

## Death in the Digital Age: Memorialization and Mourning in Online Spaces – A Sociological Perspective

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### Abstract

Globally, the advent of digital technologies has completely changed how people grieve and remember. AI-powered narrative tools, virtual memorial websites, and social media platforms have changed how people commemorate and remember the dead. With an emphasis on participation differences among various socioeconomic categories in Varanasi, India, this study investigates the sociological ramifications of online mourning. The study explores the ways in which online and offline rituals interact, change, and coexist using a hybrid model of grieving as an analytical framework. Persistent disparities in digital access are indicated by the substantial participation gap found in field data, which is 85% among high-income groups, 50% among middle-income groups, and 20% among low-income groups. The study makes use of theories of inclusive cultural adaptation, ritual and social cohesion (Durkheim), collective memory (Halbwachs), and technology design.

**Keywords:** Digital mourning, Online memorialization, Socioeconomic disparity, Varanasi death rituals, Digital divide, Social media mourning,

### Introduction

Although death is one of the few universal human experiences, there are significant cultural, religious, and historical differences in how it is lamented, remembered, and incorporated into collective memory. For centuries, funeral processions, religious ceremonies, and memorial meetings were the main physical, communal venues for grief, where closeness to one another and shared customs strengthened ties amongst the living. These customs, which were frequently passed down through the centuries with minimal modification, were intricately entwined with regional traditions, religious beliefs, and cultural expectations. But this long-standing continuity has been broken by the explosive growth of digital technologies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, leading to the emergence of new types of mourning that transcend physical locations and enter the endless, enduring world of the internet.

The term "digital turn in mourning" describes how internet platforms are being incorporated into the grieving process to enable individuals to share memories, offer condolences, and create memorials that are available from any location at any time. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have evolved into de facto memorial repositories, where messages, films, and photos are still available long after the funeral. While new AI-powered tools can create interactive digital avatars of the departed that allow for continuous communication with their recreated personas, specialized platforms like Legacy.com or GoneTooSoon.org offer carefully curated venues for memorial creation. By redefining the

temporality of loss, these practices have made grieving an open-ended, networked process rather than an event-bound ritual.

Sociologically speaking, this change brings up difficult issues regarding collective memory, ritual adaptation, and the morality of digital legacy. We must consider how virtual rituals compare to traditional in-person gatherings in terms of promoting solidarity, building on Émile Durkheim's theory of rituals, which views ceremonial acts as essential to bolstering social cohesion. In a similar vein, Maurice Halbwachs' idea of collective memory challenges us to think about how internet repositories influence how people remember the deceased, particularly when those repositories are subject to algorithmic curation by commercial companies or are subject to editing or deletion.

Examining these dynamics is made more interesting by the Indian environment, and especially by Varanasi. Varanasi, a holy pilgrimage site in Hinduism and one of the oldest continuously inhabited towns in the world, has long been the scene of complex funeral rites, most notably the cremations that take place along the Ganga River's ghats. These rites were traditionally very local, with religious officiants, physical meetings, and manual contributions. However, more and more families are adopting hybrid mourning practices—combining offline rituals with digital memorialization—as a result of the proliferation of reasonably priced cellphones, less expensive data plans, and greater digital knowledge. Creating prayer groups on WhatsApp, posting video tributes on YouTube, or live-streaming cremation ceremonies for faraway family members are a few examples.

However, not everyone participates in these activities. Significant socioeconomic gaps are revealed by the data from our field study in Varanasi: 85% of high-income families report using digital memorialization, compared to 50% of middle-income households and only 20% of low-income households. These disparities are indicative of the persistent digital divide, which is influenced by unequal access to digital literacy, internet infrastructure, and technology. Additionally, they ask whether the shift to digital mourning may exacerbate disparities in how the deceased are remembered.

This study places itself at the nexus of ritual theory, death studies, and digital sociology with the following goals in mind:

- Map the transformation of mourning practices in the digital age.
- Examine socioeconomic barriers to participation in online memorialization.
- Explore the cultural implications of hybrid mourning models in a sacred, tradition-bound context like Varanasi.

This study adds to an expanding scholarly discussion over the future of mourning in a society where death is more present in both physical settings and the digital cloud by fusing localized empirical data with worldwide thematic literature. The results are relevant not only to sociologists and anthropologists but also to engineers, legislators, and religious leaders who are debating how to embrace technology innovation while maintaining cultural authenticity.

### **Thematic Literature Review**

The study of mourning in the digital age is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing from sociology, anthropology, media studies, and religious studies. In order to understand how digital memorialization functions within the sacred and socio-cultural space of Varanasi, it is necessary to map existing scholarship under specific thematic clusters.

### 1. Ritual Theory and Mourning Practices

The importance of rituals in upholding social order has long been highlighted by classical sociology. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Émile Durkheim (1912/1995) made the case that rituals not only reinforce community ideas but also foster camaraderie in times of bereavement. Whether Hindu cremation ceremonies or Christian wakes, the collective execution of rituals during traditional mourning helps to unite the community in the face of death. The transitional character of mourning is further highlighted by anthropological writings by Turner (1969) on liminality and Van Gennep (1960) on rites of passage, in which the bereaved are momentarily cut off from daily life before reintegrating into the community.

But according to recent research (e.g., Gibson, 2018), digital rituals might not provide the same level of sensory immersion as physical ones, which raises concerns about their potential for emotional impact and social bonding. Online memorial spaces, according to some, encourage "networked mourning" (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013), allowing for greater participation across geographical borders.

### 2. Digital Sociology and the Transformation of Memory

The way that civilizations remember their deceased has changed as a result of the incorporation of technology into the mourning process. Collective memory, according to Maurice Halbwachs (1992), is socially formed and maintained via group interaction. This engagement takes place online more and more in the digital age, where images, movies, and personal stories are permanently stored. Hoskins (2011) presents the idea of the "digital afterlife," where digital remnants of the dead persist, frequently selected by algorithms or even survivors. Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillides (2012) warn that these memories are found on platforms that are subject to corporate policies that have the power to change, remove, or commercialize memorial content. Ghosh (2020) notes that in India, rural communities are more dependent on WhatsApp and local video-sharing, while urban middle-class families are using Facebook memorial sites more frequently.

### 3. Hybrid Mourning Models

The combination of online, mediated grieving expressions with offline, customary rites is known as hybrid mourning. According to Christensen and Gotved (2015), memorial hashtags, virtual condolence books, and live-streamed funerals have all become popular, especially in diasporic contexts when relatives are spread out geographically. This hybridization has a special cultural resonance for holy places like Varanasi, where livestreaming cremations from the ghats enables distant relatives to take part in rituals that are historically thought to be necessary for the soul's emancipation (moksha).

According to research conducted in Southeast Asia, hybrid rituals can make ceremonies more inclusive while preserving essential cultural components (Lim, 2021). However, they can also

lead to discussions about authenticity and ritual purity, which are important topics in Hindu traditions where it has long been considered necessary to physically attend some rites.

#### 4. Socioeconomic Barriers and the Digital Divide

Not everyone has equal access to digital grieving techniques. Who is able to take part in online memorialization is directly impacted by the digital divide, which is the disparity in access to technology depending on factors including infrastructure, education, and poverty. Digital inequality, according to DiMaggio and Hargittai (2001), is multifaceted and includes not only access but also cultural capital and digital literacy.

While only 20% of low-income families in Varanasi engage in digital memorialization, 85% of high-income families report doing so, which is consistent with global trends. This is consistent with research by Goggin & McLelland (2017), which shows how marginalized populations are frequently shut out of digital mourning spaces because of lack of familiarity with the platforms, expense, or connectivity problems.

The ethics of preserving, disseminating, and even making money off of the departed are all called into question by digital memorialization. Stokes (2012) cautions against the "commodification of grief," in which platforms whose main focus is data extraction facilitate mourning. Whether virtual involvement has the same spiritual value as in-person attendance is a topic of discussion in religious contexts.

For example, several post-cremation rites in Hinduism, such as the immersion of ashes, or *Asthi Visarjan*, have profound ritual significance and are customarily carried out in person. Some priests in Varanasi condemn these practices as being in conflict with scriptural commandments, while others now provide video call blessings for distant family members.

### Methodology

#### Research Design

In order to investigate how digital memorialization is experienced, perceived, and negotiated in the holy city of Varanasi, this study uses a qualitative research design. The cultural, emotional, and symbolic aspects of mourning customs that cannot be fully comprehended by using only numerical data are best revealed using a qualitative method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This design allows for a nuanced understanding of how ritual meanings are rebuilt in hybrid grieving settings that incorporate both digital and physical elements by utilizing participant narratives that are rich in detail.

Participant observation, ethnographic fieldwork, and semi-structured interviews are the main methods used in this study. This multifaceted approach guarantees that the study records both what people perform in ritual circumstances and what they say about their experiences. how they engage with technology, and how emotions and meanings are embodied in practice.

#### Research Site: Varanasi

One of the oldest continuously inhabited towns in the world and a popular Hindu pilgrimage site is Varanasi, which is located in Uttar Pradesh on the banks of the Ganges. It has a special

place in India's "deathscape" because of its connection to moksha, or freedom from the cycle of rebirth (Verdery, 1999). Hindu funerary ceremonies, which portray death as a spiritual transition rather than an end, have traditionally revolved around the city's cremation grounds at Manikarnika and Harishchandra Ghats.

However, during the past ten years, Varanasi has witnessed the rise of digitally mediated methods of grieving, including as social media memorial pages, WhatsApp sympathy groups, virtual prayer meetings, and live-streamed cremations.

These new practices intersect with, and sometimes challenge, long-standing traditions. The city's deeply ritualized death practices and rapid digital adaptation make it an ideal ethnographic site for examining how religious, cultural, and technological forces converge in mourning.

### **Sampling Technique**

In order to find participants with firsthand and diverse experiences of digital grief, a purposive sample technique was employed. In order to capture a variety of viewpoints on ritual authenticity, spiritual meaning, and technology mediation, the selection process sought to incorporate a spectrum of voices, including those of mourners, religious officials, service providers, and community leaders.

### **Sample Composition**

A total of 35 participants took part in in-depth interviews:

15 primary mourners who had recently engaged in digital or hybrid mourning rituals.

10 priests and ritual specialists at the ghats, who performed or oversaw both traditional and digitally mediated cremation rites.

5 digital service providers facilitating livestreams, online condolence portals, or virtual memorials.

5 local community leaders involved in guiding cultural and religious affairs, with insights into broader social acceptance of digital mourning.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Hindi was used for the interviews, with English phrases used occasionally to explain technical ideas. Participants were given the opportunity to share their personal narratives, religious interpretations, and emotional thoughts on digital mourning during each 45–90 minute session.

### **Participant Observation**

Over the course of three months, the researcher attended a number of grieving activities, some of which were totally physical and others of which were hybrid. These included prayer meetings conducted through video conferencing systems, online condolence meetings, and live-streamed cremations at the ghats. The observation was centered on:

Ritual sequencing and integration of digital tools.

Interaction between in-person attendees and remote participants.

Emotional expressions and symbolic gestures in both physical and virtual spaces.

Extensive field notes captured spoken language, gestures, spatial arrangements, and moments of tension or improvisation in the blending of tradition and technology.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Given the emotional intensity of mourning, the research adhered to strict ethical protocols: Informed consent was obtained before interviews and observations.

Anonymity was maintained in all transcripts and publications by using pseudonyms.

Interviews were conducted with cultural sensitivity, ensuring rituals were not interrupted.

Emotional well-being of participants was prioritized, with the option to skip questions or withdraw at any point.

Approval for the study was secured from an institutional ethics committee.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Findings reflect the experiences of a specific set of participants in Varanasi and may not be generalizable to other contexts. Rapid technological change means that digital mourning practices are evolving, and observed trends may shift in the near future. Religious interpretations are context-dependent, and variations may exist not only across different faiths but also within sects of the same faith.

### **Conclusion**

According to this study, digital technologies are changing how people grieve, but in different ways. The example of Varanasi demonstrates how hybrid mourning, which combines accessible online extensions with revered offline traditions, may embrace technology while preserving tradition. Socioeconomic disparities still prevent full involvement, though. Community-driven training, culturally sensitive platform design, and policy actions to enhance digital access are all necessary to close this gap. Maintaining collective memory for future generations will depend on striking a balance between inclusivity, authenticity, and technological innovation as death rites continue to change in the digital age.

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