

ONLINE CONDOLENCES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF USER DISCOURSE ON THE FACEBOOK PAGES OF PORTUGUESE FUNERAL DIRECTORS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the condolence discourse of users responding to obituaries posted by local Portuguese funeral parlours on Facebook. Aiming to explore mourning discourse and identify online community dynamics that interact with the physical community surrounding the funeral parlour, we adopted a methodology combining principles of critical discourse analysis and ethnography. The findings reveal several notable aspects: the spaces were marked by informality, evident in the prevalence of misspellings and grammatical errors, the use of pictographic elements (e.g., emojis), and the recurrence of users posting identical comments across posts regardless of the deceased. These spaces also prompted discursive contrasts, ranging from seemingly inappropriate interactions to heartfelt comments sharing personal experiences of grief. Furthermore, they served as venues for remembering, characterising, and imagining the deceased, often through narratives of shared experiences. This discursive diversity is argued to be facilitated by Facebook's integration into everyday life and its mediated nature. Coupled with an apparent lack of emotional literacy in the digital context, this appears to relieve certain users of responsibility in the discourse produced.

KEYWORDS

obituaries, discourse of mourning, Facebook, discourse analysis, ethnography

OS PÊSAMES NO ONLINE. ETNOGRAFIA APLICADA AO DISCURSO DOS UTILIZADORES NO FACEBOOK DE FUNERÁRIAS PORTUGUESAS

RESUMO

Este artigo debruça-se sobre o discurso de condolências por parte de utilizadores em obituários publicados por funerárias locais portuguesas no Facebook. Com o objetivo de compreender o discurso de luto e identificar dinâmicas comunitárias online, que dialogam com a comunidade física em que a funerária local se insere, optou-se por uma metodologia que alia princípios da análise crítica do discurso e da etnografia. Desta análise resultaram diversas considerações: revelaram-se espaços de elevada informalidade, visível ao nível da linguagem através da disseminação de erros gramaticais, pela utilização de elementos pictográficos (e.g., *emojis*), ou pela

recorrência de utilizadores que produzem idênticos comentários nas publicações, independentemente de quem morre; motivaram contrastes discursivos, desde interações que poderão ser consideradas despropositadas até comentários que partilham experiências de luto; são espaços com potencial para lembrar, caracterizar e imaginar os mortos, através de relatos de histórias que o utilizador experienciou com a pessoa. É também argumentado que esta imensa diversidade é incentivada pela eficácia do Facebook em se integrar no quotidiano das pessoas e pelo seu caráter mediado que, incentivado pelo que parece ser uma carência de literacia emocional em contexto digital, parece desresponsabilizar certos utilizadores no discurso produzido.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

obituários, discurso de luto, Facebook, análise discursiva, etnografia

1. INTRODUCTION

This article, which forms part of a wider PhD project, aims to explore the discursive dynamics in online memorials published by local funeral parlours on their Facebook pages. Obituaries have become increasingly prominent in the digital communication strategies of Portuguese funeral parlours, both on their websites and on Facebook (Mendes, 2018). The latter, in particular, appears to facilitate more frequent interactions between institutions and users, fostering new forms of mourning participation through reactions and comments on each obituary. The central hypothesis guiding this research is that, in the cases under analysis, the production of public mourning discourse through digital media encourages the creation of communities and brings them closer to the concepts of death and mourning. This hypothesis draws on two key ideas: first, a historical distancing from death in Western societies, where institutionalisation has professionalised the management of death (e.g., the predominance of funeral parlours, the common occurrence of death in hospitals rather than at home; Ariès, 1974); and second, the potential of digital media as a means that allows for social appropriation, enabling both individual and community participation in the mourning process.

This research aims to address these and other questions through an interpretative and qualitative approach, providing a focused and circumscribed understanding of the topic. In addition to the principles of critical discourse analysis, we have employed virtual ethnography, which enhances the identification and understanding of the communicative, interactive, and community processes present in the death-related posts of each funeral parlour. Comments and reactions are analysed from the perspective of the users, and the community of followers of each Facebook page is also considered—specifically, the community formed around each death announcement, consisting of individuals reacting to the death. The discourse of condolences and the interactions between users will help us understand how death is perceived and communicated, as well as offer insights into the role these communities play in the dynamics of mourning. It should be noted that the findings presented here are specific to these cases. In addition to the hypothesis mentioned above, the research is guided by three central questions:

- What is the relationship between these digital communities and their physical, local context?

- What dynamics and meanings emerge from the interactions and comments?
- How do these communities contribute to the evolution of concepts such as “mourning” and “collective memory”?

2. PUBLIC MOURNING AND ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Mourning manifests differently depending on the social context (Lofland, 1985), and in modern Western societies, there appear to have been changes in the negative emotional consequences of the mourning process (Walter, 2017). In the context of funeral rituals in the West, where attitudes towards death seem relatively standardised across various societies (Brubaker et al., 2013), public emotional expression is often discouraged, typically manifesting in forms such as crying, anger, or fear (Parkes et al., 1997/2003). Death is regarded as an essentially private event, where sharing with the broader community is circumstantial and generally shallow (Laungani & Young, 1997/2003). This contrasts with societies such as India or China or those consisting of small groups (Parkes et al., 1997/2003), where death tends to emotionally affect not only the family of the deceased but the entire community. In these societies, emotional displays by families are accepted and serve a cathartic function (Laungani & Young, 1997/2003). At the same time, despite the frequent portrayal of death in various media (e.g., television series depicting violence and death), the reality of death is generally confined to specific, private times and spaces. These tend to be scheduled and formal, such as deaths in hospitals, which have become the normative setting for dying in contemporary Western society (Laungani & Young, 1997/003). This creates a disjunction between *simulated* and *real* death (Young & Papadatou, 1997/2003), with the latter often leading to greater emotional distance or even avoidance (e.g., avoidance of contact with corpses; Longbottom & Slaughter, 2018).

In a space like Facebook, where the boundary between public and private is often blurred (Martins et al., 2022), expressions of mourning are likely to evolve. Similarly, the relationship between death and proximity — particularly in the digital realm, characterised by its greater permanence and broader reach — appears to enable the renewal of dynamics surrounding a more participatory approach to death. With the instantaneous communication between strangers, which facilitates the social and communicative reconfiguration of previously isolated individuals (Walter, 2007), online social networks such as Facebook and YouTube have become significant spaces for the discussion, commenting, and sharing of personal accounts related to death and the illness process (Gustavsson, 2011).

The digital realm thus plays a distinct role in the context of death, on the one hand by facilitating a link between the private and public domains, bringing this topic into the everyday life of social networks that extend beyond the immediate family; on the other hand, by providing an audience for private communications with the deceased, as seen in online memorials (Walter et al., 2012). These memorials reveal trends in communication among the bereaved, between the bereaved and individuals outside their immediate networks (e.g., acquaintances, neighbours), and, as previously mentioned, towards direct communication with the deceased (Arnold et al., 2018; Vries & Rutherford, 2004). However, these characteristics are not entirely new, particularly in the context of a physical

wake, suggesting that we are witnessing a *reconfiguration* of practices rather than a complete departure from traditional ones.

3. OBITUARIES, WEB 2.0, AND DISCURSIVE PARTICULARITIES IN ONLINE MEMORIALS

A memorial plays a crucial role in the construction of collective memory and in how a death or tragic event is commemorated (Ulmer, 2005). While memorialisation websites that emerged in the 1990s adhered to the concept of physical memorials, online social networks such as Facebook, which enable user-generated content, have since become significant metaphorical spaces for sharing emotions and experiences, including those related to loss and mourning (Moyer & Enck, 2018).

The obituary has become a significant sociological document in Western society, reflecting social structures and dynamics (Fernández, 2007; Fowler, 2007) and even highlighting societal disparities related to economics, gender, and ethnicity (Marks & Piggee, 1998). In terms of collective memory — how a group imagines and remembers a deceased individual — contemporary obituaries often summarise the person's past, highlighting events or personality traits chosen by those within their immediate networks (e.g., family members; Fowler, 2007). Even within funeral rituals, the significance of the deceased — the meaning attributed to them by others in relation to their death — appears to be largely constructed by the living, based on their interpretation of the deceased's life (Walter, 2017). In online obituaries, however, there seems to be a shift, with users from the deceased's extended networks now contributing to this discourse. These individuals can publicly share comments, stories, or personal experiences, enriching the collective memory and offering spaces for social participation that are constantly evolving (Kohn et al., 2012; Nansen et al., 2014). Facebook, in particular, plays a crucial role in the dynamism of collective memory in the context of death, not only helping to shape it from the public sphere but also “being shaped by it, fostering a reciprocal dynamic of popular participation and interaction between society and the deceased” (Ramos, 2015, p. 47).

In terms of the discourse of mourning, social restrictions in the context of death within Western societies often make individuals reluctant to address it in ways that deviate from traditional or expected practices (Fernández, 2007). Consequently, individuals and the broader community have access to a range of linguistic mechanisms — both aimed at the family and the deceased, such as eulogies — designed to conform to the social and religious norms associated with these events (Al-Shboul & Maros, 2013).

With technological development, contemporary social life has become *textually* mediated, with texts spanning various domains and contributing to a vast online corpus (Giaxoglou, 2014). In digital spaces, participation and specific linguistic transformations give rise to discursive peculiarities, such as misspellings, grammatical errors, the use of slang, and the sharing of memes (Nansen et al., 2017; Williams & Merten, 2009). Another notable discursive trend is the frequent use of the second-person singular when offering condolences or homages, fostering a strong tendency for direct communication with the deceased, even in the absence of the bereaved (Giaxoglou, 2014). Rusu (2020) argues

that the death of an individual, particularly following an online obituary, tends to create a community free from *gossip* motivated by a taboo against judging the deceased. As a result, the freedom to share negative experiences does not appear to be encouraged within these communities.

Such discursive tendencies of condolence occur within a public and observable space (Nansen et al., 2017), which is interactive and synchronous, offering the potential for immediate responses (Riva & Galimberti, 1998). However, what transpires here is not drastically different from the experience of a physical wake: if we consider Goffman's (1959) concept of dramaturgy, which differentiates between the backstage and the stage, the person delivering the performance (the condolence) is simultaneously engaging in a private communication (focused on that individual) and a public one (exposed to the community). In the abstract, this duality can create certain tensions due to the differing expectations between the private and public spheres. While Goffman focused on face-to-face interactions, the mediated nature of online communication introduces additional constraints on these forms of interaction.

4. THE CULTURE OF PROXIMITY OF PORTUGUESE FUNERAL PARLOURS AND DIGITAL TRENDS IN THEIR OBITUARIES

After addressing the literature on public mourning and the discursive context of online social networks, it is still important to explore the Portuguese funeral market context and clarify the relationship between funeral parlours and the concept of proximity. This will help contextualise the mourning discourse we aim to observe better.

The structure of the funeral market in Portugal mirrors that of many Western societies (Nansen et al., 2017), with a division between a dominant multinational company (Servilusa in Portugal) and smaller, more locally rooted businesses that often have inter-generational ties to the regions where they operate (Kayseller, 2012). However, Servilusa itself, which has a centralised online communication strategy characterised by a high degree of corporate formality (Pais & Neto, 2022), seems to emphasise a more “familiar” relationship between funeral parlours and local communities by retaining the names of the funeral parlours it acquires¹. An example is Agência Funerária Borges in Almada, which, while presenting a standardised company brand (e.g., logo, colours), retains the “Borges” name at the entrance of the shop. The text on its online page (Servilusa, n.d.) describes it as a funeral parlour “with tradition and a reference in Cova da Piedade”, highlighting the establishment's historical roots within the local community before transitioning to the more formal corporate tone that follows.

The same photograph of the shop's entrance also shows, in the window, an advertising poster alluding to a funeral prepayment plan — whose specific communication of the service, on its website, focuses on the elderly, who are represented in the poster (Pais & Neto, 2022) —, may indicate a communication strategy tailored to the characteristics of the local community (for example, and hypothetically, a higher concentration of older residents in the area). Overall, this multinational appears to acknowledge, both

¹ The website states that it operates more than 70 locations across Portugal.

logistically and communicatively (especially when considering its physical parlours as a medium of interaction with the surrounding community), a certain culture of proximity — one that is typically associated with independent funeral parlours.

In Portugal, the establishment of funeral parlours as institutional entities in the 19th century aligned with an ideological shift towards valuing the individual and upholding the dignity of funerals, both in urban centres and rural settings (Catroga, 1991). This period also saw the emergence of the “funeral director” as a distinct professional figure (Mendes, 2018), fostering a more explicit connection between these institutions and local communities during funeral procedures. Facebook pages can be seen as an extension of this relationship, as they generally attract followers who are connected to the locality in some way (e.g., residents or emigrants from the vicinity). Moreover, by focusing community attention on the deceased, these pages facilitate a mourning discourse that is not confined to private or intimate expressions, such as those found in closed Facebook groups aimed at sharing and emotional validation (Santi & Bianchi, 2023). Instead, as previously noted and further explored later, they support a more extended discourse originating from secondary social circles — connections and acquaintances often rooted in the physical and local context.

The publication of death notices through digital platforms has steadily increased in Portugal. While, as Mendes (2018) notes, funeral parlours have traditionally published such notices in newspapers, today, they leverage digital media to offer a broader range of services, adapting to the needs of their local populations. Alongside their websites and Facebook pages, funeral parlours often collaborate with online obituary platforms like *Até Sempre* and *InfoFunerais*². These platforms not only enable the publication of death notices but also allow, like Facebook, for user interaction, such as comments, and facilitate the creation of virtual memorials, forming a digital identity of the deceased through basic details (e.g., name, photograph, dates of birth and death). In this way, the funeral sector continues to evolve, embracing new digital avenues to communicate with local communities, with Facebook — examined in this article — emerging as one of the preferred tools.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND INTERNET ETHNOGRAPHY: A SEMI-STRUCTURED MODEL

Critical discourse analysis examines discursive meanings and facilitates the interplay of meanings across different texts (Kristeva, 1986). While it focuses on observable elements, it also uncovers the “absent” aspects — similar to the “implicit” strategy described by Rebelo (2000), which emphasises the interpretative relationship between the announcer and recipient. This relationship is, in turn, deeply connected to the socio-cultural context in which it occurs (Fairclough, 1997; van Dijk, 1997).

² Mendes (2018) states that in that year, the *InfoFunerais* website had approximately 18,000 listings in its database and was associated with around 200 funeral directors, with a total of 13,000,000 views since its founding in 2015. However, the lack of more comprehensive data on Portuguese obituary records makes it challenging to contextualise and characterise this sector further.

Since this methodology was employed throughout the thesis research that led to this article, when analysing Facebook pages, it became essential to consider both the community of the page itself and the communities visible in each obituary post. Therefore, it was deemed appropriate to integrate the principles of critical discourse analysis with an ethnographic approach adapted for the online environment.

Ethnography involves the description of individuals, groups, or cultures within their natural environment over a specified period, employing a range of general and often loosely defined qualitative methods (Skåbegy, 2011). These methods provide a unique insight into the processes and meanings that underpin and motivate social groups (Herbert, 2000). When applied to the virtual domain, however, ethnography faces several challenges, particularly due to the intermediary nature of online spaces. In online communities (such as forums, chats, and social networks), traditional ethnographic focuses like body language and facial expressions are replaced by the symbolic use of pictographic elements (Maclaren & Catterall, 2002). Moreover, the authenticity of discourse and behaviour is viewed through a more subjective lens, as the increased mediation hinders the understanding of how a particular symbol reflects an individual's mental state. This is further complicated by the potential for multiple identities under the same participant (Naidoo, 2012). These factors must be considered when analysing online obituaries, especially since many comments and reactions occur without direct responses from a recipient, intensifying the challenges of interactional analysis.

In the context of ethnography in a virtual environment, Hine (2000) poses several guiding questions, such as what it means for users to utilise the internet as a means of communication with others and whom they consider their target audience. How are social relations organised in this context, and is this organisation different from the way physical/offline life is structured? If so, how are the two reconciled or complemented? Is the online experience radically different from the offline one? How are identities in virtual spaces interpreted and experienced, and how is their authenticity judged?

Facebook has proven to be a preferred platform for applying this method due to its organisational structure and its successful integration into everyday life (Martins et al., 2022). At the same time, this digital network blurs the distinctions between public and private domains, as well as online and offline spaces (Baker, 2013; Martins et al., 2022). These blurred boundaries are particularly evident in this analysis, which, in addition to exploring the creation of identities through others, also highlights the unique connection between the physical community — where the funeral parlour is located — and the virtual community — where mourning discourse is generated.

Regarding the analytical plan, due to the qualitative nature of the analysis, it was deemed important to establish a semi-structured model to guide the process, creating a coherent link between the principles of critical discourse analysis and ethnography. This model allows for some analytical flexibility while maintaining structure. The observation is non-participant, and the pages under analysis are public.

The model is applied to each obituary post, which is then contextualised within the broader community of the page to which it belongs. Following an initial phase of denotative identification, a connotative approach is employed to interpret the discursive meanings and dynamics observed in each post (Table 1).

IDENTIFICATION OF THE FUNERAL PARLOUR'S FACEBOOK PAGE	Identification of the funeral parlour's page (e.g., frequency of posts, community size, user recurrence)	
OBITUARY POST IDENTIFICATION	Identification of reactions, comments, interactions and comments period	
INTERACTION WITH THE BEREAVED	Presence and form of interaction between bereaved and users (e.g., likes, replies)	Identification and practical dimension of discourse and community phenomena
CHARACTERISATION OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE	Grammatical content and writing formality	
USE OF PICTOGRAPHIC ELEMENTS	Identification of the use of emojis, emoticons, and GIFs	
TARGET AUDIENCE	Audience of comments (e.g., bereaved, deceased)	
DENOTATIVE REFERENCES TO DEATH AND MOURNING	Identification of explicit mentions of death and mourning	
OTHER REFERENCES	Identification of other aspects in comments (e.g., religious/spiritual beliefs)	
MEANING IN THE COMMENTS	Identifying and analysing meanings within the text based on social context	
MEANING OF PICTOGRAPHIC ELEMENTS	Whether pictographs complement or contrast the text, considering their meanings	
COMMUNITY DYNAMICS	Exploring interaction potential within the obituary community (e.g., interactions between users and bereaved)	Discursive meanings and community dynamics
MEANING OF DEATH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MESSAGE	How death and mourning are depicted regarding the meaning of life, the afterlife, and religious/spiritual beliefs	
EXPLORING THE POSSIBLE NARRATIVE ABOUT THE DECEASED	Analysing the discourse relating to the narrative function regarding aspects of the deceased's life (e.g., personality, biographical events, role within the community)	
"SECONDARY" ASPECTS OF THE POSSIBLE NARRATIVE	Exploring narrative aspects based on the subject producing it and surrounding social elements	
INTERTEXTUALITY	Contextualisation and cross-referencing with other obituaries on the same Facebook page.	

Table 1. Analytical model combining principles of critical discourse analysis and virtual ethnography

The Facebook pages were selected based on the following criteria: (a) they belonged to local funeral companies, registered within the sector and independent of the multinational Servilusa, ensuring a focus on the local character and the connection between the offline and online communities; (b) they were active on Facebook, with frequent posts; (c) they had a Facebook page primarily dedicated to obituary, with the publication of clients' obituaries; (d) the page had a relatively large number of followers (in the thousands); and (e) there was a quantitative and qualitative engagement in the posts, with significant participation, particularly through comments, from followers.

The results presented (Table 2) from the qualitative analysis focus specifically on these cases, with no intention of generalising this type of space (e.g., demographically). Six funeral parlours were selected to achieve a balance between analysing different establishments — ensuring analytical diversity — and conducting a deeper examination of each. A total of 159 obituary publications were examined between October 1 and November 30, 2023 (60 days).

NAME	LOCALITY	APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF FACEBOOK FOLLOWERS*	NUMBER OF OBITUARY POSTS DURING THE ANALYSED PERIOD
Agência Funerária Vareada	Marinha Grande (city in the district of Leiria)	8,600	38
Agência Funerária Veloso	Lourinhã (city in the district of Lisbon)	6,700	26
Funerária Medeiros Bartolomeu	Oliveira do Bairro (city in the district of Aveiro)	6,600	26
Funerária A Cercalense	Cercal do Alentejo (town in the municipality of Santiago do Cacém, Setúbal district)	5,300	23
Agência Funerária Machado Ida.	Vila Franca de Xira (city in the district of Lisboa)	4,600	16
Funerária Quintino & Silva	Pero Pinheiro (town in the municipality of Sintra, district of Lisbon)	4,100	30

Table 2. Facebook pages of the funeral parlours under analysis

Note. *Data retrieved on December 1, 2023.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1. CHARACTERISATION OF THE PLATFORMS AND THEIR DISCURSIVE DYNAMICS

Unlike Portuguese memorial websites dedicated to obituaries, such as *Até Sempre*, Facebook pages do not specialise in obituaries or memorials (e.g., no death search engine). However, due to the community and quantitative communication potential of this social network (Nansen et al., 2014), companies use it for this purpose. As a result, a mix of posts — ranging from trivial content to news — appears in the feed, also influenced by algorithmic selection. Death announcements, therefore, appear alongside other posts in the user’s Facebook feed, with visual distinction made through the image and text of the obituary.

The comments are typically made on the same day or within two or three days after the obituary is posted, demonstrating a temporary response, as Nansen et al. (2014) have observed in other studies on online reactions to death. The majority of comments express common condolences, using phrases such as “rest in peace” or “peace to their soul”. However, as highlighted earlier, there is a diversification in the communication target. As observed by Arnold et al. (2018), this includes direct communications aimed at the deceased, alongside messages with a neutral target or those directed at the bereaved. Direct addresses to the deceased are evident through the use (even if omitted) of the second person singular, “tu” (e.g., “descansa” [rest]), which is informal and typically used in familiar or intimate contexts. Alternatively, depending on the interpersonal context or the person’s age (older), a more distant form, “você” omitted (e.g., “descanse” [rest]), may be used, which is formal or polite in Portuguese.

The following clippings³ aim to illustrate this (Figure 1). The first is a direct message from a nephew, which, in its unusual intimacy within this context, reads: “I promise to perpetuate your legacy. I love you”, implying a eulogy to the deceased’s past. Following that, there are two distinct communication targets within the same post: one is directed at the deceased, and the other extends “my condolences to all family and friends”.

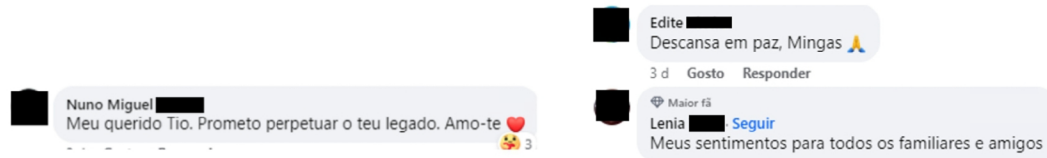


Figure 1. Two excerpts of comments on different posts

Sources. Funerária Vareda and Funerária A Cercalense, respectively

Note. Translation: “Nuno Miguel XXXXX: My dear Uncle. I promise to perpetuate your legacy. I love you”; “Edite XXXXX: Rest in peace, Mingas”; “Lenia XXXXX: My condolences to all family and friends”.

In several messages, as seen in these examples, the enunciating subject is often present — consistent with Rebelo’s (2000) concept of “deictic expression”, in which the use of deictics highlights the subject in the discourse. Therefore, condolences do not always omit the subject, as exemplified by phrases like “my condolences” or the first clipping (left), where the discourse producer’s experience —aiming to perpetuate a legacy — is not only made explicit but is also central to the connotative meaning of the comment.

It should be noted that the aforementioned *direct* dimension in communication inherently carries a communicative character directed towards other users, including the bereaved, due to the public and observable nature of the space. It is, therefore, not entirely private or potentially non-verbal, confined to the individual and the deceased (or their perception of the deceased); instead, it is a form of communication (in text) that is produced, participates, and is observable. This, in turn, contributes — sometimes unconsciously — to an externalised discourse of mourning. This aspect takes on a new significance when the user’s discourse extends beyond mere condolences and engages in the process of constructing the identity of the deceased, a topic explored in the last section.

The bereaved also participate, although this occurs sporadically, which can be observed both in their liking to comments (often recognisable by their repeated likes in the comments and/or their shared surname with the deceased) and in the comments themselves, which typically express gratitude.

Interactions between users (excluding the bereaved) are rare and generally lack detail, meaning that even when they do occur, they are not abundant in terms of characterising the deceased. Interactions through liking a comment are more frequent, although they are subtler compared to text-based replies.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that some obituaries provide detailed information about the deceased, their social role, and the emotional disposition of the community towards them. When the deceased held a significant social role — whether through their status or profession (e.g., doctor, teacher) — it is reflected in a more elaborate and detailed discourse, where the space is used to express grief and share personal

³ Here, as in the following examples, the identity of the users is protected.

experiences. The following clipping (Figure 2) exemplifies this, with comments offering various details, such as the person’s profession (arts and crafts teacher) and the impact their teaching had on several students. Additionally, like many other obituaries, there are occasional remarks on the person’s character (e.g., “always asking about my daughters”, suggesting kindness or thoughtfulness).



Figure 2. Excerpt from a post

Source. Agência Funerária Machado, Lda.

Note. Translation: “Condolences to all the family, she was my teacher at the Alves XXXXX school and it was with her that I gained a taste for handicrafts. May she rest in eternal peace”; “Isilda Alves de XXXXX: Andreia XXXXX Thank you”; “Maria Adelina XXXXX: My dear Maria I asked for you a few days ago and arranged with a friend to come and see you... you’ve gone dear! May GOD WELCOME YOU IN HIS ARMS!!”; “Maria XXXXX: Oh my arts and crafts teacher”; “Carminda XXXXX: My deepest condolences to all of Prof Maria XXXXX’s family. So long my friend”; “Maria XXXXX: Rest in peace professor, that’s how I always called you and greeted you when we met, always asking about my daughters, that umbilical cord that united us since I was 10 years old was never broken, I will miss meeting you, may God welcome you into his arms professor, my condolences to all the family and friends”; “Bela XXXXX: May she rest in peace”; “Clara XXXXX: My condolences to all the family. She was my arts and crafts teacher at the VFX industrial and commercial school. Rest in peace prof. Maria XXXXX”.

Sometimes, the impact of a death can also be perceived in the comments, even without explicit reference to the person’s social role. The next clipping (Figure 3) illustrates this with a series of comments discussing the significance and personality of an older woman. One comment, “you cannot talk about our local history without naming [the deceased]”, stands out, highlighting the local dimension inherent in these digital communities.



Figure 3. Comments on the same obituary

Source. Funerária A Cercalense

Note. Translation: “Viola XXXXX: Condolences to her relatives. She leaves the greatest legacy that can be left... fond memories for all those who knew her”; “Soraia XXXXX: marked several generations, loved by many... rest in peace”; Cidalia XXXXX: Thank you for being there. May your testimony and example of life... especially to the ladies for the LADY you were, for your existential discernment, may there still be some XXXXX left. Go in peace. Condolences to her relatives”; “Fernanda XXXXX: I always admired her, it is with sadness that I see you go Ti XXXXX, may your soul rest in peace my condolences to the family and friends”; “Madalena XXXXX: Rest in peace ti XXXXX. You will always be remembered for having provided such great memories. My condolences to the family”; “Lusitania XXXXX: You cannot talk about our local history without naming Ti XXXXX”.

These posts align with what Walter (2007) highlighted: even in internet-mediated spaces, one can perceive how a death emotionally impacts both users and local communities. Through an ethnographic analysis, which allows us to observe the flows and dynamics of community phenomena, such occurrences become evident in the discursive differences — more in *quality* than quantity — expressed by the users.

6.2. LANGUAGE, INFORMALITIES AND EMOTIONAL LITERACY IN A DIGITAL CONTEXT

In these spaces, informalities are particularly evident in language use, as well as through the inclusion of emojis and animations.

The language in these contexts seems to function in two dimensions. First, it reflects a *digital language* based on online communication codes, such as the use of emojis, which convey meaning through pictographic expression (e.g., showing appreciation or regret). Additionally, acronyms like “RIP” (rest in peace) or “DEP”, a common abbreviation for “descansa em paz” (rest in peace), are frequently used. Second, the language often

includes misspellings and grammatical errors, a feature commonly observed in digital death-related spaces (Nansen et al., 2017; Williams & Merten, 2009).

Particularly in written form, the user's intention in offering condolences appears to be valued more than the grammatical integrity of the message — it is the act of expressing the condolence that matters, not necessarily *how* it is expressed. This is especially intriguing when contrasted with the more formal setting of a physical wake, which is governed by implicit rules (e.g., dress code, restrained behaviour). In the online context, however, it seems that the formality expected in physical spaces is secondary or even disregarded by certain users. When comparing the physical and online dimensions, it can be suggested that while informal practices in funeral contexts are not new, the mediated nature of online spaces tends to encourage greater informality in the communication produced.

There is also a widespread use of pictographic elements (e.g., emojis), which have become increasingly integrated into everyday communication (Ghazanfar et al., 2022). These serve as simple, immediate ways to express emotional sentiment or to emphasise certain aspects of the text (Stark & Crawford, 2015).

Referring exclusively to reactions to posts and comments, we observed that there were typically three types of responses: a “like”, an emoji with a tear, and a hugging heart emoji. From the outset, there seems to be a contrast or paradox between the “like” (which conveys approval) and the emoji with a tear (which expresses sadness). However, this contrast becomes less paradoxical when viewed from the user's perspective and through their interpretation of the symbols. In other words, it can be assumed that the “like” does not indicate that the user approves of the death but rather serves as a form of acknowledgement or sympathy.

When it comes to making comments, the use of emojis continues. They seem to function in two ways: as *enhancers of meanings* already explicit and implicit in the text, playing a complementary role, appearing *after* or *depending on* the text, and as complete *substitutes for meanings* that are not communicated by text. The following example (Figure 4) illustrates these two recurring functions: the first emoji, which appears before the text, conveys the person's emotional state — grief — by simulating a face that expresses this emotion. Here, a text like “I feel sad about the news” is replaced by a pictographic element, which is sufficient to convey the intended meaning. The pictographic element that follows, which simulates a prayer, amplifies the sense of condolence expressed in the text.

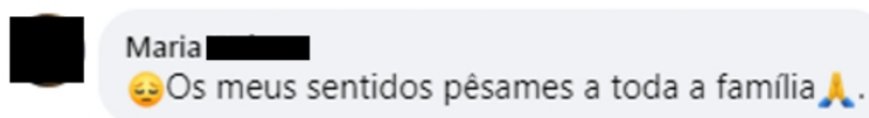


Figure 4. Examples of different functions of emojis

Source. Funerária Medeiros Bartolomeu

Note. Translation: “Maria XXXXX: My deepest condolences to all the family”.

Some comments rely solely on pictographic elements, with a notable sophistication in the use of GIFs, images, or videos. However, all these elements may contain — and they often do — some form of text inscribed in the images. The following illustration (Figure 5) presents two videos from the same user. The first features the phrase “nostalgia is a feeling that, when it does not fit in your heart, flows through your eyes”, accompanied by an image of a man crying. The second video includes the text “we die a little every time we lose a loved one. Mourning!” overlaid on a black-and-white image of a flower, a recurring symbol in funeral rituals, often connoting the cyclical nature of life. Both videos forego conventional text and instead use animation to convey supportive and empathetic intentions.



Figure 5. Illustration of videos shared by the same user

Source. Funerária Medeiros Bartolomeu

Another trend observed is the frequent recurrence of certain users commenting on obituaries with repeated messages. While not all users engage in this pattern, some can be identified as recipients of the “top fan” designation on Facebook⁴. This phenomenon

⁴ A user becomes eligible for “top fan” status after consistently interacting with a page or profile through likes, reactions, comments, or shares of posts. The status is awarded to the user, but it only becomes publicly visible if the user chooses to accept and display the badge.

is visible across all the funeral parlours analysed (each featuring regular users) and fosters a specific community dynamic. It is akin to a person in a locality attending every funeral service and offering the same comment, regardless of who has passed or which family is grieving. This tendency partly echoes the figure of the mourner, as described by Sales (2016), in the context of public emotional expression during funeral rituals. However, there appears to be a shift, with these textual and pictographic repetitions — often resembling a *copy-paste* behaviour — suggesting a decline in emotional distinction. This could imply that, despite the aim of expressing grief, these interactions may lack genuine emotional validation.

It is thus possible to observe that digital technology facilitates certain acts of offering condolences, as users do not need to interact directly with the recipients of their messages. Simultaneously and without contradiction, the online environment — particularly evident in the volume of reactions and comments — enables these and other users to engage in the mourning process actively. Digital communities emerge — rooted in the physical context where the funeral parlour operates — serving not only as an apparently effective space for mourning but also as a means for the neighbourhood to reclaim, through a social appropriation of the digital realm, a level of participation in mourning that may be absent in the physical context, where the funeral parlour acts as an almost exclusive intermediary.

Lastly, regarding the informality and contrast present in these spaces, there are relatively frequent interactions where users appear to overlook the emotional and social gravity of an obituary. While such behaviour can also occur at physical wakes, it seems to be amplified by digital mediation. This typically stems from curiosity about identifying or confirming who the deceased is. The following two examples (Figure 6) illustrate this, particularly the second example (on the right), which features slang within a dialogue that simultaneously conveys condolences.

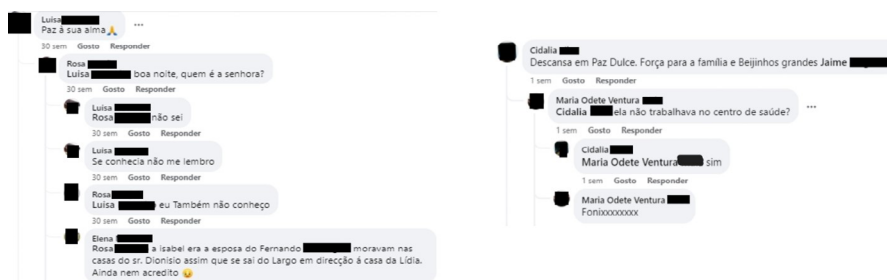


Figure 6. Two informal comments

Sources. Funerária A Cercalense and Funerária Vareda, respectively

Note. Translation: “Luisa XXXXX: Peace to her soul”; “Rosa XXXXX: Luisa XXXXX good evening, who is the lady?”; “Luisa XXXXX: Rosa XXXXX I don’t know”; “Luisa XXXXX: If I knew her, I don’t remember”; “Rosa XXXXX: Luisa XXXXX I don’t know either”; “Elena XXXXX: Rosa XXXXX Isabel was Fernando XXXXX’s wife. They lived in Mr Dionisio’s house as you leave the Largo towards Lídia’s house. I still can’t believe it”; “Cidalia XXXXX: Rest in peace Dulce. Sending support to the family and big hugs Jaime XXXXX”; “Maria Odete Ventura XXXXX: Cidalia XXXXX Didn’t she work at the health centre?”; “Cidalia XXXXX: Maria Odete Ventura XXXXX yes”; “Maria Odete Ventura XXXXX: Flippin’ ‘elllllllll”.

Moreover, comments in these spaces can simultaneously reflect an awareness of context, often sharing experiences of grief and expressing empathy and support towards

the bereaved (see Figure 7). This is particularly evident when the death is perceived as unexpected or unnatural, which seems to prompt a tendency to seek meaning and make sense of the loss (Walter, 2005).

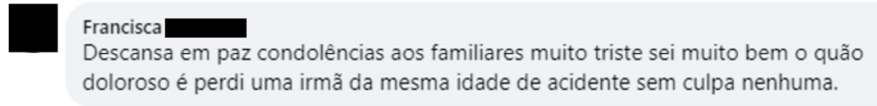


Figure 7. Sharing a similar grief experience

Source. Agência Funerária Vareda

Note. Translation: “Francisca XXXXX: Rest in peace condolences to the family very sad I know very well how painful it is I lost a sister of the same age in an accident completely blameless”.

Thus, unpredictable and discursively heterogeneous spaces are revealed. Specifically, the so-called unreasonable comments or interactions, while not entirely spontaneous, are often characterised as *innocent*. Despite ignoring the public nature of the space, they generally respect both the deceased and the ongoing discourse—a trend noted by Rusu (2020). It can thus be argued that this *innocence* reflects not so much a lack of digital literacy but rather a lack of *emotional literacy within a digital context*. The mediated nature of the space may lead some individuals to overlook the emotional complexity involved and the likelihood that the bereaved will observe their discourse. This issue may also be compounded by Facebook’s unpreparedness for death-related situations.

6.3. SPACES FOR IMAGINING THE DECEASED

When news of a death is announced, several key aspects emerge. Firstly, it is the funeral parlour that constructs an identity for the deceased, relying on basic information such as a photograph, name, dates of birth and death, and location — yet without any biographical details like profession, community roles, or other personal attributes. As a result, the deceased’s Facebook profile is typically not referenced (and they may never have had one), leading to the creation of a virtual identity that, potentially for the first time, approximates the concept of the *dividual* (Deleuze, 1990). In this context, the deceased’s personality is partially reconstructed to serve the specific purposes of the platform. Additionally, Facebook users who comment on the obituary often recognise the deceased from the physical community, thus creating a hybrid notion of mortality — a blending of online and physical death.

Historically, obituaries served as a means for certain families to assert power, using the opportunity to highlight the life and societal role of the deceased, thereby reinforcing their place in the “collective memory” (Fowler, 2007). However, in the spaces under analysis here, the narrative surrounding the deceased seems to shift towards the users, typically from secondary circles (e.g., neighbours, acquaintances). It is these users who, through public commentary, shed light on the deceased’s life, sharing more or less detailed aspects that contribute to a semiotic narrative of the person. This narrative can

encompass their social or professional roles, the values they imparted, their relationships with the community, or other aspects deemed relevant, often conveyed through simple imagery or evocations. Moreover, as we will see, these comments also reveal information about the users who post them and their social context.

The shift in narrative production from primary to secondary networks means that the potential biography of the deceased becomes more fragmented, less coherent, and less linear. It emerges from a collage of discourses generated by a group of users rather than a single voice. The collective memory of the deceased is, therefore, more accidental and distributed. This aligns with Lahire's (2005) work, which emphasises the integration of the social into the individual, viewing them as expressions of the pluralities of social relations (Caprara, 2023). In other words, for Lahire, a person's position in the social structure is inherently fragmented and shaped by the various secondary socialisation circles they belong to (e.g., family, class, religion, work, school). The discourse found in the obituary spaces analysed here is thus revealed as a collection of fragments, which, after interpretation or *collage*, contribute to constructing a partial identity — essentially creating an avatar that aligns with the notion of the “dividual” (Deleuze, 1990), offering a reconfiguration of the deceased's identity.

The following excerpt (Figure 8) demonstrates how the user constructs an imaginary evocation of the deceased, shedding light on how the person passed away. The user frames the death as an end to the deceased's “suffering”, now moving on to “live in a beautiful place in heaven”. This phrase not only reflects the user's religious beliefs but also offers insights into their perception of serious illness⁵ and how death can be viewed positively as a release from suffering. This aligns with the Christian notion that in the afterlife, “in heaven”, suffering does not exist. Additionally, the deceased is remembered as a neighbour who used to walk her dogs — a selected memory that evokes an image of her and, in part, of the user. In this way, memory is co-created through the user's subjective experience, and by recalling aspects of the past, they contribute to generating meaning about the life of another.

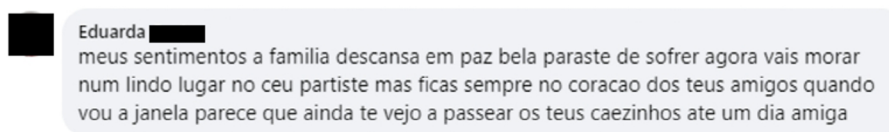


Figure 8. Commentary with imagery of the deceased

Source. Agência Funerária Vareda

Note. Translation: “Eduarda XXXXX: my condolences to the family rest in peace beautiful you have stopped suffering now you will live in a beautiful place in heaven you have left but you will always stay in the hearts of your friends when I go to the window it seems that I still see you walking your doggies see you one day friend”.

The tendency for brief commentary, as well as the lack of context in the characterisations (such as the unknown nature of the illness or its duration), distinguishes this discourse from that of secondary circles. However, as more information is added within

⁵ Other comments on the post disclose that the cause of death was an illness.

the same post, the discursive collage — crafted by an external observer (a third party) — helps to create a more coherent and less fragmented collective memory.

More rarely, as seen in the following illustration (Figure 9), a user presents a more structured narrative, choosing a detailed and reflective discourse. The references are multiple and operate on various levels. The user mentions the deceased but also her husband, idealising an inseparable bond between the couple. He notes that they were emigrants but never forgot their roots and “always had a little something for family and friends”. In the narrative, the user recalls a personal moment when he returned home with his son, and during this visit, the two countrymen unexpectedly gave the boy a souvenir.

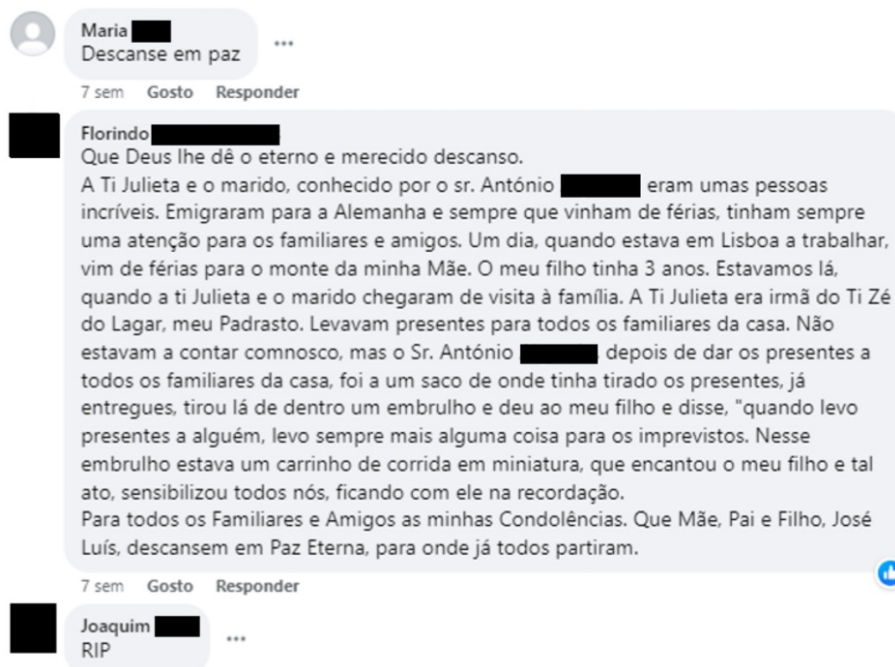


Figure 9. More detailed comment from a user

Source. Funerária A Cercalense

Note. Translation “Maria XXXXX: Rest in peace”; “Florindo XXXXX: May God grant you eternal and well-deserved rest. Ti Julieta and her husband, known as mr António XXXXX, were incredible people. They emigrated to Germany and whenever they came on holiday, they always had a little something for their family and friends. One day, when I was in Lisbon working, I went on holiday to my mother's estate. My son was three years old. We were there when ti Julieta and her husband arrived to visit the family. Ti Julieta was the sister of Ti Zé do Lagar, my stepfather. They brought presents for all the family members in the house. They weren't expecting us, but after giving out the presents, Mr António XXXXX took out a gift package and gave it to my son, saying, "when I take presents to someone, I always take something else for the unexpected. In that gift package was a miniature racing car that delighted my son and such an act touched all of us, keeping it as a memory. My condolences to all the Family and Friends. May the Mother, Father and Son, José Luís, rest in Eternal Peace, where they have all gone”.

This characterisation provides insights into not only the deceased but also her husband and broader aspects of the couple's life (e.g., their emigration). It also sheds light on the user who posted the comment (e.g., his rural upbringing, work in Lisbon, and having a young son), as well as socio-economic aspects that reflect the significance of emigration in Portuguese collective memory. From this characterisation, values such as altruism are emphasised by the producer of the discourse and shaped by their subjective experience. Although rare, this structured and detailed commentary reveals the potential of these

spaces not only for conveying condolences but also for offering more in-depth, reflective insights that inform about various individuals and their spatiotemporal contexts.

Lastly, as previously noted, it should be highlighted that this type of message — along with, to some extent, ordinary condolences — is distinctly dichotomous (Rebelo, 2000), as the individuals involved seek to assert themselves in order to clarify the message. This reveals that these are not neutral spaces, with users, whether consciously or unconsciously, presenting themselves and discursively establishing a connection with the deceased and/or the bereaved. These spaces are thus platforms where users are aware they can — and perhaps even should — contribute to the mourning process, whether through their personal experience (in relation to the deceased) or through the expression of grief directed towards the bereaved, whom they often recognise from the physical community. For these reasons, it is also essential for those interpreting this discourse to be aware of the surrounding context (e.g., who passed away, who posted the comment, and the nature of their relationship) in order to understand and contextualise the deictics conveyed.

7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Regarding the first question, which concerns the relationship between the communities identified on these pages and their physical context, this can only be answered indirectly, as the analysis here focused exclusively on the online sphere. Nevertheless, it was determined that, in addition to common expressions of condolence, there are also more specific evocations that suggest the discourse produced in the digital sphere is rooted in the physical context of the locality. The cases analysed point to an interesting relationship — which could be further explored in future research — between the role of digital platforms in the mourning discourse (where it may be produced, perhaps exclusively) and the apparent tendency for interpersonal relationships to remain anchored in the physical realm, rather than being primarily mediated online.

In terms of dynamics, these do not appear to depend on dialogues between users, as direct interactions (including with the bereaved) are relatively rare. Nonetheless, based on the ethnographic analysis, these individual contributions, made in a public space, appear to play a role in shaping a distinct community on each page. This is either through the recurring presence of specific users or through varying dynamics in the discourse (e.g., more emotional expressions, sometimes tinged with despair), which seem to change depending on the nature of the death (e.g., accidental).

In relation to the article's hypothesis presented in the first section — which is limited to the spaces being analysed — this appears to be partly supported. On the one hand, the dynamics of the users suggest that there is indeed an approach, as evidenced by the individual willingness to participate in the mourning discourse and, even if indirectly, establish a discursive connection with both the deceased and the bereaved. On the other hand, as we have observed, there are several limitations. Firstly, the mediation of the space itself and, secondly, the apparent lack of emotional literacy among users

in this context both seem to indicate a certain detachment that could render the discourse less intentional. In other words, while there may be occasional opportunities to collectively focus attention on a particular identity and engage in a shared mourning discourse, a tendency toward discursive disengagement raises questions about the future of these spaces as sufficient grounds for the discursive construction of mourning. It also invites reflection on how individuals within the digital sphere relate to concepts such as “mourning” and “death”.

From this perspective, it would be valuable to conduct research that explores the intersection of physical and online death, particularly in contexts of proximity, and to examine the role the physical space plays in societies that, as Ariès (1974) demonstrated, and as other scholars have continued to explore (see Kellehear, 2007; Walter, 1997/2003, 2008; Young & Papadatou, 1997/2003), have shifted towards a more institutionalised approach to death, distancing it from the primary and secondary circles of the deceased. As a hypothesis, the digital realm — and the active participation of individuals — could be viewed as an opportunity to re-appropriate a significant part of death and mourning through social engagement, thereby potentially fostering a reconnection with these personal and communal dimensions of the experience.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

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