OLgU
sosyoloji dergisi | journal of sociology

Cultural Aspects of Technological Grave Visits: A Sociological Assessment

Tekno Kültürel Kabir Ziyaretlerine Sosyolojik Bir Değerlendirme

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Yazar Bilgileri Author(s)

Gülşen Çankal
Necmettin Erbakan Üniversitesi,
Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Fakültesi,
Sosyoloji Bölümü, Doktorant.
ORCID: 0000-0002-4404-0384

Öz

Kabir ziyaretleri, tarihsel olarak pek çok din ve toplumda köklü bir gelenek olarak varlığını sürdüren dini bir ritüeldir. Bu ritüel, ölülerin mezarlarını ziyaret etmek amacıyla gerçekleştirilir ve insanlar arasında manevi bağın ifadesi olarak kabul edilir. Ancak, teknolojik ilerlemelerin ve dijital iletişim platformlarının yükselmesiyle bu gelenek de değişime uğramaktadır. Günümüzde sosyal medya platformlarının popülerliği arttıkça, kabir ziyaretleri de sanal dünyada yeni bir boyut kazanmaktadır. Bu çalışma, ölmüş kişilerin hayattayken kullandıkları sosyal medya profillerinin ölüm sonrası nasıl ziyaret edildiğini incelemektedir. Instagram gibi bir internet tabanlı sosyal medya platformunu gözlemlenerek ve katılımcılarla etkileşimde bulunarak ölmüş kişilerin profillerini ziyaret eden ve yorumda bulunan sosyal medya kullanıcıları incelenmiştir. Kullanıcılar, ölümden sonraki anma ve hatırlama pratiğinin nasıl dijitalleştiği ve değiştiği konusunda önemli bir perspektif sunmaktadır. Çalışma sonuçlarına göre, modern toplumlarda ölümün genellikle göz ardı edildiği veya unutulmaya çalışıldığı bir gerçeklik olarak kabul edilmektedir. Sosyal medya profilleri üzerinden yapılan ziyaretler ve yorumlar, ölüleri hatırlama ve onlara olan bağlılığı ifade etme biçimi olarak kabul edilmektedir.

Abstract

Visiting graves, historically, has been a deeply rooted religious ritual in many religions and societies. This ritual is conducted to visit the graves of the deceased and is considered an expression of spiritual connection among people. However, with the advancement of technology and the rise of digital communication platforms, this tradition is undergoing a transformation. In today's world, as the popularity of social media platforms continues to grow, grave visits are also taking on a new dimension in the virtual realm. This study examines how the social media profiles of deceased individuals, which were used during their lifetime, are visited and interacted with after their death. The research was observing internet-based social media platforms such as Instagram and studying social media users who visit and comment on the profiles of deceased individuals. These users provide a significant perspective on how the practice of commemorating and remembering the deceased has become digitalized and evolved. According to the study's findings, in modern societies, death is often acknowledged as a reality that is either overlooked or attempted to be forgotten. Visiting social media profiles and leaving comments are regarded as a way to remember the deceased and express one's attachment to them.

8

Anahtar Kelimeler / Keywords

Grave Visits / Kabir Ziyareti
Social Media / Sosyal Medya
Death / Ölüm
Postmodern Death / Postmodern Ölüm

Makale beyanı

Çalışma, özgün bir makaledir.

Teşekkür, Çıkar Çatışması ve Katkı Oranı Beyanı

Statement of Acknowledgment, Conflict of Interest and Contribution Rate

- Çalışmada çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

Atıf / Citation

Çankal, G. (2023). Cultural Aspects of Technological Grave Visits: A Sociological Assessment. *Olgu Sosyoloji Dergisi*, 2(2), pp. 8-18.

DOI

https://doi.org/10.58632/olgusos.1353466

1. Introduction

Grave visits, a phenomenon witnessed across nearly all societies and cultures, entail spatially visiting the graves of deceased individuals and incorporate diverse variations from community to community, and culture to culture. The manner and form of these visits are contingent upon how societies ascribe meaning to death. The predominance of a religious thought framework, in approaching objects, events, or phenomena, is more pronounced in pre-modern societies. The Enlightenment era marks a significant period when this conceptual framework, which once derived meaning primarily from religion, underwent profound shifts. Enlightenment rationality introduced science over religion, and natural laws over divine command, bolstering the role of science in people's understanding of reality. This shift led to a transition from attributing death to divine will to framing it as a consequence of medical limitations, both in the pre-modern and post-modern eras. Efforts in conquering death through scientific advancements or medical breakthroughs sought to diminish the concept of death by dismantling it, despite modernity's inability to fully overcome it. With humanity's struggle against death being relatively subdued, modernity portrayed death as an adversary, consequently leading to a decline in various practices revolving around death. However, technological advancements and the advent of digital communication platforms have introduced distinctive changes to the concept of death and grave visits in comparison to previous eras. It is believed that these changes have brought forth a different form of transformation, shaping the ways death is perceived and addressed in contemporary times.

With the influence of technology, individuals have progressively engaged in interactions between physical spaces and the virtual realm. This shift has also affected the practice of grave visits. Notably, the existence of individuals on various digital platforms, even after their passing, has altered the traditional form and content of grave visits. Leaving behind personal profiles on digital platforms following death has transformed the shape and content of traditional grave visits. The emergence of a techno-culture, where individuals leave commemorative messages, participate in virtual memorial events, or visit memorial profiles on digital platforms, signifies the digitalization of rituals and the growing role of the internet in this domain. Platforms like Facebook offer options for individuals to designate a digital executor for their accounts after their passing, influencing the posthumous use of these accounts. However, such options are not yet available for all platforms. Nevertheless, accounts left without a designated digital executor continue to attract visitors in the digital realm. These accounts, unattended in the digital sphere, host visitors in some capacity. These visits, often occurring on death anniversaries, birthdays, or according to specific professional groups, have given rise to a new form of commemorative culture. This study is centered on Instagram, aiming to address how profiles utilized by individuals during their lifetimes are visited after their passing – a key research issue. The study reveals that these profiles indeed receive visitors in a manner akin to grave visits, indicating the accounts serve as a form of digital grave visitation. In this context, the objective of the study is to comprehend how digital communication platforms, characteristic of contemporary postmodern societies, carry out this function and in what manner.

9

2. Grave Visits in Islam

In the context of Islam, grave visits hold significant importance as they convey to humanity the transient nature of this world and the notion that the true life begins after death. In Islamic belief, the true life is the life after death, while the life experienced in this world is viewed as a journey leading to the ultimate existence. This journey simultaneously serves as a unique test for individuals. The worldly life is depicted as not only transient and deceptive but also a life of amusement and diversion (Quran: Surah Al-Ankabut, 64; Surah Al-An'am, 32; Surah Muhammad, 36; Surah Al-Hadid, 20). In Islam, it is emphasized not to become engrossed in the flow of this transient and deceptive life, to recognize that it is a test, and to act accordingly. Death is a constant reminder of this concept. In this regard, Islam's emphasis on death and the afterlife exerts an impact on both individual and collective identities within society. The emphasis on death and the afterlife serves to liberate individuals and societies from fixation on worldly objectives and directs them towards a pursuit of deeper and more meaningful life purposes. Simultaneously, Islam's frequent reminders of death shape societal behaviors and moral values. Behaviors that aim to maintain a balance between the worldly life and the hereafter mold ethical choices and promote living in harmony with ethical values. In this context, grave visits manifest as a significant ritual that concretely enacts and reminds society of Islam's emphasis on death and the afterlife. As indicated in the saying "Let whoever wishes to visit the graves do so, for verily, visiting the graves reminds one of the Hereafter" (Nevevi, 2012: 252), grave visits serve as a reminder of the concept of death within Islamic teachings. Grave visits engrave the reality of death into individuals' minds while simultaneously conveying the message to the entire society that this world is temporary, and the afterlife holds paramount importance.

Death, as the inception of the afterlife, entails visiting the place that leads to this realm. Such visits are organized in accordance with specific ritual codes, symbolizing a consistent continuity. In Islamic tradition, grave visits predominantly occur at specific days and times with a regular cadence. For a Muslim, the graves are often the first places visited on days like Arafah or during festive occasions. These visits are motivated by respect and reverence, and during grave visits, silence, solemnity, and respectful demeanor signify expressions of respect and reverence. Since grave visits are a religious ritual, women engaging in these visits are expected to observe specific modesty practices in their attire. Particularly at shrine entrances, boxes containing scarves and shawls are provided for women who are not covered. This practice aligns with women's commitment to their religious identity and adhering to societal norms. Furthermore, certain bodily practices, such as laughing, giggling, lighting candles, spinning around the grave, or stepping on the grave,

are deemed inappropriate as they contradict the sanctity of the grave. Ultimately, expected behaviors during grave visits are often shaped by religious beliefs, traditions, societal norms, and values.

3. Symbolically Laden Rituals

Graveside rituals are deeply meaningful rituals performed after death, encompassing religious, social and cultural dimensions. These rituals emphasize the ongoing cycle of life, strengthen social bonds after death and highlight the intertwined threads of meaning. Death and the processes developed around death, which are of interest to sociology, are considered to be the best narrators of solidarity, struggle, conflict, the social, change and dynamics. For this reason, the phenomenon of death, which each discipline makes sense of or explains from its own framework, is also intensely discussed within the social sciences. What sociology has discovered about death is that it reinforces and reflects the nature of social phenomena (Prior, 1989: 7). Emile Durkheim (2005), one of the first to address the phenomenon of death within the sociological tradition, examines how post-mortem rituals re-establish solidarity and integration within a social group. From the sociological perspective presented by Durkheim (2005), post-mortem rituals serve to increase social cohesion within a community and promote integration among its members. Graveside rituals bring community members together, giving them the opportunity to share a common purpose and strengthen emotional bonds. These rituals strengthen social cohesion by facilitating individuals to unite around shared values and beliefs. As a result, social bonds are strengthened, social relations deepen and a sense of solidarity increases among community members. However, when other processes such as death, euthanasia, abortion or capital punishment come into play, this time, contrary to social cohesion, it is a problem that leads to the breakdown of the structure. According to Weber (2000), the mindset of the modern era, which emphasizes continuous development, has created a disenchanted world in which people now approach death as a meaningless event. While Weber refers to secularization in the production of meaning, Berger and Luckmann (2016) point to multiple meaning stocks. According to Berger and Luckmann, the proliferation of common stocks of knowledge that mediate between the individual and society and determine how to think leads modern man to a crisis of meaning. For Berger, this is a problem in daily life in relation to situations such as pain, evil or death that disrupt human life and threaten the established order, but this problem needs metaphysical as well as physical explanations. At this point, theology comes into play and theodicy, as an attempt to justify or defend God, becomes visible as a mode of explanation and signification (Berger, 2005). Theodicy, as Berger points out, is associated with people's thinking about the cause of death and the idea that death serves a specific purpose with the belief in the afterlife, especially in cases such as dying in severe pain or death occurring before reaching adulthood. For this reason, belief, and therefore religion, has a social function. Contrary to the Marxist approach, religion, rather than being an opiate, functions as a compensatory mechanism and provides people with spiritual strength, especially to cope with difficult situations. The institution of religion, which in ancient times was a powerful mechanism of meaning production between the individual and society, has lost this effect in the modern period. Berger and Luckmann, without going into the secularization debate, refer to the institutions that modern times have constructed for the production of meaning, and argue that recent institutions have led people to a crisis of meaning.

Beyond being an individual and instantaneous event, death encompasses a cultural memory that carries the accumulation and diversity of centuries (Sağır: 2013). In this context, grave visits help traditional societies transfer their cultural values and beliefs to future generations. They reveal hidden cultural patterns embedded in the fabric of society. As a result, post-mortem rituals contain important information about a community's identity, history and values. Through rituals, the historical background, beliefs, values and teachings of a group are passed on to younger generations, enabling them to connect with the social identity of the past and paving the way for future generations to connect with their collective heritage.

According to Bauman (2000), in past societies, death was seen as a natural part of human life and made its presence felt in all areas. Death had a domesticated nature and domestication here means emphasizing the internalization of death within society. In other words, death was deeply integrated into the way of life of individuals and communities. According to Ariès (1991), death has a more acceptable nature in the traditional period. This is because, according to Ariès, people in the traditional period were not in an active struggle with death like people in the modern period, and they also did not have the idea that they could push back the boundaries of death or direct its course. In the traditional period, as in other periods, people were engaged in a struggle against death. In the traditional period, spiritual beings were believed to be the source of death, and therefore one had to somehow prepare to defeat dead spiritual beings. The idea of defeating spiritual beings involved burying the soul of the deceased, along with all the possessions he or she had in the living world. Archaeological evidence shows that graves were filled with all the tools and foodstuffs that the dead would need in the afterlife. This could be taken as an indication that the dead believed that they would lead a life in the afterlife that was similar to their life in this world. However, the real reason may have stemmed from the idea that the dead should have everything they would need in order to eliminate the possibility of their return (Kellehear, 2012: 71).

The strategy for immortality was religion. Religion promotes belief in an afterlife and thus instills hope for a life beyond this world. The quest for immortality among humans was shaped by religious beliefs and rituals. As a result, for pre-modern societies, death is not only an individual event, but also a social and religious experience. In these societies, death meant a transition and transformation, and the belief in an afterlife perceived death not as an end but as a stage of separation from the physical world. This belief reinforces the idea that death represents a spiritual continuation rather

10

than a feared end. In pre-modern societies, not all deaths were considered untimely. There was no specific age associated with death, and children or young people witnessed many more deaths than is common in modern societies. The processes before and after death were under the control of individuals, unlike in modern societies where institutions play a greater role. In traditional societies, processes such as death and funerals were typically governed by social norms and religious rituals. Individuals honored the deceased in accordance with accepted norms, while at the same time contributing to the maintenance of social bonds and order. From this perspective, the differences between the perception and management of death in modern societies and the approaches of traditional societies become apparent. Modern societies tend to approach death as a more biological phenomenon due to medical advances and scientific understanding. In contrast, traditional societies tend to view death as a social, religious and spiritual experience.

In pre-modern societies, the moment of death was often managed by family and close relatives, not by institutional figures or professionals. This underlines the perception of death as a more personal and human-centered experience. The deceased is protected, honored and provided with moral support by loved ones. This approach undoubtedly contributes to the management of death in line with the religious and moral values of the community. Similarly, the burial process, again under the control of the deceased's family, reflects social ties and family structure. Loved ones guide the final journey of the deceased and do so in accordance with social rituals.

In pre-modern societies, the intertwined nature of life and death situates traditional burial practices within the fabric of daily life. The placement of graves near houses or along roads commonly used in communities indicates that death is at the center of social existence. The proximity of graves to homes or allowing passersby to pray reflects the intention of constant remembrance and the revitalization of social ties. Encouraging visits to graves ensures that death remains in the collective memory and daily life of the community. These rituals serve the purpose of keeping alive the memory of the deceased, honoring them with respect and preserving spiritual ties. Commitment to the community's past and values is also expressed through visits to cemeteries. From a spatial perspective, the location of graves near houses or roads reflects a cultural understanding of death as intertwined with daily life. This perspective contrasts with modern societies where death often takes place in hospitals or care facilities, leading to a weaker connection between life and death.

4. Grave Visitation in Modern Societies

While in pre-modern societies the phenomenon of death was integrated into the fabric of life, in modern times death has been positioned outside the normal process. In modern societies, the perception of death as a natural process has shifted towards the perception of death as a disease that requires intervention and has led to important scientific efforts to postpone death, especially in the field of health. The Enlightenment Period, which began with the English Revolution and ended with the French Revolution of 1789, emphasized the supremacy of reason by placing concepts such as reason, the individual and progress at its center and promised to produce solutions to the problems that arose. Built on positivist foundations, Enlightenment thought focused on the liberated mind of the individual by separating the knowledge of truth from religious thought. The acceptance of reason as the only competent authority carried with it the promise of salvation from the deadly threats faced by humankind through science and technology. This was particularly successful in the case of epidemics and infectious diseases, and science acquired a mythological dimension and a unique methodology (Allan, 2020: 50). With advances in science and technology, increased focus on genetic engineering, and advances in medicine, serious debates on death and immortality have emerged (Şahin, 2016: 267). As a result, the tendency to perceive death as a phenomenon that needs to be prevented or postponed has gradually increased.

The quest to delay or redefine death sparked a discourse that evaluated death from a technological and scientific perspective. Thus, 17th century medical technology experienced significant advances in assessing both the timing of death and the effectiveness of treatment processes. In particular, instead of the previous understanding of death as a phenomenon determined by a divine power, it was thought to be a process under human control. As a result, new approaches to acceptable and unacceptable understandings of death have emerged. Death, which did not belong to any age group before, was considered as a phenomenon specific to older age groups in this age and the foundations of an understanding accepted as 'natural death' were laid. As Ivan Illich emphasized, 'natural death' reflected an expectation for the end of life at an advanced age, in good health and under medical supervision (Illich, 2004: 107). Modern medical services supported efforts to postpone death and led to the abstraction and exclusion of the previously concrete concept of death (Sağır, 2012: 905). As a result, death has become much less visible in modern societies compared to the past, prompting individuals to exhibit avoidance behaviors even before the encounter (Burcu & Akalın, 2008: 45).

Despite all these developments, modern science has not defeated death; on the contrary, it has used all its resources to delay its realization. Various sectors shaped around social institutions, nutrition, healthy living, media and consumer behavior constitute the strategies adopted by the modern age to deal with death (Bauman, 2000). The individual of the modern age is aware of death and makes significant efforts to maintain a healthy life in order to delay death. Therefore, death in the modern age is perceived as a consequence of individual irresponsibility, not as a result of a natural process. No one dies of natural causes; death has fragmented causes. As death is pushed out of the sphere of life in modern societies, control over the dying process has shifted from individuals to institutions. For many, the place where a terminally ill patient awaits death is no longer in their own homes but in institutions. When facing death, family members or loved ones are often replaced by institutional figures (Durmuşoğlu & Ataman, 2018: 132). These institutions

11

are undoubtedly the hospitals, which were used for treatment in the early modern period, have now become the preferred places to die (Aries, 1991). In the modern period, individuals began to experience death in hospital rooms, whereas in the traditional period they met death at home. As Norbert Elias (2023: 21) argues, as societies progress, natural events such as death and dying are handled and organized from a social perspective. Generally, the elderly are aware of the approach of death and gradually isolate themselves from others as they move step by step towards the end of life.

Similarly, burials are also predominantly undertaken by institutions in modern times. Moreover, children and young people are largely excluded from this process. With phrases such as "so that they are not affected by death" or "so that they do not remember it in this way", the introduction of children and young people to the concept of death is postponed as much as possible. Modern society's obsession with keeping death away from the mind has not only transformed how the graves of deceased individuals should be visited, but has also postponed the introduction of children and young people to this concept. Despite this change, the spatial aspect of cemetery visits has not changed significantly in modern times. As in the pre-modern period, visits to cemeteries in the modern period also involve spatial experiences. However, cemeteries located near houses, in gardens or on roadsides, which were prominent in the pre-modern period, have lost their visibility. As cities grow, people no longer have enough time to visit cemeteries located in the central areas of the city. In cemeteries that are open to visitors at certain times, modern individuals wait for important days and hours to visit the graves.

5. Grave Visitation in Postmodern Societies

As we transition into postmodern societies, the framework regarding death, which was relevant in the modern era, starts to lose its validity. In the modern period, medical advancements and scientific progress led to the perception of death as a controllable phenomenon. However, in the postmodern era characterized by science, technology, and cultural diversity, death is recognized as a more intricate matter that cannot be addressed through a single approach. In postmodern societies, death is primarily seen as an individual experience, and during this period, the meaning and significance of death can vary based on personal beliefs, cultural differences, and individual experiences. As a result, individuals can interpret death in diverse ways.

The transition from the modern era to the postmodern era has been significantly influenced by mass media, leading to the emergence of new cultural patterns related to death. Social media platforms have transformed into tools not only for announcing the loss of individuals but also for commemorating and showing respect to them. They have facilitated the sharing of messages and posts on special occasions like birthdays and death anniversaries. Social media platforms are now used to share the works of deceased celebrities, artists, or writers, thereby preserving a kind of legacy. In cases of people losing their loved ones, supportive messages are sent through social media, digitally transferring solidarity. In this context, communication tools have transcended being mere instruments and have come to shape the thought patterns, cultural values, and social interactions of society. In this light, the sharing culture, which is one of the most fundamental examples of the impact of communication tools on human experience, is undergoing a similar transformation due to the influence of digital communication tools. The culture of sharing that fosters solidarity and interaction among communities continues to exist in the digital world. Traditional verbal sharing within communities has been replaced by visual and written materials in the digital realm. People now use social media platforms to share news of a loved one's passing or to commemorate them. Photos, memories, and written expressions are employed on digital platforms to convey emotional sentiments related to death. These shared contents serve both as a personal form of remembrance and as a means of creating a sense of solidarity and understanding among digital communities. This transformation can be seen as an adaptation of the sharing culture to the digital world. However, this shift also raises thought-provoking questions about how the diminishing physical contact and the digitization of communication methods are affecting emotional expressions and meanings.

In the postmodern era, death has become an integral part of everyday life, constantly visible and remembered every moment. According to Bauman (2000), postmodernity brings death, which was pushed into the background during the modern era, to the forefront, and daily life takes on a continuous rehearsal of death. What is rehearsed every day is transience. The things that embellish people's dreams have a lifespan only until encountering something better. Each new thing is not related to the obsolescence of the old, but to its disposability. Therefore, in postmodern societies, nothing maintains its presence for a long time. Everything is fleeting. The transience of everything has also turned death into a transient aspect within life. The immortality that modernity aspired to and put all its effort into achieving has been shattered in the realm of postmodernism (Bauman 2000).

Baudrillard's criticisms of the postmodern culture, where media simulations replace reality, seem applicable when adapted to the context of grave visits. According to Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 1998), the postmodern era is a simulation age governed by models, codes, information, and indicators managed by cybernetics. In these societies, the distinction between model and reality becomes vague. In hyperreality, models replace reality. As hyperreality progresses, simulations begin to construct reality itself. In this phase, simulation models become even more real than actual institutions, and distinguishing between simulation and reality not only becomes increasingly challenging but also blurs the boundary between simulation and reality, with simulation becoming reality. From this perspective, in the realm of postmodernism, individuals' social media profiles continue to host visitors after their death. In this era where the

12

distinction between object and representation is blurred, individuals no longer unfriend deceased individuals from their social media accounts; instead, they visit these profiles independently of time, performing a form of grave visitation in a way.

6. Methods

This research is designed with a qualitative research method to understand how and in what manner grave visits occur, focusing specifically on the digital communication platform Instagram. Qualitative research involves an interpretative process aimed at recognizing previously known or unnoticed problems and realistically addressing natural phenomena related to the problem. Within the scope of this study, the phenomenological approach is employed to comprehend individuals' feelings, perspectives, and personal perceptions regarding grave visits in the digital realm. The phenomenological approach is chosen to investigate a phenomenon that is frequently encountered on specific social media platforms, familiar to individuals, yet not fully understood. Due to the non-generalizable nature of the research, the most suitable social media platform to reach the sample group had to be determined. Initially, 15 participants using Facebook were identified, and it was determined whether there were deceased individuals on their friends' lists. Subsequently, with their permission, profiles of deceased individuals on their accounts were examined. Within the scope of the examination, it was determined that Facebook primarily serves functions such as announcing news of individuals' deaths, reminding about death anniversaries or the deceased person's birthdays. Therefore, profiles on Facebook are observed to be visited a maximum of two times a year. Subsequently, on another social media platform, Instagram, individuals were asked if they had accounts of deceased individuals on their friends' lists. With their permissions, these accounts were examined. However, this approach did not create a suitable groundwork for the desired research sample. The fact that the cause of death for most individuals was natural, the limitations they placed on others accessing their profiles, and the relatively low number of followers on their profiles indicated that these accounts received visitors only in the few days after their passing. Due to these reasons, Instagram profiles were identified where the cause of death had received media coverage or they were followed by many people during their lifetime, and where there were no limitations to access their profiles. This decision was made considering their suitability for the study's sample. The Instagram profiles that served as sources for the study were those of Neslican Tay, who passed away in 2019 due to mesenchymal tumors, and Pınar Gültekin, who fell victim to a murder in 2021. Within these profiles, the comments made under the photos uploaded by Tay and Gültekin when they were alive were examined, and individuals who consistently left comments were identified. Thus, a total of 6 participants who visited the profiles of deceased individuals the most with the non-probability sampling technique contributed to this study using the purposive sampling technique. The participants were reached via Instagram and interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview techniques with their permission. The study was conducted between August and September 2021. The study was completed by analyzing the data obtained through thematic conceptualizations within the scope of the study.

7. Findings

7.1. Acquaintance After Death

Digital media serves functions such as rapidly disseminating death news and reaching wide audiences. As a result, individuals not only learn about the deaths of people they have personally known through social media but also quickly gain access to information about individuals they may not have been acquainted with. When examining the findings of the study, none of the participants had known the deceased individuals in real life, nor had they engaged in face-to-face interactions. Following the deaths, participants either became aware of the deceased individuals through media coverage of their deaths or through the process of the diseases that led to their deaths. With no restrictions to access the Instagram profiles of the deceased women, individuals accessed visual content and written posts related to them, and they continue to follow their profiles.

> "*I didn't know them in real life. I only know them as much as I've seen on social media.*" (Participant K1, Female, 17).

> "*I didn't actually know them, I had just seen them on Instagram's explore page. I got to know them when they were still alive, and that's when I started following them.*" (Participant K3, Male, 29).

The participants in the interviews became familiar with the deceased individuals through social media. The state of becoming acquainted, which previously occurred between individuals who didn't know each other, now takes the form of one person getting to know the other through images allowed by that person on social media. In this case, the state of acquaintance is not mutual between two people, but rather it is one person getting to know the other. Thus, even in situations where physical contact is absent, digital media enables individuals to acquire information about each other and establish relationships. This actually illustrates how social media has altered the ways in which people meet and communicate with each other. Particularly, the digital traces left behind by deceased individuals allow people to form a virtual connection with them and gain the impression of knowing them. The expressions of the participants reveal that people can establish genuine bonds, develop emotional connections, and create personal meanings even in the virtual world. Undoubtedly, this demonstrates how social media can influence people's life experiences in various ways.

"When she was killed, I was just curious. I wondered how she was, who she was. I searched her name, found her account, and she was a very beautiful woman. I started following her. I looked at her pictures. I still get curious and visit her profile. I read the comments to see what others are writing." (Participant K4, Female, 30).

This statement illustrates how the individual approached a deceased person through social media, how they established a connection, and how social media triggers people's sense of curiosity. It also highlights how physical appearance and the contents of the deceased person's social media account serve as tools for recognition and connection between individuals. The participant, driven by curiosity, accessed the Instagram profile of Pınar Gültekin, who had been murdered by her boyfriend, upon seeing the news. The phrase 'She was a very beautiful woman. I started following her' indicates that the participant began following her due to the woman's physical attractiveness. From the participant's perspective, the woman's beauty made her worth following, even though she was no longer alive.

"I really loved Neslican, I never thought she would be defeated, and her defeat saddened me greatly. I mean, I think if I remove her from my Instagram friends, it would be unfair, like a betrayal. If someone is there for you when you're sick, then not remembering them when they pass away would be unjust and hypocritical in my opinion. That's why every time I log into Instagram, every day, I look and see, and my last Instagram post was in 2019 related to Neslican." (Participant K3, Male, 29).

K3's participant reflects how illness and death are perceived in modern societies. K3's participant that death is seen as a defeat and an unexpected outcome is a general opinion. This situation is itself related to the characteristic structure of the modern period. The modern era accepts death as a defeat and fights against diseases. It is also seen that individuals believe that they owe a debt of gratitude to people they have never met. Those who are unaware of each other's existence in life build a sense of obligation after death. Thanks to this sense of obligation, individuals constantly visit the profiles of deceased people in order not to forget them. The participant spends a significant amount of time on the profile of Neslican Tay, who died in 2019 due to a mesenchymal tumor despite having beaten cancer three times before. The participant became aware of Neslican Tay while she was battling cancer. The participant believes that because she followed Neslican while she was alive, unfollowing her after her death would be perceived as a betrayal. The participant has spiritual feelings for someone with whom she has never communicated face-to-face. As a result of these feelings, a sense of attachment has developed and the participant constantly stays on Neslican Tay's profile in order not to forget and constantly remember during this attachment process. The concept of "loyalty" (gratitude) is not only about fulfilling a promise, but also about being loyal to friends (Sami, 2015: 1157). Therefore, it can be said that the participant who contributed to the study developed a one-sided sense of gratitude and can be considered loyal because of this feeling.

14

"No woman deserves to be killed in my opinion. Plus, she was a very beautiful woman, like an angel. If I don't occasionally go and look at her pictures, it feels like she'll be forgotten. I don't want her to be forgotten, so I don't unfollow. I want her memory to stay alive." (Participant K5, Female, 18).

The participant associates the beauty of Gültekin, who fell victim to murder, with beings often attributed with superior power and abilities, angels. The statement "No woman deserves to be killed. Plus, she was a very beautiful woman..." indicates that the participant believes death is not fitting for someone beautiful, and in fact, even less fitting for someone beautiful. The description of the woman as beautiful creates a curious connection between beauty and death. This suggests that the interruption of the beautiful life individuals construct for themselves in the digital realm is astonishing to the participant.

The purpose of these visits for individuals is not to conduct a digital grave visit. While the grave serves as a reminder of death, social media profiles perpetuate the idea of immortality. Rather than the notion that the deceased has died, participants emphasize the idea that they continue to exist there. Hence, the tone they use in visiting profiles is more akin to having conversations. This perspective is evident not only in the comments under the pictures on profiles but also in the conversations they have during these visits.

"I enter the profile, look at the pictures, the comments. Then I imagine her as if she's still alive, I talk to myself, I get really sad. I watch her videos every time, even on YouTube, and I comment every time." (Participant K3, Male, 29).

The participant continuously follows the pictures and videos that the deceased person uploaded while alive. The continuity of these images and videos pushes the reality of death into the background and creates an image of the person being alive. Therefore, for the participants, the deceased individuals exist somewhere. The personal pronouns used in the comments made by participants or other individuals under the pictures or videos are in the first person singular form. Examples include phrases like "I miss you, I haven't forgotten you, I love you..." as well as "Do you know what happened today?"... "I'm having such bad days... I've seen worse before, but I was too young to understand. Growing up and taking responsibility is so difficult. I have no one by my side, I've been left alone to fight..." They also discuss negative aspects of their own lives. In this context, it can be said that the remaining digital profiles after death are also used for the purpose of sharing personal feelings and thoughts.

"While scrolling through Instagram today, I got upset by the phrase "least interacted with." Even though I constantly follow her, Instagram tells me that I interact with her the least. However, I'm always having conversations with her." (Participant K2. Male, 37).

Interaction refers to the visibility of posts made on social media platforms by other users, who respond by liking or commenting, thereby exerting an influence. The participant, despite spending a significant amount of time on the social media profile of the deceased person they constantly follow, received a notification from the system stating "least interacted with," indicating minimal engagement. This lack of reciprocal interaction prompted the participant to express frustration with the situation.

7.2. Digital Rituals in Grave Visits

Participants engage in genuine grave visits during occasions such as holidays, religious observances, or Fridays. Very few individuals among them perform grave visits without having lost a close family member or someone within their social circle. Generally, the participants have not visited the graves of people they never knew. These visits are shaped by specific rituals within the boundaries defined by religion. Prior to visiting the graves, individuals perform acts such as ablution, paying particular attention to clothing and dress code, and engaging in prayer. While experiencing the physical practices of the location through these rituals during actual grave visits, the participants perform various digital rituals when visiting Instagram profiles. These digital rituals often involve commenting under the last photo the deceased person shared during their lifetime and liking all of their photos.

Participants regularly express their remembrance and commitment not to forget through comments placed under the last photo at certain intervals, or by liking comments made by others to signify their presence. Additionally, when analyzing the comments made on both profiles, it is observed that people generally use phrases like "May your place be paradise" or "May your grave be illuminated." The expression "May heaven be he place", which is frequently used during physical grave visits, turns into "May heaven be your place" in the digital world. While in the former the addressee of the wish and prayer is the divine power, in the latter the addressee is the deceased person himself/herself. This discourse, on the other hand, produces a meaning such as "May your place be in heaven, you hear and see me somewhere out there and I am telling you. In addition, the participants' physically planned visits to the graves on certain days and times are transformed into digital visits that are spaceless and timeless. In the digital world, individuals can realize these visits at any time, and grave visits can be at their fingertips at any time.

15

"We can't be close by, we can only look at your photos and like and comment" (Participant K1, Female, 17).

The only thing the participant can do for the deceased person is to like their photos and leave comments under their photos. In digital grave visitation, participants have no other options available to them.

"It feels like she hasn't died. It's as if she's there and can see my likes. I've liked all of her photos. Whenever I want, whenever it comes to my mind, I go in and leave comments on her pictures. It's like she knows, it feels that way." (Participant K5, Female, 18).

All participants mention that they prayed for the deceased individuals after hearing about their deaths. However, in terms of profile visits, only one participant consistently engages in praying. Other participants do not necessarily pray during their profile visits.

"I always pray during every profile visit. Because she is like an angel to me." (Participant K6, Male, 32).

7.3. The Construction of Digital Space

The transformation of a physical experience into an abstract experience through digital means blurs the emotions that a place evokes in individuals. The emotions that participants feel during a real gravesite visit are quite distinct from the emotions they experience when visiting deceased individuals' online profiles. In a genuine gravesite visit, participants feel the presence of death, whereas the emotions they experience when visiting Instagram profiles are akin to rifling through someone else's diary. The virtual space does not provide the same sense of the reality of death, causing individuals not to consider this act as an actual gravesite visit. Participants describe the following emotions when physically visiting gravesites:

"When I realized that I wouldn't be able to experience anything with them again in life, that I wouldn't be able to have a conversation with them anymore, I felt really bad. But at the same time, I felt a bit better because I'm still doing something for them, planting flowers, praying." (Participant K1, Female, 17).

"While making a visit to the grave, I think about how people hurt each other's feelings for no reason, how everyone is the same there, and no one is superior to anyone else..." (Participant K3, Male, 29).

"It's bad, you know. I mean, I haven't lost someone really close to me. Just my grandfather, grandmother. We visit their graves during holidays, but when I'm there, I don't just think about my grandparents, I think about myself, my own mother, my father (passing away), and I get sad." (Participant K5, Female, 18).

The genuine emotion that a real grave visit evokes in participants is the reality of death itself. They are aware that with death, they won't be able to do any of the things they did with the person who was once alive. Participants are conscious of death when they visit a grave. The statement from the participant signifies the inevitability of death for everyone. Therefore, when participants engage in a grave visit, their expressions indicate that they feel the reality of the concept of death. While feelings experienced during a grave visit are related to the actuality of death, these emotions tend to dissipate during digital visits. In a grave visit, participants experience the palpable reality of death, whereas in digital visits, the true essence of death is not conveyed to the individual.

"At times, it evokes the same feelings, even when I see things posted from Neslican's account, it saddens me greatly, but I try to think positively and convince myself it's just a fantasy (she didn't die). When I enter her profile, I often find comfort in the thought 'Neslican hasn't died.' Visiting her grave, on the other hand, is quite difficult. Because now I have to accept that she's there. Neslican is no longer alive, but when I visit her profile, it brings some comfort. Maybe one day she'll respond... Even if it's just wishful thinking... An endless hope... (K3, Male, 29)."

The participant expresses mixed feelings when interacting with Neslican's digital profile. Seeing posts from her account causes sadness, yet they try to find solace by imagining that it's just a fantasy, as if she hasn't passed away. The act of visiting her profile provides a degree of comfort, serving as a form of consolation. On the other hand, visiting her actual grave is challenging, as it requires accepting her physical absence. The participant holds onto the hope that maybe one day there will be a response, even if it's only a wishful thought. This ongoing hope, despite the impossibility, illustrates the enduring nature of their emotional connection with Neslican through her digital presence.

Based on the participant's expressions, it can be understood that Instagram plays a consoling role in the face of death. However, this consoling power is presented as a deceptive force. The participant finds solace in their perception that the deceased person is still alive, which is a deceptive illusion created by Instagram. The concept of death has been obscured through the digital realm. The participant mentions the difficulty of physically visiting the grave of the deceased person. This difficulty arises from the awareness that a physical visit to the grave would involve confronting the reality of death. Rather than facing this reality, they settle for the virtual world's masking of reality. Through the inadequacy of the virtual world to replace reality, the actual truth is reinterpreted and emphasized in a veiled manner (Demir, 2016: 510).

16

"When visiting a grave, you think about death, losing loved ones. You're silent. You feel sad, yet you're powerless. It's not the same here. You contemplate how someone dies, how they deserve their death, and that saddens you." (Participant K4, Female, 30).

The phrase "how someone dies, how they deserve their death" in the participant's statement is related to the earlier statement "very beautiful woman." The reflection of lifestyle through digital means contributes to the participants perceiving this person as someone who "doesn't deserve death" due to these statements. "This woman doesn't deserve death because she is very beautiful, because she has a beautiful life, because there are no signs of problems in her life." Digital communication platforms are where people often share their positive memories. As a result, the presented life appears to be flawless and problem-free to others, leading to the belief that death has no place within such a life.

For the participants, the significance of an actual grave visit lies in performing certain rituals at the grave site. The absence of specific rituals on digital platforms means that this experience is not equated with a physical grave visit.

"For example, when visiting Neslican, I can't do anything for her; I just look at her photos. I can't fulfill my last duty or anything because I can't do anything about it. That's why I don't think it counts as a grave visit." (Participant 1, Female, 17).

"Looking at her profile is like looking at a photo album at home, remembering... If there was an intention for a grave visit, I think other people, except for me, would probably copy and paste prayers." (Participant 2, Male, 37).

The rituals revolving around death provide ready behavioral patterns for how grave visits should be conducted and in what manner. Rituals, shaped by the structure, values, attitudes, and belief systems of the society individuals belong to, give meaning to the act of visiting a grave. In this context, it is important that the first participant indicates these rituals. The participant evaluates digital visits and grave visits within the context of rituals. The absence of rituals in the digital realm suggests that this visit cannot be labeled as a grave visit. The other participant also points to a similar situation. The actions the participant performs during profile visits consist mainly of looking at the same photos repeatedly and occasionally expressing their emotions through comments. In the statement, "If there were intentions for a grave visit,

except for me, I think others would probably paste copied prayers," the participant implies that other individuals are more likely to copy and paste written prayers rather than genuinely engaging in the act of prayer. However, upon examining the accounts of deceased individuals, comments under photos tend to focus more on expressions of love, longing, and regrets than on prayers.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The utilization of digital communication platforms gains significance within the context of social dynamics. Each digital communication platform catering to different age groups contributes to the differentiation of societal groups they engage with. The commemorative accounts created on Facebook following the deaths of Neslican Tay and Pınar Gültekin, as explored in this study, sustained their presence; however, these accounts did not exhibit the same level of rapid engagement as observed on Instagram. Therefore, within the scope of this study, it has been determined that the digitized world within specific social contexts (Instagram) alters perceptions within the societal realm. Instagram profiles utilized by certain individuals during their lifetime have, after their demise, concealed the reality of death and constructed their own reality within the virtual world. This constructed reality is fundamentally rooted in the showcasing of an extravagant and idealized lifestyle that individuals establish for themselves and their experiences while alive. The lifestyles constructed by these individuals have entranced others, preventing the reality of death from permeating their consciousness. Based on their lifestyles, others have deemed these individuals undeserving of death – in fact, they have not passed away; they exist somewhere.

The profiles visited every day, every second, have led to the emergence of the previously marginalized concept of death in postmodern societies, albeit in a veiled form. This obscured notion of death has given rise to a form of virtual "grave visitation" that could be termed as profile visits. These visits, occurring in the context of specific days and times, manifest as spatial experiences. However, within the contexts of digital platforms, they take on a timeless and placeless nature, perpetually unfolding.

The findings of this study shed light on the role of digital media in the dissemination of death-related news and the commemoration of deceased individuals. Participants' statements reveal that digital media enables the swift propagation of death news to broad audiences, granting individuals rapid access to both acquaintances' and unfamiliar individuals' obituaries. Additionally, the mode of acquainting oneself with deceased individuals predominantly occurs through digital media, with this familiarity originating unilaterally. Following the announcement of a death, the monitoring of deceased individuals' social media accounts facilitates access to their life experiences and digital footprints.

17

Participants' testimonies underscore that the process of acquainting oneself with deceased individuals fosters emotional and personal connections. Through the platforms provided by digital media, emotional bonds can be formed among people even after death, fostering a sense of tribute and sustaining memories. This phenomenon underscores that digital media supports individuals' emotional needs and commemorative rituals. Among the motivations driving participants to visit the social media profiles of deceased individuals, emotions such as curiosity, longing, respect, and the desire to ensure remembrance prominently emerge. Post-mortem digital interactions offer a novel realm for individuals to maintain their connections with those they have lost and to remember them.

However, the findings also demonstrate that digital media concurrently transforms the perception of the concept of death. The digital realm attenuates the reality of death, perpetuating the presence and memories of deceased individuals in an ongoing manner. The concreteness and permanence of death diverge from the realm of digital media. In a sense, digital media abstracts death, engendering an impression of immortality. This phenomenon offers a fresh perspective on how death takes shape within individuals' minds and emotional realms.

In conclusion, the outcomes of this investigation unequivocally illustrate how digital media has revolutionized experiences related to death and has impacted the processes of acquainting oneself with and commemorating deceased individuals. Digital media reshapes the perception of death, enabling individuals to sustain emotional connections and perpetuate memories. Nevertheless, given that the digital realm exists in a distinct dimension from physical reality, consideration must be given to how rituals that aid individuals in confronting death can find a place within digital platforms despite the abstracting effect of death. This study lays a crucial foundation for researchers who aspire to delve deeper into comprehending the effects of digital media on death and commemoration and for those aiming to pioneer novel approaches within these domains.

References

Allan, K. (2020). Çağdaş Sosyal ve Sosyolojik Teori, İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları.

Arıès, P. (1991). Batının Ölüm Karşısında Tavırları, (M. A. Kılıçbay, Çev.), Ankara: Gece Yayınları.

Baltacı, A. (2019). Nitel Araştırma Süreci: Nitel Bir Araştırma Nasıl Yapılır? Ahi Evran Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 5(2), 368-388.

Baudrillard, J. (1998). Simülakrlar ve Simülasyon. İzmir: Dokuz Eylül Yayınları.

Bauman, Z. (2000). Ölümlülük, Ölümsüzlük ve Diğer Hayat Stratejileri. İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları.

Berger, P. L. & Luckmann T. (2016). Modernite, Çoğulculuk ve Anlam Krizi, Modern İnsanın Yönelimi, (M. D. Dereli, Çev.). 2. Baskı, Ankara: Heretik Yayınları.

Berger, P. L. (2005). Kutsal Şemsiye, (A. Coşkun, Çev.), İstanbul: Rağbet Yayınları.

Burcu, E., & Akalın, E. (2008). Ölüm Olgusu Üzerine Sosyolojik Tartışmalar. Hacettepe Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları, 5(8), 28-52.

Demir, S. T. (2016). Dijital Aşklar: Sanallık ve Gerçeklik Arasında Bedenin, Mekanın ve İletişimin Tasarımı. TRT Akademi, Dijital Medya Sayısı, 01(2).

Durkheim, E. (2005). Dini Hayatın İlkel Biçimleri. (F. Aydın, Çev.) İstanbul: Ataç Yayınları.

Durmuşoğlu, K., & Ataman, K. (2018). Kutsaldan Seküler: Değişen Ölüm Algısı Üzerine Sosyolojik Bir Değerlendirme. Bülent Ecevit Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi, 5(1), 123-149.

Efil, Ş. (2016). Düşünce Tarihinde ve Modern Tıpta Ölümsüzlük Arayışı ve Eleştirisi. Beytulhikme An International Journal of Philosophy, 6, 267.

Elias, N., (2023) Ölmekte Olanların Yalnızlığı Üzerine, Çev. Oğuzhan Ekinci, İletişim İstanbul.

Illıch, I. (2004). "Ölüme Karşı Ölüm". Cogito, (40), 107-121, İstanbul: Yky.

Kellehear, A. (2012). Ölümün Toplumsal Tarihi. (T. Kılınç Çev.). Ankara: Phoenix Yayınları.

Nevevi, İ. (2012). Riyazü's-Salihin. Çev.: A. F. Kocaer. Esra Yayınları.

Prıor, L. (1989). The Social Organisation of Death. London: Mac.

Sağır, A. (2012). Toplu Merasimlerden Belediye Hizmetlerine Kurumsallaşan Ölüm Bağlamında Bir Ölüm Sosyolojisi Denemesi. International Periodical for the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish, 7(2), 905.

Sami, Ş. (2015). Kamus-ı Türki (Latin Harfleriyle). İstanbul: İdeal Kültür Yayınları.

Şahin, EA. (2016). Düşünce Tarihinde ve Modern Tıpta Ölümsüzlük Arayışı ve Eleştirisi. Beytulhikme An International Journal of Philosophy, 6, 267.

Weber, M. (2000). Sosyoloji Yazıları. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.

Yıldırım, A., & Şimşek, H. (2016). Sosyal Bilimlerde Nitel Araştırma Yöntemleri. Seçkin Yayınları.