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DIGITAL DEATHSCAPES: A TRANSDISCIPLINARY STUDY ON DEATH AND MOURNING, WORLDVIEWS, AND IDENTITIES ON FACEBOOK

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Abstract
In this cyberethnography and computer-mediated discourse analysis, I explored the common digital deathscapes on Facebook and how they (re)configure death and mourning in the absence of rituals in physical spaces. I also investigated social realities, worldviews, and identities constructed by the virtual semiotic resources. Results of the transdisciplinary investigation illustrate that digital mourners resort to seven repertoires of semiotic digital deathscapes, with candles and text being the most prevalent. Avoidance of death discourse emerged as a common social reality, and belief in God and the afterlife constitute the grievers' worldviews. In terms of computer-mediated communication, two interesting impressions were uncovered. First, Facebook appears to be a platform for women, as seen in their predilection for social media engagement and virtual mourning. Conversely, men are less engaged in virtual mourning. The results highlight gender-based differences in digital grief expressions. Additionally, they underscore the prominent role of women in emotionally charged social and family events such as death and memorialization. Findings have theoretical implications on semiotics and critical discourse analysis in the context of digital mourning while also offering rare Facebook data on the subject.

Keywords: death, digital deathscapes, Facebook, mourning, multimodality, social media

Introduction

Social media, which became a global phenomenon in 1996, has been a conduit of efficient and multimodal communication worldwide (Meghawat et al., 2018). Globally, 5.24 billion people are social media dependent, and the figure is expected to increase (Backlinko Team, 2025). Facebook, for instance, is a leading social media network with 1.1 billion active users in Asia, representing 22.9% of the entire continent's population (Intelpoint, 2025). In Southeast Asia, Facebook remains a very popular medium with nearly 400 million users, with Indonesians, Filipinos, Malaysians, and Thais spending 4 hours daily engaging in community interaction (TechNode Global, 2025). Indonesia alone is home to 174 million Facebook users, making the archipelagic nation the fourth-largest Facebook audience in the world (World Population Review, 2025). According to the report,

Indonesian males are more active on the platform compared to females. In the Philippines, there are 86.75 million active social media users, representing 73.4% of the total population of roughly 110 million. Facebook is also the most dominant platform with nearly 87.7 million users as of 2024 (Statista, 2025).

With the ubiquitousness of the Internet and social media, the lines between traditional obituaries or obits and death rituals have been blurred (Sapalo, 2024). Now, there is a coexistence of offline and online domains, especially in the context of death and memorialization (Singh, 2025). The seamlessness between the physical and the virtual became even more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic as health restrictions prevented the use of traditional modes of printed announcements and funerals/burials for the dead (Corpuz, 2021). Along these lines, material spaces for death rituals that normally meant the presence of relatives and friends became impossible, necessitating heavy reliance on web-based modes for grieving and memorialization (Myles & Millerand, 2014; Mitima-Verloop et al., 2022). Such developments made the concept of digital deathscapes gain attention in academic research, especially how death and mourning are (re)configured virtually.

The idea of semiotic deathscapes in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and media discourse is traced to the physical landscapes and "material expression" in relation to communal death rituals (Maddrell, 2020, p. 167). In cases where mourning rites cannot be accommodated by physical spaces, virtual infrastructure and other Internet-based technologies become the default platforms for remembrances (Brubaker et al., 2013). Such alternative spaces have given rise to non-material semiotic landscapes known as digital deathscapes (Alexis-Martin, 2020). Although memorialization and online obituaries had already penetrated the virtual world even before Covid-19, these online death landscapes or web-based deathscapes became more prevalent (Haverinen, 2015; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Murrell et al., 2021). On Facebook, for instance, posts and new profile photos that signal death and grief have become part of the virtual habits of account owners (Yeager, 2021; Sapalo, 2024).

Berlanga-Fernández and Reyes (2024) highlight a dearth of digital semiotic scholarship. Cabañero (2025) and colleagues concur, noting the limited studies dealing with virtual mourning practices. Underexplored territories include semiotic analysis of virtual mourning and how it is shaped by society and modern technologies (Sasa et al., 2019). More recent studies call for interdisciplinary approaches in analyzing online death/mourning rituals. In particular, scholars see the need to explore how the pre-COVID communal death ceremonies have been mediated and reshaped by digital technologies and platforms (Fusco et al., 2024; Christensen & Sumiala, 2024). Importantly, Christensen and Sumiala believe a more nuanced investigation into such mediation is a matter of priority. Based on the foregoing, an exploration of the prevalence and meaning-making aspects of digital deathscapes deserves attention in scholarship.

In this study, I focus on virtual signs, symbols, and text related to death and mourning during the COVID and post-COVID periods using cyberethnography and computer-mediated discourse analysis. I am particularly interested in three key facets. First, digital deathscapes occur as semiotic representations of death and grief on Facebook. Second, the virtual semiotic repertoire signifies social

realities and worldviews, and third, the identities of virtual mourners are constructed.

Material deathscapes and media discourse

Within landscape studies, researchers have ventured into the study of death spaces and other related practices (Maddrell, 2020; Sasa et al., 2019). Several researchers (e.g. Alexis-Martin, 2020; Maddrell, 2016; Murrell et al., 2021), for instance, note this growing interest in the death genre in (social) media. However, literature on online semiotic data per se is limited in terms of scope (Berlanga-Fernández & Reyes, 2024). More specifically, studies on death and mourning appear to be fairly new. Hence, calls for more investigation into the semiotic and spatial dimensions of online memorialization have been growing as mentioned earlier (See Sidaway, 2012; Sasa et al., 2019). This highlights the ever-expanding field of communication and the intersectionality between landscape studies, semiotics, and critical discourse analysis, particularly that relates to (digital) media discourse.

As regards media discourse, as early as two decades ago, Herring (2004) complained about the failure of scholars to fully identify and describe online phenomena in a culturally meaningful way. Commenting on the challenges connected to studying Internet-based discourse, Herring suggested that results have not been empirically grounded. It appears, based on Herring, that a timely response is to deploy a multidisciplinary approach in examining Internet-based data such as online deathscapes.

In a seminal work, Fairclough (1995) stressed that media discourse scholars, in addition to media text inquiry (the language aspect) within the domain of linguistics, must also encompass other features of "media artefacts" such as visuals and other images (p. 47). Specifically, any inquiry concerning "media texts should include…detailed analysis of visual images…comparing semiotics and social semiotics with other approaches" because of their multimodal characteristics (p. 33). Fairclough (2012) drew from critical discourse analysis and social semiotics, calling his strategy a "trans-disciplinary research methodology" pp. 10 & 12). He argues that beyond scrutiny of written and broadcast texts, media discourse studies must also investigate three phenomena, namely, representations, identities, and relations. Analysis via representations focuses on how the world—events, relationships, etc.—is represented in media. As to the second aspect, the focus is on what identities are created in the texts or narratives, and these may include the journalists, the audiences or consumers, etc. Investigation concerning relations is interested in what relationships are built between/among those engaged in media discourse. He emphasizes that text "simultaneously" represents, constructs identities, and builds relations (p. 5).

From pre-digital death signs to Facebook deathscapes

Traditional forms of communication, such as print media, have been the default channels for formal texts, especially those that required publishing and posterity, such as obituaries and death notices (NewspaperLinks.com, 2022a, 2022b). To be specific, before the global migration into digital media, death notifications and obits came in two forms: a news format and a straightforward announcement. The memorial usually contains the name of the deceased, their age

at the time of death, the surviving immediate family members, and requests for prayers (Fernández, 2006; Kingsu-Cheng, 2021).

The news format includes a headline in bold, a photo of the deceased, and a short report item about the person's demise. Reports about the death of famous personalities include the cause of death and a tribute (Fernández, 2006; Ilagan, 2021). Obituaries about accomplished individuals usually highlight the contributions made in society (Navarette, 2020). Considered as paid advertisements, death notices have always been limited to the middle class, but with the accessible social media affordances, memorial advertisements, as well as the traditional mourning, have also penetrated various platforms such as Facebook (Murrell et al., 2021; Davoudi, 2023). This has given rise to death semiotic resources or web-based deathscapes within the realm of CMC.

To iterate, Facebook provides free and accessible space for signs and symbols to commemorate the dead. Death vectors such as a candle, a cross, flowers, etc., are often used as temporary profile photos or as part of virtual obits on mourners' profile feeds to signal death and grief. A quick Google search using the keywords "candle condolence death" can easily provide an array of designs for death, funeral services, etc., either for offline or online usage. Many of the designs are available for a fee. The following are 2025 screenshots from VectorStock, a company that sells designs for death and memorials, with the death candle as one of the most common vectors (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Death vectors by Vectorstock (2025), consisting of lighted candles, flowers, and a black awareness ribbon, screenshot on 7 March 2025

Other designs include funeral cards with flowers and/or candles, and a black awareness ribbon with a white candle on a white vector image. Although these images are meant to be purchased, they are usually screengrabbed and utilized to communicate death and mourning without proper attribution. This raises some ethical and intellectual rights issues, which are the focus of this study. Finally, with the use of web-based memorial signs and symbols, we see a growing dependence on multimodal communication (Proust, 2024; Riaz & Mustafa, 2025). Also, as Sapalo (2024) maintains, social media serve as an extension for individual and communal mourning and other death-related communicative activities that require physical spaces.

The preference for images of a candle, flowers, and ribbon as symbols of grief is understandable. In most religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, candles are a common material signification for remembrance and mourning (Ancient Theory, 2025). To honor the departed, rituals such as the

lighting of candles are performed (Leboeuf, 2025). White or black ribbons are also an expression of mourning and loss, according to Leboeuf. Other artefacts for death rituals and communication include flowers and the Christian cross. Across cultures, flowers serve as catalysts for mourning and are also used to honor the departed (Anna, 2023; FlowerAnchor, 2023). Finally, the cross is another tool to signify mourning and remembering the dead (Williams, 2013; Revington, 2020).

Research questions

In this study, I follow Fairclough's 3-domain interdisciplinary approach in identifying prevalent virtual semiotic signs, symbols, and texts as seen on Facebook feeds during and after the pandemic. However, I limited the scope to the first two dimensions—representations and identities. The focus is on the (re)configuration of death and mourning, the depiction of worldviews and social realities, and the construction of mourners' identities through digital deathscapes. Specifically, this investigation sought answers to the following: (1) What types of digital deathscapes are used by the Facebook mourners to configure death and mourning? (2) What social realities and worldviews are represented? (3) How are the identities of the Facebook grievers constructed?

Framework

This study is anchored mainly on semiotics—which is interested in examining the functions, meanings, stances, and ideologies of signs and symbols—and on social semiotics (van Leeuwen, 2005). According to Chandler (2007), signs can take various forms and may include objects, text, images, sounds, gestures, etc. Van Leeuwen (2005) goes further and argues that semiotic resources can be almost anything—material or non-material—like speech, writing, and pictures. From these verbal, visual, or aural resources, individuals and societies engage in social meaning-making.

A trans-disciplinary study, this qualitative work draws concepts of two research approaches, namely, social semiotics and (critical) discourse analysis DA/CDA (Iedema, 2003; Johnson & McLean, 2020). It analyzes Facebook posts and temporary profiles of select individuals to gather empirical data that relate to online death and mourning, following Fairclough (2012). Elements of social semiotics are employed in examining the digital deathscapes and how death and mourning are (re)configured. Aspects of DA are relied upon in tackling the implications of select language features in the posts. CDA is employed to account for the sociolinguistic facets of the research, particularly how multimodal texts work in terms of cultural values and worldviews.

Method

Digital deathscapes via Facebook posts and temporary profile photos were gathered during a 10-month period, from August 2021 to June 2022. In this cyberethnographic investigation, I used convenience sampling, which was limited to ten (n=10) grieving individuals—following Cabañero and Guison-Bautista (2025)—identified and chosen purposively during regular digital self-tracking. Their inclusion is based on three criteria. The primary requirement is that account users must be in my list of Facebook friends (followers) for the facility in

understanding their sociocultural contexts. Their backgrounds are needed in interpreting linguistic and semiotic choices. Second, the Facebook feed must contain any or all of the following: announcement of death or funeral, temporary profile photos/images that are symbolic of death/mourning, and any text honoring or commemorating the departed. Third, the list of mourners must include working and non-working classes. This is to ensure that depicted social realities and the worldviews represented both sectors. The number need not be balanced since this is an exploratory study designed to gather impressions about the common digital deathscapes and their possible significations. The following table shows the demographic profile of the selected mourners.

Table 1. *Demographic profile of digital mourners*

Characteristic	Details
Nationality	9 Filipinos based in the Philippines; 1 Filipino based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)
Gender	6 females; 4 males
Educational Attainment	8 college graduates; 1 high school graduate, 1 elementary graduate
Socioeconomic status	8 employed (lower-to-middle income); 2 housekeepers
Age Group	7 in their 50s-60s; 1 in early 40s; 2 in early 30s

Routine social media auditing was done in the morning (anytime between 6:00 AM to 11:00 AM) and afternoon or evening (between 1:00 PM and 9:00 PM). In the context of this study, it was during this period that the COVID-19 health emergency began to decline but still posed a significant threat, thereby still affecting regular mobility and traditional forms of mourning (Lee & Eom, 2023; Santana et al., 2023).

Although permission for publicly available social media data is not required (London School of Economics and Political Science, 2005), account owners were contacted to ask for their consent for the use of their content. This is what Lauterwasser and Nedzhvetskaya (2023) call as duty of care on the part of researchers, which includes anonymizing data for the users' privacy. Mosaic was placed on the faces of the users and their dead family member/s in order to protect their identities. Personal details (e.g., account names, physical addresses, etc.) were obscured. To further anonymize content sharers, only their initials were provided. Analysis was guided by the trans-disciplinary model as inspired by Fairclough (1995, 2012). For this study, digital deathscapes are any representations of death, mourning, and memorialization in the form of text, images, and other signs and symbols.

Death posts and temporary mourning profiles were perused using Microsoft 365 Copilot for coding and thematic analysis. First, the Facebook texts and temporary change in profile photos (including use of other images in the posts, except emojis) of Facebook mourners were typed using Microsoft Word. Descriptions and the number of other semiotic resources were also encoded. Selective coding was utilized as the study focused on certain core categories that

relate to the research questions. To determine the themes (inductive approach), the entire Word file was fed through Microsoft 365 Copilot. Copilot is a large language model (LLM) developed by OpenAI whose architecture is based on GPT-4 or Generative Pre-trained Transformer 4 (OpenAI, 2023). This generative AI assisted in identifying themes/categories that facilitated the data presentation, interpretation, and analysis (Lockwood & Castleberry, 2024; Sinha et al., 2024). The language model was prompted to provide five codes or categories as a starting point, a number that could be increased or decreased depending on the need. The following categories were supplied by the app: (a) symbolic visuals of mourning, (b) religious and spiritual references, (c) emotional language and personal reflections, (d) cultural and linguistic identity, (e) call for collective memory and tribute.

In determining social realities, worldviews, and identities constructed by the digital deathscapes, I examined the themes and juxtaposed them with the actual content for processing. Interpretation and analysis of the data followed. To ascertain the prevalence of digital deathscapes, each feed was examined to account for the kind of content (e.g., text, images, etc.) and determine their frequency of usage using frequency statistics. Tables and charts were provided to record the data or illustrate the findings.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents data as outlined in the research questions. Presentation and interpretation of findings first focus on the semiotic repertoires that are prevalent in the data. It also delves into the (re)configuration of death and the process of mourning on Facebook. Findings related to social realities and worldviews are then provided. Finally, constructed identities by the semiotic agents are discussed. Since this is an exploratory study, findings are illustrative and may not be generalizable given the limited number of Facebook mourners (n=10).

Semiotic repertoires for death and mourning

Seven modalities for configuring death and mourning have been virtually identified, namely, lighted candle, black ribbon, emoji, photograph, text, hashtag, and other images (See Table 2). In this study, text is limited to typed or written messages and does not include photographed messages. The latter belong to the ‘other images’ category, where photographed images and text are classified. Lighted candles, although representing screengrabbed images, are assigned a separate category of their own.

Images of a lighted candle, used by six (6) mourners, appeared six (6) times on Facebook timelines—one of the most preferred digital deathscapes. This corroborates Costa et al. (2022) who found the candle as a common symbol for signifying death and mourning on Facebook. Text also appeared on 6 Facebook feeds, making it equally popular. Emojis are less prevalent based on the number of account owners, appearing only on 3 Facebook walls. It is worth noting, however, that it has the highest number of occurrences—10 or 29.41%. Pictures were used by 3 grievers, first as temporary profile photos, second as part of the death announcement, and third to honor the dead. Other images (photographed

text or images), ribbon, and hashtag symbol were the least popular, with 2 mourners, 1 user, and another griever, respectively.

Table 2. Frequency of digital deathscapes repertoire by mourners

Modality (Deathscape or semiotic resource (n=7)	Frequency (Number of Occurrences, n=34)	Percentage based on the number of resources (n=34)	Virtual mourners (n=10)
Lighted candle	6	17.64%	(n=6) MM, DM, ER, DB, BM, OL
Emoji	10	29.41%	(n=3) JA, QR, OL
Photos (of deceased; of mourner and deceased)	5	14.71%	(n=3) CG, QR, DB
Ribbon	1	2.94%	(n=1) AD
Text	6	17.64%	(n=6) MM, ER, QR, DB, JA, OL
Hashtag	3	8.82%	(n=1) OL
Other images	3	8.82%	(n=2) CG, OL
Total	34	100.00%	

Note: Most of the mourners used multiple semiotic deathscapes.

Lighted candle and its signification

As already stated, the lighted candle is one of the two most prevalent modes of communication and expression of grief (See Table 2). Six mourners used either the lighted candle as a temporary profile photo or as part of the death announcement on their Facebook walls. The number of candle images represented 17.64% of the total number of semiotic resources (n=34). For example, on August 3, 2021, MM, a daughter-in-law of the deceased, used an image of a large lighted candle in yellow and orange colors as her temporary profile photo (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. Digital deathscape #1: post and profile change by MM, screengrabbed on 14 August 2021

A small lighted candle with a black background also appeared on the timeline of ER (Figure 5). Similarly, DB signified the passing of her son on her profile feed through a candle image (Figure 3). More prominent than the two other images, the candle's immense size reflects the intensity of the grief.

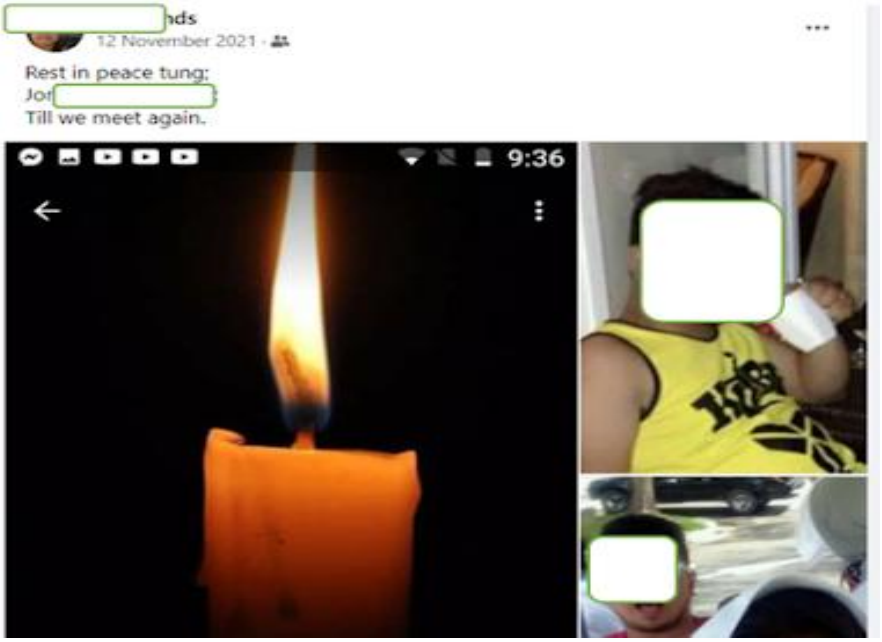

Figure 3. Digital deathscape #7: post by DB, screengrabbed 15 November 2021

On June 23, 2022, OL details on his personal wall his grief over the passing of a friend using multiple modes, including a small lighted candle (See Figure 4). The image is not prominent compared to the large picture of the friend. Through this symbol, online mourners communicate their emotions about the passing of loved ones, an extension (or evolution) of the traditional memorialization and death announcements (Sapalo, 2024).

Candles—signifying the journey of the soul as well as divine connection—are common artefacts for remembrance and mourning, while candle-lighting rituals demonstrate one's homage for the departed (Ancient Theory, 2025; Leboeuf, 2025). Hence, the use of a lighted candle not only facilitated computer-mediated communication of death and bereavement but also revealed the grievers' expression of love, honor, and remembrance of the departed. With the ubiquitousness of the Internet and social media, digital spaces provide an extension for the traditional obituaries and mourning with the display of candle images on Facebook walls. We see here the seamlessness of the online and offline domains in the context of death communication and mourning (Singh, 2025). Also obvious is the value of memorialization as a significant social practice. These have implications for social realities and worldviews of the Facebook users.

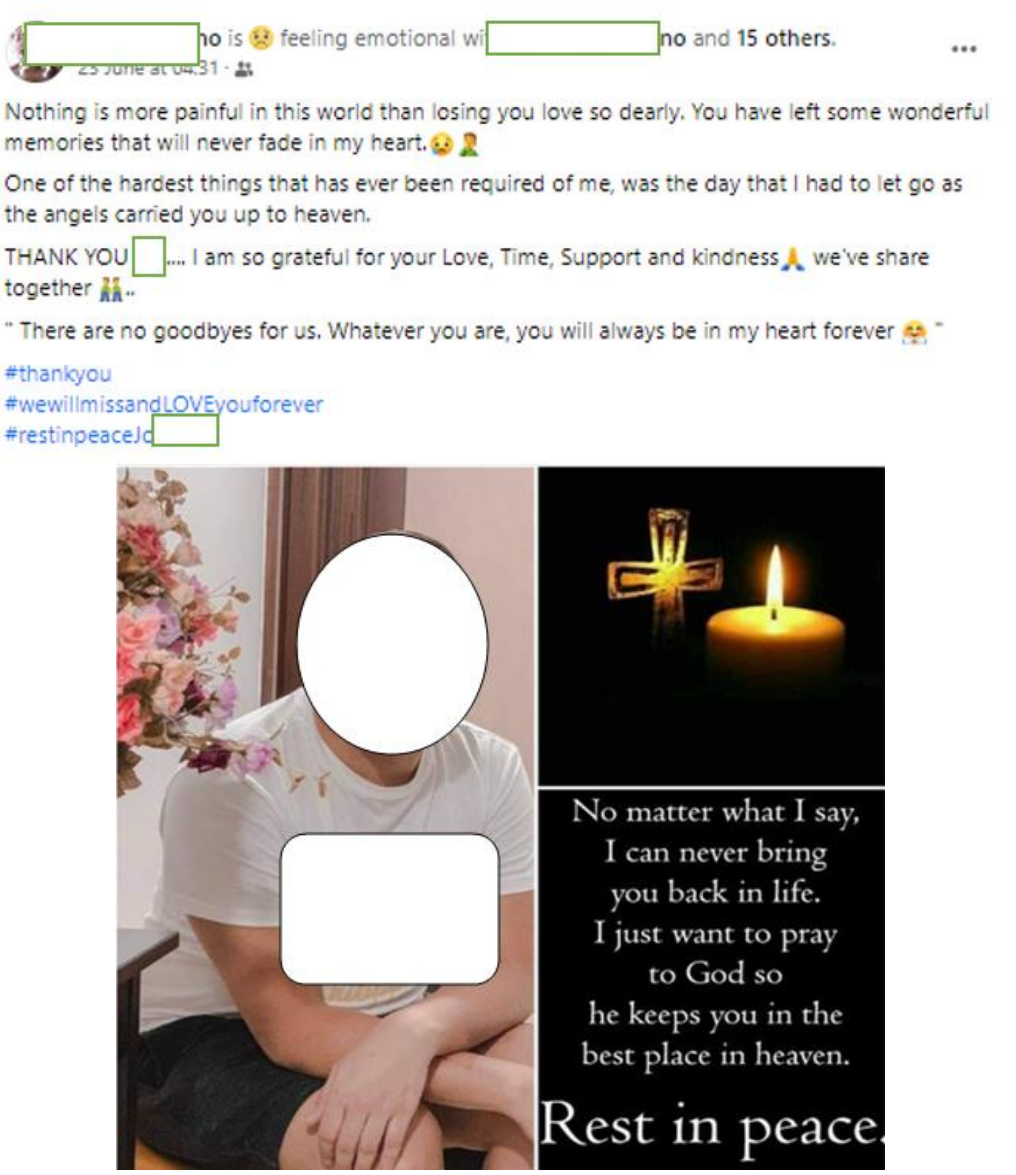

Figure 4. Digital deathscape #10: post by OL, screengrabbed June 23, 2022

Emojis

Unicode emojis, originally from Japan but adopted extensively worldwide with new symbols (Freedman, 2018), are the most prevalent in terms of occurrences, though used only by three individuals. Interestingly, OL, based in the UAE, utilized the greatest number of digital deathscapes (six in total) by a single Facebook user: text, emojis, photo, candle, hashtag, and other images—cross and screengrabbed text. A male in his early 30s, the youngest among the 10 mourners, showcased six different kinds of emojis. These are sad and crying emojis, friendship emojis, men holding hands emojis, praying hands, etc. (Emojipedia, 2022), illustrating the intensity of grief in the emotion-filled tribute.

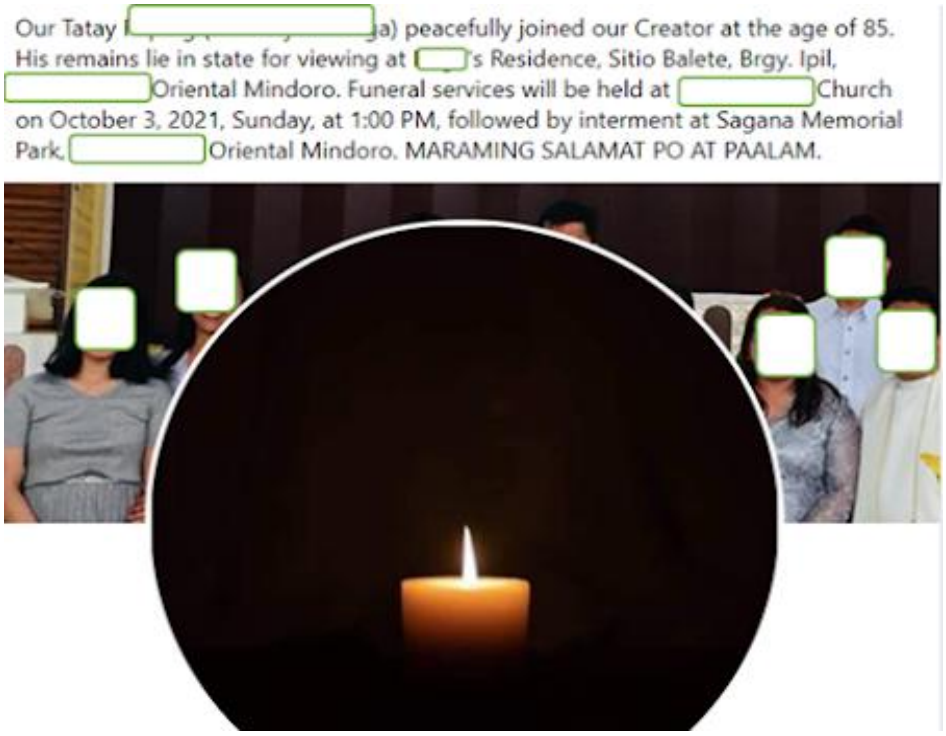

Figure 5. Digital deathscape #5: profile image by ER, screengrabbed 2 October 2021

JA, a female mourner in her mid-30s, relied on 3 semiotic resources: text, photo, and emojis (used thrice). A red heart, a crying emoji, and a red broken heart were found on her post. QR, a female in her 40s, used a single heart emoji. Siever (2023) emphasizes that emojis contribute to multimodal grief expression. Murrell et al. (2021) concur, noting that "multiple modalities" in online death announcements represent "social performances…[that] reveal the depth of complexity present in grieving online" (p. 1).

All the older mourners (between 50s and 60s) were content with a text and photo, a candle and announcement, or just a candle. It appears that age has an influence on multimodality in virtual communication (and mourning). In other words, there is a correlation between age and social media habits or preferences, as discussed in later sections. The younger the social media users, the more complex their digital expressions.

Photographs

In total, half of the grievers feature photo images on their personal walls. OL included a whole-body photo of his friend, indicating the value attributed to the deceased and their relationship. On DB's wall, two photos of her departed son alongside an image of a lighted candle were conspicuous (Figure 5).

Figure 6. Digital deathscape #9: post and profile by JA, screengrabbed on 14 December 2021

JA made use of a picture of her with her deceased parent as a temporary profile photo on Facebook, besides using emojis to configure death and mourning (Figure 6). Finally, QR posted a picture of her with her deceased brother while also calling for communal tribute and celebration (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Digital deathscape #4: post by QR, screengrabbed on 21 September 2021

Text

Besides the lighted candle, text is also the most prevalent digital resource for death and memorialization, with six (60%) of the Facebook mourners resorting to typed messages. As the most common modality, text comes in the form of death/funeral announcement (3 instances), tribute and expression of grief (4 occurrences), memorial symbolism (5 instances), and 1 short sentimental message (See Figure 8).

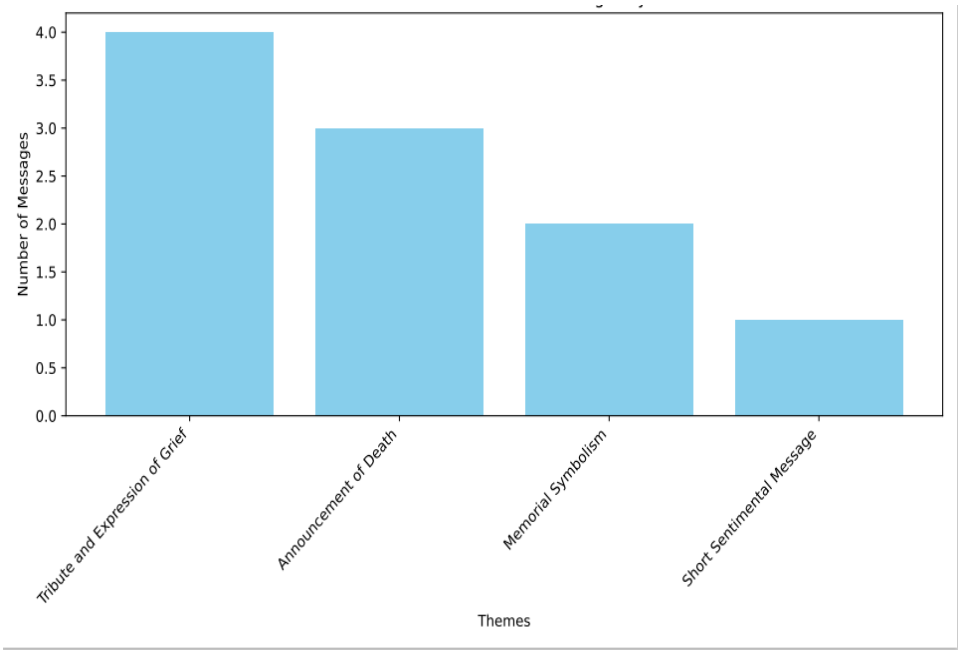

Figure 8. Classification of bereavement messages by theme

Ribbon

Only one account owner, AD, featured a black ribbon when she changed her profile photo to signal death and grief (Figure 9). This is illustrative of the unpopularity of the death ribbon compared to the lighted candle, as Costa et al. (2022) have found.

Figure 9. Digital deathscape #6: profile photo by AD, screengrabbed on 3 November 2021

One speculation is that the black ribbon is too gloomy, compounding the already sorrowful situation the Facebook user is in. The essence of black, as seen in the image, represents grief (Sunnexdesk, 2014) and may be overwhelming since Filipinos, although emotional, often focus on the brighter side of things (Eslit, 2024).

Other Images

There are 3 other images that are not categorized under any of the 6 digital deathscapes: a cross and 2 screenshots of 2 separate written messages. On September 23, 2021, CG updated her profile photo with a screengrabbed text that read, "We ♡ you Nanay (or mother)" (Figure 8). This is placed beside the photo of the deceased.

Figure 10. Digital deathscape #3 Facebook profiles by CG, screengrabbed on 23 and 24 September 2022

Social realities reflected by digital deathscapes

In the digital deathscapes that I explored, social realities such as poverty, lack of education, and pervasiveness of social media are even embodied, consistent with Fairclough (2012) that the world is represented in media discourse. AD and DB, both mothers in their late 50s, have limited education, and this is further shown in the quantity and quality of their written articulations. DB's 9-word minimalist obit appears to correlate with her educational attainment. This characteristic highlights social inequality and lack of access to educational opportunities (World Bank, 2022) in the country. AD's monomodal semiotic resource also reveals such social reality. This is in stark contrast, for example, with the very detailed narrative of OL, a gainfully employed accountant who has graduated with honors. QR, owner and administrator of a large school east of Manila, is not only expressive but also manifests thoroughness in her writing. The message of JA, an office manager at a financial company, is also comprehensive. Finally, ER, a college professor, provides a news-style approach in his online post, also thorough in his linguistic codes. All these are proofs that education is very empowering and a lack of it deprives people of confidence and appropriate linguistic resources (Vacalares et al., 2023).

Given their linguistic capital, the educated are capable of achieving more in life, such as productive (online) communication compared with the less educated

users (Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021; Rössel & Schroedter, 2021). Also seen is the power and pervasiveness of (social) media, especially in the context of death discourse. Specifically, social practices are no longer hindered by geographical limitations. Even the pandemic restrictions failed to deter mourners from performing their individual and communal duties and responsibilities via digital obits and memorialization rituals.

Worldviews as reflected through the digital deathscapes

Religion, according to Peterson (2001), is an orienting worldview that shapes one's beliefs and symbols, among others. In the digital deathscapes, three oriented aspects of worldviews are reflected: the dead as worthy of homage, the power of death symbols, and belief in theism and the afterlife. Moreover, the Filipino value of *kapwa* or *pakikipag-kapwa* or the belief in sharing with others' lot in life (Reyes, 2015; Cabañero et al., 2025) is prevalent.

Based on the data, the departed are worthy of honor or homage, reflective of ancestor worship common in many cultures, such as in Asia (Tavor, 2020). hence the need for death rituals and commemoration. For many Asians, relationships with loved ones continue even after death. In fact, honoring them through memorial events is not only a familial responsibility but also a spiritual duty (Tran, 2017). A number of Facebook mourners demonstrated such a worldview, such as in QR's call for communal remembrances for her brother.

Also reflected by the chosen deathscapes is that only certain symbols (e.g., lighted candle, death ribbon, cross, etc.) matter in death rituals. The reliance on the candle image, for instance, is not arbitrary. Such a preference has shaped the belief in the power of symbols. In the Philippines, the use of a physical lighted candle is seen as symbolic and an extension of one's prayers in Catholic traditions (Limos, 2018). Moreover, associating these symbols with the journey of the departed into the afterlife is common. That no other semiotic symbols and signs are used is indicative of the well-established worldview about the power of death symbols and the need to conform to such a view.

In terms of spiritual convictions, most of the grievers manifested a belief in God (theism), the existence of heaven, and the afterlife. They are expressed through such statements as, "Got her wings to heaven" and "Rest in peace in the bosom of our Lord" (MM). It is also demonstrated in ER's post, "Our *tatay* (father) peacefully joined our Creator," and the statement, "Our Heavenly Father will take good care of you" (QR).

Mourners almost instantaneously publicize death and mourning in order to inform and get familial and emotional support from their network of friends and relatives, reflecting the communal spirit of Filipinos (Ocampo, 2025). Moreover, the use of visual images, such as candles, also shows their collectivist culture. These point to a worldview known as *kapwa or pakikipag-kapwa,* which in mourning translates to shared sorrow and community support (Cabañero et al., 2025). *Pakikipag-kapwa* is further connected to *pakikiramay* (expression of empathy/sympathy), which is an obligation in a country noted for *bayanihan* spirit (community cooperation) (Cabañero et al., 2025). This is signified, for example, in the statement, "Kindly share here your good thoughts and happy memories with him" (QR).

Constructed identities

In the analyzed digital deathscapes, the prominent role of women in social media use and in virtual mourning is evident. They take the initiative in informing their networks about their situations, such as in times of bereavement. They also make use of the appropriate symbols and text to honor the departed. That only a few men are involved in virtual grieving suggests that social media engagement and mourning are not within their sphere, hence, not part of their identity. To illustrate, the absence of text in DM's feed seems to correlate with his gender. Compare this with MM, his wife, who provides more details, replete with emotions and homage to the dead. All the other women, especially those with education, capitalized on the available media and semiotic resources to communicate grief. Current statistics show that Filipino men (47.7%) are not as engaged in social media as their female counterparts (52.3%) (Caparas, 2024).

Linguistic choices and their implications

Death discourse and heritage language

There seems to be a propensity among the grievers to express themselves in their native tongues when making a death tribute. This is particularly true when addressing their dead. ER, in his English message, codeswitches twice, notably to use a Tagalog word for father. In QR's announcement, multilingual codes are deployed. Besides English, she engages in translanguaging by communicating in Filipino—the national language—in the third sentence, and then shifts to her native Kapampangan, a language spoken north of Manila. She chooses "*kaputol*" (literally, the other half/part of me), the generic but endearing term for sibling in her heritage language. Similarly, MM refrained from using the broader English word "mother," opting instead for the Kapampangan equivalent, "Ima," which is more intimate. In the same manner, DB used "*tung*," an endearment for a young boy in Kapampangan. JA does the same by resorting to her Ilokano language in addressing her dead parent, "*nanang ku*" (literally, mother of mine), indicating a very deep connection with the latter. In all these instances, the online mourners use more intimate expressions through their native tongues, illustrating the significance of birth languages in crafting more meaningful text-based digital deathscapes. The (inevitable) integration of first language codes in grief expressions on social media underscores the relationship between cultural practices and language. As Ahearn (2017) has argued, language and culture are inextricably linked. Overall, virtual grief depicts the multilingual characteristics and regional distinctives of the Facebook mourners. In other words, cultural identities manifest through language usage.

Metaphor and avoidance of death discourse

The use of the metaphor "got her wings to heaven" (MM) represents dying as something not to be feared. It may also be a representation of the difficulty in accepting the loss of a loved one in that the surviving relatives would prefer to highlight life rather than death (Neimeyer et al., 2014; Silverman et al., 2021). That the phrase is euphemistic also denotes that death is avoided in discourse because it is an unpleasant subject. People would rather use a language laden with happy and positive images, not of gloomy expressions (Eslit, 2024). QR appears to evade the subject completely by focusing on the celebration of the life of her

brother when he was still living. ER does the same and downplays the demise of his father, focusing instead on funeral arrangements. CG displays a colorful photo (non-linguistic code) of her mother-in-law, another evasive strategy about death discourse. Setting aside the usual black or gloomy hues, the Facebook user relies on bright or pleasant colors—white in the first picture and red and pink in the second. This shifts the focus from something depressing to one that is celebratory. Instead of an emphasis on a very difficult subject such as death, "praising and magnifying the biological act of dying by means of overstatements based on Christian beliefs" is reflected (Fernández, 2006, p. 111). This observation reinforces certain worldviews as discussed in the preceding section. Overall, we see most of the mourners being pious in their identity.

Multimodality in mourning and other implications

This paper has outlined the preferred semiotic resources as a result of the analysis. It highlighted, as well, certain social realities, worldviews, and constructed identities of the mourners. It is worth noting that social media such as Facebook serve as conduits to informing online contacts about the dead and their significance to the living, making them agentive and even mobile (Dou, 2021).

Beyond these findings, I theorize that the semiotic repertoire relied upon by the grievers reveals the prevalence of multimodal communication in this day and age, especially in the context of death discourse and digital grieving. This is an apparent contribution of Philippine cultural practices within regional or global mourning studies. Multimodality applies mostly to women—who must grieve either in physical spaces or virtual spheres—and among the younger generation (millennials at least). These assertions support Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) multimodality theory, which posits that different ensembles of modes within sociocultural terrains help convey complex messages such as death and grief. Further, through this paper, I underscore broader issues in society, such as digital inequality and gender in online rituals, among others.

Further on the theoretical contributions of this study it was able to show that, despite its limitations, semiotics and CDA can be applied to digital mourning. The empirical findings also provide rare data on Filipino Facebook practices as previously highlighted. It should also be noted that this paper was able to establish the important role of social media (Facebook in particular) in sustaining mourning rituals during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary

In the configuration of death and mourning, the most preferred virtual semiotic resources are digital images of candles and obits. This applies to both genders, but is more common among the female mourners. Honoring the dead through photos is also common, used alongside text and other symbols. Choice of digital deathscapes is influenced by culture and language, and grief expressions reflect poverty, lack of education, and the pervasiveness of social media. The conviction that the dead are worthy of homage, akin to ancestral worship, is a prevalent worldview. Additionally, views about God and the power of digital deathscapes as a must in virtual mourning were uncovered.

Cultural and linguistic identities are constructed through the digital deathscapes. This identity construction is seen in the use of vernacular languages,

albeit on a limited scale, when expressing grief. Additionally, familial terms and culturally specific expressions are employed to convey intimacy and identity. Said differently, drawing from one's birth language in times of grief (e.g., when addressing a dead loved one) suggests that heritage languages afford more intimacy in death discourse. Thus, switching from the national/official languages to their birth languages, the mourners identify with (and return to) their regional roots when they mourn their dead. Death and grief, therefore, are realities that reveal the cultural heritage and identity of the virtual mourners. In terms of gender roles, women lead in platform usage and engagement, and show this through active social media givers. Men, on the other hand, are constructed as more reserved and less active or disengaged in social media.

Conclusion

In terms of computer-mediated communication, two interesting impressions were uncovered. First, Facebook appears to be a platform for women, as seen in their predilection for social media engagement and (online) death rituals. Conversely, men are less engaged in virtual mourning. The results highlight gender-based differences in digital grief expressions. Additionally, they underscore the prominent role of women in emotionally charged social and family events such as death and memorialization.

In semiotic scholarship, we see the propensity for multimodal expressions even in the subject of death and mourning. Murrell et al. (2021) note "multiple modalities" in online death announcements, which to them represent "social performances…[that] reveal the depth of complexity present in grieving online" (p. 1). As Kress (2009) has aptly put it, communication has now become a multimodal approach in computer-mediated transactions.

Use of dominant languages takes place in formal settings (e.g., work/office), and birth languages are reserved for more personal aspects of communication, such as mourning. Religion, the pervasiveness of media, and cultural practices are interwoven in death discourse and digital mourning.

Given the limitation of this study, that relied only on 10 mourners and corresponding Facebook feeds, it is important to explore this intersectionality as illustrated in this exploratory study. Moreover, gender inequality surfaces not only in broader media discourse but also in these aspects: (digital) mourning, use of social media (e.g., Facebook), and multimodality. These, too, deserve further attention in future studies to arrive at generalizable findings.

Future research may find interest in cross-cultural comparisons in the context of death discourse and digital mourning. Investigation may also opt to focus on post-pandemic changes in the context of death and grief on the Internet. In terms of participants and volume of data, larger samples are obviously necessary in order to have generalizable results. Finally, death and mourning are unavoidable realities. Yet, despite the burden they cause and the emotional impact on individuals, there is always a resolve to focus on the contribution and value of the dead when they were living. In the hearts of grievers, there is no such thing as separation, and mourning offers countless affordances for relationships to persist and flourish even after death.

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