


“You’re Just Playing the Victim”: Online Grieving and the Non-use of Social Media in Italy

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Abstract

Studies on death and digital media all agree that social media have changed how we mourn. However, they also highlight a considerable resistance to using social media in grieving. This article explores these resistances in greater depth based on a national research project on the Italian population (400 in-depth interviews and a representative survey) that includes non-users in the research into online death practices. Our theoretical framework is the paradigm of media and information and communications technologies (ICTs) domestication in everyday life and the study of the mediation of death from a socio-constructivist and non-platform/media-centric perspective. The article focuses on the findings of the interviews. Our research questions are as follows: What are the reasons for refusing or resisting social media use when mourning? Which type of social media domestication characterizes Italian users? How has social media changed the way we mourn? Online grieving emerges as a profitable area to study the resistance to and domestication of social media in everyday life. Social media are accepted differently in the various stages of the loss process. The most ritualized practices, like death announcements and condolences, are relatively approved. Instead, displays of grief online and, especially, the interaction with the digital remains of the dead are controversial. Social media have enhanced the everyday public visibility of death and bereavement and the public presence of the dead. However, social media have neither triggered a significant expansion of the enfranchisement of public displays of grief nor of continuing bonds online—not even in Italy.

Keywords

social media, grieving, non-use, mediatization, media domestication

Introduction

The literature on death and digital media has grown exponentially in recent years. However, extensive studies are still rare. When faced with a proliferation of explorative studies on the users of platforms in different national contexts, an overarching understanding of the role of platforms and digital media in death practices is still ongoing. Progress regarding the systematization of the field of study was made by, among others, Cumiskey and Hjorth (2017), Arnold et al. (2018), Kasket (2019), and Sumiala (2022). Meanwhile, various special issues and collections have provided theoretical perspectives and empirical insight, mainly regarding Anglo-Saxon and Northern Europe countries (e.g., Christensen & Gotved, 2015; Christensen & Sandvik, 2014; Giaxoglou & Döveling, 2018; Moreman & Lewis, 2014; Papacharissi, 2019; Savin-Baden & Mason-Robbie, 2020).

These studies all agree that social media have changed the way we mourn. However, “in some corners, there is also a considerable amount of resistance and unease when it comes to particular aspects of loss remediation online and the increased publicness of grief” (Giaxoglou et al., 2017, p. 8). This article explores the resistance highlighted by previous studies in greater depth and aims to take advantage of the empirical results of a national research project that investigates changes in the Italian population

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concerning beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes regarding death, including the uses of social media in grieving and remembering the dead.

This sociological research broadens our understanding of why many continue to reject social media in death and mourning practices in two different ways. First, the focus on the Italian context allows us to enhance the importance of inadequately illuminated national differences concerning the socio-cultural aspects of death because they have been obscured by the long-dominant concept of a modern death (Barbagli, 2018; Walter, 2012). By focusing on the southern European nation of Italy, this article will attempt to fill the gap in the studies of death and digital media by exploring a barely investigated cultural and social context. Second, our study includes both users and non-users of social media. It addresses the inclusion/exclusion of social media in bereavement practices, starting from a broader understanding of social transformations related to death (Colombo, 2017; Hallam, 2018; Howarth, 2000; Van Brussel & Carpentier, 2014; Walter, 2018b). Studying users and non-users in the same research framework helps contextualize social media uses and non-uses in death-related practices within the broader individual and social patterns of the acceptance and refusal of social media platforms (Arnold et al., 2018; Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017). This helps to avoid a platform/media-centric perspective (Couldry, 2004; Morley, 2009) and allows us to understand how different and individual ways of “living” or “refusing” the same technology can exist (Selwyn, 2003, 2006). We refer here to the paradigm of media and information and communications technologies (ICTs) domestication (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992), which highlights how uses are guided by specific relationships between technologies (with their affordances) and exquisitely social elements, connected to socio-demographic variables and values, imaginaries, social relations, and contexts of use. In our hypothesis, the refusal of digital media for death-related practices arises from a combination of, on one hand, structural elements, discourses, social uses, and individual agency that shape the adoption of or the unwillingness to use digital platforms and, on the other, individual behaviors and experiences concerning mourning and death as a fact of life.

From the perspective of media and cultural studies, studying non-uses also offers a critical perspective on how “the media in its different forms has shaped death as a cultural and social condition” (Sumiala, 2014, p. 681) and death, like other areas of life, is mediated (Christensen & Gotved, 2015; Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017; Sumiala, 2022; Sumiala & Hakola, 2013). Observing user resistance allows the deconstruction of the mechanical and linear vision of mediatization—understood as a transfer of “media logic” (Altheide & Snow, 1979) to the various areas of experience—by adopting a more complex concept of “mediated death” (Sumiala, 2022). It is a question of investigating daily practices by adopting a socio-constructivist idea of mediatization (Hepp

& Couldry, 2017) as an area of mutual shaping between media and social transformation—in this study, the change connected with death and mourning. Therefore, practices of use and non-use are intended to be a starting point for analyzing social changes in the interconnections with the mediated processes of communication, taking into account the cultural and symbolic dimensions, the materiality of the media, and communication infrastructures.

Our research questions are as follows:

- What are the reasons for refusing or resisting social media use when mourning? (RQ1)
- Which type of social media domestication characterizes Italian users in online grieving? (RQ2)
- How has social media changed the way we mourn in Italy? (RQ3)

In the following sections we first outline the state of the art of the studies on death and social media. A methodological paragraph follows in which we present the sample and the research design. After that, we discuss the findings, focusing on the main reasons for the unease felt by users, which can, in turn, lead to a refusal to use the platforms in mourning practices: the perception of death and mourning as a private, intimate matter; the ideologies dominant in the use of social media; the controversial issues connected with the affordances of the platforms, such as the datafication and quantification of emotions and the different forms of dislocation; finally, the ways of domestication and the tactics users adopt to cope with these drawbacks.

Death and Social Media

The media also affects the liminal phases of life (Christensen & Sandvik, 2014; Kasket, 2019; Papacharissi, 2019; Sumiala & Hakola, 2013; Van Brussel & Carpentier, 2014). Digital and social media uses are negotiated both for continuing ingrained mourning rituals online, and for emergent death practices (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017; Eriksson Krutrök, 2021; Gibson, 2014; Navon & Noy, 2021). Understanding how social media shapes life and death should embrace both the study of the social and cultural changes concerning death and grief and the ways social media is conceived and used in everyday life (Arnold et al., 2018; Sumiala, 2022).

Recently, death studies have revealed a tendency to individualize death rituals and the spread of vernacular, deinstitutionalized practices (Hallam, 2018; Walter, 2018b), which have found a welcoming, enabling context in digital environments and social media in particular (Gibbs et al., 2015; Sumiala, 2022). The literature also demonstrates how death has not been merely removed from contemporary Western societies: it is necessary to distinguish a multiplicity of aspects (Hertz, 1907) in which some more than others tend to be hidden or separated, and with significant national differences (Walter, 1991, 2012). Multiple modifications have

occurred: for example, the relationship with the remains of the deceased. The separation of the dead from the living in 21st-century Western society is blurring (Despret, 2015; Howarth, 2000; Walter, 2018b). Instead, grief is not yet openly acknowledged in daily social interactions. It is becoming more and more common for the individual and not the community to be in mourning, with loss becoming a much more private matter (Walter, 1991, 2015). The bereaved risk isolation, much more so now than in the past. The dominant concept of grief, which prescribes a swift, efficient return to everyday life, has been heavily criticized since the second half of the 20th century, both in psychological and social studies. The recognition of continuing bonds between the deceased and those left behind progresses in this way (Despret, 2015; Klass et al., 1996; Klass & Steffen, 2018). Despite this, it is not commonly accepted in the contexts of everyday life that the bereaved must obtain full recognition of their experience of suffering (Doka, 1989; Walter, 1991).

The media have always played a significant role in the visibility and public communication of death (Durkin, 2003; Sumiala, 2013, 2022; Sumiala & Hakola, 2013), but the new dawn of digital and social media has introduced evident innovations. Since the end of the 1990s, web memorials have demonstrated how “the internet is indeed bringing death, dying, and mourning out of the protective box within which modern society seems to have located them” (Walter et al., 2012, p. 286). However, only social media can enable such a radical change. Web memorials were moderately common and maintained a separation between the commemoration of the dead and the everyday of the living (Arnold et al., 2018). On social networks, death and grieving practices intertwine with other multiple dimensions of online life, and this occurs pervasively thanks to the widespread diffusion of social networks (Arnold et al., 2018; Walter, 2015) and mobile technology (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017). If the mass media have made death more public, social media have ensured it has become omnipresent in everyday life, especially in our networks. Social networks reconnect the circles of life that have been isolated, either temporally or spatially, by recreating a bereaved community and permitting mourning to become a communal activity again (Walter et al., 2012).

However, social networks like Facebook were not conceived to share grief and remember the dead, differently from web memorials or previous online support groups (Brubaker et al., 2019). Even if social networks have been domesticated in this sense by some users, grieving in public is not always shared grief. Those who choose to mourn online must deal with the expectations and reactions of a heterogeneous public that does not go onto social networks to commemorate a death or participate in the mourning of others. Social media users might feel embarrassed or irritated because of their unexpected encounters with death and the deceased or after seeing the grief of others (Brubaker et al., 2013; Pennington, 2013; Walter, 2015). Disenfranchised loss

in offline relationships (Doka, 1989) can remain disenfranchised online or obtain acknowledgment only in some social contexts or just for some subjects (Christensen et al., 2017; Döveling et al., 2018; Walter et al., 2012). An intense online boundary work may be necessary to protect the stigmatized bereaved also in closed groups on Facebook (Yeshua-Katz & Hård af Segerstad, 2020).

Here at least two sets of issues collapse: the ideologies of the platforms and their specific domestication by users; the conception of death as a public or private issue, and, in particular, of bereavement as an intimate experience. The pervasiveness of death on social networks has already resulted in a definition of a digital grief etiquette (Abidin, 2019; Christensen et al., 2017; Sabra, 2017; Wagner, 2018). Negotiations between users and the production of informal rules can be interpreted as a part of the domestication of the platforms.

Online commemoration also intensifies the risks of memory conflicts among those who have the right to remember the deceased and to decide how to remember them; many subjects are potentially involved in recalling the dead: family members, friends or acquaintances, and even strangers (Brubaker et al., 2013; Gibson, 2014; Kasket, 2018; Marwick & Ellison, 2012). The deceased, and those they leave behind, are further exposed to the risks of attack or insult online (Arnold et al., 2018; Phillips, 2011), which demonstrates how the “sequestration of death” can also have, paradoxically, positive aspects (Walter et al., 2012).

One significant change enabled by the platforms regards the “continuing bonds” between the dead and the living, who can now interact with the digital remains of the deceased (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Carroll & Landry, 2010; Gibson, 2014; Kasket, 2012, 2019). This change concerns the online remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) of relationships that existed before the arrival of social media (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017; Walter et al., 2012). These continuing bonds interact with new possibilities and risks because even these interactions become exposed to the heterogeneous public collapse on social media profiles (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). As our findings demonstrate, continuing bonds online does not represent a choice that should be discounted even by those who choose to grieve online (Brubaker et al., 2019).

Research into online grieving must pay close attention to how users interact with the platforms and their affordances, trusting in their capacity to cope with the constraints and opportunities creatively (Arnold et al., 2018; de Certeau, 1984) and acknowledging the growing intertwining of online and offline life (Boccia Artieri et al., 2017; Hallam, 2018). In this perspective, it is vitally important to consider the specific affordances and the vernacular of each platform (Eriksson Krutrök, 2021; Giaxoglou, 2014; Gibbs et al., 2015; Sumiala, 2022) and the many functionalities inside the same platform (Navon & Noy, 2021) that enable and shape various uses and domestications within death and mourning. Of the main problems highlighted by the literature, we must

not forget the algorithmic curation of content (Lambert et al., 2018), quantification and datafication processes (Lagerkvist, 2019), the spatial and temporal effects of dislocation (Brubaker et al., 2013), and the affordances for manipulation of the self-representation (Sabra, 2017) and emotional capitalization of the user (Marwick & Ellison, 2012).

Data Collection and Research Design

The results discussed herein are a part of an expansive research project on “Death, Dying and Disposal in Italy” that involved six Italian universities (led by Bologna and including Bergamo, Milan, Turin, Urbino and Naples) from 2017 to 2020 and represents the first sociological and systemic study on Italian beliefs, behavior, and attitudes concerning death and dying. The research encompasses a representative survey of the Italian population (2,000 cases)¹ and 400 in-depth interviews with Italian family members. In the article, we focus on the findings of the interviews. Nevertheless, throughout the article we also offer quantitative data that emerged from the survey on the uses of social media in grieving practices in Italy.

Families were carefully selected for the interviews in order to collect experiences that were differentiated by gender, age, education, and geographical area. In each family, two to three interviews were performed in order to collect narratives and experiences that were representative of different generations. The interviews were performed in person between January 2018 and December 2019—just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic²—and are conceived as life histories concerning the relationship of the interviewees with death. A section of the interviews investigates if and how social media is used in death, grieving, and remembering the dead.

A set of keywords allowed researchers to identify when the relationship between the media and death was addressed (among them: Internet, social, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, post, like, tag, chat, messag*, phot*, video, phon*, mobile). Researchers first collected the sections concerning the use or non-use of social media in the distinct practices that occur after the death of a person, coded as the following: death announcements, condolences, grieving, the commemoration of the dead, and continuing bonds. The texts selected underwent qualitative thematic analysis (Cardano, 2011), combining issues that emerged from the lived experience of the interviewees and the literature. The findings have been discussed collectively by the authors in order to create a shared interpretation. The main issues and challenges connected with the domestication of the platforms in mourning practices are the publicness/privateness of death and grief; the ideologies for the use of the platforms; the risks connected with the affordances of the platforms in online grieving; and the strategies and tactics users adopt.

Public and Privatness of Death and Grief

The concept of death as a private or public event plays a central role in the practices related to death and grieving on digital platforms where this barrier is unclear (Gibson, 2014). Our interviewees understand that online grieving means expressing their own experience in spaces where the pain is a communal experience (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017; Hallam, 2018) and where death has become a public event (Arnold et al., 2018; Sumiala, 2022). For some, death and the dead are sacred and should not be “desecrated or debased” on a social network. Others believe they are either a profound and intimate event that is almost inexpressible and never really fully shareable, or something to be contained and private and not put on public display.

When death is a private affair, determined practices, like those of an announcement, are performed for a close circle of friends and family. In this case, digital platforms are considered inadequate:

I have my way of seeing things. When my mother wrote that my granny had died, I got a little angry because I think pain is very personal. Maybe I seem to be a little bit reserved, but who cares. Maybe my mum found more comfort in telling others and sharing the news. I'd rather keep it for myself. I don't like it when people write about their memories and stuff like that. (Male, 18 years old)

In some cases, the reference to privacy is even more radical, and pain should be experienced alone:

. . . if a person, or even a dog or an animal dies, it's like “Bye, see you in the next life . . . crying emoji.” I find this unacceptable because I can't stand the idea that bereavement is pixelated. It's something that is just too intimate. I think it's just people looking for attention, trying to involve others in their pain because they can't be alone with their loss. It's more of a cry for help. Grief should be experienced a little on your own. (Female, 31 years old)

For Italians, giving condolences is an ingrained habit (practiced by 93.7%, as our survey demonstrates). Giving condolences immediately after a death is the most common and appropriate way, and the practice is mostly connected to the funeral itself or to the custom of visiting the home of the deceased. Despite this, the experience of condolences online is increasing.³ The appropriateness of paying condolences online or not depends on how close one was to the deceased or their family. One should not be too near nor too distant. Condolences can be perceived as a sincere manifestation of closeness and a pure formality—both online and offline:

This R.I.P. means nothing, because it's like . . . it's worse to stand in a line to give condolences, do you know what I mean? In the graveyard at the end of the funeral, even when the family has said that's enough, there are always people who stand in

line, that's the worst thing of all—not because you aren't sorry, because maybe you really are, but I think it loses all meaning. (Male, 40 years old)

[C]ondolences, right . . . what do they mean, an empty word and a little . . . I don't know, even a feeling of someone—you know—standing there in their pain with a queue of people to get through, saying “yes, yes, thanks, goodbye,” I don't know . . . I've never been good at condolences . . . (Female, 25 years old)

The hybrid state of the “public/private” aspect of social networks (Splichal, 2018) and their heterogeneous compositions make managing these ritualized practices online even more problematic. Condolences expressed on social networks are accepted, but they come with conditions. The platforms tend to be used in a watered-down fashion:

Condolences? It happened to me too. But only when they are not very personal. For example, what do I know about your father-in-law? Then I would say something in the group as there are people whose funeral I wouldn't go to. But when they are close to me, I don't think it's the right thing to do. It's better just to go. (Female, 43 years old)

The dimension of intimacy is oft-mentioned as a motive of resistance to sharing online, even when it comes to commemorations, as emerges in the following extract, which underlines the frequent issue of exhibitionism (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017):

I see people writing: Hi, Dad, I miss you. You've been gone for three months . . . or you've been gone a year. As I said before, I think it is a very personal thing. I believe that the dead won't read those posts. It seems to be a way of showing off to people. Unfortunately, it's horrible, but I think that's what it is. I think everyone should deal with death in their own way. Some probably think it's OK to do it this way. I don't think it makes any sense at all. But if you want to talk to them, you can, because I do, so I don't think there is any sense in writing it. (Female, 28 years old)

Overall, the predominantly private, intimate nature of death renders social media inadequate and induces people not to use it for grieving. Notwithstanding, the practices of expressing and sharing grief online are now beginning to spread in Italy too. This situation has led to grief etiquette becoming relatively acceptable and continuously renegotiated, taking into account very different sensitivities and attitudes among users and the multiplicity of ways to cope with loss.

Ideologies for Social Media Use and the Refusal of Online Grief

The resistance of users to grieve online also leads back to the dominant ideologies on social media.⁴ Investigating the

experience of a whole population, our research was not intentionally platform-specific. However, Facebook does emerge quite strongly in the interviews, alongside other popular platforms in Italy, like WhatsApp and Instagram. Those interviewed associate social networks with recreational environments that are perfect for sharing “nice things,” like the birth of a child, ordinary everyday things, or just socializing:

I use social networks for things that are a bit more fun, more, you know, playful. I'm always trying to make people laugh. (Male, 23 years old)

Moreover, the platforms are more appropriate for instrumental uses, concerning work or study, commercial purposes or self-promotion. Therefore, it comes as no surprise when Italians remediate more traditional obituaries and funeral posters by using social media to inform people, quickly and cheaply, of a death (Murrell et al., 2021). The possibility to reach everyone with a message on Facebook or a WhatsApp group is much appreciated (where news “travels fast”) when people are busy with bureaucratic and administrative issues:

The daughter of my uncle posted something kind of poetic on Facebook and then she wrote that we could go to the vigil. She told us so we could decide what to do. Either go to the vigil or to the funeral at a certain hour. And I think that in the situation of Marco, who had loads of friends, calling everyone one by one was just out of the question. This was the best way to reach everyone. (Male, 45 years old)

Q: Have you ever used WhatsApp? A: Yes, because if you can't get in touch with someone directly . . . Also because when these kinds of things happen, there are ten thousand different things to do, unfortunately, or you don't think about the other ten thousand things you need to do. I believe it's a good way to let people know straight away. (Female, 38 years old)

Instead, social media is inadequate when communicating the more personal, private aspects of a user's life or more profound, sincere aspects of existence. As we have seen, grief must not be mixed with leisure, even if this often happens and not only on the platforms (Kaul & Skinner, 2018):

. . . it's bullshit. People die, and you have to post it on a social network? It has become an event, like a party. It's horrible because it kind of downplays the importance of that person. (Male, 22 years old)

Our research confirms the common-sense approach that is widespread among Italian users concerning what is or is not appropriate to do on Facebook. The evolution of Facebook (from the point of view of affordances, uses, and the prevalent user profile) has transformed it into a platform on which “content that is considered too personal, sentimental or private” should not be published

and “publishing content which is considered too sad or depressing” is especially stigmatized (Boccia Artieri et al., 2017, pp. 89 and 90). This common sense is coherent with what also emerged in international research that depicted Facebook as “too casual for a weighty topic such as grief and grieving” (Brubaker et al., 2013, p. 5), where users expect “a predominantly positive, humorous, and life-affirming atmosphere” (Sabra, 2017, p. 10), where a “look at me” competitive display dominates (Walter, 2015). These considerations can be extended to other platforms, bearing in mind their specific affordances and vernaculars. Conversely, users are also aware of how the evolution of uses and the domestication of the different platforms can lead to a progressive legitimization, like in the case of WhatsApp:

... but I’ve seen that it has become more accepted over the years. WhatsApp, and others, are used even for important, intense things. It has even supplanted one-to-one communication, even on the phone. (Male, 51 years old)

Social Media Affordances and the Mediation of Death

Even some of the most significant affordances (Meese et al., 2015) of social media discourage their use when it comes to the grieving process. Two aspects, in particular, are highlighted.⁵ The first concerns the multiple states of “coalescence” in social media of the public and private, of closeness and distance in space and time and of relational proximity or distance (Boccia Artieri et al., 2017). As highlighted in previous works, condolences and commemoration are subject to multiple processes of dislocation that involve space, time, and relations (Brubaker et al., 2013) and provoke a collapse in contexts that can be particularly problematic for some users (Sabra, 2017). Among those interviewed, some have, for example, highlighted how social media notifications arrive at inopportune moments because they are too commonplace or lack the emotional or relational support necessary to deal with news of death:

I wouldn’t use them because they seem to be somewhat disrespectful, because you know, you get a Facebook message while you are getting off the tram and, so you start thinking about someone while you are doing something else, no? (Female, 47 years old)

... one morning, you get up and, on your way to the toilet, you see someone being commemorated in a post. And then I see that Lucia has died. And I, you know, knew Lucia. I was shocked because I used to know her. (Male, 22 years old)

Others have mentioned the problems related to content which, when decontextualized by everyday life, enters into a communication flow in which they can assume different significances depending on who is looking:

I remember how a friend of mine posted a picture of her late dad. Then about a year later, she posted another of them together, but some people made some comments which had nothing to do with anything. They probably had no idea he was dead, putting their foot in it. (Male, 28 years old)

Even the collapse of different relational networks generated in social networks can be considered by many to be problematic when content referring to the deceased could give rise to inappropriate situations or violate the feelings of others:

[A woman who died] had written a letter . . . and her sister published it on Facebook. But her mum immediately cancelled it because she didn’t want the grandchildren reading it because the comments could have upset the children. You are violating people’s feelings because, you know, Facebook is a public space, and anyone can read anything. (Female, 26 years old)

Another critical issue that emerged concerns the logic of the quantification of social media. Lagerkvist (2019) highlights how “there are certainly pre-digital precedents, and cultural norms for quantifying grief” (p. 15) which involve, for example, grieving times or participation at funerals: for instance, a well-attended funeral is seen as a good one as it demonstrates that the deceased had had a good life, rich and capable of leaving numerous traces. However, this online quantification manifests itself according to decidedly more complex and controversial ways that are considered unacceptable under two specific aspects. The first, and more superficial, concerns the inadequacy of reaction buttons:

No, I think they should introduce an “I’m sorry” button just for posts like these. A “Like” doesn’t seem very appropriate in these situations. (Female, 40 years old)

A second, more profound criticism concerns the quantification process as it belongs to a commercial and self-promotional logic considered incompatible within the context of death. Ultimately, what is being rejected is “the potential for economic and emotional capitalization, for instance, ‘to get likes’ on Facebook” (Sabra, 2017, p. 9):

Yes, but it’s just a way for people to get, my God, I don’t want to say this, but it could just be a way of getting some likes or comments and not caring too much about the people involved. (Male, 23 years old)

I think it’s hypocritical because you publish something on a social network just to get some likes and shares, and stuff like that. (Male, 18 years old)

Inscribed inside a dynamic of quantified performances of the self and interaction, online grief and the remembering of the deceased would seem to distract attention from the deceased, focusing it on the self-promotion or self-validation of the mourner. The spontaneity and authenticity employed

as an idealistic *modus operandi*, taken for granted in grieving (Lagerkvist, 2019) are perceived, by some users, as incompatible with an online presence. Social networks are considered unsuitable for expressing genuine and profound emotions and feelings if they are perceived as spaces dedicated to self-presentation. This refusal is consistent with a definition of authenticity as a way of being true to the inner self rather than adjusting behavior to social norms (Berman, 2009 cit. in Syvertsen & Enli, 2020); social norms that in this specific ideology of social media would take the form of self-spectacularization as the most appropriate way to stay on social media.

Others, instead, believe authenticity has to do with the specific ways to be online. We are here at the heart of the complex and ambivalent relationship between social media and authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012), where authenticity has less to do with the truth of feeling and more to do with the appropriateness of performing your feelings online. This aspect emerges when our interviewees mention what we describe as audience management techniques.

Stigmatization, Audience Management Techniques, and User Tactics

Users adopt different strategies when dealing with the inadequacies of affordances, the ideologies of platforms, and the rules of grief and memorialization online (Walter, 2015). Italians use cryptic communication, which can only be understood by a sufficiently intimate public, to protect themselves from the risks associated with the collapse of contexts. For example, when one publishes a captionless photo or exploits the ephemeral character of an Instagram story. These are audience management techniques (Marwick & Ellison, 2012) that can be adopted when announcing the death of a loved one or commemorating them. In this way, the user tries to reproduce a segmentation of the public inside a platform. The objective here is not the management of the self-presentation but how to protect themselves from unwelcome reactions or stigmatization and not have to renounce their online presence, which is fundamental for the user who wants to share but only with those who understand:

While now, for example, I post a red rose on my brother's anniversary, which he used to like, and I write "I miss you," you know, without writing any name or anything. It's a private thing. (Female, 56 years old)

Maybe an Instagram story lasts less. It lasts 24 hours. I tag my cousin, and it stays there for 24 hours. She can decide to keep it or not. The post is there. And nobody understands. (Male, 24 years old)

The need to protect oneself is still evident when users interact with the digital remains of the deceased. This use

of social media in grieving is marginal and controversial. As our survey demonstrates, only 14% of Italians have ever read the old posts of a loved one who has passed away on a social network (27.1% of those who have a social profile). Even more marginal is the practice of continuing to post on the social media profile of a loved one after they have died (12.5% of users). Listening and searching are key forms of participating online, and peering into the profiles instead of actively contributing is common also in online grieving (Brubaker et al., 2019; Carroll & Landry, 2010; Walter, 2015).

The private concept of grieving (Pennington, 2013), which was examined thoroughly, can contribute to explaining the marginal interaction with the digital remains, but our interviews offer more nuanced insights. Italians strongly criticize the possibility of ensuring that the social accounts of the deceased remain active. The digital remains of the deceased are perceived as strange and disturbing, like "ghost profiles." The emerging practice of stewarding—"managing the online media of a posthumous loved one" (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017, p. 6)—is extremely controversial. Those who manage dead user profiles, or publish content, are attributed with pathological grief and a tendency toward self-harm. The departed "must be let go" is a statement that often appears in interviews.

Italians have domesticated the social media profile of the deceased as a suitable way just to maintain ties with those they were close to the dead, to receive affection, comfort, and share their pain. Moreover, the profile of the dead, preferably if transformed into a memorialized account, is more adequate to remember the deceased rather than maintaining a relationship with them because, as we have seen, "the dead will never read" that post on Facebook. Even in this case, the accusation of exhibitionism is never too far away:

I have taken a look (at the profile of a friend who committed suicide) but just to see some old photos. It's always: "Margi, I miss you." But who reads them? Everyone else? Just to let everyone know that you miss them? So what? It's useless because you're just playing the victim. (Female, 25 years old)

The social media profile of the dead could be the most suitable affordance for maintaining an active connection with the departed, even online, as if they were still here and could hear and read what people write to them—especially in Italy. Continuing bonds with the dead should be more accepted in a country with a predominantly catholic culture like Italy, corresponding to a cultural frame of "care" which promotes rather than resists continuing bonds (Walter, 2018a). The dead continue to exist in some spiritual realm and can enter into an exchange with the living. Our survey demonstrates that most Italians (53.9%) believe that people continue to exist in some form after death; many continue to maintain a connection with them—for example, conversing

with them offline (39.5%).⁶ We also know that Italians who have experienced offline contact with the dead probably use their social media account to continue it online.⁷ Despite all this, continuing bonds online seem to be still disenfranchised. As a consequence, users have to carefully manage their visibility online when connecting with their loved one.

Online conversations with the dead are then often concealed, without specifying that the user is referring to a person who can no longer hear or read, or the affordances of the platforms and sub-platforms are used strategically to avoid predictable stigmatization. In this case, again, the temporary visibility of Instagram stories can be helpful. Other times, the users maintain contact with the deceased by conversing with them privately on WhatsApp or Messenger, a sub-platform on Facebook characterized by the lowest visibility of communication practices. The very nature of communicating with digital and mobile devices, which are open, unrestricted, and easily maintained, seems to favor the desire to continue the conversation, which in instant messaging apps is generally open-ended, even with the deceased (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017):

- A: A boy who used to live downstairs has recently died. And a lot of people have written stuff. I didn't write anything, but I did leave a private message.
- Q: What do you mean by "private"?
- A: Well, I wrote on Messenger, not on the main page. (Female, 40 years old)

In Italy, social media do not appear to have triggered significant changes in the conception of the dead, the type of relationship that is legitimate to maintain with them, and their place in the land of the living. At least, not yet. The stigmatization of continuing online bonds on behalf of most users—and non-users—does not impede a niche of the bereaved from cultivating these relationships even on the platforms, evidently inseparable from everyday life:

And if I had to say something, yes, it's because, deep down, I hope she (her dead friend) reads it, don't ask me how. All of them (the messages), both public and private. I don't care what others think because I write to her. (Female, 37 years old)

The marginal practice of posting and interacting with the accounts of the dead could be interpreted as a domestication of the platform as an intimate medium, a place to express oneself and one's emotions, even those which are less appropriate, almost as if it were not in public. This situation occurs when liminal conditions exist—like the loss of a loved one. Some social media users seem to have created a kind of a marginal "sub-culture of emotion" (Döveling et al., 2018) (especially on Facebook but also on Instagram), where grieving a deep loss online and maintaining a tie with the departed is enfranchised.

Discussion: How and Why Social Media Have Changed (or Not) the Way We Mourn

Contrary to what can often be found in the literature on online grieving, our research has extended the investigation to include non-users. This led to the discovery, not entirely expected, that both Italian users and non-users do not consider social media to be suited to mourning online, without substantial differences between the two groups. Users and non-users share the same common senses concerning social networks as casual and recreational environments, adequate for sharing "nice things" and socializing, for self-presentation and self-promotion. The inadequacy of social media for grieving is reinforced by the dominant conception of death and grief as a private and intimate matter. The scant legitimization of grief and its public display—offline and online—is characteristic of a modern Western society where it is not so much death that is concealed, but the pain and fatigue of grief (Walter, 1991). Our research confirms that Italy is no exception. The shift from private and individualized to more communal grieving in social media cannot be taken for granted, not for all users, not for all grief.

Nonetheless, we have also noticed several social media domestication processes in online grieving and remembering the dead. Social media are accepted differently in the various stages of the loss process. The most ritualized practices, like death announcements and condolences, are relatively approved also on the basis of an idea of social media as platforms suitable for providing practical information and for the micromanagement of daily life or as environments for the remediation of social rituals such as public death announcements. Instead, the display of grief online is still controversial. Even more controversial is the interaction with the digital remains of the dead, especially those which can appear to be a continuation of the bond with the departed. In the case of Italy, the resistance to using the profiles of the dead for continuing bonds is particularly interesting. While in Anglo-Saxon and protestant countries the dead can remain alive only in the memory, in the catholic cultural context the active presence of the deceased in the community of the living is more accepted, even if it is not totally legitimate (Walter, 2018a). Notwithstanding this, continuing bonds online are not enfranchised, and even in Italy the "letting go and moving on" paradigm in grief work is prevalent (Bartoletti et al., 2020; Christensen et al., 2017). Social media do not yet seem to trigger relevant changes in this direction.

Nevertheless, Italian users have also domesticated the social media accounts of the dead. These profiles are mostly used to maintain bonds among the living or to share memories of the deceased. This appropriation of the profile of the dead is consistent with the specificity of social networks, especially of platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

Mourning online on these sites is characterized by an accepted focus on the living and on mutual support and solidarity among the bereaved users, or on the shared commemoration of the dead—it is the death of ordinary people or traumatic death events (Sumiala, 2022). Our study also confirms the main findings of previous international research concerning the digital afterlife (Brubaker et al., 2019; Pitsillides & Wallace, 2021): Italians do not seem to be interested in the digital immortality enabled by the affordances (Kasket, 2019; Savin-Baden & Mason-Robbie, 2020; Sisto, 2020). Digital immortality is rather perceived as uncanny, since the digital remains are often seen as “ghost profiles.” Affordances and sub-platforms offer social media users many different ways to grieve and maintain a connection with the dead online. For instance, users can take advantage of the stories on Instagram or of a sub-platform like Facebook Messenger in order to manage the visibility of their emotions and of their communication with the living and the dead. The tactics aimed at ensuring a degree of invisibility and privateness in public are among the most interesting appropriations of social media, located on the blurry borderline between acceptance and refusal, use and non-use.

We notice that the different forms of the domestication of social media when grieving online appears prevalently remediation of existing practices, rather than emerging new practices. This is not, however, a mere transfer from one context to another, from one medium to another: online death practices must cope with the affordances of online contexts (i.e., the public/private hybrid statute; the space/time dislocation; the heterogeneity of the public) and are transformed. They acquire an ordinary, vernacular character and are inseparable from the everyday (Sumiala, 2022). However, even this remediation of older rituals and practices should not be taken for granted, and is not always accepted. The only practice that we can recognize as emergent is stewarding (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017), which results as being the least accepted by Italian users and non-users.

In summary, our research into the Italian population confirms the presence of non-marginal resistance to the adoption of social media in online grieving and therefore invites us not to overestimate the changes triggered by social media that emerge from the explorative studies into users. At the same time, the ideologies regarding the use of social media among Italians are aligned with those that emerged from research in other national contexts; our findings are also coherent with the motivations for the uses and non-uses which emerged in the international literature on online death and grieving. It can then be affirmed that there is a synchronization of online grieving in different national contexts related to the platforms and their affordances. These seem, therefore, to mitigate the effects of the cultural and religious differences relative to death, which still exist—and in some cases produce more evident effects, for example, when it comes to disposal in Anglo-Saxon protestant and catholic countries (Colombo, 2017).

Social media have surely changed the way we mourn. They have enhanced the everyday public visibility of death and bereavement (Sumiala, 2022) and have produced the expansion and amplification of the public presence of the dead (Navon & Noy, 2021; Walter, 2018b). Online mourning rituals have become vernacular practices, inseparable from everyday life. However, social media have not yet triggered a significant expansion of the enfranchisement of public displays of grief and of continuing bonds online—not even in a country that, conversely from Anglo-Saxon contexts, provides for margins of exception to the idea that the dead are inaccessible to the living. Online grief and commemoration practices emerge thus as a profitable area, both for the study of the refusal of, and resistance to, social media and the creativity of the user who decides to use them, even if they do not feel wholly legitimized to do so. This study contributes to the field of digital media studies by demonstrating that the ability of the platforms to trigger a more extensive cultural and social transformation is not to be taken for granted and must be investigated further in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of uses and refusals by focusing on the concrete experience of users and non-users in different social and cultural contexts.

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Notes

1. The 2,000 cases in the survey were stratified by gender, age, geographic zone, and demographic amplitude of the district of residence, educational background, and employment status. The questionnaire, composed of 96 questions, was administered using the CAPI method (computer-assisted personal interviewing) between December 2017 and February 2018.
2. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the domestication of digital media when expressing grief and commemorating the dead in Italy and elsewhere (Pasquali & Bartoletti, 2020; Pitsillides & Wallace, 2021), the medium- and long-term effects of which will require future in-depth study.

3. Our survey demonstrates that 20.6% of Italians have read online condolences for a loved one; this rises to 38.7% for Italians with a social media profile.
4. In 2018 (when we performed our quantitative survey), 74.2% of Italians between the ages of 16 and 74 years said they had used the Internet in the past 3 months, and 46.8% had used it to access social media. If we look at the population between 16 and 54 years, the percentage of access to social networks rises from 54.8% to 78.7% among young people (16–24 years old). Source: OECD.Stat, ICT Access and Usage by Household and Individual, data extracted June, 2022, <https://stats.oecd.org>.
5. We refer to respondents' assessments of the common characteristics of social media while being aware that, if we take Facebook as an example, pages, groups, and profiles have different affordances that shape contrasting practices concerning mourning and remembrance (Navon & Noy, 2021).
6. Our representative sample of Italians said, for example, to feel that the deceased are protecting them (55.5%), feel their presence (43.7%), speak to them (39.5%), or have visions (28.6%).
7. On the basis of a series of logistic regressions (binomial multivariate logistic regression models), we can state that an active interaction with the social profile of the deceased is adopted mainly by users who have offline experience of some type of contact with a dead loved one.

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