



# The Extension of Digital Death to the Concept of Quality of Life and the Necessity of Introducing Hospice Care

Linyu Zhou

Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai, 200233, China

18861833413@163.com

**Abstract.** With the deepening of digital technology, the concept of “digital death” has gathered public attention, reflecting the close integration of digital realm with the experience of death. This paper aims to explore the application and significance of digital death in enhancing the quality of life by analyzing the three main aspects of digital death, namely, digital immortality, digital legacy, and digital mourning. It examines the establishment of continuous connections between loved ones and the dying, the reflections on individual life as observed by other digital netizens, and the rationality and value of introducing this concept into hospice practice. Additionally, this paper argues that the implementation of this concept into hospice practice must consider cultural differences, with methods guided by specific historical and cultural perspectives. Finally, this paper analyzes “spiritual” communication practice from the perspective of digital death and demonstrates that the practice of integrating digital death with hospice care represents a form of spiritual care.

**Keywords:** digital death; hospice care; the quality of life; spiritual care.

## 1 Introduction

Throughout the course of human history, the concept of death has always been closely linked to the technological dimension[1]. Nowadays, technology has undergone qualitative changes and enhancements in the continuum of developmental laws that can be summarized in two ways: first, the expansion of the concept of death; second, the expansion of the impacts of death. Some scholars call this new concept of death “digital death” to describe the ever-closer integration of death with digital technologies[2]. In this paper, we discuss “digital death” as a way to explore death and its related issues in the digital context through the medium of digital technology. From the perspective of digital death, death is no longer just a beginning or an end, but a connection – connecting the state of the individual before and after life, the existence in the physical and digital worlds, and the individual with all living entities in physical space and cyberspace. With its advanced technological means, wide dissemination, and profound impact, digital death has had a significant impact on the life and death concepts of the dying, their families, and even all digital Internet users.

© The Author(s) 2024

L. Chang et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2024 8th International Seminar on Education, Management and Social Sciences (ISEMSS 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 867,

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-297-2\\_59](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-297-2_59)

This paper analyzes and the connection between digital death and hospice care and the necessity of introducing the concept of digital death into the hospice stage by elaborating on the core content of digital death, using “life quality” as a conceptual bridge. At the same time, by comparing the similarities and differences between the Eastern and Western concepts of death in the digital age, this paper explores the cultural differences between the concept of digital death and hospice practice, as well as the necessity of integrating the concept into the hospice field under a localized perspective and developmental suggestions. Further, this paper takes “spiritual care” as an example to analyze how digital death provides new possibilities for the deeper development of “spiritual care.” Accordingly, it demonstrates the rationality of the integration of digital death and end-of-life care.

## 2 The Content of Digital Death

This paper takes a broader view of the interaction of an individual and its digital life with the real world and the digital world, and all that is involved in this process is considered to be a specific manifestation of digital death. In the following, digital death is analyzed on three levels: digital immortality, digital legacy, and digital mourning. The relevance of each level to end-of-life care practices is also explored.

### 2.1 Digital Immortality

In exploring digital immortality, Microsoft researchers Gordon Bell and Jim Gray (2000) proposed the concept of digital immortality as a form of “two-way immortality” that ranges from preserving and disseminating ideas (one way immortality) to continuous experience and learning that allows a part of “you” to communicate with the future (two-way immortality) [3].

Incorporating digital immortality into the dying stage, especially when the dying person can still clearly express their wishes, is an important process for individuals to organize and encode their life information, creating a complete “digital body” for future development and companionship. In the non-death stage, there are many challenges in managing one’s digital information, such as the continuous updating of information and the difficulty in choosing what information to keep. As life draws to a close, digital information updates stabilize, making it easier to choose which memories to keep. This process ensures authenticity of digital information and the personalization based on selective retention of important memories, forming a unique “digital body” that preserves the dignity of the dying person’s digital life.

In the “post-Internet world,” this “incarnation” is regarded as a second body of the deceased, a synthesis of all memories. For the living, interacting with this “digital body” serves as a way to remember and care for the deceased. Using AI technology, these “digital bodies” are able to simulate the deceased’s state, provide companionship, and help the deceased achieve digital immortality. This brings two levels of effects: emotional care through materialized memories, and ongoing companionship, as the digital

body simulates and “lives” in the digital world. This mind replica, created from memories, thoughts, emotions, and values, exists independently and accompanies the living as the deceased.

## 2.2 Digital Legacy

Digital legacy refers to the accumulation and organization of a deceased person’s online digital data, constituting a valuable resource covering the exact digital records of people [4]. It bridges the real and digital worlds, but raises privacy concerns regarding the boundary between disclosure and influence. In dealing with the privacy of the deceased, current models favor the next of kin’s right to know – the right to know the content of privacy is dealt within a simple and linear manner – which may overlook the deceased’s right to privacy.

The key to privacy does not lie in the actual existence of private objects or virtual information, but in the subject’s right to control them. Death should not be the point of dissolution of an individual’s right to privacy. Nissenbaum[5] proposed the theory of “contextual integrity” of privacy information, which points out that privacy is a concept that evolves with the process of social interaction; its essence is that “personal information is communicated in a timely manner” (pp.). At the stage of death, the subject still has the ability and thought to make self-determination on digital heritage, and handle personal account information and digital footprints. Therefore, the inclusion of digital heritage in the treatment not only means the expansion of the content of the estate, but also the respect for the legal personality of the deceased and the importance of the individual’s right to privacy and dignity of life. From the perspective of current practice, there are already many platforms exploring the handling of digital heritage after the death of Internet users. For example, Bilibili’s “Memorial Account” (2020) offer practical paths for managing digital legacies, marking a positive step in integrating digital death into life[6]. Although this treatment still needs to be further refined, it undoubtedly opens up new possibilities for exploring digital death and the protection of the dignity of life.

Dealing with digital legacies during hospice care is essentially part of the relatives’ preconceived notion of the parting process. Dutch scholar Stroebe refers to this process as the “grief work hypothesis,” which helps relatives move through the grieving phase in a more positive way than the traditional suppression of negative emotions[7]. Within this framework, relatives, alongside the dying, manage the digital legacy, reviewing the person’s life and establishing emotional connections. This process deepens relatives’ understanding and appreciation of life, as they internalize their emotional bonds and reflect on the deceased’s life and memory.

## 2.3 Digital Mourning

Currently, digital mourning is not clearly defined and is mostly interpreted and expressed through idiomatic expressions or comprehensible descriptions. This paper defines digital mourning as a commemorative activity using network technology to create a specific space for the purpose of commemorating the deceased and expressing the

feelings of the living. This involves two aspects: “commemoration,” which sorts memories into a virtual space emphasizing collectivity and ceremony, and “remembrance,” which expresses private condolences, focusing on the emotional connection between the living and the deceased.

Unlike digital immortality and legacy, where the deceased has a strong presence of subjectivity, digital mourning often features the deceased as absent, — all content related to the deceased is organized and formed from the perspective of the living. However, it is crucial to consider the deceased’s will in these memorials, allowing them to plan their digital memorialization while alive. Focusing on places of remembrance dedicated to the deceased, when digital memorialization is incorporated into end-of-life care, the deceased has the power to make decisions about their after-death rituals and places of remembrance such as planning their own methods of digital memorialization, including the autonomy to design their own digital grave, replicate, or create an online form of tribute to organize their passing in a more personalized way.

Digital mourning helps alleviate the “grief” of the living by preserving digital memories that connect with their emotional logic. In fact, it is the blurring of memories that often exacerbates grief. Digital memory preservation takes the living as the main body, and connects memories with its personalized emotional logic, so that interactive effects can be produced between memories. When the deceased can personally participate in the memory construction process of the living, the deceased’s emotions are intertwined with the living’s through the medium of recorded memories, and the private memories are turned into collective memories. As a result, the starting point of the memory of the living is no longer the death of the deceased, but the companionship with the deceased during the dying period, and this “memory labyrinth” of common experience implies the significance of death as a turning point rather than the end of memory.

### **3 A Comparison of East and West in Digital Death: The Spiritual Orientation as an Example**

Throughout Chinese and Western traditional thought, there are both substantial discussions about the topic of death. Chinese thought over-emphasizes “life;” the filial piety culture attaches great importance to the length of life of the dying person, viewing end-of-life care as potentially unfilial and destructive to longevity. This cultural stance makes hospice care less accepted and ethically challenging to promote. In contrast, Western cultures, with their focus on individualism, rationality, and a positive view of death, find it easier to embrace hospice care and explore the connection between digital death and hospice care.

Quality of life and the quest for of a “good end” depend on cultural ideas and group experiences. Therefore, integrating digital death into hospice practice needs to take these differences into account. This section compares Chinese and Western cultural and ideological views on death to guide the development of hospice care and digital death practices.

### 3.1 Cultural Differences

Both Chinese and Western cultures recognize the importance of life and death. Traditional Chinese thought has a predominantly negative attitude toward death. Although Confucius did not deny the objectivity of death, he used it as a means to emphasize the importance of life and avoided exploring death itself. Taoism emphasizes the preciousness of life by talking about death, and even gives full play to the maximum value of life through the means of death, which in itself has only a negative meaning. Buddhism views death as a turning point, allowing reincarnation, which can positively influence end-of-life care acceptance. However, its relatively positive view of death was less universally accepted in ancient China compared to Confucianism and Taoism due to the complexity of its religious concepts and philosophical system[8].

Western culture is more positive and accepting of death. Socrates saw death as a fulfillment, leading to true rest for the soul after a life pursuing virtues[9]. The Hebrew divine civilization and Greek rational thought complemented each other to promote a more positive concept of death in Western culture. Christianity encourages facing death with courage, viewing it as a necessary path to eternal life[10].

Another major difference between Chinese and Western views of death is reflected in the difference between the culture of caring and the culture of remembering. East Asian and Southern Hemisphere cultures, including China, believe in continuing to care for the deceased through rituals and ancestor worship, reflecting a caring culture [11]. In contrast, Western cultures focus on remembering the deceased, allowing digital death concepts to be more readily accepted.

These cultural differences impact the current practices of digital death in China and the West. Under the guidance of the traditional Chinese concept of death and caring culture, the content of digital death in China is often ethically questioned, seen as disturbing the deceased's peace. The concept of digital immortality is not widely accepted, and digital afterlife discussions are rare. For example, a Bilibili UP owner "WuWuLiu" created a virtual AI version of his grandmother, sparking controversy over ethical norms. Conversely, Western cultures have more smoothly integrated digital immortality. For instance, Microsoft patented technology to use deceased individuals' data for AI robots in 2021. Western academia also has deeper exploration of the concept of digital immortality, focusing on its realization and social implications rather than the vision itself[12].

### 3.2 Communication of "Spirituality"

"Spirituality," as an existence beyond the physical body, implies a deep quest for the meaning, purpose and value of life. Both Chinese and Western cultures address life and death through their philosophies and religions, putting forward the concept of "spiritual care." Taoist plain materialism views human birth as a change of Qi, returning to nature materially and transcending spiritually. Similarly, Christianity emphasizes spiritual comfort, viewing death as a kind of "last judgment" and a means of transition from the real world to the other world. Under such a view of death, individual death is no longer the end of life, but an intermediary in which the life and death of the present world are

dissolved in the love of God, and there is no longer a great fear of death itself. This belief reduces the fear of death, focusing on spiritual care for a good death, supported by clergy providing guidance and psychological counseling[13].

In such a cultural and religious context, spirituality is central to health, influencing other health dimensions of health by focusing on physical comfort and spiritual peace. The core of hospice spiritual care lies in realizing life's meaning and value, fostering harmonious relationships with family, significant others, environment, and self. Digital death expands this concept, offering new understandings that impact spiritual conversion and dignity[14]. Respecting the dying person's choices and incorporating digital death into hospice practice, including their living will, demonstrates this principle. Properly preserving digital legacies and providing digital memorialization platforms can be effective for loved ones to express their condolences, turning grief into relief, achieving desired outcomes in end-of-life care.

## 4 Conclusion

Although China's hospice service has made steady progress, it still lacks deep care and support in terms of proper spiritual care, preventing them from being considered a high-quality hospice service. Using quality of life as an indicator, improvements are needed to ensure that the dying and their families feel genuine care, support and respect.

The digital dissemination of individual deaths prompts the public to rethink death and end-of-life care and encourages a deeper consideration of the dignity of life in the digital age and the importance of end-of-life care. Such discussions can raise societal awareness about death and dying, urging people to confront these issues and ensuring the end of life is no longer a silent passing.

## Reference

1. Zhou, Y, Q. Zhang M, Y. (2023) Death and Communication from the Perspective of Process. *Modern Communication(Journal of Communication University of China)* 45:1-10. DOI: 10.19997/j.cnki.xdcb.2023.02.004.
2. Beaunoyer, E., Matthieu J, G. (2021) Cyberthanatology: Death and beyond in the Digital Age. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 122:106849. DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2021.106849.
3. Dennis, D., Silverman Phyllis R., Steven, N. (2014) *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. Taylor and Francis. Oxford. DOI: 10.4324/9781315800790.
4. Gordon, B., Gray, J. (2000) "Digital Immortality." Technical report for Microsoft Research. Available online at: [www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/tr-2000-101.pdf](http://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/tr-2000-101.pdf).
5. Kuhn, R, L. (2016) Virtual Immortality. *Skeptic Magazine*. 21:26-34, 64. Available online at: <https://rlkuhn.com/wp-content/uploads/Closer-to-Truth-Essays/Kuhn-Virtual-Immortality-Skeptic-Magazine-21-2-2016.pdf>.
6. Ma Y X., Wang Z., Li K H. (2024) Comparison of the concepts of life and death between Confucius and Socrates. *Imago Literary Creation*. 2024: 70-72, 94. DOI:1 0. 20024/ j. cnki. CN42-1911/I.2024.02.022.

7. Menzfeld, M. (2018) *Anthropology of dying*. Springer VS, Wiesbaden. Berlin. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-658-19826-8.
8. Nissenbaum, H. (2019) Contextual Integrity Up and Down the Data Food Chain. *Theoretical Inquiries in Law*, 20(1): 221-256. DOI: 10.1515/til-2019-0008.
9. Ma, Y. (2023). An Analysis of Cultural Differences in Death Education between China and the West. *Transactions on Comparative Education*,5:6-11. DOI: 10.23977/trance.2023.050802.
10. Pitsillides, S., Waller, M, Fairfax, D. (2013) Digital Death: What Role Does Digital Information Play in the Way We Are (Re)membered?. In book: *Digital Identity and Social Media* (pp.75-90) DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1915-9.ch006.
11. WHO. WHO Definition of Palliative Care. <https://www.who.int/cancer/palliative/definition/en/>.
12. Stroebe, M. (1993) Coping with Bereavement: A Review of the Grief Work Hypothesis. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*. 26(1): 19-42. DOI:10.2190/TB6U-4QQC-HR3M-V9
13. Walter, T. (2017) How the dead survive: Ancestors, immortality, memory. *Postmortal society*. Routledge. 19-39. DOI:10.4324/9781315601700-2.
14. Warburton and Stylianos Hatzipanagos. *Digital Identity and Social Media*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, pp. 75–90. DOI:10.4018/978-1-4666-1915-9.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

