consideration must always be given to ensure no harm is brought to participants (Thomas 1996).

SHARED ANTHROPOLOGY

Collaboration is integral to this ongoing research project and, as mentioned at the outset, I have applied filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch's (1995) concept of *shared anthropology*—creating cinema based on collaboration and participatory methods—to this research. Rouch's technique involved 'feedback screenings' with the people with whom he made the films, and he would then make changes to the films based on their remarks. Luke Eric Lassiter (2005) and other scholars also advocate for a collaborative process at every stage of ethnographic research. When doing ethnography online, collaboration became vital to ensure trust and understanding at a time when offline exchanges were impossible. Applying these techniques, a draft of this paper was shared with participants in November 2021 for their approval, consent, and if they wanted to add anything before the final submission. I marked out the parts which were directly related to them, although they were welcome to read the entire text and thus context. At times, I have inserted footnotes and comments where participants' feedback or additional information was added—inspired by John Creswell's (2013) theory of *member checking* to validate the researcher's findings and allow participants to fill in areas that are missing. Participant approval was key; as a result, I have not included quotes shared by two participants who did not respond when I sent a draft of this paper. The slow-paced approach to this research—from initial interviews in 2020 to final revisions following peer review in 2023—allowed for sustainable collaboration, validation, and distance. However, rapid technological changes posed challenges, constantly making elements redundant. Regardless, this process has encouraged my interest in the action as opposed to the end result, 'I prefer to emphasize

storytelling over stories—the social process rather than the product of narrative activity' (Jackson 2013: 37). I am fascinated by the unfinished processes: a constant dialogue between the narrator and the narrated, the self and the other, and the public and the private. This approach further paves the way for a shared anthropology as the stories are exchanged with participants who simultaneously add to and subtract elements from the conversation. Moreover, regular sharing and updating has helped strengthen the relationships with my participants.

Given the project's consistently malleable nature, I agree with Colin Young (1974: 133) in that there cannot be only one methodological approach: 'Any intellectual discipline will outgrow its early enthusiasms and change its methodologies.' I believe this adjustability also extends to ethical guidelines. Some scholars argue for formal rules (King 1996), others follow a teleological approach to guidelines (Boehlefeld 1996; Thomas 1996), and others recognise ethics as emerging out of a participatory process with the group under study (Allen 1996). I draw from the teleological approach, whilst leaning towards Christina Allen's negotiated ethics—some guidelines are important for research integrity, but researchers must still recognise each unique research context and involve participants throughout. Regularly revisiting my fieldnotes allowed offline reflection on effective and adjustable methods, like being responsive whilst still maintaining boundaries.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND LIMITATIONS

As noted previously, I engaged with a diverse global cohort. Whilst the taboo surrounding death has been shifting with internet prevalence (Sofka 2020), nuanced distinctions in attitudes

emerged within my study. Yet, additional research is required to fully understand these sentiments; considering the offline contexts of internet research can enhance the whole ethnography (Davies 2007). For Josefina in Mexico, she believes that due to their Day of the Dead, they have a more open attitude to mortality—and this also extends to the digital afterlife. On this day, they create altars for their late friends, photograph them, upload them to Facebook and Instagram, and tag their remembering profiles.¹⁰ However, she also attributes this to the prior digital relationship she had with these friends, in comparison to her father, with whom she never had a digital relationship. In addition, she states:

I think it creates a certain kind of feeling of community—like, you are not alone in this. If I post something like ‘hey, I miss you’ then another friend would say, ‘hey, I was also thinking of him and I also miss him.’ And then maybe you would say, ‘well, let’s have a drink for him’ or things like that. It creates this kind of feeling that maybe... I don’t know, maybe this digital thing, it’s easier...

The immediate, interactive sense of community fosters continuing bonds with departed loved ones and ensures they remain present across their social media networks. As noted, the impact of prior digital relationships on engagement levels along with cultural differences demands further research for a more sufficient analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

We might be catching up with technology, yet we are becoming increasingly entangled as we do so. Conflicting sentiments arise, our memories are tested and challenged, and our relationship

towards the dead online complicates. Whilst some find solace in continuing their bonds with the deceased, others, namely, UK-based Filipino who unfollowed his late friend’s Facebook profile, feel these digital presences complicate their grieving. This research is testament to grief’s diversity. Most of my participants were unsure as to how to handle their own digital remains, and I, too, remain undecided.

The rapidly changing nature of the internet and uncertainties arising out of death’s shift online constantly pose new challenges in digital death research, necessitating a continually evolving set of methods. Being reflexive (Behar 2003), open and adaptable to emerging factors, and transparent strengthens research methods, and detailing these experiences can assist future scholars in the field. A participatory process at every stage of the research is not only integral for ensuring no harm is brought to participants, but it also reinforces the research’s validity through techniques such as member checking and Rouch’s (1995) shared anthropology. Working towards a shared anthropology digitally follows a similar trajectory to offline research through regular communication, and clearly exchanging with participants removes the need for passive, unethical lurking, allowing the researcher to engage in deeper ethnographic research. Moreover, my openness (not only through my shared misfortune) became particularly vital when building trust online, especially amongst people with whom I was previously unacquainted. The constant online availability removes geographical barriers, however, and care must be taken to prevent exhaustion from an online field site. The technological shield and privacy paradox aid the sharing of grief online, and this research’s lengthy timeframe removes impatient demands. Whilst further steps can be taken, this approach encourages the dismantling of hierarchies and provides opportunities for

a more collaborative form of storytelling online. Yet, barriers remain in collating and shaping the research outputs; ultimately, the question of authorship still stands, and I do not expect all participants to freely read the entirety of this academic paper in order to provide feedback. Furthermore, with this academic paper as the current research's only output, the issue of accessibility remains unresolved.

By conducting a multi-sited ethnography, and drawing from critical race theory, I have addressed the sociocultural and sociopolitical impacts which are underexplored in the field of digital death and the digital afterlife. The internet is not neutral, algorithmic prompts can be insensitive towards grief, and the ability of others to hijack and craft identities of the deceased are increasing phenomena, which demand greater oversight regarding the privacy of the dead. Thus, navigating an online field site requires attention to detail to authentically understand certain scenarios. This is where additional offline research can enhance digital ethnographies by strengthening findings and authenticity, and provide opportunities for easier collaboration such as through in-person workshops.

As I collate fragments of my research from the internet's depths across multiple platforms, I recognise the importance of maintaining oversight and ethical data management. Particularly within the hands of mega-corporations, the urgency of downloading and saving data to regain (some sense of) control is evident. Online personal data are often taken for granted as 'immortal', but recurring instances—from Li's loss of her dad's QQ chats to Elon Musk's sweeping statements regarding X's account deletion—demonstrate how such data are not permanent and invariably remain out of our control. Markham's (2012) fabrication

methods have proved useful in protecting participants' privacy, and I appreciated rather quickly that publicly available content does not imply consent for wider sharing. Themes like cultural differences, the racialised landscape of the internet, the privacy of the dead, and legal procedures related to afterlives require further research—further highlighting the sprawling, rich nature of this field. In addition, the emergence of companies offering 'immortal' promises and digital afterlife management add other dimensions. Combining research findings with methodological challenges contextualises the research and highlights the significance of a reflexive approach, whilst maintaining a wider audience through storytelling. To close, I must stress that this research is ongoing, mimicking the unfinished processes that live on after death, and the need for an adaptable set of methods. Thus, the question of collaborative grief storytelling via the internet is more than a methodological query, rather an incomplete exploration into the evolving landscape of technology, mortality, and human emotions. On that note, I must again call HSBC—the issue with my late father's account remains unresolved.

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NOTES

- 1 When writing a draft of this paper in 2021, Chadwick Boseman's same post had 7.7 million likes and 3.1 million reposts (formerly retweets). Investigating the cause for this drop is beyond the scope of this essay, but serves here to highlight the ephemeral nature of the internet and who controls it.
- 2 To protect and respect the identity of the participants, all names used here are pseudonyms.
- 3 As Harju and Huhtamäki (2021: 5) note, '[d]espite "afterlife" implying eternal existence, data have a life cycle and are not permanent or forever lasting, but like all material things, are subject to disappearance and decay.' The use of immortal has, therefore, been placed in inverted commas, since it is often implied, yet should not be taken for granted.
- 4 Recent examples include exhibition format at PACT Zollverein, Essen (2022) and Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris (2021), as well as conference presentations at DGSKA (2023), RAI (2023), EASA (2020), BSA Social Aspects of Death, Dying and Bereavement (2020).
- 5 Given my background in visual anthropology, I aim to create a visual representation of this research to increase accessibility. As a result of their parallel development, methods relating to the written and visual elements often intersect—for example, a shared anthropology. Similarly, both draw from experimental ethnography, a term, which 'has begun to circulate in post-colonial anthropological theory as a way of referring to discourse that circumvents the empiricism and objectivity conventionally linked to ethnography' (Russell 1999: xi).
- 6 The Facebook post received 66 Likes, 9 Facebook 'love' reactions, and 9 shares—some calling for participants, others resonating with my prior research (I also shared my 2017 paper). The Instagram post received 107 Likes and 13 comments including research suggestions and expressions of support and connection. Whilst there may be multiple motives for engaging with the 'Like' button, with liking the content being the most obvious, 'Liking' also expresses support and maintains relationships (Levordashka, Utz and Ambros 2016).
- 7 Upon sharing a draft of this paper with Josefina, she added: 'At the beginning, you mentioned that you only had participants identify as female, but later I saw a Filipino participating and was called a he, just this confused me a bit.' To clarify, although those with whom I engaged via video call identified as female, this paper includes messages exchanged with people of other genders, like Filipino.
- 8 'It is not surprising that exposure to death, in whatever form, often discomforts us. The industrial and medical revolutions drove a wedge between the living and the dead, shunting the dying into hospitals and the deceased into climate-controlled mortuaries and large, purpose-built cemeteries in the suburbs' (Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie 2020: 28).
- 9 To delve into this topic is too broad for this paper, and regulations vary per country. In addition, despite procedures such as the Facebook Legacy Contact, there has been little uptake, which the lack of information and reluctance to deal with one's own death may explain (Morse and Birnhack 2020).
- 10 After reading a draft copy of this paper in November 2021, Josefina reflected on the ease with which digital media allows more frequent and immediate interactions on the Day of the Dead, 'How do we share with the other family members? Social media: Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp. And talking about and laughing about our loved ones, [we] would have a hectic night visiting all (...) gave warmth to our hearts.'

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