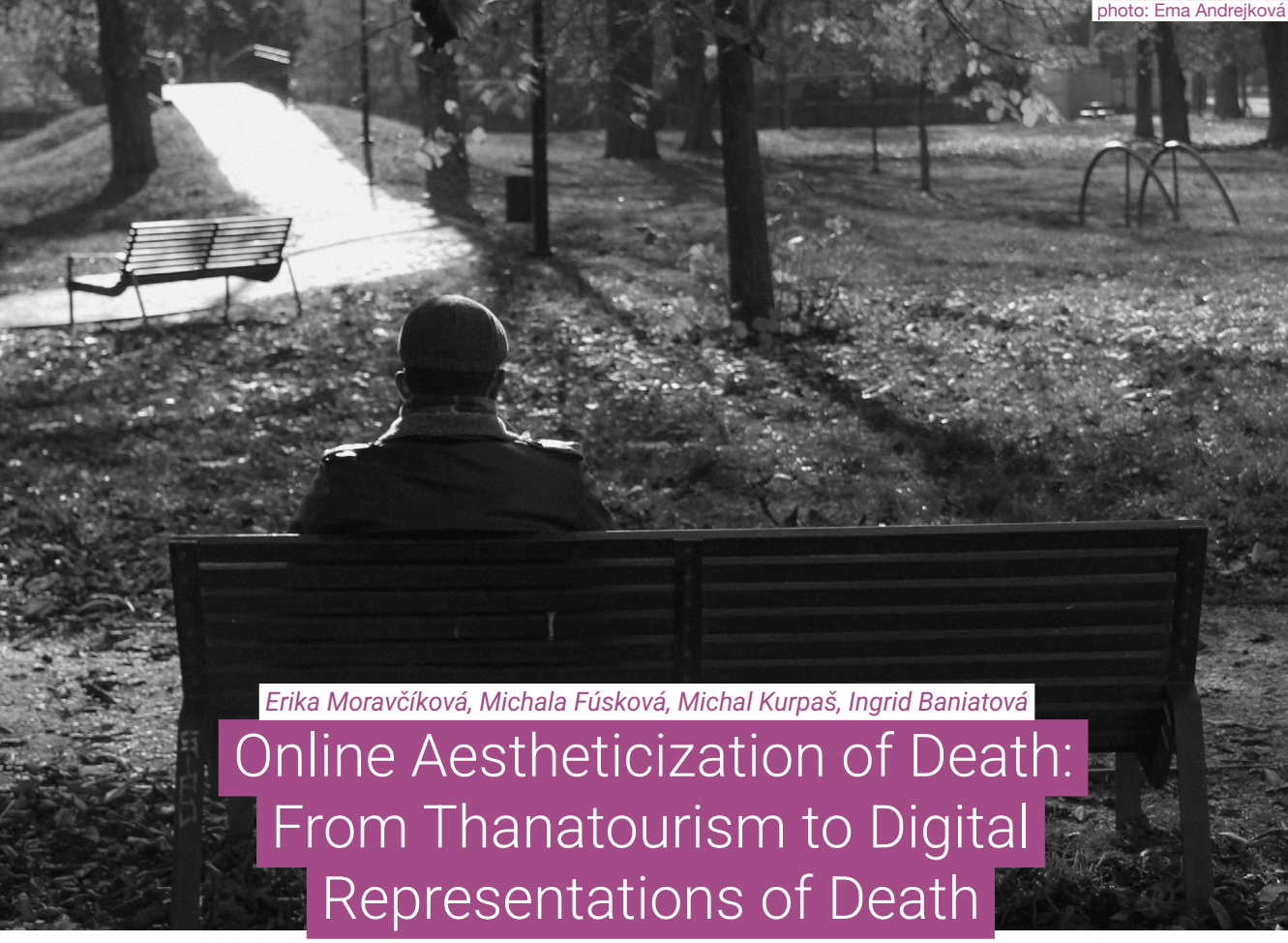
photo: Ema Andrejková

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Online Aestheticization of Death: From Thanatourism to Digital Representations of Death

ABSTRACT

The study examines representations of death in digital memory culture, focusing on selfies, visual practices at Holocaust memorials, and thanatourism as travel to sites of tragedy and suffering. In the digital era, these practices have gained new dimensions tied to influencer culture and social media aesthetics, where death becomes aestheticized and commodified. The Holocaust, as a uniquely sensitive event, is especially vulnerable to superficial mediatization through necrotainment. Sites such as Auschwitz or Terezín, mediated online, oscillate between piety, education, and the trivialization of trauma. The framework draws on Freud's death drive, Hirsch's postmemory, and Thiemeyer's performative memory culture, supplemented by Ballis's pedagogical view, which stresses the role of digital media in fostering empathy, media literacy, and critical thinking among Generation Z. The methodology combines hermeneutic and semiotic analysis with cultural-critical reflection on narcissism and necrotainment. Case studies include the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, the Yolocaust project, and digital initiatives on TikTok and Instagram (Lily Ebert & Dov Forman, Miriam Ezagui, Montana Tucker). Findings show that digital depictions of death oscillate between piety and trivialization: performative aspects of memory culture enable new trauma mediation but risk aestheticized reduction into a decorative element of digital identity. The study underscores the need to integrate death, trauma, and memory into media education, with emphasis on historical sensitivity and ethical representation.

KEY WORDS

Digital Memory Culture. Holocaust Memorials. Media Literacy. Performative Memory Culture. Postmemory. Selfies. Thanatourism. Visual Self-Presentation.

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1 Introduction

Death represents a fundamental phenomenon of human existence, which throughout the history of cultures has been framed by rituals, religious notions, and social norms. Within the framework of traditional culture, death and dying have been extensively examined by anthropologists and ethnologists (e.g., Letavajová, 2013, 2025). Modern society, however, oscillates in its relation to death between tabooization and fascination, with these contradictory tendencies becoming even more intensified in the digital era. Death is no longer perceived solely as a biological fact but has increasingly become the subject of media representation, aestheticization, and consumption.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the psychoanalytic conception of the death drive, which points to the ambivalent attraction of destruction and the return to non-being. At the same time, it reflects the concept of thanatourism, which interprets travel and visual practices associated with sites of death and trauma as part of cultural tourism. An important interpretative tool is the semiotics of the image, which enables the tracing of how memorial spaces are transformed into digital signs and how their meaning shifts within the culture of social media. This approach is complemented by the concept of postmemory, which explains how generations without direct experience of the Holocaust mediate their identity through images, narratives, and digital practices.

An important addition is the concept of performative memory culture as developed by Thomas Thiemeyer. He emphasizes that memory is not a static legacy of the past but is realized in practice through staged and participatory forms, which are particularly evident in the digital environment. Special attention must also be given to the pedagogical dimension of digital memory culture, formulated by Anja Ballis, who highlights the possibilities of developing empathy, media literacy, and critical thinking through interactive testimonies and new media.

This study aims to analyze how death is represented and transformed in the digital environment, and how memorial images become markers of identity in the culture of Generation Z. At the same time, it explores the extent to which these practices open a space for reflection and empathy, and the extent to which they instead contribute to the aestheticization and trivialization of historical trauma (for more, see, Ballay, 2021).

2 Methodology

The methodological framework of this study is interdisciplinary, combining psychoanalytic perspectives, semiotic interpretation, and cultural-critical analysis. Starting from Freud's conception of death, it examines how destructive impulses and fascination with death are projected into digital media. This perspective is linked with thanatourism, which interprets visits to sites of death and trauma as part of travel identity and visual consumption.

The analysis uncovers both visual elements and symbolic layers, where piety may become a decorative sign and trauma neutralized through self-presentational strategies. This is extended by Hirsch's concept of postmemory, offering a framework for studying mediated memory across generations without direct Holocaust experience, with digital images functioning as imaginative and emotional appropriation of others' trauma.

Thiemeyer's concept of performative memory culture further emphasizes memory as a dynamic process expressed in participatory practices of social media users. The study thus examines how these gestures preserve or trivialize memory. Anja Ballis's pedagogical perspective is also crucial, highlighting whether digital practices foster empathy, media literacy, and critical thinking in Generation Z, or lead to banal aestheticization of trauma.

Empirically, the study analyzes case studies such as Berlin's Holocaust Memorial and the Yolocaust project, complemented by TikTok and Instagram initiatives and interactive 3D testimonies. The methodology avoids quantitative metrics, instead uncovering structures of meaning, ideological implications, and psycho-cultural consequences of digital representations of death.

First, the selection of case studies was guided by their exemplary status in the public debate on digital commemoration: the Berlin Holocaust Memorial as a globally recognized site of memory often subject to digital appropriation; the Yolocaust project (Shapira, 2017) as a critical intervention exposing tensions between playfulness and remembrance; and specific social media initiatives (Lily Ebert & Dov Forman, Miriam Ezagui, Montana Tucker) as prominent examples of Generation Z-oriented postmemory practices. These cases were not chosen randomly but according to their ability to illustrate the spectrum between piety, trivialization, and pedagogical potential. Second, we collected multimodal data relevant to each case:

1. Visual materials – for the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, this included selfies and group photographs posted on Instagram with hashtags such as #memorialtothemurderedjews, which often framed the memorial as an aesthetic backdrop. From the Yolocaust project, we analyzed Shahak Shapira's digital montages that juxtaposed playful selfies with archival images of Holocaust victims. In the case of Lily Ebert & Dov Forman, we examined TikTok videos where Ebert responded directly to young users' questions, some of which reached over 50 million views.
2. Textual elements – we focused on captions such as "#NeverForget" or "#yolocaust", as well as user comments debating whether selfies at memorials are disrespectful or legitimate acts of remembrance. We also included artist statements from Shapira's Yolocaust project explaining his intervention, and personal testimonies shared by Miriam Ezagui, who narrated her grandmother's Auschwitz story on Instagram.
3. Contextual information – we examined media coverage of the Yolocaust project in *The Guardian* (Oltermann, 2017), which framed it as a provocative critique of selfie culture, and news articles in *The Washington Post* (Edwards, 2022) highlighting the educational impact of Lily Ebert's TikTok channel. We also considered indicators of audience engagement (views, shares, virality), not as quantitative metrics in themselves, but as contextual signs of how strongly the material resonated with the digital public. Third, the interpretation of data was conducted systematically through three interconnected conceptual lenses:
   - Thanatourism provided a framework to interpret memorial visits and digital self-presentations as cultural practices of encountering death and trauma.
   - Postmemory (Hirsch) explained how mediated testimonies and visual practices allow younger generations without direct experience of the Holocaust to adopt memory as part of their identity.
   - Performative memory culture (Thiemeyer) illuminated how gestures of commemoration in digital environments take on the form of staged, participatory acts that both preserve and potentially trivialize memory.

Finally, these interpretive steps were brought together in a comparative synthesis, focusing not on quantitative measures but on the **structures of meaning** that emerged across cases: recurring patterns of aestheticization, narcissistic self-presentation, empathetic mediation, or necrotainment. This procedure ensured that the interdisciplinary framework was translated into a clear, step-by-step process of qualitative analysis.

3 Results

3.1 Psychoanalytic and Cultural Approaches to Death

Fascination with death, particularly with the death of others and with distant death, belongs to the deepest structures of human experience. Norbert Elias observed a peculiar shyness that seizes people in the presence of the dying, and, conversely, the attraction exerted on many people by death, graves, and cemeteries (Elias, 1998). This attraction to macabre themes is closely linked to the legitimization of violence in society, since fascination with death and aggression, according to psychoanalysis, share common psychological roots.

Freud's conception of the death drive opens space for interpreting cultural practices that reflect this unconscious fascination with destruction. The instinct manifests not only in individual aggression or self-destruction but also in collective forms of symbolic processing. Rituals, commemorations, and artistic representations can be seen as cultural tools to regulate and sublimate destructive impulses. Death thus becomes not only a biological fact but also a cultural construct through which society balances life and death drives.

From this perspective, the growing interest in sites of tragedy, suffering, or genocide reflects more than historical memory – it offers individuals an existential confrontation with their own finitude. These practices prepare the ground for the theory of thanatourism, which translates Freud's insights into cultural and travel forms associated with death.

The globally resonant phenomenon of thanatourism, now amplified by digital media, is rooted in deep psychological and cultural processes. Seaton (1996) defined it as travel linked to death and trauma, extending the anthropological and psychological dimensions of how societies process violence. It connects with Rojek's (1993) notion of black spot tourism and Tunbridge and Ashworth's (1996) concept of dissonant heritage tourism, both emphasizing conflicting narratives in cultural memory. In this sense, death represents not only biological finitude but also a psychic principle with cultural meaning.

The Death Drive from the Perspective of S. Freud

The digital environment introduces new forms of representation through which death becomes an object of interest, fascination, and sharing. A deeper understanding of these dynamics is offered by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, particularly in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Freud described human behaviour as shaped not only by the life instinct, Eros, but also by the opposite, destructive force – the death drive. This instinct directs the subject back toward an inorganic state. As Freud noted: If we are to take it as a truth which admits of no exception, that everything living dies from internal reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that the aim of all life is death (Freud, 2005). For Freud, death is thus not only a biological fact but the inherent goal of life itself.

Freud also emphasized the interplay between the two instincts: Both the sexual instincts and the death instinct are conservative in the strictest sense, life itself would be the conflict and compromise between these two tendencies (Freud, 2016). The struggle between Eros and the death drive shapes psychic life, making culture a permanent negotiation between survival and destruction (Freud, 2023).

This inner conflict extends into collective practices. Aggression and destructive impulses, stemming from the death drive, are reflected in social norms, rituals, and symbolic representations of death. Freud described aggression as an original, autonomous disposition in man and the greatest impediment to civilization (Freud, 2023). Cultural frameworks, therefore, function to regulate and sublimate these impulses.

Here, psychoanalysis meets the concept of thanatourism, which thematizes death, tragedy, and suffering as part of collective memory and cultural processing. While Freud uncovers the latent fascination with annihilation, thanatourism shows how it becomes socially institutionalized

and transformed into experiential or memorial practices. Our previous research (Moravčíková et al., 2023; Jakubovská & Jakubovská, 2023) confirmed that digital memory culture around the Holocaust carries multiple layers – from reconstruction and reinterpretation of the past to civic engagement. These forms play an important role in shaping cultural identity and highlight the need for critical thinking and media literacy as safeguards against the trivialization of trauma.

Thanatourism as a Cultural Framework of Death

If Freud's psychoanalytic reflection shows that death is the inherent goal of life, the concept of thanatourism extends this perspective into social and cultural contexts. Fascination with death does not manifest only at the individual level but becomes institutionalized through cultural practices that collectively process trauma and confront finitude.

Thanatourism thematizes death, tragedy, and suffering in historical and symbolic dimensions. Places such as Auschwitz, Ground Zero, or Hiroshima are often visited as existential experiences that transcend ordinary tourism and function as "mediated memory", where physical presence in charged locations aids in understanding the past. R. Dunkley and colleagues elaborated an alternative framework of thanatourism, rejecting the narrower term "dark tourism". They described it as a fluid model encompassing forms from grief to genocide tourism, emphasizing its role in meaning-making rather than mere morbidity (Dunkley et al., 2007). Their model includes seven categories – horror, grief, hardship, tragedy, warfare, genocide, and extreme thanatourism – organized by symbolic intensity and distance. For Generation Z, thanatourism resonates with a desire for authenticity and boundary experiences. It combines personal transformation with digital self-expression, where social media play a crucial role in shaping the image of dark destinations as emotionally powerful, even aestheticized spaces (Kotíková, 2013; Fúsková, 2024).

Influencers and content creators amplify this narrative, framing places of trauma through dramatic audiovisual storytelling. From a postmodern perspective, thanatourism reflects the shift from leisure-based tourism to "experience tourism", which serves identity construction and existential reflection (Fúsková & Grachev, 2025). Participants do not view death only as fear, but as knowledge and self-realization (Stone, 2006; Gabašová, 2014).

In the digital era, these practices increasingly shift into online spheres. Lennon and Foley (2000) already stressed that dark tourism is deeply shaped by media and simulation. Today, selfies, videos, and live-streams at memorials illustrate how personal experiences are transformed into communicative and identity-forming signs. Yuill (2003) further noted that media act as both "push" and "pull" factors, a mechanism especially strong among Generation Z, for whom aestheticized trauma on social media inspires both visitation and new modes of representation.

3.2 Digital Representations of Death

Society seeks to regulate and transform these impulses through established social and cultural forms. Such practices serve as instruments that enable the cultural processing and sublimation of the death drive, ensuring that death does not escalate into destructive chaos and the disintegration of social order. At present, traditional ways of processing death are changing under the influence of digital media, which introduce new forms of visual representation and the sharing of themes that reflect death.

Digital media fundamentally reshape how society represents and processes death. Traditional forms of commemorative rituals are transformed into visual and performative dimensions, in which death becomes an object not only of reflection but also of sharing and aestheticization. Selfies at memorials, short videos from commemorative sites, or artistic projects on social networks demonstrate that commemoration and memory are interlinked with the logic of digital self-presentation and the algorithmic distribution of content.

As we have also analyzed in relation to the Holocaust, digital memory culture acquires the character of a performative space, in which the past is not only reconstructed but also reinterpreted and updated through new media. Digital visuality thus becomes the medium that allows younger generations to engage with the past in a way that is close to them, while at the same time carrying the risk of trivializing trauma (Moravčíková et al., 2023).

As we demonstrated in previous research, death is increasingly transformed into a commodity in media culture, presented in entertaining, de-tabooized, and aestheticized forms. This process, visible for example in the trends of dark tourism associated with Chernobyl, points to the ambivalent human relationship to death – between fascination and desensitization, between commemoration and its commercial trivialization (Moravčíková et al., 2023).

If thanatourism highlights that death and trauma have become the aim of travel and cultural practices, digital media further deepen and transform this process. Traditional forms of commemorative presence are turned into visual representations that are instantly shared and consumed in the online environment. Memorial sites thus become not only locations of historical memory but also backdrops for digital self-presentation, where individual fascination with death (Freud) intersects with the social frameworks of thanatourism and the logic of visual culture.

Online Environment and the Visualization of Death

Digital media provide platforms where the opposing forces of Eros and the death drive are visually and symbolically enacted, turning death into an accessible, aestheticized, and shareable experience. Social networks such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and X (Twitter) host images, videos, and stories linked to death. Online memorials and digital cemeteries also commemorate tragedies such as the Holocaust or terrorist attacks. These spaces serve as arenas for reflection and aestheticization of death through visual and textual media, but from Freud's psychoanalytic perspective, they also represent symbolic attempts to control, master, or sublimate the death drive. Digital influencers entering spaces of death and collective trauma create narratives balancing between commemoration and performance, respect and aestheticized self-representation. Their visualizations reflect an unconscious need to come to terms with death through media-mediated presence and sharing. Influencers and visitors thus participate in thanatourism both online and offline, using photos, reels, and posts to spread awareness of memorial sites and open societal discussions on memory, suffering, and history. Digital platforms thereby connect personal experience with collective memory, enabling interactive processing of death in the contemporary media environment.

Freud also noted trauma's tendency to repeat itself (*Wiederholungszwang*), driven by the death drive: "This compulsive repetition and 'replaying' of unpleasant, tabooed experiences and wishes […] [offers] an impetus for the individual to gain distance from the distressing experience or wish through this replaying and thus master it" (Freud, 1990). The digital space amplifies this mechanism: death is repeatedly thematized, staged, and experienced "at a distance". While this may facilitate symbolic processing, it can also lead to emotional desensitization and trivialization.

Narcissism and Digital Self-Presentation

Within this tension, a pronounced narcissistic (pathological) dimension may be revealed – death ceases to be solely the subject of commemoration and becomes a space of digital self-presentation. Selfies at memorials, staged emotions, or visually altered images often serve not only as signs of participation but also as strategies for gaining "likes", shares, and followers-digital indicators of success. Behind this need for validation lies an unconscious desire for recognition (Eros) linked with a latent attraction to death. As Baniatová (2025) notes, the normalization of secondary pathological narcissism on social networks creates a globally spreading trend of self-presentation.

This dynamic cannot be separated from platform structures. Social media shape visibility through opaque algorithms and policies that reward emotionally exposed or visually striking content. Users thus become active participants adapting their behaviour to these rules to enhance visibility. Kabát et al. stress that users "are not passive consumers but active participants navigating and adapting to new norms of communication, often in real time" (2025, p. 126).

Pathological narcissism produces an illusion so strong that subjects fail to recognize it. Freud aptly remarked: An illusion is never discovered by the one who still lives in it (Freud, 2023). In this context, memorial selfies exemplify narcissistic practices, where the death and suffering of others become a backdrop for constructing an idealized digital identity. Trauma is thus aestheticized into self-images seeking external validation.

Such narcissistic self-presentation undermines the meaning of commemoration, trivializing suffering and historical trauma into superficial performances. Instead of fostering authentic reflection and reverence, it provokes dramatization and oversimplified perceptions of death, disrupting collective memory and eroding respect for victims. Death, in this setting, becomes less a medium of genuine reflection and more an instrument of narcissistic projection, posing a cultural risk to the authenticity of historical legacy.

Necrotainment as a Risk of Cultural Erosion

The phenomenon of necrotainment stems from pathological narcissistic representation. Death in our culture remains paradoxical – intimate yet spectacular, tabooed yet commodified. In postmodern society, its retreat from daily life opens space for aestheticized returns through thanatourism, where individuals confront mortality at a safe distance and frame it as an "authentic" experience. This resonates with Generation Z, seeking meaning, intensity, and transformation. Yet a tension emerges: the marketing exploitation of death – its packaging as attraction or product – erodes moral and commemorative boundaries. The global nomad thus moves on the edge between genuine interest in suffering and complicity in its monetization, reflecting a wider ethical crisis in today's relativized culture. Today, death increasingly becomes part of the commercial sphere and an object of media entertainment, giving rise to phenomena such as necromarketing or necrotainment. Death becomes a business like any other. This does not only concern the wide portfolio of funeral goods, including bizarre items of the coarsest kind, such as the possibility of being cremated into a diamond, virtual cemeteries, or urns with the likeness of the deceased. We mean the so-called "entertainment of death" (particularly) in the mass media. We thus speak of a certain aspect of death objectified in the form of photographs and videos of suicides, murders, torture, abuse, public executions of dictators, as well as the mediatized death of celebrities and "telebrities", through which we can reflect upon a new phenomenon – necrotainment, constituted since the death of Princess Diana, which takes the form of public media mourning (Moravčíková, 2013).

Death, stripped of symbolic framing, silence, and authentic trauma, becomes a visual commodity that may shock or fascinate but rarely fosters deeper psychological processing or reconciliation. In necrotainment, death is staged as an emotionally charged, visually attractive show, carrying the risk of desensitization and emptiness, reducing it to spectacle without genuine meaning.

In conclusion, if the death drive cannot be removed from the psyche or culture, it must be shaped through culture, education, and above all media education. The aim is not to suppress but to transform it – from passive consumption of death images into critical reflection that nurtures empathy and historical responsibility.

3.3 Approaches to Death and Selfie Culture in the Digital Media Environment

Marianne Hirsch's Concept of Postmemory

In addition to Freud's death drive, the concept of postmemory, developed by Marianne Hirsch (2012), is essential for our research. Postmemory refers to the relationship of the "second generation" to traumatic events that they did not themselves experience but that shape their identity through mediated memory – through storytelling, photographs, artistic representations, or digital media. Postmemory is thus a "memory without direct experience", operating through imagination and affective identification:

> Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (Hirsch, 2008, p. 107)

Hirsch's concept provides a framework for understanding how younger generations relate to traumatic pasts. It does not constitute authentic memory but rather "imaginative investment, projection, and creation rather than recollection" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 109). For a generation with no direct contact with Holocaust survivors, the past becomes part of identity primarily through visual media. According to Hirsch, the fundamental medium of postmemory is photography, which conveys not only a visual record but above all affective intensity. Selfies at commemorative sites may therefore be interpreted as a contemporary form of digital postmemory: through photographs shared on social networks, Generation Z adopts memory that does not belong to them as lived experience but that they performatively project into their visual self-presentations. This process is ambivalent – on the one hand, it enables emotional and empathetic engagement with past trauma, while on the other, it risks trivialization and the transformation of commemoration into a consumable image. In the digital environment, postmemory becomes a participatory, media-mediated construct oscillating between reflective preservation of memory and its aestheticized banalization.

Digital social media environments also bring new forms of mediating postmemory, demonstrating how trauma may be transmitted into the present through participatory and interactive forms. A key example is the case of Holocaust survivor Lily Ebert and her great-grandson Dov Forman, who, through TikTok, reached more than 1.7 million followers, with their most successful videos surpassing 50 million views. The content relied on a simple but significant gesture: Lily Ebert answered young people's questions about her life and survival in Nazi camps (Edwards, 2022). This case can be interpreted as a performative practice that combines the authenticity of testimony with the digital logic of the platform, thereby allowing Generation Z to engage with the past through a form native to them.

A similar example is the activity of Miriam Ezagui, who mediated the testimony of her grandmother – an Auschwitz survivor – through TikTok and Instagram. Her video reached approximately 23 million views and confirmed that the emotional power of personal testimony can be as effective in the digital space as traditional forms of education (Zaltzman, 2024). This case also illustrates that postmemory – understood as mediated and imaginative memory (Hirsch, 2008) – is transformed in the digital environment into a performative act grounded in audience participation and response. Digital postmemory can therefore function not only through formalized platforms but also through personal family channels inherently linked to Generation Z culture.

These case studies show that digital media can extend the reach of memory culture far beyond institutional frameworks while simultaneously opening new pedagogical possibilities. At the same time, they highlight the ambivalence of performative memory in the online environment: although they mediate authenticity and empathy, they also risk becoming part of an algorithmized culture of consumption, where trauma may be trivialized in the form of viral content.

The Concept of Performative Memory Culture in Digital Media Practices

The concept of *performative memory culture* (*Performative Erinnerungskultur*), developed by Thomas Thiemeyer, emphasizes the shift from traditionally understood, official narratives toward practical forms of individual and collective participation in memory. From this perspective, memory is not preserved solely through institutionally mediated discourses but above all through concrete social practices in which individuals actively enact, stage, and experience their relationship to the past. Digital media and social networks constitute a space where this performative dimension of memory manifests itself particularly strongly (Thiemeyer, 2018). One of the most visible expressions of performative memory in the online environment are selfies at memorials, which users share with hashtags such as #memorialtothemurderedjewsofeurope or #remembrance. These digital gestures no longer represent mere documentation of a visit but an active way in which individuals appropriate memory and publicly demonstrate their participation in collective reflection. Photography thus becomes part of a memory practice in which commemoration is intertwined with digital self-presentation (Bareither, 2021).

Digital media and social networks fundamentally alter the character of commemorative practices and cultures of memory. The risks of aestheticization and trivialization of this type of performative acts were highlighted by Israeli artist Shahak Shapira in the project Yolocaust (2017). Through digital montage, he combined "playful" selfies of visitors at the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe with authentic images of Holocaust victims. This intervention exposed the tension between the commemorative function of the memorial and its transformation into a photogenic backdrop for social media, and can be understood as a critical performance of memory that reintroduced historical trauma into images suppressed by the logic of entertainment (Shapira, 2017; Oltermann, 2017). On the other hand, as Bareither emphasizes, the Yolocaust project, in which the artist publicly shamed the "selfie culture" at the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, also showed that blanket condemnation of digital self-presentations in the context of Holocaust remembrance is overly simplistic. Instead, "many visitors use digital self-presentations to explore and stage possible emotional relations to the past represented by places of difficult memory" (Bareither, 2021, p. 57). In this sense, selfies may also be interpreted as part of performative memory practice. Tourist photography here does not function merely as documentation but as a cultural activity that "as a socially consumptive and constructive practice performatively produces and utilizes visual and communicative culture" (Sather-Wagstaff, 2008, in Bareither, 2021, p. 61). In this way, digital self-presentations become active means of cultural production of memory.

These findings also lead to broader reflections on the relationship between digital media and memory culture. As Bareither notes, "this observation raises critical questions about the role of digital media in contemporary transformations of tourist memory cultures" (Bareither, 2021, p. 57). Research on digital memory culture, therefore, requires a more differentiated approach – one that does not see only the risks of trivialization but also the potential for reflexive and empathetic transformation of memory within Generation Z.

The Pedagogical Dimension of Digital Memory Culture (A. Ballis)

The pedagogical dimension of digital memory culture offers a crucial framework for examining how the past is represented for today's young generation. As Anja Ballis emphasizes, new forms of mediating memory, such as interactive 3D testimonies or digital narratives on social networks, can significantly foster empathy and a deeper understanding of historical events. Their educational potential lies not only in authentic mediation but also in engaging youth in participatory forms of memory culture (Ballis & Gloe, 2020). Digital testimonies should thus be seen not merely as technical reproductions but as performative acts intertwining human and machine communication. Interactive testimonies create a specific experience of mixed reality – digital and analog elements together shape the situation and interaction (Ballis, 2021). In this way, memory is staged as both mediated and authentically human.

For Generation Z, the aim is to feel empathy with victims of violence and terror – with or without a family connection to memory – while simultaneously reflecting on their own emotions and critically considering the chances and risks of digitalization (Ballis, 2021). A key prerequisite is media literacy, understood not just as detection of disinformation but as fostering critical thinking, civic responsibility, and values that protect the public sphere and common good. As Kačinová and Vrabec (2022) state, media literacy has to do with the need to implement educational processes within a broader framework, especially the essential values of humanism, human rights, and democracy. In this sense, Generation Z's digital practices – such as producing and sharing content from commemorative sites – can serve as pedagogical interventions. With critical reflection and historical sensitivity, they may transform self-presentation into spaces for ethical responsibility and memory preservation. Integrating memory-related themes into media education is therefore necessary to prevent trivialization and instead ensure responsible transmission of collective memory.

A positive example is *Eva's Story* (2019), which conveyed teenager Eva Heyman's diary through Instagram stories, reaching millions in a format accessible to younger audiences (Deutsche Welle, 2019). Similarly, *Dimensions in Testimony* enables interactive conversations with digitally recorded survivors, making memory an active, participatory process (Ballis, 2021). Another case is Montana Tucker's series *How to: Never Forget* (Lebovic, 2022; Wagenheim, 2022), which retraces her grandparents' Holocaust experiences through immersive, youth-targeted storytelling. It embodies Hirsch's postmemory concept, as Tucker, the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, transforms inherited trauma into a personal narrative. At the same time, it constitutes performative memory culture (Thiemeyer, 2018), deliberately using popular formats to evoke empathy, awareness, and reflection among Generation Z.

4 Discussion

These examples demonstrate that the performative culture of memory in the digital environment oscillates between two poles. On the one hand, it can lead to the trivialization and commodification of tragedy, when commemorative spaces are reduced to visual backdrops for self-presentation. On the other hand, however, it also enables new forms of empathetic and interactive mediation of the past, expanding the reach of memory and opening space for its intergenerational transmission. In this sense, performative memory culture represents a significant concept for understanding the tension between commemoration, digital visuality, and cultural consumption in contemporary society.

The results of the analysis indicate that digital representations of death and trauma constitute an ambivalent phenomenon that cannot be interpreted unequivocally as either positive or negative. On the one hand, there is the risk of aestheticization, commercialization, and trivialization of memory – processes linked to the phenomena of digital narcissism and necrotainment. Selfies taken at commemorative sites can thus become part of visual self-presentation, suppressing the historical dimension of memorials and transforming them into decorative backdrops for digital identity.

On the other hand, digital memory culture creates new opportunities for the mediation of trauma, particularly for younger generations who have no direct contact with witnesses of the Holocaust or other genocides. Case studies such as the projects of Lily Ebert and Dov Forman, Miriam Ezagui, or Montana Tucker demonstrate that digital media can function as tools of postmemory and performative memory, conveying authentic stories and emotional bonds within an environment familiar to Generation Z. Stone's (2012) model of "mortality mediation" is especially useful in the digital era, as it highlights the tension between commemoration and aestheticization. The integration of dark tourism theories into media education and digital ethics, therefore, emerges as an important pathway toward a more responsible engagement with both

collective and individual trauma. It may also indirectly contribute to enhancing cultural literacy. In the words of Pitoňáková:

> Media products can act as a bridge between the past and the present, and certain products can disseminate the information that is related to cultural identity and cultural heritage. Technological advances and digital media create new opportunities for sharing cultural heritage. Virtual reality, interactive applications and multimedia projects allow users to experience history and cultural heritage in an authentic way. (Pitoňáková, 2024, p. 255)

The discussion also points to the importance of the pedagogical dimension of digital memory culture. Projects employing interactive 3D testimonies or educational formats on social media suggest that the digital environment does not necessarily lead to banalization. When supported by critical reflection, these approaches can foster empathy, media literacy, and the ability of Generation Z to perceive historical experiences as part of their own identity.

This study, therefore, raises the question of the extent to which society can utilize digital platforms as spaces for reflection and learning, and how it can address the risks associated with the trivialization of memory. Another related issue is the protection of privacy and the safety of Generation Z on the internet, since the sharing of sensitive topics may provoke hateful reactions in both online and offline environments (Trninic & Kupresanin Vukelic, 2021), a topic that should be more frequently discussed with young users. Future research could focus on comparing differences between generations and on the long-term impact of digital representations of death on collective consciousness.

5 Conclusion

Our analysis has demonstrated that digital representations of death and trauma oscillate between commemoration and trivialization, between the preservation of memory and its aestheticized banalization. Selfies at memorials, viral postmemory projects, and interactive testimonies show that digital memory culture constitutes a dynamic space in which death is staged, and collective trauma is re-inscribed into visual formats familiar to Generation Z. However, these forms of mediation are not neutral – they carry the risk of transforming historical tragedy into a decorative element of identity or even into a form of necrotainment.

At the same time, digital platforms open new opportunities for the preservation and transmission of memory, which can foster empathy, self-reflection, and civic engagement. The performative culture of memory reveals that memory is not a closed archive but a living process enacted through participation, interaction, and digital staging. Postmemory, for a generation that no longer has direct contact with authentic witnesses, is thus formed primarily in the digital environment – an environment in which images and narratives acquire the ability to generate emotional bonds with the past.

In this context, discourse on death, cultural trauma, and collective memory must become an integral part of media education. It is not sufficient merely to point out inappropriate practices or instances of trivialization; it is crucial to guide the younger generation toward an understanding of historical sensitivity and the adoption of ethical principles of representing trauma. Integrating memory-related themes into media education can help Generation Z distinguish between authentic mediation and banalizing aestheticization, while also cultivating their capacity for critical reflection.

Digital self-presentations that may initially appear superficial or trivial can acquire new meaning when incorporated into conscious media and historical reflection. Their potential lies not only in documenting presence but also in mediating the past in ways that contribute to the formation of a media-responsible identity. In a society increasingly impoverished by the loss of living witnesses, digital media can serve as a bridge between the memory of the past and the experience of the present – a bridge that has value only if it is supported by historical sensitivity and ethical representation.

While this study has provided a conceptual map of the paradoxes of digital memory culture, several important questions remain unanswered and require more detailed empirical investigation. First, longitudinal studies could explore the long-term impact of digital representations of death on the collective memory of Generation Z and subsequent cohorts. Second, further research should examine how the ambivalence between commemoration and trivialization can be systematically observed, measured, or even managed in practice – for example, through audience reception studies, discourse analysis of online comments, or ethnographic observation of digital memorial practices. Third, there is a need to identify pedagogical strategies that transform potentially superficial or aestheticized digital self-presentations into opportunities for critical reflection and ethical memory work. By outlining these directions, the paper not only conceptualizes the paradoxes of digital memory culture but also provides a foundation for future scholarly inquiry aimed at bridging theory with empirical evidence and practical application.

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