

REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE  
ANKARA UNIVERSITY  
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MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES

DIGITAL BONDS BEYOND THE GRAVE: A THANATOTECHNOLOGICAL  
STUDY OF TURKISH MOURNING ON FIND A GRAVE

Master Thesis

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Ankara, 2025

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I hereby declare that all the information in my master's thesis I prepared under the advisory of **Doç. Dr. Ergin Şafak DİKMEN** with the title “**DIGITAL BONDS BEYOND THE GRAVE: A THANATOTECHNOLOGICAL STUDY OF TURKISH MOURNING ON FIND A GRAVE (Ankara 2025)**”, was collected and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct; all materials in this thesis which I obtained from other sources have been fully cited and referenced; that I acted in accordance with the rules of scientific research and ethical conduct during the course of the study; and in any contrary case of above statements, I will accept any form of legal consequences.

**24.11.2025**

**Ash YAZICIOĞLU**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Death has long been recognized not only as a biological inevitability but also as a deeply social and cultural phenomenon. Because death disrupts both individual life stories and collective continuity, communities have historically developed ritual frameworks to manage its impact. Mourning rituals, in this sense, do more than honor the dead: they structure grief, transmit collective memory, and reaffirm community ties. In Western Europe, Philippe Ariès (1974/1981) famously traced how mourning practices shifted from public, communal events to more privatized and medicalized experiences, linking these changes to modernization, secularization, and the impact of industrial wars. His work underscored that attitudes toward death are historically contingent, shaped by broader cultural and institutional transformations.

From the late twentieth century onwards, digital technologies have added yet another layer of transformation. Carla Sofka (1997) coined the term *thanatotechnology* to describe the emerging tools and infrastructures that mediate death online. Early manifestations included email condolence lists, grief chat rooms, and static memorial webpages, which allowed mourners to share memories asynchronously and across distance. With the advent of Web 2.0, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter normalized public grieving on a massive scale. These developments shifted mourning into participatory, networked, and durable forms that exceeded the temporal and spatial limits of traditional funerary practices. This shift laid the foundation for the emergence of digital mourning as a mainstream cultural phenomenon.

The significance of studying digital mourning lies precisely in this reconfiguration. Tony Walter (2015) argues that “the internet does not secularize death but makes visible new forms of ritual and remembrance” (p. 123). Rather than eroding ritual, online platforms extend its scope: they preserve prayers, condolences, and

commemorations as enduring digital traces. Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish (2013) demonstrate how Facebook users re-appropriate technical affordances such as the “wall post” to continue conversations with the deceased. These practices exemplify what the continuing bonds framework (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996) describes as enduring connections with the dead. In this sense, digital mourning is not a marginal novelty but central to how late modern societies grapple with loss.

However, most of this scholarship remains Euro-American in focus. Scholars such as Christensen and Sandvik (2014) caution that this Western bias risks presenting digital mourning as universal while overlooking culturally diverse grief repertoires. Catholic masses, Protestant memorial services, and secular commemorations dominate the literature, while Islamic contexts remain understudied. Yet traditional Turkish faith-referential mourning practices include rich vernacular repertoires: Qur’anic recitations, calendrical milestones (the 7th, 40th, and 52nd days), communal rituals such as mevlid readings, and religious holidays like kandil nights or bayrams. These practices structure grief in ways that differ substantially from pop-religious formulas with Christian references or secular frameworks, raising important questions about how they are rearticulated online.

It is within this gap that the present study intervenes. Türkiye provides a particularly compelling case due to its hybrid mourning culture: Islamic traditions such as dua formulas, ritual timings, and collective prayers coexist with secular expressions and with globalized repertoires like “Rest in Peace”. A global platform such as Find a Grave provides an arena where these diverse repertoires converge, intermingle, and persist as durable digital inscriptions.

The significance of this study is therefore threefold. First, it contributes to media and communication research by analyzing how technological affordances mediate the

cultural performance of death. Second, it enriches thanatology by foregrounding a non-Western, Traditional Turkish faith-referential mourning repertoire in a field dominated by Western examples. Third, it builds empirical and theoretical bridges between ritual studies, cultural sociology, and digital media research, showing that digitalization does not erase tradition but reconfigures and renders it visible in new ways.

### **1.1. Case and Platform Choice: Find a Grave as a Thanatotechnological Site**

Find a Grave, founded in 1995 by Jim Tipton and acquired by Ancestry.com in 2013, is one of the longest-running virtual cemeteries. Its longevity and persistence distinguish it from many other memorial platforms that have collapsed or radically altered over time. As Walter et al. (2012) emphasize, the volatility of digital infrastructures makes platform endurance a crucial factor for scholarly analysis. Find a Grave's continuous operation for nearly three decades therefore offers a unique opportunity to study digital mourning practices within a stable, replicable environment.

What makes Find a Grave particularly relevant is its organizing logic. Whereas on Facebook death appears as one content stream among many, incidentally woven into everyday social networking, on Find a Grave it is the very *raison d'être* around which all interactions, features, and commemorative practices are structured. Every affordance of the platform from biographical narratives to the "Flowers" section assumes death as the central organizing principle, making it a paradigmatic example of a thanatotechnological environment. Beyond its persistence, the site's affordances also create fertile ground for cultural and ritual analysis. Memorial pages allow multiple contributors to upload photographs, write biographical narratives, and leave symbolic offerings, transforming individual acts of remembrance into multi-vocal portraits of the deceased. Importantly, these affordances invite culturally specific appropriations. This

coexistence of universal design features with localized practices illustrates how global infrastructures are adapted to specific cultural repertoires.

For this study, Find a Grave thus serves as an exemplary case. Its persistence provides methodological stability, its affordances enable a systematic analysis of ritual language and symbolic gestures, and its global scope allows for the observation of how Turkish mourning practices, shaped by tradition, secularism, and transnational hybridity are reconfigured within a digital cemetery.

## **1.2. Research Problem and Research Gap**

Existing scholarship on digital mourning has overwhelmingly concentrated on Western and Anglophone contexts, particularly social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. These studies have illuminated how digital environments extend mourning temporally, enable continuing bonds with the dead, and create public performances of grief. Yet the predominance of Euro-American cases has created a significant imbalance: non-Western cultural frameworks of mourning, remain underexplored.

Within this literature, Find a Grave has received limited attention, and when it has, it is typically framed as a genealogical archive rather than a living site of ritual practice. Its role as a thanatotechnological space where cultural repertoires are actively rearticulated has not been systematically studied. This gap becomes particularly salient in Turkey, where mourning practices intertwine with faith-referential elements such as Qur'anic recitation, calendrical milestones, gatherings with secular and globalized repertoires like "Rest in Peace" messages or emoji-based offerings.

Theoretically, existing frameworks provide powerful tools for analyzing digital grief. However, these frameworks have rarely been applied to Turkish mourning

traditions. As a result, the ways in which culturally specific repertoires of remembrance intersect with platform affordances remain insufficiently theorized.

Methodologically, prior studies often rely on interviews or discourse analysis of Western social media platforms. Few have conducted platform-based, corpus-driven analyses of non-Western mourning practices in standardized digital infrastructures. By focusing on Turkish memorials within Find a Grave, this study contributes a culturally situated, platform-specific case that both enriches existing theoretical debates and broadens the geographical and cultural scope of thanatotechnology.

### **1.3. Scope and Limitations**

The scope of this thesis is delimited in three main ways. First, the empirical focus is on publicly accessible Find a Grave memorials associated with Turkey, restricted to individuals who died after 2000 and whose pages contained both a photograph and at least one flower entry. This ensures that the corpus includes memorials with substantive biographical texts and interactive traces. Second, the dataset was limited to memorials created by Turkish users. While many of the flower entries and biographies are in Turkish, some are written in English or in mixed registers. These were nevertheless retained, since they reflect the practices of Turkish mourners operating in transnational, sometimes secularized, digital spaces. Third, the thesis does not claim representativeness of all Turkish digital mourning practices; rather, it examines one influential platform as a case study.

Limitations also include the platform's evolving nature: memorial pages are dynamic and may change after data capture. A fixed snapshot (August–September 2025) was therefore archived to ensure analytic stability. Furthermore, because the data are publicly visible, no private communications are included. This inevitably privileges more public-facing and socially acceptable forms of grieving. These limitations are

acknowledged not as weaknesses but as boundary conditions that make the research transparent and replicable.

#### **1.4. Aims and Objectives**

This thesis aims to bridge significant gaps in thanatology and digital media studies by systematically analyzing how traditional Turkish mourning practices are reconfigured on Find a Grave. Its primary objectives are: (1) to document the specific ritual, linguistic, and symbolic repertoires Turkish users employ; (2) to analyze how platform affordances shape these practices; (3) to contribute a non-Western case study to the predominantly Euro-American literature on digital mourning; and (4) to develop theoretical connections between mediatization studies, ritual theory, and cultural sociology in the context of digital death.

#### **1.5. Research Questions**

This thesis is guided by the following research questions:

1. How are Turkish mourning traditions and ritual vocabularies rearticulated within the thanatotechnological environment of Find a Grave?
2. In what ways do memorial biographies and flower entries reflect continuing bonds between the living and the dead?
3. How do temporal markers (e.g., kandil nights, anniversaries, birthdays, civic or religious holidays) structure digital practices of remembrance?
4. What symbolic and iconographic choices (e.g., roses, candles, calligraphy, national or religious symbols) emerge in Turkish digital mourning, and how do these choices mediate grief?

5. What role do platform affordances (such as sponsorship, photo enlargement, and the “Flowers” tab) play in shaping the visibility and form of Turkish digital mourning practices?

These questions establish a coherent bridge between the thesis’s empirical corpus and its theoretical orientation. They ensure that the study is not only descriptive but also contributes to ongoing debates about digital death, cultural variation in mourning, and the affordances of online commemorative platforms.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

To interpret how Turkish mourning practices are reshaped within digital environments, this study employs a multi-layered theoretical framework that integrates grief theory, ritual studies, and media sociology. At its core lies the continuing bonds perspective (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996), which shifts the focus from detachment to the persistence of relational ties with the deceased. This provides a crucial lens for analyzing Turkish traditions such as the 40th-day commemoration or mevlid recitations, where the dead are actively remembered and socially integrated into the life of the community.

Complementing this, theories of mediatization and deep mediatization (Hjarvard, 2013; Hepp, 2019) illuminate how digital infrastructures co-structure cultural and religious practices. Rather than simply transmitting existing rituals, platforms like Find a Grave reshape how mourning is performed, archived, and made visible, thereby embedding traditional repertoires into new communicative logics. The concept of digital religion (Campbell, 2013) further refines this analysis by foregrounding the interplay between technological affordances and theological expectations, explaining how a phrase such as Allah rahmet eylesin or an icon of a candle becomes meaningful when re-situated within a platform's design.

Finally, ritual studies (Bloch, 1989; Turner, 1969) provide tools for interpreting the symbolic density of mourning gestures whether distributing helva in embodied contexts or offering a rose icon online as “ritual condensations” that compress theological, emotional, and social meaning. These perspectives are woven together under the broader rubric of thanatotechnology which situates mourning within the technological infrastructures that increasingly mediate death in contemporary life. By

combining these lenses, the framework establishes an interpretive bridge between Turkish ritual traditions and the globalized infrastructures of digital commemoration.

## **2.1. Continuing Bonds Theory**

Classical psychoanalytic approaches to grief, most notably Freud's essay *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917/1957), framed the "task" of mourning as detachment from the deceased, a process of withdrawing libido from the lost object and reinvesting it elsewhere. Within this paradigm, the persistence of bonds was seen as pathological. Against this background, the continuing bonds framework emerged as a major theoretical shift. As Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) introduced in their influential edited volume, grief is not necessarily about "letting go" but about "finding ways to maintain a connection with the deceased while adapting to life without them" (p. xviii). This reconceptualization reframed bereavement as an ongoing relational process rather than a finite psychological task.

At its core, the continuing bonds framework emphasizes that "the deceased remain significant members of the family, community, and culture" (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996, p. 22). Bonds are not severed by death but transformed. Klass (2006) elaborates that these connections are not only psychological but also cultural: "Continuing bonds are not simply intrapsychic phenomena but are embedded in rituals, narratives, and collective practices" (p. 844). This recognition moves the analysis beyond individual grief, situating mourning within shared cultural repertoires that affirm relationality across the boundary of death.

The framework identifies multiple modalities through which the living sustain ties with the dead. These include storytelling, dreams, ritual commemoration, and physical acts such as visiting graves. Klass (2014) highlights how such practices create a sense of presence: "The ongoing connection to the dead is mediated through symbols,

rituals, and narratives that affirm the deceased's place in the moral universe of the bereaved" (p. 43). Importantly, these forms of connection are not fixed; they evolve with social change and, in contemporary contexts, migrate into digital media.

Continuing bonds theory has proven especially useful for examining non-Western mourning cultures, where the assumption of detachment is often alien. As Klass (2006) stresses, "In many cultures, bonds with the dead are not only continued but are seen as essential to family and communal well-being" (p. 845). Turkish rituals such as the 40th-day commemoration, mevlid recitations, and taziye visits exemplify this orientation: they affirm that the deceased remains socially and spiritually present. Such practices illustrate how cultural traditions provide structured ways to sustain relationships with the dead, making the continuing bonds framework directly relevant to this study.

In the age of thanatotechnology, continuing bonds are increasingly enacted in digital environments. Online memorials, condolence messages, and symbolic offerings enable mourners to maintain relational ties in durable, publicly visible ways. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) already anticipated this when they argued that "the task of grief is not to sever the bond but to find an appropriate place for the deceased in the lives of the survivors" (p. xvi). Digital platforms such as Find a Grave materialize this "appropriate place" through their affordances: memorial pages, flower icons, and textual prayers all serve as mediated continuities of the relationship. In this sense, the continuing bonds framework provides a crucial theoretical lens for analyzing how Turkish mourning repertoires are translated into digital form, showing that the connection with the dead is not diminished but reconfigured.

## 2.2. Mediatization and Deep Mediatization Theories

The concepts of mediatization and deep mediatization provide a crucial theoretical framework for understanding how mourning practices are reconfigured in contemporary societies. These perspectives move beyond the idea that media are neutral channels of transmission, instead arguing that media actively co-structure social life, cultural traditions, and ritual performances. By situating mourning within this framework, it becomes possible to see how digital technologies do not merely “host” grief but transform the temporalities, languages, and symbolic repertoires through which bereavement is enacted.

Stig Hjarvard’s work is foundational in theorizing mediatization. He defines the concept as “the process whereby culture and society to an increasing degree become dependent on the media and their logic” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 17). Importantly, this dependence does not mean that media simply report or disseminate social life; rather, “media are not merely channels... but have become integrated into the operations of other institutions” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 21).

For Hjarvard, the transformative power of media lies in their media logics the ways in which formats, technological affordances, and institutional imperatives shape how communication occurs. When applied to mourning, this suggests that the act of remembrance is shaped not only by religious or cultural traditions but also by the interface design of platforms, the affordances of social media, and the visibility rules embedded in digital infrastructures. In this sense, mediatization theory directs attention to how mourning rituals migrate into new domains of communication. Just as religious institutions once defined the norms of mourning in pre-modern societies, media institutions today increasingly shape how grief is expressed, shared, and remembered.

Ritual calendars, condolence formulas, and symbolic gestures are re-articulated through media forms that impose their own logics of temporality, brevity, and circulation.

Hjarvard's work aligns with broader sociological developments in media theory, particularly Hepp and Couldry's concept of the "mediated construction of reality." They argue that "the social world itself is constructed through communicative action, and today this communicative action is deeply interwoven with media" (Hepp & Couldry, 2016, p. 8). This formulation extends the classical sociological insight that social life is built through communication by adding that in the twenty-first century, nearly all communication is mediated by technological infrastructures. Thus, mourning whether through prayers, visits to cemeteries, or condolence gatherings cannot be separated from the communicative forms and platforms that enable and structure it. When mourners post on a digital memorial page or leave icons such as flowers or candles, their communicative action is simultaneously a personal expression of grief and a mediated act shaped by platform affordances.

The implication is that mourning becomes structurally dependent on media infrastructures: the visibility of grief depends on posting frequency, the endurance of memory on archival stability, and the social recognition of loss on algorithmic circulation. Mediatization theory thus provides a vocabulary for explaining why digital mourning is not a superficial "copy" of offline rituals but an emergent social form in its own right.

While Hjarvard theorized the mediatization of culture and society, Andreas Hepp extends this framework into what he terms deep mediatization. Hepp (2020) emphasizes that the proliferation of digital media and their infrastructures has fundamentally altered the fabric of social and cultural life: "Deep mediatization means

that the very fabric of social and cultural order is interwoven with digital media and their infrastructures” (p. 2).

The distinctiveness of deep mediatization lies in its focus on multiplicity and entanglement. As Hepp writes, “what is specific about deep mediatization is the multiplicity of media and their entanglement in everyday practices” (Hepp, 2020, p. 9). Unlike earlier phases of mediatization dominated by mass media institutions, deep mediatization refers to a condition where social action is saturated by digital media across multiple platforms, devices, and temporalities.

Applied to mourning, this perspective highlights how grief today is enacted across overlapping environments virtual cemeteries, social media timelines, instant messaging, and photo archives. Deep mediatization reminds us that these spaces are not discrete but interconnected, creating a networked ecology in which remembrance circulates. The mourner does not simply choose between offline and online rituals; rather, their practices are embedded in a continuum where both dimensions are interwoven.

A central question in both mediatization and deep mediatization theory is how agency is redistributed when social practices become dependent on media infrastructures. Hepp (2019) argues that we should not reduce media to either positive or negative forces but instead ask “how far certain forms of mediatization offer agency to certain figurations of the social world, while limiting the agency of others” (p. 47).

This observation is especially pertinent in the domain of mourning. Digital platforms offer new forms of agency to mourners they allow individuals to sustain bonds with the deceased, make grief visible across time and space, and preserve traces for future generations. At the same time, they constrain expression by limiting symbolic repertoires (e.g., through standardized icons) or by privileging public forms of grief

over private ones. The negotiation of these limits is not incidental but central to how mourning unfolds in the digital age.

In this context, mediatization and deep mediatization provide an interpretive framework that explains the transformation of mourning in contemporary societies. Mediatization emphasizes how media logics reshape existing rituals, embedding them within technological and institutional structures while deep mediatization highlights how digital infrastructures become inseparable from social life, producing new forms of ritual entanglement and symbolic expression.

For this thesis, these frameworks provide two crucial insights. First, they explain why Turkish mourning traditions do not simply appear online unchanged but are reshaped by the affordances and constraints of platforms like Find a Grave. Second, they illuminate how digital mourning is not peripheral but constitutive: the very categories of memory, ritual, and presence are mediated through infrastructures that distribute both possibilities and constraints.

Building on these accounts of mediatization, Sumiala (2021) extends the discussion by theorizing death itself as a mediated phenomenon embedded in a global hybrid media ecology. Sumiala's (2021) monograph *Mediated Death* advances the field by theorizing how death is produced, circulated, and ritualized within a global hybrid media ecology. Rather than focusing on a single platform or case, the book offers a conceptual and comparative analysis, drawing on multiple examples from news reporting, social media, and digital commemorative practices to show how media logics fundamentally structure experiences of death. Sumiala argues that contemporary public life is saturated with mediated death "a mere glance at our smartphones is enough to be faced with death" (p. ix) and that this omnipresence produces both new forms of visibility and new cultural anxieties. A central contribution is the concept of mediated

rituals, which reframes mourning not as a declining or private act but as an expanding set of highly mediated practices dispersed across different communication platforms (p. 13). These rituals are marked by hybridity: they circulate across news outlets, Twitter hashtags, YouTube tributes, and Instagram feeds, merging professional journalism with vernacular expressions of grief. The book also examines how digital mourning generates contestations about what constitutes appropriate remembrance, emphasizing the ambivalence of public death spectacles where grief can be commodified, banalized, or even “pornographized” for clicks and circulation (p. 24). Importantly, Sumiala interrogates questions of victimhood and grievable life, showing how media logics help determine which deaths are recognized, memorialized, or ignored (p. 21). The text further extends the conversation into the terrain of digital immortality, analyzing how artificial intelligence and algorithmic systems sustain relationships between the living and the dead and challenge traditional notions of “rest in peace” (pp. 13–14). By situating death within a global media ecology, Sumiala’s work highlights that mourning today cannot be understood outside of processes of hypermediation, commodification, and ritual performance. Its importance for the literature lies in providing a comprehensive theoretical lens that connects micro-level practices of online mourning with macro-level transformations in global media culture.

### **2.3. Digital Religion, Online Religion, and Networked Religion**

One of the earliest attempts to conceptualize religion in digital environments comes from Christopher Helland (2005), who distinguished between “religion online” and “online religion.” The former refers to institutional or informational uses of the internet, where churches, mosques, or religious organizations distribute official texts, sermons, or announcements. As Helland observes, “religious institutions were reluctant to develop open and interactive areas on the WWW” (2005, pp. 1–2). By contrast, online religion involves interactive and participatory practices such as virtual rituals,

collective prayers, or shared testimonies, in which authority and agency shift toward lay participants (Helland, 2005, p. 5).

Helland's framework underscores the methodological importance of authenticity. He emphasizes that "the apparent authenticity of a religious activity or experience will play a determinate role in the degree of religious participation" (2005, p. 6). This concern resonates with studies of mourning rituals in digital cemeteries, where the authenticity of acts like posting a flower icon or writing "Allah rahmet eylesin" can be questioned or defended by participants. In this sense, Helland's binary provides an analytical tool: Find a Grave memorials simultaneously host religion online (archival facts, biographical data) and online religion (interactive condolence messages and ritual performances).

Heidi Campbell (2012a), however, argues that such binaries are too rigid. In her book *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, she defines digital religion as "not about a separate sphere but the integration of online and offline religious practices" (p. 3). For Campbell, digital platforms neither replace nor detach from traditional religion; instead, they function as hybrid spaces where cultural expectations and technological affordances intersect.

This shift from dualism to hybridity is crucial for analyzing mourning online. When Turkish mourners post religious verses or light virtual candles on Find a Grave, these are not mere replicas of offline rituals but digitally shaped practices, compressed by interface constraints (limited icons, short message fields) yet infused with culturally specific meanings. Campbell's framework therefore allows us to see how traditional Turkish faith-referential repertoires with secular messages ("Rest in Peace") and globalized emojis, forming a hybrid mourning vernacular. In a related article, Campbell (2012b) develops the concept of networked religion. She identifies five traits of

religious practice in digital culture: networked community, storied identity, shifting authority, convergent practice, and multisite reality. According to her, “networked religion highlights how religious practices online are shaped by the logics of digital culture”. Campbell identifies five interrelated traits that characterize digital religion.

First, networked community highlights how digital media reshape religious belonging. Rather than fixed or bounded communities, digital networks enable flexible and dispersed connections. As Campbell observes, “online religious communities are shaped by the digital architecture of networks, emphasizing connectivity over locality” (2012, p. 66). This means that participation is not confined to geographic congregations but is instead structured through ongoing digital interactions.

Second, storied identity refers to the way religious and spiritual identities are narrated and performed across platforms. Campbell argues that “religious identity is constructed through ongoing narratives, stories that are shared and reshaped across multiple platforms” (2012, p. 68). These narratives allow individuals and groups to situate themselves within religious traditions while adapting them to the affordances of digital media.

Third, shifting authority captures how digital media decentralize traditional hierarchies of religious power. Campbell notes that “digital media decentralize power, allowing multiple voices to interpret and claim religious authority” (2012, p. 70). In digital settings, clerical authority is often supplemented or even challenged by lay voices, grassroots interpretations, and vernacular ritual practices.

Fourth, convergent practice emphasizes that digital and offline practices are not separate but intertwined. Campbell explains that “rituals may be simultaneously enacted in the pews and in the pixels” (2012, p. 72). For example, online prayers, digital

offerings, or live-streamed ceremonies coexist with traditional practices, creating hybrid modes of participation.

Finally, multi-site reality acknowledges that religious life unfolds across overlapping spaces. Campbell observes that “digital religion cannot be confined to the virtual; it is lived in overlapping and intersecting spaces” (2012, p. 74). This means that digital practices are not isolated but are embedded within broader cultural and ritual ecologies.

In the context of Find a Grave, Turkish users engage in networked communities of grief through flower messages and biographies; they articulate storied identities by narrating the lives of the deceased in culturally resonant ways; they enact shifting authority by embedding faith-related phrases and rituals without clerical mediation; they demonstrate convergent practice by translating offline rituals into symbolic digital forms; and they inhabit a multi-site reality where mourning spans cemeteries, homes, and online platforms simultaneously.

This framework sheds light on why Find a Grave is not just a static archive but a space where Turkish users construct narratives of the dead (storied identity), challenge or affirm religious authority through user-generated prayers (shifting authority), and participate in transnational ritual acts visible across linguistic and cultural boundaries (multisite reality).

Helland’s distinction and Campbell’s revisions highlight both continuity and transformation. Helland (2005) reminds us that informational and participatory dimensions coexist but are often in tension, especially in questions of authenticity. Campbell (2012a, 2012b) moves beyond this binary, showing that digital mourning must be understood as a hybrid, networked process where ritual is simultaneously anchored in tradition and reshaped by digital logics. Applied to the Turkish context,

these frameworks help explain how Find a Grave mediates between archival functions (names, dates, genealogies) and ritualized interaction (flowers, prayers, emojis). They also foreground the shifting balance between religious institutions and lay users: in digital cemeteries, it is ordinary mourners not clerical authorities who perform, evaluate, and sustain rituals.

## **2.4. Ritual Studies**

Ritual studies offer a vital framework for analyzing how societies give symbolic form to death and mourning. Unlike psychological approaches that focus primarily on the individual, anthropological and sociological perspectives emphasize the collective and performative dimensions of grief. Theorists such as Victor Turner, Paul Connerton, and Maurice Bloch with Jonathan Parry show how rituals create transitional spaces, sustain social memory, and regenerate collective life in the face of mortality. Their insights provide essential tools for interpreting how digital environments like Find a Grave reshape Turkish mourning traditions. By placing online mourning within this lineage, the thesis underscores that digital practices are not isolated novelties but extensions of long-standing cultural repertoires through which communities negotiate loss.

### **Turner: Liminality, Structure/Anti-Structure, and Communitas**

Victor Turner's theory of ritual emphasizes liminality as a transitional condition in which ordinary social roles are suspended and participants are placed in a space of transformation. In *The Ritual Process*, he identifies two main types of liminality: rites of status elevation, which convey a novice from a lower to a higher position, and calendrical or status-reversal rites, in which structural inferiors temporarily dominate their superiors. As Turner observes, "the liminality of the strong is weakness; of the weak, strength" (Turner, 1977, pp. 94–95). In both cases, participants enter a state

“betwixt and between,” neither fully inside nor outside ordinary society, where new meanings and identities can be forged.

Analytically, Turner anchors liminality in the tension between structure and *communitas* “two modalities of social interrelatedness” (Turner, 1977, p. 96). Structure represents the patterned hierarchy of statuses, obligations, and rights; *communitas* denotes an anti-structural togetherness that levels rank and emphasizes human equality. As Turner explains, liminal processes often strip participants of the signs of status and obligation, offering “release from the normal constraints of role and status” (Turner, 1977, p. 102). In this stripped-down condition, ritual actors experience *communitas*: a sense of intense community and solidarity rooted not in formal roles but in shared humanity.

Turner also stresses the ethical and pedagogical thrust of liminality. Its “pedagogics” amount to a rebuke of two distortions: acting only according to office-rights without regard for others, or pursuing private desires at the expense of communal obligations. By disorienting participants, liminal rituals function as a form of instruction, preparing them for renewed incumbency in the social order. At the same time, Turner notes the ambivalence of liminality: it may humble novices destined for elevation, invert hierarchies during carnival, or draw attention to the fragility of authority. As he famously puts it, “status reversal does not mean anomie but simply a new perspective from which to observe structure” (Turner, 1977, p. 109).

Liminal spaces are also linked to sacred power. Turner emphasizes that rituals of passage often draw upon divine or supernatural sanction, reinforcing the seriousness of transformation while keeping participants suspended in a morally charged ambiguity. This element of danger and possibility makes liminality a fertile site for generating symbolic creativity and cultural renewal.

In the framework of this thesis, Turner's schema provides critical concepts for interpreting online commemorative activity as a liminal field. Digital mourning spaces such as Find a Grave can be read as symbolic thresholds that temporarily loosen everyday roles and hierarchies, creating opportunities for mourners to interact outside of their ordinary social positioning. The repetition of flowers, prayers, and commemorative icons reproduces *communitas* by fostering shared emotional and symbolic participation. At the same time, these practices are not anarchic; they eventually re-embed participants into broader cultural frameworks of kinship, faith, and national identity. In this way, Turner's model helps illuminate how digital mourning platforms function as ritualized liminal spaces where grief is both destabilized and re-stabilized through collective expression.

### **Connerton – Social Memory and Commemorative Practices**

In *How Societies Remember*, Connerton (1989) argues that collective memory is sustained through commemorative ceremonies and habitual bodily practices rather than merely through textual records. He explains that such practices “performatively re-enact and, in that sense, reactivate the past” (p. 41), embedding memory into ritual repetition. In other words, memory lives not only in archives but in the embodied scripts of communities.

A key distinction Connerton makes is between inscribing practices (writing, recording, building monuments) and incorporating practices (bodily gestures, repetitive behaviors). While inscribing practices preserve memory externally, incorporating practices ensure that memory is carried forward through lived performance: greetings, blessings, and ritualized speech acts (pp. 72–73). In this way, everyday gestures and recurrent ceremonies bind individuals to a shared past.

These insights are especially useful for understanding digital mourning in Turkey. On Find a Grave, users often leave short blessings such as Allah rahmet eylesin or nur içinde yatsın on religious holidays like bayrams or kandil nights. Though digital, these repeated formulas resemble what Connerton calls “habitual performances” (p. 59): concise but powerful acts that reaffirm collective belonging. Rather than grand anniversary ceremonies, it is precisely these small, repetitive gestures, holiday greetings, brief messages that sustain cultural memory in online mourning.

Connerton’s framework therefore highlights how digital inscriptions (text, images, icons) and incorporated practices (ritualized greetings, formulaic prayers) converge in online spaces. In Türkiye’s digital mourning repertoire, this convergence ensures that even individual, seemingly private messages contribute to a wider structure of social memory.

### **Bloch & Parry: Death, Ritual, and the Regeneration of Life**

In their influential volume *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, Bloch and Parry (1982) argue that death rituals are not only responses to loss but also mechanisms through which societies regenerate themselves. Funerary practices, they note, transform the rupture of death into an opportunity for reaffirming continuity: “The symbolism of death is central to the reproduction of the social order” (Bloch & Parry, 1982, p. 6). In this sense, mourning rites function as cultural technologies that stabilize collective identity in the face of mortality.

Bloch further emphasizes that rituals of death often invert or reframe the experience of loss so that it becomes productive for the living: “Death is not only an end but also a means of creating life” (Bloch & Parry, 1982, p. 15). This paradox captures the regenerative power of mourning, where the finality of death is symbolically redirected toward the continuity of social and cultural systems.

Traditionally, this regeneration has been understood in explicitly religious terms communal meals, prayers, and calendrical rituals situate the deceased within a transcendent order while reaffirming the solidarity of the living. However, in digital mourning spaces such as Find a Grave, the logic of regeneration is not limited to formal religion. Personal and vernacular expressions “we miss you,” “iyi ki vardın,” or “happy heavenly birthday” also perform regenerative work by repairing bonds among the bereaved and reaffirming emotional continuity. These utterances may lack explicit theological framing, yet they contribute to what Bloch and Parry identify as society’s need to reconstitute itself after loss.

Seen this way, Find a Grave supports two interconnected levels of regeneration. At the ritual level, Turkish users transpose established religious practices prayers, Qur’anic recitations, and references to kandil nights or bayrams into digital form, reproducing the collective rhythms of mourning. At the personal level, users post affective and individualized messages that extend relationships with the dead, thereby regenerating the micro-social fabric of kinship and intimacy. Both levels resonate with Bloch and Parry’s insight that death rituals do not merely conclude a life but contribute to the renewal of the social world.

The theoretical approaches outlined above provide complementary lenses through which Turkish mourning practices on Find a Grave can be interpreted. At the individual level, continuing bonds theory (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996) challenges earlier notions of grief as a process of detachment, instead emphasizing the persistence of relationships with the deceased. This insight is central to understanding how Turkish users employ dua formulas, commemorative phrases, and symbolic offerings in digital spaces to maintain ongoing relational ties.

At the institutional and cultural level, the concepts of mediatization and deep mediatization (Hjarvard, 2013; Hepp, 2020) draw attention to how digital infrastructures reshape mourning practices. Rather than serving as neutral containers, platforms like Find a Grave co-structure rituals through their affordances the “Flowers” tab, sponsorship features, and biography sections that channel expressions of grief into standardized yet reinterpretable forms. These perspectives explain why traditional repertoires such as kandil greetings or Qur’anic recitations appear not as static transfers but as reconfigured practices within digital environments.

The framework of digital religion (Campbell, 2012; Helland, 2005) extends this discussion by demonstrating that online mourning rituals are shaped by the interplay between technological features and theological-cultural expectations. In this sense, a flower message containing Allah rahmet eylesin is not merely a digital equivalent of an offline phrase, but a practice mediated by interface design while simultaneously grounded in Turkish vernaculars.

Finally, insights from ritual studies (Turner, 1977; Connerton, 1989; Bloch & Parry, 1982) situate these practices within broader anthropological understandings of ritual and memory. Turner’s notion of liminality and *communitas* helps to explain how virtual cemeteries create transitional spaces where mourners reaffirm collective belonging. Connerton’s emphasis on commemorative practices highlights how temporal markers such as the 7th or 40th day structure grief both offline and online. Bloch and Parry underscore that death rituals regenerate social life, a perspective that resonates with how digital offerings function not only as remembrance of the deceased but also as reaffirmations of communal identity.

These frameworks build a multi-layered lens for this study. They allow the analysis to move beyond descriptive accounts of online memorials and toward an

interpretation of how digital mourning is simultaneously personal (continuing bonds), technological (mediatization), theological (digital religion), and societal (ritual studies). This synthesis also directly informs the research questions of the thesis: the endurance of relational ties (RQ2), the structuring role of ritual calendars (RQ3), the symbolic repertoires of Turkish mourning (RQ4), and the shaping influence of platform affordances (RQ5). In this way, the theoretical framework ensures that the study contributes not only to empirical knowledge about Turkish mourning online but also to broader debates in media, religion, and ritual studies.

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **3.1. Global Scholarship on Digital Mourning**

The scholarly engagement with digital mourning has evolved significantly since the early days of the internet, reflecting broader transformations in how societies grapple with death, grief, and memory in technologically mediated contexts. Beginning in the 1990s, when online grief forums and email support lists first appeared, researchers noted that bereavement was no longer confined to physical communities but extended into emerging digital “internetworks.” Over the following decades, scholarship has traced this shift across diverse platforms from memorial websites and social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram to human–computer interaction (HCI) research on digital inheritance and the mediatization of ritual. Collectively, this body of work demonstrates that mourning is not simply transposed onto digital media; rather, it is reshaped by platform affordances, cultural vernaculars, and new temporalities of grief. At the same time, critical voices highlight the Western and Christian biases of much of this scholarship, pointing to the need for culturally specific analyses.

One of the earliest systematic reflections on digital mourning came from Carla Sofka’s (1997) pioneering article, *Social support “internetworks,” caskets for sale, and more: Thanatology and the information superhighway*, which introduced the now widely used concept of thanatotechnology. Writing at a time when the internet was just beginning to enter everyday life, Sofka explored the multiple ways death was being mediated through digital networks. She identified three main areas of transformation. First, she noted that online grief forums and email lists provided new kinds of social support, offering “both immediacy and anonymity for the grieving” (p. 560), which allowed mourners to express emotions outside of traditional, face-to-face condolence

frameworks. Second, Sofka pointed to the growing commercialization of death online, with funeral homes experimenting with web pages and even “caskets for sale” (p. 566), raising questions about the commodification of mourning practices. Third, she emphasized the methodological and ethical dilemmas that would face both practitioners and researchers, cautioning that “clinicians need to be alert to the influence of technology in shaping grief experiences” (p. 570). Crucially, Sofka argued that the internet was not simply a neutral medium but was actively constructing a new cultural awareness of death a “Web of Death” that altered public engagement with mortality (p. 570). By framing technology itself as a force shaping mourning, Sofka’s article established the agenda for later scholarship: digital death was not a peripheral curiosity but a central phenomenon that would transform how societies remember and grieve.

A major turning point in the field was Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillides’ (2012) article *Does the Internet Change How We Die and Mourn? Overview and Analysis*, which provided one of the first comprehensive frameworks for analyzing the cultural and social implications of online mourning. Unlike earlier descriptive accounts, this study synthesized existing empirical findings to map broader patterns of change. The authors argued that the internet alters mourning along three main dimensions. First, it transforms who participates in grief: digital platforms extend mourning beyond the private sphere of family and close friends, enabling “new kinds of public” to emerge around death (p. 285), often composed of strangers connected through shared affect rather than kinship. Second, it reconfigures the temporality of grief, introducing asynchronous communication and the possibility of continuous interaction with the deceased through digital traces (p. 288). This extension means that grief no longer ends with the funeral but can persist indefinitely in online memorials. Third, Walter et al. observed the creation of new mourning publics, where online communities collectively engage in commemorative practices, sometimes in ways that contest or complement

traditional rituals (p. 291). At the same time, they cautioned that these practices are deeply shaped by cultural context, emphasizing that “what may appear as new and universal is always inflected by religious and social traditions” (p. 296). Their key contribution lies in reframing digital mourning as simultaneously global because it draws on platform affordances that transcend geography and local, because those affordances are always embedded in specific ritual and cultural settings. In doing so, Walter et al. bridged the early observations of Sofka with the more platform-specific studies that followed, establishing an agenda for comparative, cross-cultural research into how the internet reshapes death and mourning.

Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish’s (2013) article *Beyond the Grave: Facebook as a Site for the Expansion of Death and Mourning* is one of the first empirical studies to systematically explore how social networking sites transform mourning practices. The authors collected data from 436 Facebook memorial profiles between 2005 and 2012, combining archival analysis of user interactions with qualitative case studies of grieving communities (p. 154). This mixed approach allowed them to examine both the scale of postmortem communication and the micro-level practices through which the bereaved engage the deceased online. Their findings reveal how mourning is expanded along three axes. Temporally, posts to memorial walls continue long after funerals, producing “an indefinitely extended temporal frame of grief” (p. 156) that challenges traditional notions of closure. Spatially, Facebook dissolves geographic boundaries, enabling distant friends and family members to participate in rituals of remembrance (p. 157). Socially, the platform opens mourning to new publics, including acquaintances and even strangers, thereby constructing broader communities of grief (p. 160). Beyond these expansions, the study highlights how Facebook shapes “postmortem identity,” as profiles remain dynamic and subject to ongoing contributions, algorithmic reminders, and resurfacing of photographs (p. 161–163). The authors stress that these identity

negotiations are not simply continuations of offline rituals but novel practices conditioned by platform design and algorithmic logics. By analyzing a large dataset of memorial profiles, Brubaker and colleagues demonstrate that Facebook not only extends mourning into new temporal and spatial domains but also introduces new challenges for identity, memory, and closure. Their work remains foundational for understanding how social media infrastructures themselves co-produce contemporary experiences of grief.

Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, and Carter's (2015) article *#Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media and Platform Vernacular* expanded the study of digital mourning into the visual culture of Instagram, focusing on how platform-specific grammars shape the expression of grief. The authors employed a grounded theory approach, collecting and coding over 2,000 images tagged with *#funeral* and *#RIP* across three data waves in 2014 (p. 257). Through iterative open and axial coding, they identified the distinctive vernacular practices that structure mourning on Instagram. A key finding was that selfies dominated the *#funeral* dataset: individual and group self-portraits taken at funerals, sometimes accompanied by hashtags such as “*#likeforlike*” or “*#sexy*,” reflecting the interweaving of personal display and memorialization (p. 259). Other clusters highlighted the materiality of mourning, with photographs of coffins, flowers, and service cards, as well as the cultural repurposing of the funeral trope in ironic or playful memes (pp. 260–262). Importantly, Gibbs et al. distinguished between *#funeral*, which emphasized ritual presence and immediate participation, and *#RIP*, which often centered on celebrity deaths or retrospective memorialization (p. 263). They argued that Instagram mourning practices are primarily communicative, serving “to signify presence, and to communicate an important context and affective situation to a wider social network” (p. 263). This finding situates Instagram mourning within a longer genealogy of photographic mourning, suggesting continuity with nineteenth-century post-mortem portraiture while simultaneously documenting the

informalization of ritual in highly personal and idiosyncratic displays (p. 265). The article's significance lies in demonstrating that grief online cannot be understood apart from the vernacular styles, affordances, and logics of specific platforms. By theorizing "platform vernaculars," Gibbs and colleagues provided a critical conceptual tool that has since been widely used to analyze mourning practices across digital media environments.

Massimi and Charise's (2009) paper *Dying, Death, and Mortality: Towards Thanatosensitivity in HCI* brought the discourse on digital mourning into the domain of human-computer interaction (HCI), introducing the influential concept of thanatosensitive design. Presented at the CHI 2009 conference, the article was not a single-case study but rather a conceptual and design-oriented investigation into how death and dying intersect with everyday technologies. Drawing on interdisciplinary sources from psychology, sociology, and design research, the authors established a theoretical framework by distinguishing among mortality ("the condition of being mortal or subject to death"), death ("the act or fact of dying"), and dying ("a state of physiological decline facing imminent death") (p. 2). This conceptual clarification provided the foundation for their central claim: for the first time in history, individuals were leaving behind unprecedented volumes of personal information stored on computers and networked systems, making questions of digital inheritance unavoidable (p. 1). They highlighted pressing challenges such as the fragility of access when digital materials are locked behind passwords or biometrics "as more data becomes tied to biometrics, access to data following death becomes increasingly problematic" (p. 9). From this analysis, the authors proposed thanatosensitivity as an orientation for HCI research: a call for designers and engineers to account for death, dying, and mortality when building systems, interfaces, and infrastructures (p. 3). While the article was exploratory, its importance lies in bridging thanatology and HCI, shifting the

conversation from descriptive accounts of online mourning to normative questions about how technologies should be designed to support grieving, inheritance, and memory. By naming the problem and offering an agenda for future research, Massimi and Charise anticipated later empirical work on digital heirlooms and design affordances, thus anchoring the theoretical trajectory of death studies within the field of computing.

Odom, Sellen, Harper, and Kirk's (2012) article "Technology Heirlooms? Considerations for Passing Down and Inheriting Digital Materials" extended the conversation on thanatosensitive design into the concrete domain of family practices around digital inheritance. Published in the CHI conference proceedings, the study combined design research and qualitative inquiry, presenting three design probes Digital Slide Viewer, Timecard, and BackupBox to provoke reflection on how digital belongings might be passed down, lived with, and inherited in the future (p. 337). The authors conducted interviews with families who engaged with these probes, collecting narratives about how participants perceived the value, use, and safekeeping of digital heirlooms. Findings revealed a paradox: while digital possessions such as photographs and videos were described as among the most precious family materials, they were rarely "used" in daily life, serving instead as objects of symbolic and intergenerational significance (p. 340). Participants emphasized safekeeping, describing heirlooms as items that must be preserved across generations rather than consumed (p. 346). At the same time, families expressed anxieties about the fragility of digital archives: "We put things online to share them, not to preserve them... the thought of them being where someone could get at them makes us uneasy" (p. 400). Importantly, the physical instantiation of digital memories through the design probes altered participants' perceptions, encouraging greater care and ritualized engagement: "These devices show you care and make you want to care for them, tend to them" (p. 430). The study's

contribution lies in demonstrating that digital materials acquire heirloom qualities not merely through their content but through their materialization, storage, and affordances of safekeeping. In this way, Odom et al. underscored the central role of design in shaping how digital afterlives are inherited, curated, and integrated into family memory practices, providing a critical bridge between theoretical calls for thanatosensitivity and the everyday realities of mourning and legacy.

Christensen and Sandvik's (2015) chapter *Death Ends a Life, Not a Relationship: Timework and Ritualizations at Mindet.dk* brings an ethnographically informed and conceptually rich perspective to digital mourning by examining how parents in Denmark use an online memorial platform to grieve young children. The authors focused on Mindet.dk, a dedicated digital environment for bereaved families, and analyzed how participants created "memory profiles," lit virtual candles, and engaged in shared rituals of empathy and support (p. 58). Drawing on qualitative data from the site, they argue that online mourning is best understood as a form of ritualized timework a continuous process by which mourners restructure temporality after the loss of a child. Death, they suggest, radically distorts time, leaving parents in a liminal "nontime" where presence collapses into absence (pp. 57–58). Through digital rituals, however, parents attempt to rebuild temporal coherence: marking birthdays, anniversaries, and "red letter days" by lighting candles or leaving messages (p. 60). Importantly, Mindet.dk fosters not only individual remembrance but also communal solidarity, as users "perform empathy toward others mourning their own loved ones" (p. 59), thereby constructing a genuine community of care. The authors identify three ritual phases: creating the memory profile, sustaining ongoing parenthood through repeated acts of commemoration, and generating new narratives that integrate the deceased into family history (pp. 62–68). These practices also support continuing identity work, as when mothers refer to themselves explicitly as "mother of [child's name]," affirming

their parental role despite the child's death (p. 63). The chapter concludes that online mourning is not a finite process but "an endless work of creating a subjunctive world in overt tension with the world of lived experience" (p. 68). The significance of Christensen and Sandvik's contribution lies in extending the theory of continuing bonds by showing how digital media enable parents to sustain relational identities and reconfigure temporality through ritualized interaction. Their study highlights the potential of digital memorials to serve as both personal lifelines and collective arenas where grief is shared, legitimized, and continuously reshaped.

### **3.2. Mourning in Turkish Context**

In traditional Turkish society, condolence rituals (*taziye*) have served as both religious obligations and moments of social solidarity. The ethnographic fieldwork by Dikici and Büyükdoğan (2020) among the Avşar Turks of Tokmak village in Kayseri provides a rare micro-level account of how these practices are defined, sustained, and reshaped. Relying on qualitative interviews with ten villagers of different ages and occupations, the study documents the multidimensional character of *taziye*. Participants repeatedly stressed that condolence is, above all, a moral and religious duty, an obligation to visit the bereaved and share their suffering. It was described as a practice that brings religious merit and alleviates the weight of grief, but also as a collective reminder of mortality, reinforcing the awareness that human life is fragile and transient. The fieldwork further reveals that *taziye* has historically been embedded in strong communal bonds. Visits extended for up to one week, neighbors and relatives contributed food rather than expecting the mourning family to cook, and villagers collectively assisted with the household chores and agricultural tasks of the bereaved. These practices underscored the role of condolence as an arena of solidarity and cooperation.

A particularly striking theme is the persistence of the lament (ağıt) tradition, despite its contested position within Islamic orthodoxy. Among Avşar communities, lamentation remains a defining element of funerary culture, to the extent that a funeral without laments is considered incomplete. Both men and women actively perform laments, often improvising verses around the belongings or life events of the deceased, thereby dramatizing grief in a performative and communal manner. The study also identifies variation in mourning intensity depending on the age of the deceased. The loss of a young person typically produces more dramatic expressions of grief, extended lamentation, and collective sorrow, while the death of an elder is more readily accepted as natural destiny and accompanied by more subdued rituals.

At the same time, the research highlights significant transformations that reflect broader processes of modernization and urban influence. Whereas in the past no cooking was permitted in the mourning household and all meals were provided by neighbors, today it is common for the bereaved family to prepare meals themselves, often with store-bought or catered food. Similarly, the overall duration of condolences has shortened, and the intensity of lamentation has diminished in recent decades. These changes reveal how economic pressures, urban lifestyles, and shifting norms of propriety have compressed or altered older traditions.

The authors conclude that while certain practices such as extended visits, collective food provision, or elaborate laments have been modified or weakened, the fundamental essence of taziye remains intact as a religious obligation, a moral duty, and a communal performance of solidarity. Rather than a wholesale decline, the Avşar case illustrates an ongoing adaptation of mourning practices to the rhythms of modern life. This dynamic of continuity and transformation provides an essential cultural context for analyzing contemporary digital mourning: just as offline taziye has been compressed,

individualized, and symbolically reconfigured, similar tendencies are observable when condolences migrate onto online platforms.

The study by Sağır and Canayaz (2022) represents one of the first systematic sociological analyses of how death is articulated and ritualized on Turkish social media platforms. Framed within the perspective of death sociology, the authors collected and analyzed a large corpus of online posts and comments on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, with a particular focus on condolence messages and commemorative practices. Their aim was to uncover the shifting meanings of mourning in digital spaces, where religious scripts, cultural conventions, and platform-specific vernaculars intertwine.

The findings demonstrate that social media has expanded mourning into both more individualized and more public forms. On Facebook, user profiles often function as virtual cemeteries where death announcements are shared and friends leave condolence comments. These comments frequently replicate traditional Turkish faith-referential formulas such as Allah rahmet eylesin (“may God have mercy on them”) and nur içinde yatsın (“may they rest in light”), illustrating the continuity of religious language in digital contexts. However, Facebook also enables the persistence of the deceased’s profile as a lasting memorial space, transforming the temporal frame of mourning into an ongoing, asynchronous process.

On Instagram, the study highlights the strong role of visuality. Users frequently post black-and-white photographs, candle or flower emojis and short verses or prayers, turning mourning into a highly stylized visual performance. Hashtags such as #mekani\_cennet\_olsun (“may their place be paradise”) or #rip are used to situate individual grief within a wider network of visibility. These practices blur the line between private sorrow and public display, embedding mourning within the aesthetics of the platform itself.

Twitter, by contrast, emerges as a contested space where death becomes entangled with politics, celebrity culture, and public debate. While users also post conventional prayers and condolences, the platform often amplifies conflict around the circumstances of death, issues of justice, or ideological polarization. As the authors observe, Twitter mourning can oscillate between genuine empathy and performative outrage, underscoring how mediatized death is simultaneously a site of solidarity and division.

Overall, Sağır and Canayaz argue that online condolences in Türkiye illustrate a form of cultural hybridity: Islam-referential invocations remain prominent, yet they coexist with secular symbols, emojis, hashtags, and platform vernaculars. This hybridity reflects both the persistence of religious mourning scripts and the adaptation of grief into the affordances of social media. For the purposes of the present research, these insights highlight an important contrast: while platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter embed mourning within everyday digital communication flows, Find a Grave centers on the cemetery as its primary site of memory. Examining how traditional condolence scripts and secular expressions are rearticulated within this explicitly funerary platform will therefore provide a complementary perspective on how Turkish mourning practices are being remediated in digital environments.

Kılıç and Özorán's (2017) article *From Virtual Cemeteries to MyTrustedWill: The Changing Face of Death* represents one of the most comprehensive early attempts to map how Turkish mourning practices are reshaped through digital infrastructures. Their analysis moves along three distinct axes: municipal virtual cemetery modules, Facebook memorial accounts, and AI-driven afterlife applications. At the municipal level, the authors examine more than sixty local websites offering "virtual cemetery" services, primarily in small towns and villages. These sites range from simple repositories that display photographs, birth and death dates, and basic biographical data,

to more interactive modules that allow visitors to play recitations of the Fātiḥa, Mulk, or Nebe suras, or even “select an imam” from a drop-down menu to perform prayers on behalf of the deceased. In some cases, clicking a play button beneath a grave photograph triggers a pre-recorded audio file, giving the impression of a live ritual performance. The authors interpret these design choices through the lens of postmodern consumption: prayers become clickable commodities, rituals are modularized into menu options, and the act of commemoration is reduced to the temporal gap between “enter” and “delete.” As they note, this blurs the boundaries between authenticity and simulation, recalling Baudrillard’s argument that in hyper-mediated contexts “the copy becomes more real than the real.” At the same time, the relocation of cemeteries from peripheral urban spaces to screens that can be accessed daily renders death both banal and omnipresent, shifting mourning from an exceptional, embodied ritual to an everyday, routinized digital encounter.

Their second axis turns to Facebook, where they analyze the profiles of two deceased Turkish users. In both cases, accounts became focal points for condolence in the days immediately following death, filled with photographs, memories, and messages written directly to the deceased as if they were still alive. This practice exemplifies the theory of continuing bonds, where ties to the dead are not severed but sustained through acts of direct address. Algorithmic prompts intensify this phenomenon, surfacing birthdays and “friend anniversaries” long after death, prompting both sincere and inadvertent commemorations. Yet the management of these profiles diverges: in one case, a legacy contact converted the account into an official memorial, curating and pruning its content; in the other, the account remained active but dormant, occasionally reanimated by algorithmic reminders. Both trajectories reveal how platforms co-produce grief by shaping temporality, visibility, and authorship. Through Facebook’s design,

mourning is stretched indefinitely, and the deceased retains a digital identity that oscillates between absence and presence.

Finally, Kılıç and Özoran extend their scope to global thanatotechnologies such as MyTrustedWill, Eterni.me, and Replika. These services shift from commemoration to anticipation, reframing death as a matter of digital administration and simulation. MyTrustedWill allows users to create digital wills, safeguard passwords, and schedule farewell messages to be delivered posthumously, effectively bureaucratizing death through subscription-based infrastructures. Eterni.me and Replika promise algorithmic immortality by training avatars or chatbots on the digital traces of the deceased, enabling survivors to continue interacting with the voices, texts, or simulated presence of the dead. Such tools collapse classical binaries life/death, real/virtual, human/machine by sustaining a mediated existence after biological death. The authors stress that while these technologies claim to preserve memory, they also commodify grief, offering immortality as a service and further entangling mourning with the logics of consumption and simulation.

In this context, these three strands sketch the contours of how Turkish death culture is being refracted through digital systems. Yet the scope of the study is primarily descriptive and illustrative: the municipal survey identifies features but does not track patterns of user interaction; the Facebook analysis rests on two case studies; and the discussion of AI applications highlights their novelty without empirical grounding in Turkish usage. By contrast, the present thesis moves beyond description to conduct a systematic, cemetery-centered analysis of Find a Grave as a dedicated funerary platform. Unlike the ad hoc village websites or generalist social networks, Find a Grave institutionalizes commemoration through affordances specifically designed for mourning biography fields, photograph uploads, flower offerings, sponsorship, and virtual cemetery groupings. This study operationalizes those affordances to analyze how

Turkish users negotiate mourning scripts online: the persistence of Qur’anic invocations (Allah rahmet eylesin, nur içinde yatsın), the hybrid coexistence of religious and secular symbols (roses, candles, flags, emojis), and the structuring of grief around temporal markers such as the 7th, 40th, and anniversary days. In doing so, it demonstrates not only how traditional and cultural rituals are remediated but also how platform design itself co-produces the conditions of mourning. Where Kılıç and Özorun chart the presence of digital mourning in Turkey, this thesis interrogates its mechanisms, showing that platforms like Find a Grave are not neutral containers but active infrastructures that reshape the experience of grief, memory, and identity.

### **3.3. From Facebook to Cybercemeteries**

Elaine Kasket’s (2012) article “Continuing Bonds in the Age of Social Networking: Facebook as a Modern-Day Medium” is one of the most detailed empirical and theoretical explorations of how Facebook mediates postmortem communication and reshapes grief. The study employed a two-phase qualitative design. In the first phase, Kasket conducted qualitative document analysis (QDA) of 943 posts drawn from five Facebook in-memory-of groups, all dedicated to late adolescents who had died suddenly in car crashes in the US, UK, and Canada. In the second phase, she interviewed three bereaved individuals administrators of these groups using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to gain insight into their lived experiences of interacting with the deceased’s profiles and groups.

From this material, four major themes emerged: (1) modes of address, where the bereaved often spoke directly to the deceased using informal second-person pronouns (“you”), especially among younger users, while older users wrote in a more formal, condolence-letter style; (2) beliefs about communication, with many mourners explicitly stating that they felt the deceased could “see” their posts or would respond indirectly

through dreams, natural signs, or moments of guidance; (3) the experience of continuing bonds, reflected in everyday updates, ongoing visits to the profiles, and fear of profile deletion, which was perceived as “losing them all over again”; and (4) the role of the Facebook community, which provided comfort, information, and co-construction of the deceased’s biography, though sometimes also conflict and competition around memorialization

The study makes two key contributions. First, it situates these findings within continuing bonds theory, arguing that Facebook enables not just private, inner bonds but also communal and sociological forms of ongoing connection. Unlike virtual cemeteries, which often present curated eulogized representations, Facebook profiles remain the original co-constructed identities of the deceased, layered with their interactions and memories accumulated during life. This continuity allows the bereaved to feel that they are “talking to the same person” rather than a retrospective reconstruction. Second, Kasket advances the notion of Facebook as a “modern-day medium” or mediator deathworker, supplanting traditional figures like priests, obituary writers, or funeral celebrants. Here, the platform itself becomes the channel through which the dead “speak” by virtue of their persistent profiles and through which survivors maintain bonds without requiring institutional mediation. Ultimately, Kasket concludes that Facebook revolutionizes both the intimacy and the sociology of mourning. The persistence of the “digital self” makes grief an everyday, ongoing practice rather than a bounded ritual, and the communal participation in co-constructing the deceased’s biography aligns perfectly with Walter’s and Klass’s arguments for grief as a biographical project. Importantly, the study also raises ethical and clinical questions for bereavement professionals, urging them to understand and integrate these digital practices into their frameworks of support.

While Kasket (2012) focuses on the lived experiences of mourners on Facebook and demonstrates how continuing bonds are enacted through the persistence of social media profiles, Walter et al. (2012) adopt a broader lens by examining the rise of cybercemeteries and commemorative websites. Their work shifts the attention from mainstream social networking platforms to purpose-built digital environments where death itself is the organizing principle. Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillides (2012) trace the emergence of cybercemeteries as one of the earliest and most distinctive online mourning practices, dating back to the mid-1990s. They highlight the launch of The World Wide Cemetery in 1995 as a pioneering example, followed by platforms such as Virtual Memorials later in the decade (pp. 281–283). Unlike grief forums or social networking platforms, cybercemeteries are explicitly designed for commemoration: they include fixed fields for names, dates, epitaphs, photographs, and visitor tributes. These memorials are built to endure, thereby reshaping the temporality of grief. Instead of being tied to a funeral or a ritual calendar, mourning acquires an “open-ended timescale,” allowing remembrance to be revisited indefinitely (p. 287). The authors also underline the expansion of participation: not only relatives but also distant acquaintances and strangers can contribute, leading to what they call the enfranchisement of grief (p. 289).

Crucially, cybercemeteries reframe how death circulates online. Whereas platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter incorporate death into the wider flow of everyday updates, cybercemeteries remove mourning from that transient, distracted environment and relocate it to a dedicated space. In doing so, they distinguish death as a separate, enduring digital domain rather than one more fragment within social media streams. At the same time, they blur boundaries between sacred and secular, since scriptural prayers may appear alongside personal anecdotes or vernacular images. For Walter et al., this visibility signals a process of de-sequestration: the reintegration of

mortality into daily life through its persistent presence in ordinary digital environments (pp. 290–293).

Angela Riechers' (2013) chapter *The Persistence of Memory Online: Digital Memorials, Fantasy, and Grief as Entertainment* examines the cultural consequences of online memorial sites by emphasizing their hybrid status between mourning spaces and popular media. Drawing on case studies of early memorial platforms such as *Virtual Memorials* and experimental interactive projects, Riechers argues that digital commemorations often take on the qualities of entertainment media, reframing grief through the logics of spectacle, fantasy, and consumer culture (pp. 49–51). The persistence of these memorials means that they remain available to be revisited indefinitely, but this endurance also detaches mourning from its ritual and temporal boundaries, making grief into a form of ongoing display.

One of the central insights is the way digital memorials construct a “fantasy of immortality,” where the dead appear continually present through photographs, multimedia tributes, or avatars (pp. 53–55). Rather than marking an end, death becomes a point of perpetual circulation, as memories and images are endlessly curated, shared, and commented upon. Riechers notes that this transformation risks turning mourning into a consumable product: memorial websites often rely on advertising models, subscription fees, or premium features, making grief itself a site of commodification (p. 57). The chapter therefore introduces a critical tension: while these sites offer comfort and connection for mourners, they also aestheticize and commercialize grief in ways that can trivialize loss or exploit vulnerability.

Another important dimension is visibility. By opening memorials to anonymous visitors, digital commemorations turn mourning into a public spectacle that may attract audiences far removed from the deceased's social circle. This can generate solidarity

and broaden participation, but it also subjects grief to voyeurism and, in some cases, sensationalism (pp. 59–61). Riechers links this to broader shifts in media culture where death is increasingly mediated, shared, and consumed, not unlike reality television or celebrity culture. The implication is that online memorials both democratize commemoration and risk blurring the boundaries between sincere remembrance and entertainment spectacle.

Placed alongside Walter et al. (2012) and Kasket (2012), Riechers' contribution underscores how digital memorials are not neutral archives but socio-technical and cultural constructs. They persist beyond ritual time, offer fantasies of continued presence, and expose mourning to commercial and entertainment logics. For the present discussion, this highlights that the affordances of commemorative platforms persistence, visibility, and accessibility carry ambivalent consequences: they sustain continuing bonds but can also commodify or aestheticize grief in ways that challenge traditional understandings of mourning.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1. Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design with supportive quantitative elements. The primary aim is to investigate how Turkish mourning and grief practices are articulated in digital environments, particularly on Find A Grave, an online cemetery platform. Given the novelty of thanatotechnology and the limited scholarship on Turkish mourning practices in digital contexts, an exploratory design allows the researcher to inductively identify emergent patterns, cultural symbols, and ritual continuities.

At the same time, the analysis incorporates descriptive quantitative support. Through binary coding (1 = presence, 0 = absence) of key categories, the study systematically records frequencies of religious expressions, temporal markers, emojis, and modes of address. This mixed approach enables both close qualitative interpretation and broader pattern recognition, enhancing the validity of the findings.

### **4.2. Sampling Strategy**

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy, selecting memorials that met specific inclusion criteria to ensure both cultural relevance and sufficient textual richness. Following the guidelines of qualitative sampling, the cases were not chosen to be statistically representative but to capture a wide variety of Turkish mourning practices as they appear in digital memorials.

Inclusion criteria:

1. Memorials of individuals who died after the year 2000, ensuring 21st century contemporary practices.
2. Memorials with at least one photograph, providing visual content for analysis.

3. Memorials with at least one flower tribute, guaranteeing interactive engagement.

4. Memorials with biographies exceeding 25 words, to ensure sufficient narrative material.

5. Memorials authored by Turkish users, identified either by Turkish nicknames or by Turkish-language content.

Datasets:

- Dataset 1: A total of 105 Turkish memorials meeting the above criteria.
- Dataset 2: A corpus of 24 sponsored Turkish memorials, enabling a comparative perspective between regular and sponsored forms of remembrance.

This strategy allowed the researcher to focus specifically on the Turkish cultural context while ensuring a balance between breadth (number of memorials) and depth (narrative richness). The dual datasets further facilitate a comparative analysis of ordinary versus sponsored memorials, highlighting potential differences in affordances, visibility, and ritual expression.

Although the two datasets differ in size, the division was intentional and analytical rather than statistical. Dataset 1 (non-sponsored memorials) and Dataset 2 (sponsored memorials) represent two distinct modes of participation within Find A Grave's architecture. Sponsorship materially alters a memorial's affordances-it guarantees permanent visibility, removes advertisements, and allows expanded narrative input. Consequently, it reshapes how grief and memory are expressed. Separating the datasets therefore enables a qualitative comparison between ephemeral and enduring forms of digital remembrance.

The goal is not numerical symmetry but to examine how design affordances condition mourning practice: Dataset 1 illustrates the “default” public grammar of remembrance, whereas Dataset 2 reveals how users invest in and personalize the memorial space when permanence is technologically secured. This contrast highlights how emotional labor and ritual continuity respond to the platform’s structural hierarchies of visibility and persistence

### **4.3. Data Collection**

Data were collected through a sequential process that combined automated scraping, manual verification, and structured coding. This approach allowed both efficient retrieval of a large corpus and careful cultural interpretation of Turkish mourning practices. The study site was Find A Grave, chosen because it is a persistent, structured platform entirely dedicated to commemoration, unlike social networking sites where death appears incidentally.

Using Playwright Chromium in Python, the researcher developed a script to systematically search and export memorials meeting three technical parameters: (1) created after the year 2000, (2) containing at least one uploaded photograph, and (3) containing flower tributes. This automated search initially yielded 998 memorials. The exported dataset included basic fields such as the deceased’s name, dates, presence of biography, sponsorship status, location, and number of photographs and flowers.

To focus on memorials rich enough for qualitative analysis, biographies with fewer than 25 words were excluded. This step reduced the first dataset to 105 Turkish-authored memorials. The criterion ensured that the remaining cases provided substantial narrative material rather than minimal entries.

In addition to the first corpus, a second dataset was created consisting of all Turkish memorials located in Turkey that had been formally sponsored. Sponsorship

introduces enhanced affordances (customization, permanence, and visibility), making these memorials analytically distinct.

Following the automated selection, the researcher manually reviewed both datasets. Only memorials authored by Turkish users (identified through Turkish language use or Turkish nicknames) were retained. During this stage, additional context such as ritual references (e.g., 7th day, 40th day, anniversaries, Bayram, Kandil), condolence formulas (Turkish faith-referential formulas, Pop-religious formulas with Christian references, secular formulas), and emoji usage was annotated, since these could not be reliably captured by the scraping script.

The final corpus was organized into a structured Excel-based codebook. All variables were organized into a structured Excel-based codebook, whose operational definitions are detailed in the subsequent section.

Each variable was coded in binary form (1 = presence, 0 = absence), except for inherently numeric features (word counts, flower counts). Binary coding was selected to facilitate visualization and statistical comparison, while still supporting qualitative interpretation.

#### **4.4. Data Analysis**

The analysis proceeded through a qualitative content analysis supported by descriptive quantitative elements. Each variable was operationalized and coded in binary form (1 = presence, 0 = absence), except for inherently numeric features such as word counts and flower counts. Binary coding was chosen because it allows frequencies to be calculated and compared across memorials while still preserving the interpretive flexibility of qualitative analysis. This dual strategy provides both close readings of cultural expression and systematic recognition of broader patterns. All data were first coded by the researcher and subsequently verified by a second coder (the researcher's

sister). Discrepancies were discussed and resolved, ensuring intercoder reliability and minimizing subjective bias.

### **Condolence Formulas: Turkish faith-referential formulas, Secular, Pop-religious formulas with Christian references**

Condolence expressions were divided into three mutually exclusive categories based on lexical markers and theological references:

- Common Turkish faith-referential condolence phrases such as “Allah rahmet eylesin” (“May God have mercy on them”), “Mekânı cennet olsun” (“May they rest in paradise”), or “Nur içinde yatsın” (“May they rest in divine light”) continue to appear across digital memorials, preserving the moral lexicon of compassion even in technologically mediated grief.

- “Işıklar içinde uyu” (Rest in light), “Toprağın incinmesin” (May the earth treat you gently), “Sevgi ve özlemle” (With love and longing), “We miss you,” or similar expressions that convey sentiment sans a religious formula. These are markers of individualized or globalized mourning repertoires where affect is foregrounded without reference to God.

- Pop-religious formulas with Christian references were coded when explicitly Christian or globally Christianized expressions appeared, including “Rest in Peace (R.I.P.),” “Rest in Paradise,” “God bless,” “Heaven,” or references to angels framed within a Christian idiom. However, these phrases no longer function solely as markers of religious belief. Circulating widely through popular culture, social media, and transnational memorial templates, they have become secularized idioms of compassion rather than confessional statements of faith.

In this sense, “R.I.P.” or “fly high, angel” operate less as theological declarations and more as affective conventions-linguistic artifacts of global mourning culture that

blend Christian imagery with universal sentiments of care and transcendence. Their appearance in Turkish memorials therefore reflects not religious conversion but participation in a shared digital vernacular of loss. This tripartite classification<sup>1</sup> was central for distinguishing how Turkish faith-referential, secular, and Christianized repertoires co-exist, overlap, and circulate in Turkish-authored memorials.

### **Temporal Markers**

Temporal references were coded into three distinct categories reflecting culturally specific structuring of mourning time:

1. Ritual markers such as the 7th day, 40th day, 52nd day, and seneyi devriye (yearly death anniversary). These markers are deeply rooted in Turkish mourning traditions and were coded independently from general anniversaries.

2. Anniversaries and birthdays, including explicit mentions of death anniversaries or birthday remembrances.

3. Religious holidays, including greetings tied to calendrical observances such as “İyi bayramlar”, “Bayramın kutlu olsun”, “İyi kandiller”, or “Kandilin mübarek olsun”. These were distinguished from condolence formulas because they represent ritual calendar greetings rather than direct prayers for the deceased. This scheme preserves cultural specificity by separating ritual timekeeping, personal anniversaries, and Islamic calendrical observances.

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<sup>1</sup> This categorization does not aim to compare religious systems but to trace how linguistic repertoires of mourning persist and hybridize in digital contexts. “Traditional Turkish faith-referential formulas” denote expressions shaped by Islamic moral and linguistic heritage but used today as culturally normative condolences, regardless of individual belief. “Pop-religious formulas with Christian references” describe English sympathy idioms with Christian origins that circulate globally as secular emotional templates. The distinction is analytical rather than confessional, emphasizing communicative function, historical influence, and cultural adaptation.

### **Direct Address**

Messages written in the second person (e.g., “Happy birthday Dad,” “I miss you so much”) were coded as direct address. This category operationalizes the “continuing bonds” framework, highlighting dialogic relationships in which the deceased is treated as an ongoing interlocutor rather than an absent figure.

### **Emojis and Iconography**

Emoji use and symbolic icons were coded into culturally and affectively significant categories: Turkish flag, Islamic calligraphy, hearts, flowers, candles, butterflies, angels, cartoon characters, and context-related emojis which are specifically chosen to fit the deceased person’s life/personality/area of interests (for example: basketball for basketball player, music note icon for musicians, theater mask icon for actors etc.) Each cluster carries a specific semiotic repertoire: national identity, religious devotion, affective intensity, conventional mourning, transformation motifs, or playful vernacular expression. Analyzing these icons enables comparison across gender, age of death, and sponsorship status, showing how symbolic repertoires are mobilized differently depending on demographic and platform-related factors.

### **Biography-Level Variables**

Biographies were coded for gender, age at death, cause of death (if specified), and narrative style (CV-like chronology, news-report style, or personal narrative). These contextual variables allow investigation of associations between life course and symbolic repertoires for instance, whether younger deceased are more often represented with angel or butterfly motifs, or whether violent or sudden deaths attract more religious formulas.

### **Language of Content**

Each entry was coded by language (Turkish, English, or Other). This variable captures both the visibility of Turkish mourning in globalized digital spaces and the role of code-switching. English-language entries were examined for correlation with pop-religious repertoire with Christian references (e.g., R.I.P., Heaven), while secular Turkish phrases such as *Işıklar içinde uyu* function as local equivalents. This coding thus allows analysis of how global repertoires and local expressions intermingle.

### **Sponsorship Status**

Memorials were coded for sponsorship because sponsorship affects both visibility (more prominent placement, removal of advertisements) and editability (greater permanence and customization). Comparing sponsored and non-sponsored memorials allows testing whether these enhanced affordances correlate with richer symbolic layering, greater use of ritual markers, or more elaborate biographical narratives.

Following coding, the analysis combines qualitative thematic interpretation with descriptive quantitative support. Binary-coded variables provide frequencies and cross-tabulations. These numerical patterns are not ends in themselves but serve as scaffolding for qualitative interpretation, showing where symbolic repertoires cluster or diverge. The interpretive stage connects these findings to the study's theoretical framework: continuing bonds (direct address, temporal rituals), mediatization (language choice, sponsorship affordances, emoji repertoires), and ritual studies (calendrical observances, commemorative structuring of time).

## 5. FINDINGS

### 5.1. Demographics

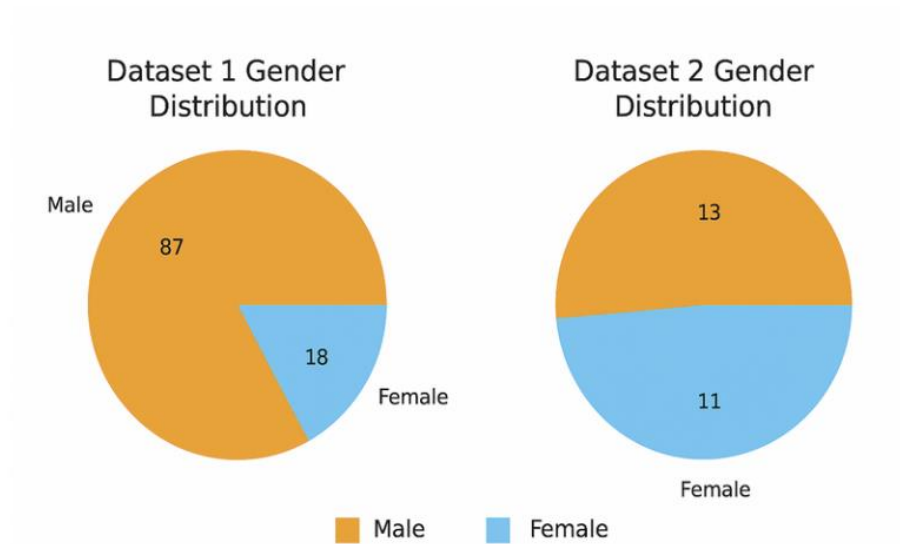
**Table 1. Demographic Overview of Dataset 1 (Non-Sponsored) and Dataset 2 (Sponsored) Turkish Memorials on Find A Grave<sup>2</sup>**

Variable	Data set 1 (n=105)	Data set 2 (n=24)
Male	87 (%82.9)	13
Female	18 (17.1%)	11
Average age at death	63.8 years (range 0-100)	38.1 (range 2-90)
Cause of death given	55 (52.4 %)	14
Sponsored memorials	7 (6.7%)	24

The demographic profile of the two datasets reveals both similarities and contrasts. In Dataset 1, the distribution of gender is heavily male-dominated: 87 of the 105 memorials (82.9%) commemorate men, while only 18 (17.1%) commemorate women. In contrast, Dataset 2 presents a nearly balanced gender profile, with 13 male memorials and 11 female memorials.

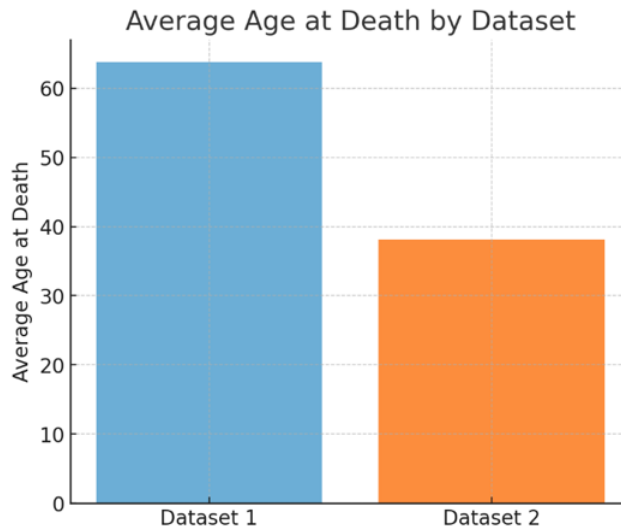
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<sup>2</sup> Due to the substantial difference in sample size between Dataset 1 (n = 105) and Dataset 2 (n = 24), raw counts rather than percentages are reported for Dataset 2 to prevent misleading proportional comparisons.

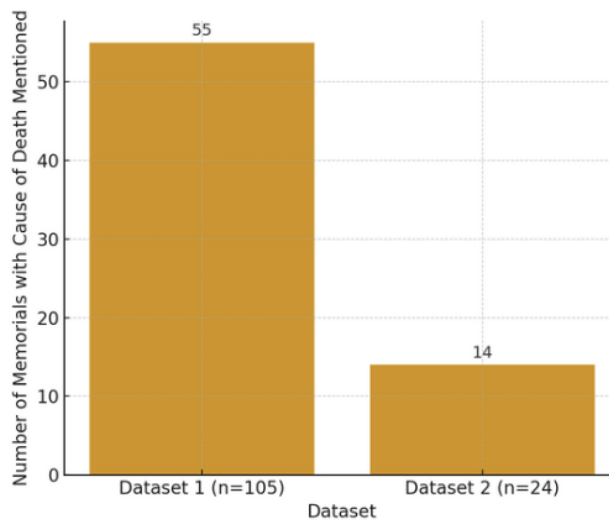


**Figure 1 Gender Distribution**

The average age at death also differs substantially. As shown in Figure 2, Dataset 1 records a mean of 63.8 years, with ages ranging from two months to 100 years, reflecting a relatively older memorialized population. Dataset 2 has a much lower average age of 38.1 years, with ages spanning from 2 years to 90 years, suggesting that younger deaths are more commonly represented among sponsored memorials.



**Figure 2 Average Age of Death**



**Figure 3 Cause of Death given**

Cause of death is mentioned in over half of the cases in both corpora. As Figure 3 demonstrates, In Dataset 1, 55 biographies (52.4%) provide explicit details on the cause of death, while in Dataset 2, 14 memorials out of 24 contain this information. Although the proportions are comparable, Dataset 2 has a slightly higher tendency to include cause-of-death references. Finally, sponsorship status marks the most

categorical difference between the two groups. Only 7 memorials in Dataset 1 (6.7%) are formally sponsored, whereas all 24 entries in Dataset 2 are by definition sponsored.

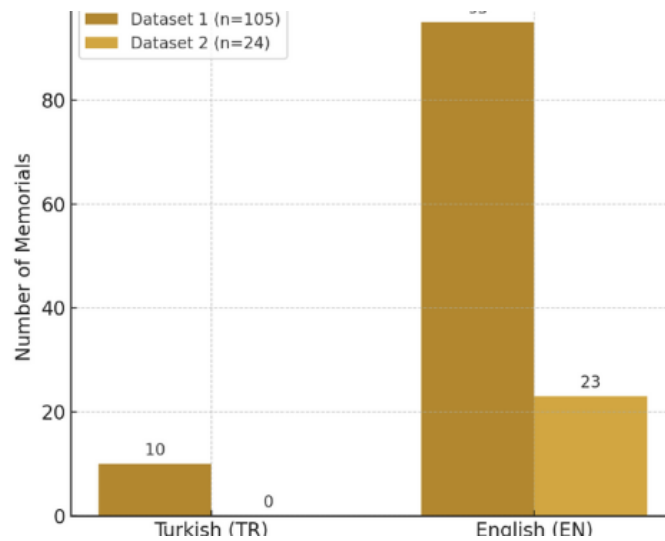
## 5.2. Biography Layer

**Table 2. Biographical Characteristics of Turkish Memorials on Find A Grave**

Variable	Data set 1 (n=105)	Data set 2 (n=24)
Language (TR/EN)	TR: 10 (9.5%)	TR: 0
	EN: 95 (90.5%)	EN: 23
Biography Style	CV: 79 (75.2%)	CV: 9
	Obituary: 19 (18.1%)	Obituary: 9
	Narrative: 6 (5.7%)	Narrative: 10
Content Type	Traditional Turkish faith-referential formulas: 4 (3.8%)	Traditional Turkish faith-referential formulas: 0
	Secular: 8 (7.6%)	Secular: 7
	Pop-religious formulas with Christian references: 6 (5.7%)	Pop-religious formulas with Christian references: 2
	Direct Address to the deceased	0
Continuing bonds markers	4 (3.8%)	8

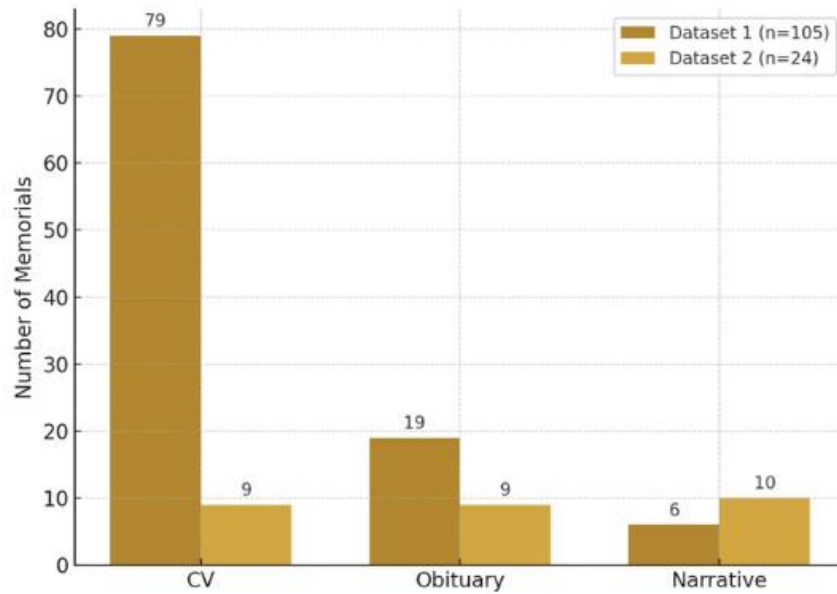
When comparing the two datasets along these selected dimensions, several important contrasts emerge. Language use confirms the predominance of English across both corpora. In Dataset 1, Turkish accounts for a small minority (9.5 percent), reflecting occasional reliance on local idioms, whereas in Dataset 2 Turkish is entirely absent. (*see Figure 4*) The complete disappearance of Turkish in sponsored memorials

underscores how sponsorship is tied to globalized repertoires of mourning, privileging English as the primary language of visibility on Find A Grave.



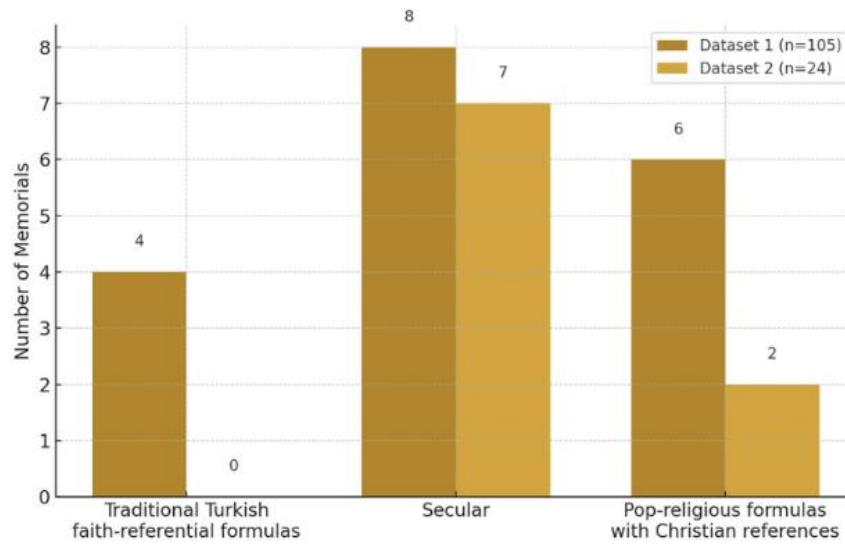
**Figure 4 Language Distribution in the memorials' biography section**

The most striking divergence is found in biography style. Dataset 1 overwhelmingly favors CV-like entries (75 percent), where the deceased's life is presented in an enumerative and impersonal fashion. By contrast, Dataset 2 demonstrates a far greater tendency toward narrative forms: the majority of the sponsored biographies take the shape of personal recollections, while CV and obituary styles are evenly distributed. This shift from formal enumeration to affective storytelling suggests that sponsorship is associated with more personalized modes of remembrance, where the biographical frame is less about achievements and more about relational memory.

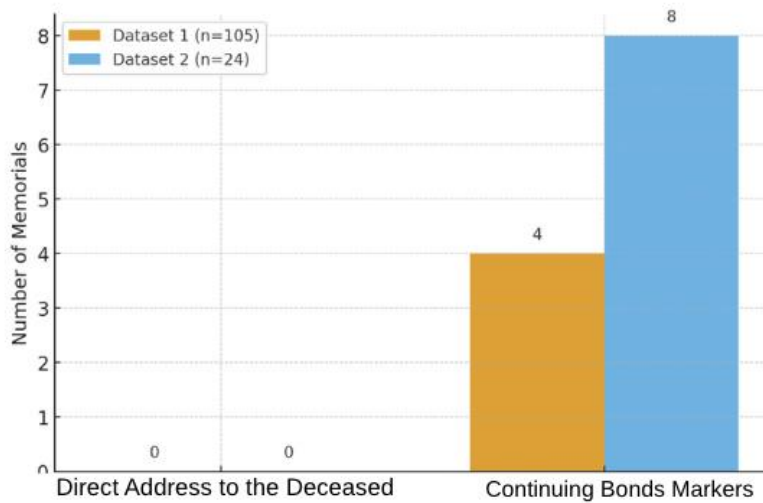


**Figure 5 Biography Style in Turkish memorials**

Content type further differentiates the two corpora. As Figure 6 demonstrates, traditional Turkish faith-referential formulas content, although marginal in Dataset 1 (3.8 percent), disappears entirely from Dataset 2. Instead, secular expressions rise sharply, and pop-religious formulas with Christian references increase slightly. This pattern highlights the cultural hybridity of online mourning: sponsored memorials appear to foreground secular and transnationally recognizable expressions at the expense of local repertoires, a tendency that aligns with the affordances of a globalized platform.



**Figure 6 Condolence formulas in Turkish memorials' biographies**



**Figure 7 Direct Address and Continuing Bonds markers in Turkish memorial biographies**

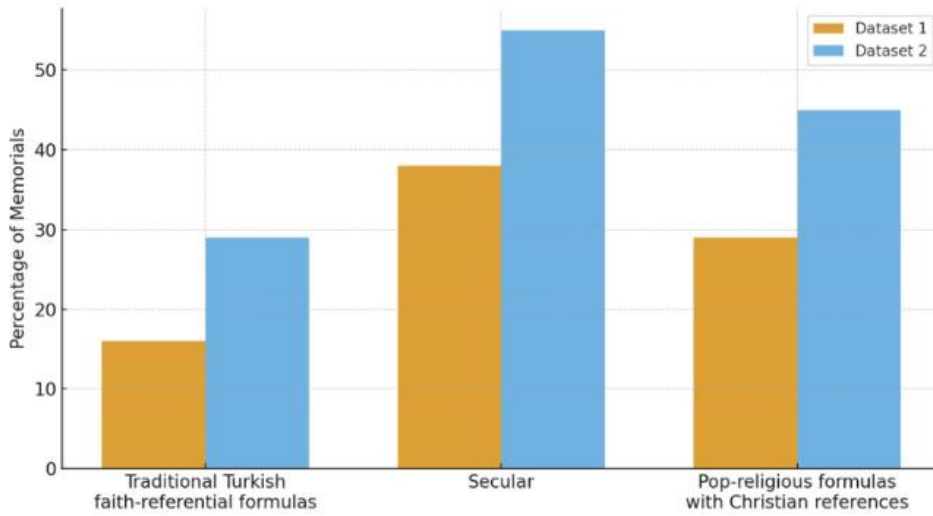
Continuing bonds markers are far more pronounced in sponsored memorials. While only 3.8 percent of Dataset 1 biographies displayed such elements, one third of Dataset 2 contained evidence of ongoing relational ties, such as symbolic language that

implies the deceased's continued presence. Direct address itself was absent from both datasets, but the prevalence of continuing bonds in Dataset 2 illustrates a stronger emphasis on maintaining dialogue with the deceased, echoing theoretical frameworks that describe mourning as a process of sustaining rather than severing bonds. This difference can be explained by the affordances of sponsorship: the permanence, visibility, and customization it provides encourage mourners to invest more in ongoing symbolic ties. In particular, younger deaths dominate sponsored memorials, and this demographic context may also intensify the need for relational continuity, as survivors are less willing to present the loss as a closed chapter.

### **5.3. Flower Layer**

The flower message layer, which constitutes the most interactive and affective dimension of Find A Grave memorials, displays clear differences between regular and sponsored datasets. In both corpora, almost every memorial includes at least one verbal flower message. Yet the intensity of interaction diverges: while the 105 regular memorials collectively received 3,264 flowers, the 24 sponsored memorials attracted 5,137, a density that is disproportionately high. This concentration indicates that sponsorship not only alters the affordances of the biography layer but also reshapes the dynamics of commemoration in the flower layer by making sponsored profiles more visible, permanent, and thus more actively engaged with by mourners.

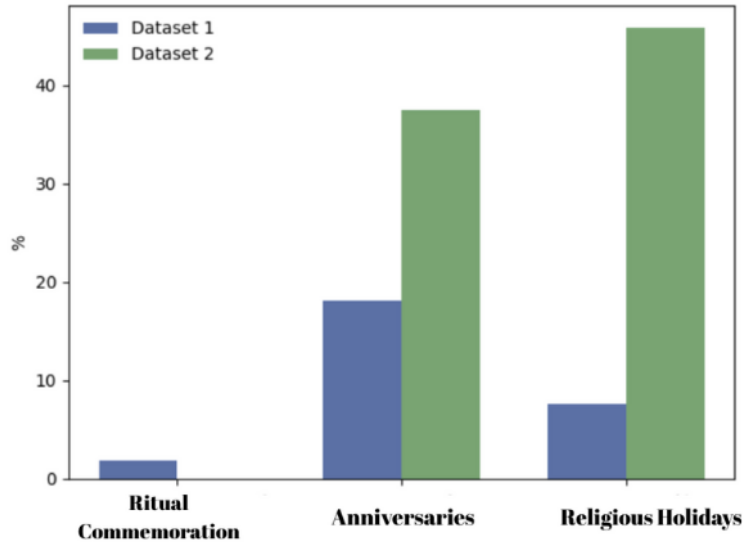
## Condolence Formulas



**Figure 8 Condolence formulas in the flower messages**

The verbal content of flower messages demonstrates striking differences in condolence repertoires. In Dataset 1, faith-referential formulas such as Allah rahmet eylesin and Mekânı cennet olsun appear in only 16 percent of cases, while secular phrases such as “Işıklar içinde uyu” , “Toprağın incitmesin seni” , “We miss you” dominate with 38 percent. Christianized references, particularly English-language “Rest in Peace”, “Heavenly blessings, and “God bless,” are also significant, accounting for 29 percent of messages. Dataset 2, however, exhibits a remarkable amplification across all categories: Turkish faith references nearly double, secular formulas climb to 54 percent, and pop-religious references rise to 46 percent. This pattern reveals two important dynamics. First, sponsored memorials broaden the repertoire of condolence, drawing on both traditional and globalized traditions alongside secular idioms. Second, the predominance of secular and pop-religious expressions in Turkish-authored sponsored memorials underscores the global circulation of mourning idioms on digital platforms, where transnationally legible phrases gain prominence.

## Temporal Markers



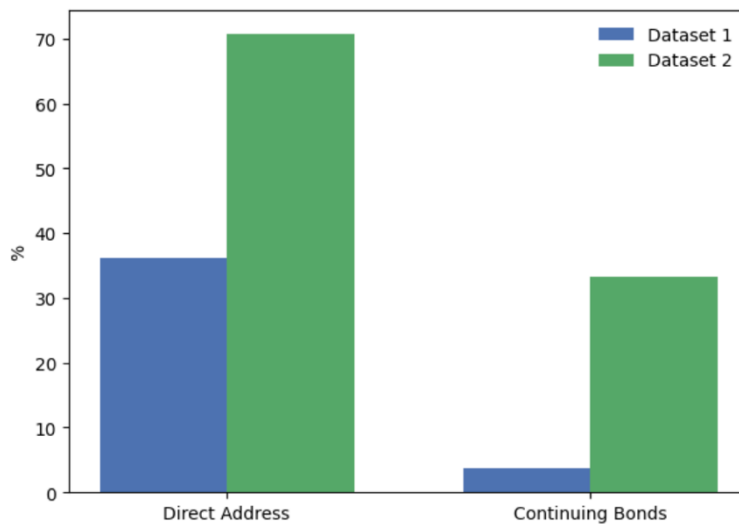
**Figure 9 Temporal markers in the flower messages**

Temporal references embedded in flower messages also diverge across datasets. Dataset 1 preserves traces of traditional Turkish mourning intervals, with mentions of the 7th and 40th day, but these are extremely marginal. Anniversaries, including birthdays and yearly death commemorations, appear in 18 percent, while greetings tied to religious holidays such as *İyi bayramlar* or *Kandilin mübarek olsun* occur in 8 percent. Dataset 2, by contrast, completely abandons the day-specific ritual markers. Instead, anniversaries nearly double in frequency (38 percent), and religious festivals increase sixfold (46 percent). This demonstrates a cultural recalibration: while the locally embedded 7th and 40th day traditions fade from digital space, calendrical religious holidays become central occasions for remembrance. Sponsorship thus appears

to anchor mourning in recurring public festivals rather than traditional ritual intervals, pointing to how digital affordances reshape the temporal structure of grief.

### **Direct Address and Dialogic Forms**

Another striking pattern concerns modes of address. In Dataset 1, only 36 percent of flower messages employ the second person. In Dataset 2, this proportion nearly doubles to 71 percent. This finding indicates that the dialogic register, in which the deceased is treated as an ongoing interlocutor, is far more prominent in sponsored memorials. Such direct address reflects the “continuing bonds” framework, where grief is expressed not as closure but as sustained conversation. While direct address was absent in biographies across both datasets, its marked prevalence in the flower layer highlights the unique role of this interactive space as a channel for ongoing relational communication.

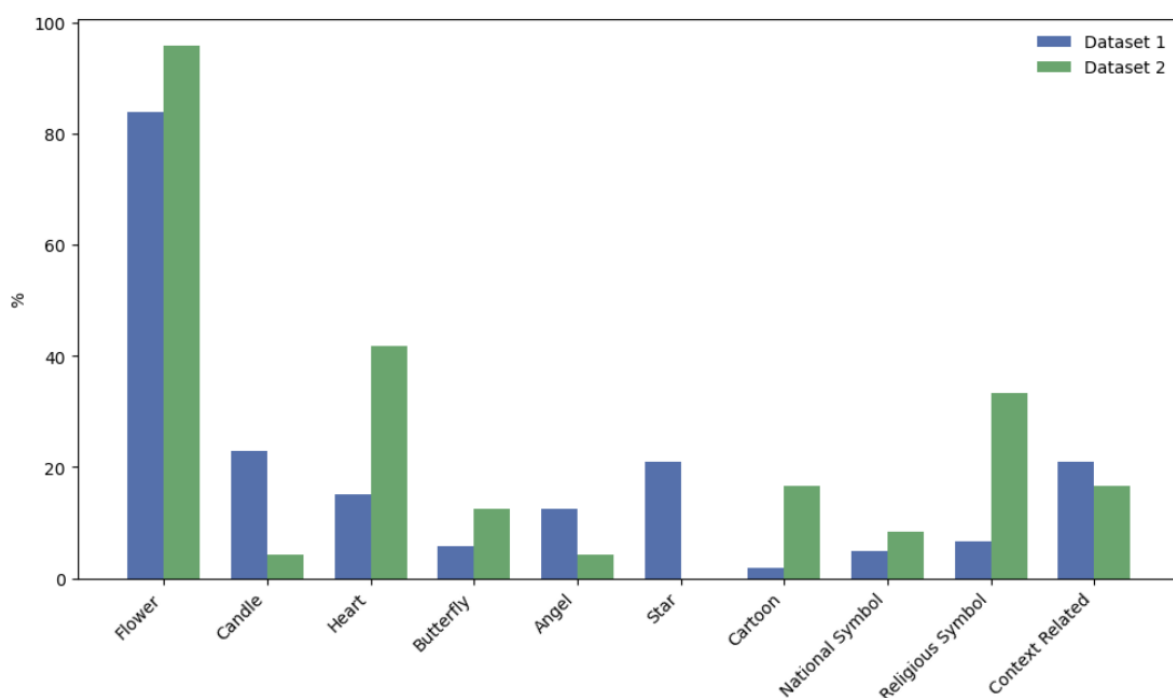


**Figure 10 Direct Address and Continuing bonds markers in flower messages**

The relationship between direct address and continuing bonds shows both overlap and distinction. As Figure 10 illustrates, direct address appears far more

frequently than continuing bonds, particularly in Dataset 1. This discrepancy reflects the coding distinction: direct address captures the linguistic form of second-person messages ("I miss you Dad"), while continuing bonds requires explicit symbolic references to the deceased's enduring presence ("you are always with us," "watching us from heaven"). Thus, while direct address often signals emotional immediacy, it does not always convey the relational continuity that defines continuing bonds. The stronger presence of continuing bonds in sponsored memorials indicates that these affordances encourage mourners not only to address the deceased but also to frame the relationship as ongoing.

### The Use of Emojis and Symbolic Repertoires



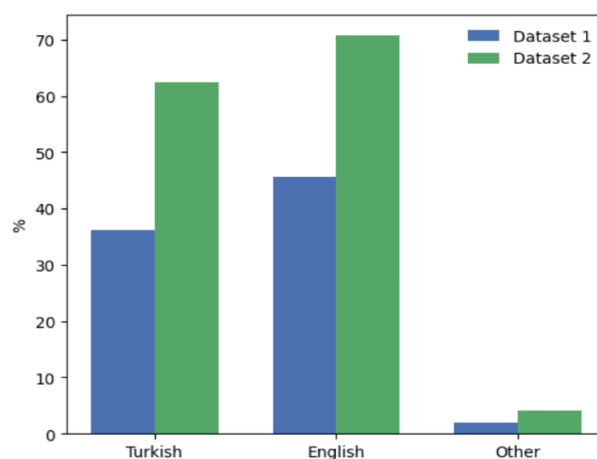
**Figure 11 Distribution of emojis sent by Turkish users in the flower messages**

The use of emojis within flower messages further differentiates the two corpora. Dataset 1 displays a diverse repertoire: flowers (84 percent) dominate, candles (23 percent) and stars (21 percent) are common, and context-related (emojis tailored to the deceased) icons (21 percent) add personalization. Hearts (15 percent), angels (12

percent), and Islamic calligraphy (7 percent) are present but secondary. Dataset 2 shows a sharper symbolic profile. Flowers remain near-universal (96 percent), but hearts rise dramatically to 42 percent, and Islamic calligraphy increases fivefold to 33 percent. These increases suggest that sponsored memorials privilege affective intensity (through hearts) and explicit Islamic reference (through calligraphy). At the same time, stars vanish altogether, and angels decline sharply to 4 percent, indicating a narrowing of symbolic repertoire. Cartoon characters appear in 17 percent of Dataset 2 memorials, all of which were dedicated to children. Context-related emojis such as musical instruments, sports symbols, or animals associated with the deceased further individualize these commemorations. Present in roughly one-fifth of Dataset 1 and slightly lower in Dataset 2, they anchor mourning in the life narrative of the deceased, extending beyond conventional mourning symbols to craft intimate and person-specific memorials. This eclecticism illustrates how digital mourning practices accommodate both sacred and popular-cultural references in the same commemorative layer.

### Choice of Language

The language distribution of flower messages also reveals an important contrast with biographies.



**Figure 12** The distribution of language in the flower messages

As demonstrated in Figure 12, in Dataset 1, English dominates at 46 percent, while Turkish accounts for 36 percent. In Dataset 2, Turkish increases to 63 percent, even though biographies in the same dataset were exclusively in English. This discrepancy highlights the layered multilingualism of digital mourning: while biographies conform to globalized, English-dominant repertoires, the flower layer reintroduces local vernaculars. Turkish thus resurfaces at the interactive level, suggesting that affective and dialogic registers are more likely to be expressed in native language, whereas biographical narration aligns with the global expectations of the platform.

These findings reveal that the flower message layer functions as a more intimate and expressive space of mourning, where sponsorship amplifies both quantity and intensity. Compared to regular memorials, sponsored ones are characterized by higher frequencies of condolence formulas across all traditions, greater reliance on anniversaries and religious festivals rather than ritual days, more dialogic forms of address, and stronger affective and religious iconography through emojis. Furthermore, while English dominates the biography layer, Turkish reasserts itself in the flower layer, emphasizing the distinction between narrative and interactive registers of mourning. Sponsorship therefore reshapes not only visibility but also the symbolic and linguistic repertoires through which grief is articulated, blending globalized idioms with vernacular intimacy.

The comparison reveals notable tendencies rather than definitive generalizations. The larger set of ordinary memorials displays greater symbolic diversity, whereas the smaller set of sponsored memorials emphasizes affective and religious forms with more intensity. Given the limited size of the sponsored dataset, these contrasts should be read as indicative patterns rather than conclusive differences. Nevertheless, they point toward

the ways sponsorship and platform affordances can recalibrate digital mourning repertoires, a theme developed further in the discussion.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

This section situates the comparative findings within the thesis's theoretical framework deep mediatization, platform affordances, digital religion, ritual studies, and continuing bonds. Treating Find A Grave as a mediating architecture, the analysis unfolds through its layered structure: Section 5.1 outlines how affordances shape the conditions of mourning; 5.2 examines the biography layer's shift from enumerative record to relational narrative; 5.3 traces the flower layer as a site of iterative ritual; 5.4 analyzes dialogic and intergenerational continuities; and 5.5–5.7 explore linguistic and symbolic hybridities. Section 5.8 synthesizes these dynamics under the theme of Public Visibility and Private Continuity, leading into the conclusion that reflects on the broader implications of digital mourning.

### **6.1. Platform Architecture and Affordances: Deep Mediatization of Mourning**

The two datasets examined in this study reveal distinct yet interrelated modalities of mourning shaped by the affordances of the Find A Grave platform. Through their differential structures of biography, message interaction, language, and symbolism, the memorials illustrate how technological design, cultural convention, and personal emotion converge in the production of digital mourning.

The architecture of Find a Grave does not merely host acts of mourning; it constitutes them. Within Hepp's (2020) framework of deep mediatization, media are no longer external tools that transmit communication they become the very environments through which social and emotional life takes shape. The platform's affordances therefore do not simply enable mourning; they determine its possible forms, rhythms, and visibilities.

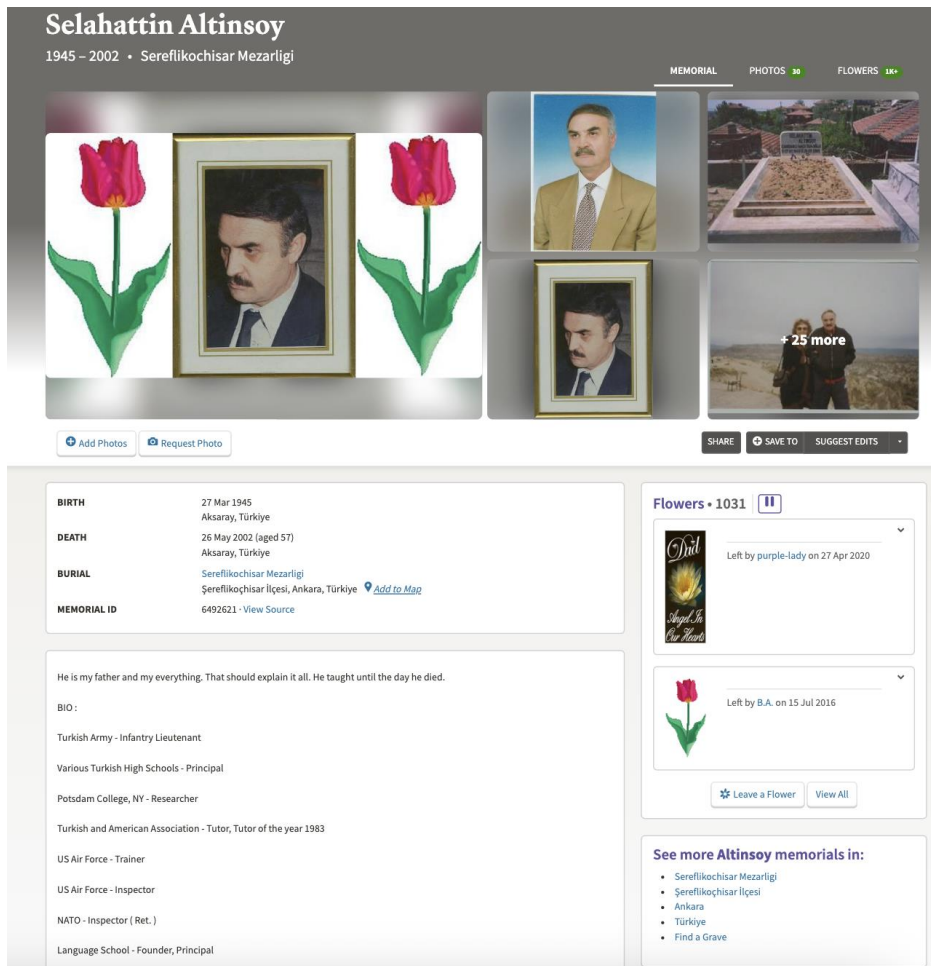
Treem and Leonardi's (2013) four affordances visibility, persistence, editability, and association manifest in Find a Grave as distinct yet overlapping strata of grief.

These affordances interact not additively but structurally, creating a layered ecology that transforms private remembrance into networked ritual

**Table 3. Platform Affordances and Their Mediated Effects on Mourning Practices**

Affordance	Platform Function	Mediatized Effect
Visibility	Public bios, photos, search indexes	Converts the deceased into a searchable social identity, renders mourning performative
Persistence	Continuous flower and message logs	Temporalized mourning, sustains emotional continuity
Editability	Sponsorship features, image and text updates	Enables iterative narrative of loss, grief becomes revisable and ongoing labor
Association	Follower lists, linked relatives	Transforms solitary mourning into shared witnessing, produces relational networks

Under visibility, the biography layer renders the deceased as a datafied identity, a set of searchable attributes that perform social legibility. For instance, in the memorial of Selahattin Altınsoy, education, profession, and place of burial are presented in the impersonal tone of a digital CV. (see Figure 12)



**Figure 13 An example of a CV-formatted memorial bio.**

This enumerative style mirrors what Walter (1999) describes as mourning as public performance, but now enacted through algorithmic infrastructures rather than newspapers or obituaries. Visibility therefore mediates not just who is remembered, but how remembrance is formatted: it transforms grief into a legible digital record.

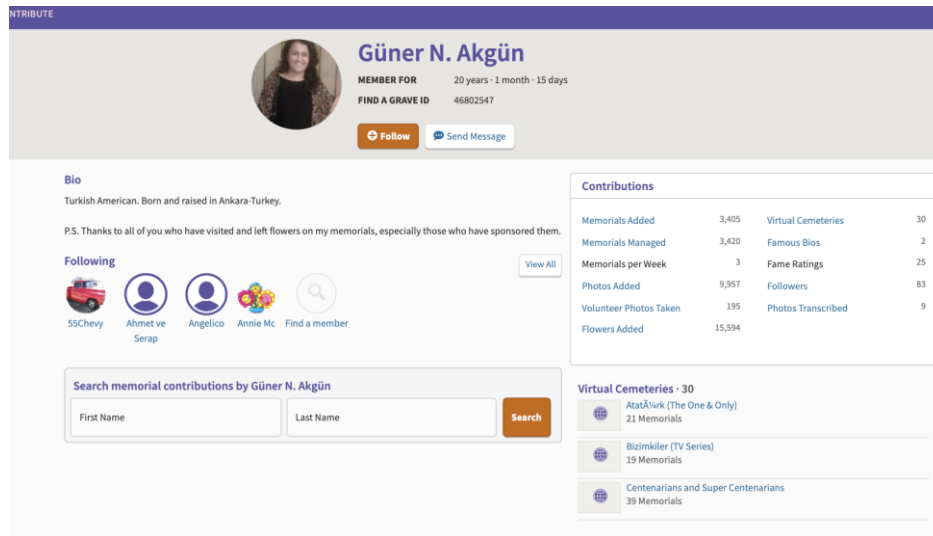
The persistence affordance extends mourning temporally. Each flower message, each emoji, remains permanently inscribed, producing an accumulating archive of affect. The repetition of notes such as “We miss you” , “never forgotten”, “someone thought of you today” demonstrates what Hepp calls the “temporal thickening” of mediatized life where emotion is no longer bound to linear time but layered across an enduring archive. In this way, Find A Grave translates the cyclical temporality of

traditional mourning (e.g., the bayrams, the 40th day, annual remembrance) into an asynchronous, cumulative digital rhythm. Grief persists because the medium does.

Through editability, mourning becomes a distributed process of maintenance, extending beyond familial bonds to include volunteer curators who actively manage and refine digital memorials. This is exemplified by a prolific Turkish contributor who manages 77 memorials and has added 2,402 flowers across the platform. Their profile statement 'I believe that people die when nobody talks or thinks about them' directly articulates the continuing bonds paradigm, while their curatorial labor (adding photos, updating biographies, leaving flowers) materializes this philosophy through platform affordances. By treating cemeteries as living archives 'We live with "them".. Because, Turks believe that death is something ordinary and a part of life' this volunteer transforms editability into an act of communal remembrance, using the platform's features to sustain public memory and prevent what they term social death.

Finally, association materializes what Hjarvard (2013) identifies as mediated communities: affective networks bound by shared witnessing rather than shared location through the platform's networking affordances follower lists that create voluntary memory publics and volunteer curation networks that transcend geographical boundaries. This is spectacularly embodied by Güner N. Akgün, a Turkish-American volunteer who manages 3,420 memorials and has built a following of 83 users. Their extraordinary contributions 15,594 flowers added, 9,957 photos uploaded demonstrate how associative features enable the formation of transnational digital kinship networks. Simultaneously, the platform's 'linked relatives' feature enables the digital reassembly of family trees, connecting memorials like Hacı İsa Altınsoy with his children and grandchildren across generations and geographical distances. These associative affordances create what Turner (1977) would call digitally mediated communitas: grief

becomes connective tissue, extending solidarity beyond physical kinship into algorithmic kinship networks and voluntary memory communities.



**Figure 14 Güner Akgün's (a volunteer) profile on the Find A Grave platform**

Overall, these affordances demonstrate that Find a Grave operates as what Bucher and Helmond (2018) call a platformized ritual system: an infrastructure where technical properties shape emotional and cultural outcomes. In the Turkish context, this mediatized architecture hybridizes traditional taziye practices with the global logics of visibility and data persistence. The act of remembering shifts from ephemeral gathering to enduring inscription; from embodied ritual to algorithmic return.

Within this deep mediatized framework, mourning ceases to be a private experience mirrored online it becomes born digital, structured by the affordances that sustain it. The following section explores how this transformation unfolds within the biography layer, where the visible self of the deceased first takes textual and cultural form.

## **6.2. Biography Layer: The Architecture of Posthumous Identity**

The biography layer represents the most stable and visible dimension of Find a Grave, structuring how mourning becomes organized through digital media logics. As

the primary interface for posthumous identity construction, this layer transforms personal loss into socially legible profiles governed by platform architecture.

### **Dataset 1: Institutional Framing and Public Documentation**

Non-sponsored memorials demonstrate a clear preference for institutional identity framing, with 75.2% adopting CV-style formats that foreground professional achievements and genealogical data. This enumerative approach is exemplified by memorials like Prof. Dr. Tuncay Çelenk:

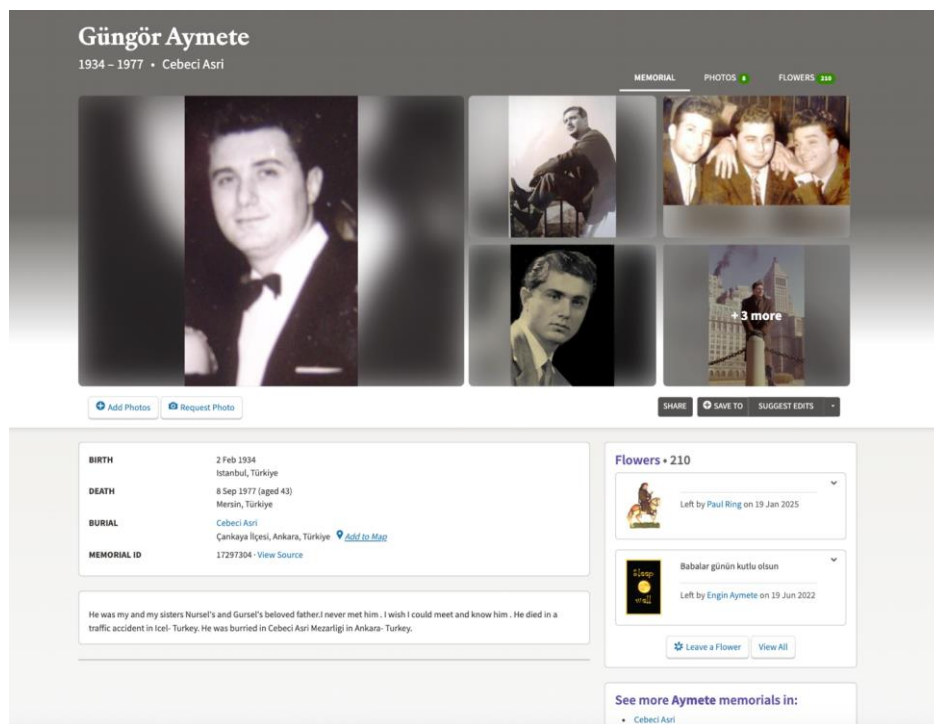
" Born in 23 January 1946 in Gaziantep. Studied and graduated as a medical doctor from Istanbul University (Cerrahpaşa Faculty of Medicine) in 1971. Worked in Turkish Navy and in the GATA (Military Academy of the Medicine). Obtained the Professor Title and worked as the chief of the General surgery clinic until 2006. He also worked in John's Hopkins university hospital and Anadolu ASM Hospital.."

Such biographies mirror bureaucratic structures of social recognition. The minimal presence of continuing bonds markers (3.8%) and the dominance of English (90.5%) further reinforce this formal, public-facing orientation where grief is mediated through visibility (Treem & Leonardi, 2013) as public documentation rather than private memory.

### **Dataset 2: Affective Selection and Relational Investment**

Sponsored memorials reveal a significant diversification in identity construction; however, this pattern likely reflects an affective selection bias (where emotionally significant cases are chosen for sponsorship) rather than being a direct causal effect of sponsorship itself. These memorials disproportionately represent cases of strong familial bonds (like Güngör Aymete, created by his son) or tragic deaths that inherently invite emotional engagement individuals whose commemorations naturally lend themselves to relational storytelling.

The dramatic increases in narrative biographies (41.7%) and continuing bonds markers (33.3%) thus represent pre-existing relational investment that motivates sponsorship, rather than sponsorship creating emotional expression ex nihilo. As the data shows, sponsored memorials are typically created by family members with existing emotional ties or commemorate emotionally charged tragic cases, creating natural conditions for personal narrative from the outset.



**Figure 15 Gungör Aymete's biography showing how familial relationship enables personal narrative**

This selective personalization demonstrates how sponsorship functions as both enabler and amplifier of pre-existing relational bonds. While platform affordances allow for personalized narratives, the decision to sponsor and thus to invest in more elaborate memorialization is itself shaped by the nature of the relationship to the deceased: we sponsor those with whom we already maintain strong emotional connections.

Through this architectural mediation, the biography emerges not as a static text of closure, but as an ongoing negotiation between documentation and devotion a space

where platform conventions, cultural traditions, and personal emotion intersect to construct digital personhood that balances public legitimacy with private connection.

The following section turns to the flower layer, where these mediated structures of continuity and emotion become most palpable not in the static biography, but in the living stream of messages, emojis, and temporal rituals that sustain digital mourning over time.

### **6.3. Flower Layer: Ritual Continuity and the Thanatotechnological Transformation of Mourning**

As discussed in Section 5.2 the biography layer presents death in an orderly and factual manner, but its tone and structure shift according to the nature of loss. The enumerative style reflects a cultural need to remember without unraveling, to stabilize loss through formality. Such composition preserves the coherence of the self by foregrounding achievement over emotion.

They perform what may be called an aesthetics of control, maintaining the deceased's public image as complete and dignified, even in death.

This tendency to structure life as a résumé reflects a cultural need for continuity and composure to remember without unraveling.

In contrast, when death stems from accident or injustice, the narrative voice changes dramatically. It moves toward a news-report register, as in: "Dilara Dumru died after falling into an uncovered manhole in Istanbul," or "Emine Nur Nalbant passed away due to medical neglect." Here, affect emerges indirectly through circumstance: factual narration carries an ethical charge.

These stylistic patterns reveal the biography as a surface of mediation, a space that translates grief into socially legible categories; the accomplished life, the accident, the injustice while concealing the affective turbulence beneath.

Yet this composure is precisely what the flower layer disrupts. If the biography stabilizes identity through representation, the flower field restores mourning to interaction and continuity. It dismantles closure through repetition, address, and intimacy, turning static remembrance into a rhythm of participation.

In this layer, mourning is not archived but enacted.

Each message, emoji, or digital flower transforms the page into a living field of relational activity. Therefore the flower layer enacts mourning as relation a movement from reputation to presence, from the frozen narrative of death to the fluid performance of care.

In Dataset 1, flower messages are typically singular: “RIP ,” “Mekânın cennet olsun,” “Vatan sana minnettardır.” These expressions represent collective decorum rather than personal dialogue. In Dataset 2, however, repetition and direct address transform the same space into an ongoing conversation: “Good morning my angel,” “We celebrated your birthday today 🎂,” “Red was your favorite color .” Through these serial acts, mourning becomes iterative a rhythmic presence maintained through writing. The return button replaces the pilgrimage; emojis and short phrases replace prayer.

On Find A Grave, the platform’s affordances operate as ritual technologies. Messages can be posted at any time, remain permanently visible, and accumulate over years. In sponsored memorials where visibility and persistence are guaranteed this produces dense temporal layering, with more than 5,000 flower entries across only 24 pages in Dataset 2. However, this volume does not necessarily reflect a broad audience; in many cases, the same mourner returns hundreds of times. Continuity here is thus not collective but iterative a personal devotion enacted through routine return. Each repetition functions simultaneously as remembrance and renewal. The interface’s

durability converts affect into habit; grief becomes a practice of presence rather than a finite event.

This iterative rhythm exemplifies Bollmer's (2013) concept of affective labor the emotional work required to sustain attachment within mediated environments. Quantitatively, the continuity deepens across layers: in the biography, continuing bonds appear rarely. In the flower layer, however, these relational markers multiply: direct address to the deceased occurs in 36 percent of Dataset 1 messages and 71 percent of Dataset 2. The same affordances that guarantee visibility and persistence also sustain ongoing dialogue. Sponsorship transforms the memorial from a static epitaph into a communicative space one that invites return, repetition, and relational care.

Over time, these accumulated messages form an emotional archive resembling the sediment of offerings in physical cemeteries. Scrolling through them reveals the evolution of feeling from shock to serenity. Through such accumulation, mourning becomes not only personal but collective, as strangers join the ritual chain of empathy. As Sağır & Canayaz (2022) observe, Turkish users transform *taziye* from an event into an ongoing communicative act ritual not as occasion but as endurance. Each message or emoji becomes a micro-ritual: part prayer, part conversation, part algorithmic performance, where continuity itself is the ultimate expression of love.

In this sense, the flower layer stands at the intersection of cultural ritual and platform design. It is where technological logics of persistence and visibility meet the moral logics of care, respect, and remembrance. Through thanatotechnology, mourning becomes iterative rather than terminal; its temporality extends beyond the moment of death into the everyday rhythms of digital life.

#### 6.4. Continuing Bonds: Dialogues with the Dead

The emergence of continuing bonds marks a deeper shift from commemoration to ongoing relationship. While the biography frames the deceased as a completed life closed, coherent, and fixed in time the interactive layer beneath it brings that life back into motion, situating it within the mourner’s present. Empirically, this shift is clear: expressions of continuing bonds appear only in a handful of biographies (roughly four in Dataset 1 and eight in Dataset 2), yet they dominate the flower layer, where direct address occurs in about one-third of Dataset 1 messages and in more than two-thirds of Dataset 2. Sponsorship thus provides not only visibility and permanence (Treem & Leonardi, 2013) but also an emotional infrastructure that sustains dialogue across time (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996; Hepp, 2020).

A paradigmatic example is Selçuk Ahmet Ertansel’s sponsored memorial, which contains nearly 385 posts written almost entirely by his daughter. Her entries span two decades, each marking anniversaries, Father’s Days, and religious or seasonal milestones: “Tam 17 sene sensiz ve yalnız çok zor seni çok seviyorum yattığın yer incitmesin” (Seventeen years without you so hard, I love you so much; may your resting place be gentle), “Bugün o gün en uzun gece tarif edemem o acı yine bitmedi” (Today is that day the longest night the pain never ends), or “Her bayram balon alırdın bize canım babam seni çok seviyorum” (You used to buy us balloons every Bayram, my dear father, I love you so much).

Temporal self-marking (“sensiz 5 yıl dile kolay” / five years without you so hard to say) turns the memorial into a private chronicle of endurance. Each post situates memory within lived time: “Bugün babalar günü ve ben bu günü artık sevmiyorum çünkü yoksun” (Today is Father’s Day and I don’t like it anymore because you’re not here); “Regaip Kandilin kutlu olsun babacım” (Blessed Regaip Night, my father); “Yeni

eve taşındım babam ama yoksun” (I moved to a new house, dad, but you’re not here). Even digital media are woven into ritual space: one entry links to a YouTube video, extending remembrance beyond the platform.

Linguistically, the page alternates between Turkish, English, and hybrid formulas: “Mekânın cennet olsun (May your place be heaven) / Rest in Peace,” “Işıklar içinde uyu (Sleep in light) / We never forget you.” Such code-switching constructs what Walter (2015) calls a hybrid mourning grammar emotionally direct yet ritually anchored. Iteration itself becomes the bond: hundreds of small returns translate persistence into a habit of presence (Bollmer, 2013), transforming grief from finite event into ongoing practice.

A similar dynamic appears in Enver Yağcı’s memorial, comprising roughly 233 entries from his daughter over many years. Each message carries both remembrance and relational continuity:

“Seni çok özledim... 7 yıl oldu sen gideli ama hala dün gibi ayrılışımız” (I miss you so much... it’s been seven years since you left, yet it still feels like yesterday);

“Yakında torunun gelecek babacım” (Soon your grandchild will arrive, dad);

“Kızın Dr. unvanını aldı babacım” (Your daughter received her doctorate, dad).

These posts often appear bilingually “I miss you so much daddy... Nur içinde yat baban” (Rest in light, dad). Their alternation of English and Turkish formulas reflects both the globalized interface of Find A Grave and the hybrid identity of its Turkish users. The mourner uses the page as a conversational diary, continuing family life with the deceased: “Bugün kızın Dr. unvanını aldı babacım... İnşallah haberdar olmuştundur” (Today your daughter became a doctor, dad... I hope you know).

Together, these memorials show that continuity emerges through repetition rather than multiplicity. High message counts do not signal mass participation but

iterative devotion one person's emotional maintenance enacted through technological persistence. Over time, this single-user repetition often becomes intergenerational. On several pages, grandchildren eventually post their own messages transforming the memorial into a multi-voiced archive of familial continuity.

In this sense, the memorial operates as a digital heirloom (Odom et al., 2012): a repository of affective heritage where posts, emojis, and links become family relics. Authorship itself becomes a ritual practice each generation adding its textual layer to the same digital grave, just as families once gathered physically around shared tombstones. Remembrance thus shifts from spatial proximity (the cemetery visit) to textual proximity shared authorship on the same page.

Culturally, these dialogic practices signal a move toward post-secular hybridity. Traditional Turkish faith-referential blessings (“Allah rahmet eylesin” / May God have mercy on him), secular-poetic phrases (“Kalbimizdesin” / You're in our hearts), and Pop-religious formulas with Christian references (“Rest in Peace”) coexist seamlessly. Faith, affection, and routine intertwine without contradiction. Technologically, Find A Grave's affordances enable this coexistence, turning private grief into a durable, multilingual, intergenerational conversation.

Through these processes, the memorial ceases to be a record of death and becomes an ongoing text of life an archive continuously rewritten by the living in dialogue with the dead.

Theologically and culturally, this mode of relational continuity signals a move toward post-secular hybridity. The mourner's dialogue with the deceased may blend dua with secular phrases forming a hybrid lexicon that fuses religious cadence with emotional immediacy. This coexistence reflects the same ambivalence that defines contemporary Turkish mourning: faith and affection, ritual and intimacy, coexist

without contradiction. As these dialogic practices unfold across time and language, Find A Grave becomes not only a site of communication with the dead but also a medium where spiritual and secular vocabularies of care are continually negotiated setting the stage for the linguistic hybridity explored in the next section.

### **6.5. Language and Cultural Positioning: Linguistic Registers of Grief: Religious, Secular, and Global Formulas**

The linguistic landscape of Turkish memorials on Find A Grave reveals a complex layering of belief, emotion, and cultural adaptation. Messages left in the flower layer and short biographical epitaphs form a mosaic of three overlapping repertoires: Turkish faith-referential ritual formulas, secular–poetic idioms, and Christianized or globally circulating English phrases. Rather than replacing one another, these registers coexist, producing a hybrid mourning vernacular that bridges sacred continuity and modern expressivity.

Across both datasets, this hybridity is empirically traceable. In Dataset 1, traditional faith-referential Turkish expressions constitute roughly 16 percent of all flower messages, secular idioms 38 percent, and Christianized or global English formulas 29 percent. In Dataset 2 composed entirely of sponsored memorials each category expands: Traditional expressions rise to 29 percent, secular idioms to 54 percent, and English-derived phrases to 46 percent. The overlap between these categories demonstrates that Turkish users do not experience them as mutually exclusive but as emotionally complementary.

#### **Traditional Turkish faith-referential Formulas: Ritualized Blessings and Continuity of Faith**

Cultural expressions remain among the most persistent linguistic forms across the platform. These phrases reproduce the moral cadence of dua prayer as both

remembrance and blessing and signal the endurance of traditional ritual speech within a secular interface. Even when written without overt religious imagery, the structure of supplication persists: invoking divine mercy, light, or peace.

Such messages often cluster around traditional times of prayer or religious holidays, preserving the rhythm of mevlid and kandil commemorations within digital space. Their presence aligns with Walter’s (2015) notion of the “ritual persistence of sacred language” in mediated mourning, where digital media do not erase spirituality but relocate it into new temporal and technological frameworks.

### **Secular Aesthetics**

In parallel, secular formulas “Işıklar içinde uyu” (“Sleep within the lights”), “Kalbimizdesin” (“You are in our hearts”), “Toprağın incitmesin seni” (“May the earth not hurt you”), “Seni unutmayacağız” (“We will not forget you”), and “Daima bizimlesin” (“You are always with us”) have emerged as a distinctly Turkish idiom of non-religious remembrance. These phrases transform theological imagery into metaphors of warmth, illumination, and continuity.

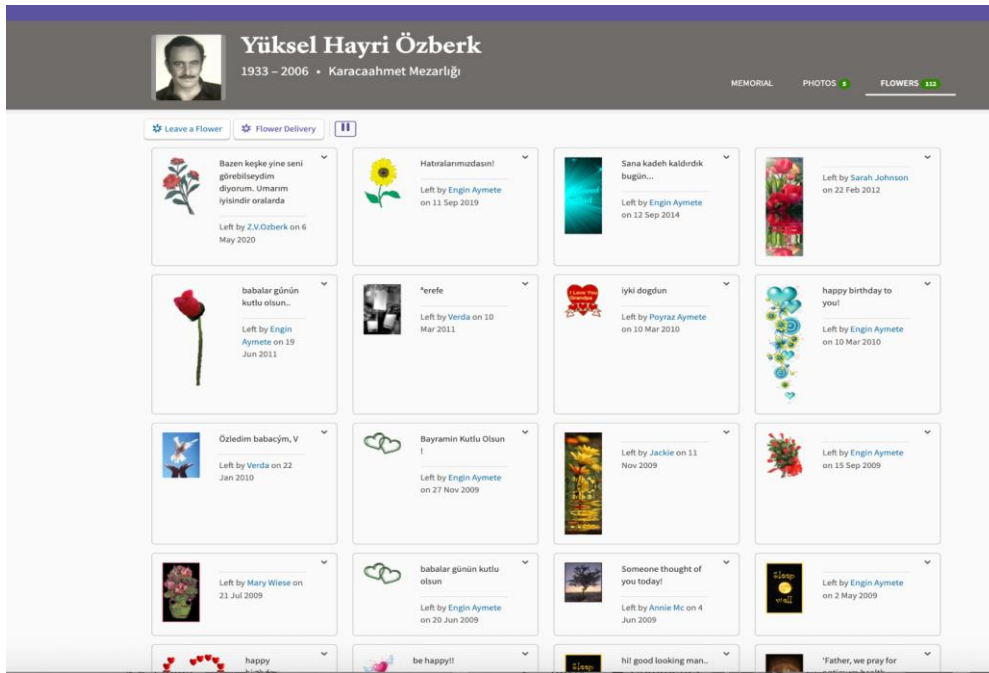
The expression “Işıklar içinde uyu”, for instance, replaces the divine afterlife with cosmic luminosity, while “Toprağın incitmesin seni” anthropomorphizes the earth as a gentle caregiver rather than a sacred domain. Together, such idioms perform what might be called the secular poetics of mourning a language that retains ritual rhythm while divesting it of doctrinal reference. Their prevalence in Dataset 2 suggests that secularization in Turkish mourning does not entail the disappearance of spirituality but its aesthetic transformation. The mourner still seeks transcendence, but through metaphor rather than theology.

### **Pop-religious References and Global English Formulas**

Alongside these local repertoires, English expressions such as “Rest in Peace,”, “R.i.p”, “Fly high,” “Heaven gained an angel,” “God bless,” , “Heavenly blessings,” circulate widely, even within Turkish-language memorials. These phrases function as

affective templates imported through global media and social networks. On Find A Grave, their presence is partly infrastructural English remains the platform’s default interface but also aspirational. Using English widens visibility, positioning the deceased within a global narrative of sympathy and ensuring their remembrance is legible to an international audience. Yet Turkish users do not deploy these expressions as markers of Christian belief. Instead, they operate as emotionally neutral idioms of compassion, detached from theological roots. For instance, one user writes: “Işıklar içinde uyu my friend, RIP ”a hybrid utterance that merges a secular Turkish blessing with a universalized English epitaph.

This linguistic fusion produces what can be termed post-secular pluralism: a mourning lexicon in which sacred invocation, secular metaphor, and global empathy coexist without contradiction. The same mourner may write “Kandilin mübarek olsun” one week and “Cheers to you today ” the next, without perceiving any inconsistency between the two as in the example of Yüksel Hayri Özbek’s memorial messages.



**Figure 16 Yüksel Hayri Özbek's memorial as an example for post-secular pluralism**

Such hybridity exemplifies how Turkish users translate emotional authenticity into multiple symbolic registers religious when seeking blessing, secular when expressing intimacy, global when seeking visibility.

Overall, the coexistence of these linguistic forms reflects not a fragmented mourning culture but a deeply adaptive one. Turkish digital mourners mobilize traditional, secular, and global vocabularies situationally choosing the phrase that best mediates between private emotion, cultural belonging, and the public gaze of the platform. Through this multiplicity, Find A Grave becomes not only a space of remembrance but a linguistic laboratory of modern Turkish grief, where faith, poetry, and empathy intertwine to articulate loss in a global yet culturally distinct voice.

The bilingual structure of Turkish memorials on Find A Grave reveals a subtle emotional division of linguistic labor. English and Turkish do not merely alternate as codes; they operate as distinct registers of affect and visibility. While English dominates the biography layer marking formality, universality, and platform compliance Turkish resurfaces in the flower layer as the language of intimacy, prayer, and kinship. This layered bilingualism transforms language itself into a cultural affordance: English ensures that grief is seen, Turkish ensures that it is felt.

In Dataset 1, over 90 percent of biographies are written in English; in Dataset 2, Turkish disappears altogether from the biographical text. This dominance reflects both the platform's infrastructural bias and the mourners' strategic adaptation. As Bucher & Helmond (2018) observe, digital systems shape participation by privileging linguistic forms that optimize visibility and searchability. On Find A Grave, English functions as a gatekeeper of recognition a way to ensure that the deceased can be found, understood, and validated within a global network of remembrance.

Yet this visibility comes at a cost. English biographies tend to adopt a universalized tone of mourning short, formulaic, and stripped of local idiom: “He was loved by all,” “rest in peace,” These global grief scripts are emotionally standardized templates circulating across digital memorials worldwide. In Turkish memorials, such scripts replace the specificity of local mourning with transnational legibility. The biography thus becomes a global CV of death public, polished, and detached from vernacular emotion.

In contrast, the flower message layer reclaims linguistic locality, transforming into the primary site for the social work of mourning. This shift from the formal English of the biography to the intimate vernacular of the flowers can be powerfully understood through Tony Walter's (1996) model of grief. Walter argues that the purpose of grief is not to detach from the deceased, but to construct a "durable biography" a narrative that allows the living to integrate the dead into their ongoing lives through conversations with others who knew them.

On Find a Grave, this "biographical work" is conducted overwhelmingly in Turkish. In Dataset 2, Turkish constitutes 63 percent of flower messages almost double the proportion in Dataset 1 (36 percent). Messages like “Sensiz bir bayram daha geçti” (Another holiday has passed without you) or “nerden esti bilmem? yaptigin domatesli sucuklari hatirladim..Özledim seni” (Not sure why it crossed my mind, but I remembered your tomato sucuk... Missing you) are not merely expressions of sadness and longing. They are the digital equivalent of the conversations Walter identifies as crucial: they are acts of biographical maintenance, ensuring the deceased remains a active presence within the relational and cultural fabric of the living. The platform thus digitally recreates a traditional bifurcation: the English biography serves as the formal obituary (ölüm ilanı), while the Turkish flower field becomes the space for taziye the

intimate, conversational condolence where the "durable biography" is actively built and sustained.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this pattern reflects the performative flexibility required for mourning in a global digital space. The mourner does not choose one language over the other; they alternate depending on the emotional and social affordance of the moment, a practice that directly serves Walter's model of biographical construction. English expresses universality an outward gaze toward the imagined public that grants the biography visibility. Turkish, by contrast, enacts the relational presence and continuity that makes the biography durable. As one user wrote, "Işıklar içinde uyu, rip." (Rest in light). This switch mid-sentence embodies a code-switching of biographical intent. English ("rip") offers accessibility and legibility within the platform's global infrastructure. Turkish ("Işıklar içinde uyu") delivers the cultural and emotional resonance necessary to weave the deceased into a personal and enduring narrative. This bilingual rhythm reveals an implicit affective hierarchy where English indexes visibility and standardization, while Turkish indexes authenticity, belonging, and the continuity of tradition. The mourner thus navigates between building a biography for the world and building one for themselves. A poignant example can be found on the memorial for Aliye Dilligil Rona, where a mourner writes: "great untie. ruhuna (fatiha)." This hybrid utterance is a perfect microcosm of the bilingual mourning practice. It begins with a global, affectionate term in English ("great auntie"), establishing the personal relationship in a language of universal kinship. It then seamlessly switches to a deeply local and religious Turkish ritual the request for a Fatiha prayer for her soul ("ruhuna fatiha"). This code-switch is a switch in function: English is used for the relational identification (who she was to them), while Turkish is used for the spiritual intercession (a culturally specific act of remembrance and blessing).

These hybrid utterances fuse a global sympathy with a local, relational address, suggesting that bilingual mourning is not an index of linguistic loss but of active cultural negotiation. Mourners use English to ensure the biography is findable, yet they return to Turkish to ensure it is lived.

In the Turkish context, this interplay also redefines the secular–religious boundary. English expressions such as “Rest in Peace” function as universal markers of care within the global "grammar" of mourning. Turkish phrases like “Nur yagsin üzerine..isiklarda uyu” or “Kandilin kutlu olsun,” however, evoke a spiritual intimacy rooted in local tradition, deepening the biographical connection. Bilingual mourning thus enables a vernacular flexibility, allowing the expression of grief through both universal and culturally-specific idioms without contradiction.

Ultimately, the bilingual mourning practices observed across both datasets illustrate how Turkish users transform Find A Grave into a platform for what Walter would recognize as dual-layered biography work. Language becomes the medium for this navigation. In the biography, English constructs a public record of a death. In the flower layer, Turkish performs the ongoing social work of integrating that death into life, transforming it into a relationship to be continually lived with. The platform, in turn, sustains both hosting grief that is simultaneously transnational in its reach and deeply personal in its Turkish-infused continuity.

## **6.6. Temporal Rituals and the Digital Recalibration of Mourning**

Time structures the moral and emotional rhythm of mourning. In Turkish funerary culture, commemoration unfolds through ritual intervals the 7th day, 40th day, and visits during bayram or kandil each marking both continuity and closure. These events, centered on bodily gathering, prayer, and shared food, transform grief into a collective rhythm of presence. Yet when mourning migrates to a digital space such as

Find A Grave, this temporality is reconfigured. Ritual time becomes asynchronous, enacted not through physical assembly but through serial acts of writing, posting, and returning.

The empirical data illustrate this transformation clearly. In Dataset 1, references to traditional intervals appear only in 2 percent of flower messages. Mentions of religious holidays (e.g., bayram or kandil) reach 8 percent, and anniversary greetings 18 percent. By contrast, in Dataset 2 these proportions shift dramatically: the 7th- and 40th-day rituals vanish completely, while anniversaries almost double (38 percent) and religious holidays increase sixfold (46 percent). Mourning thus becomes decoupled from fixed temporal thresholds and reattached to recurring cultural rhythms.

This transformation exemplifies the digital recalibration of ritual temporality. Traditional Turkish mourning is cyclical yet finite a rhythm that moves from communal gathering toward symbolic closure. Online, the same rhythm becomes open-ended and recursive. Users return to the memorial page on Bayrams, Mother's/Father's Day, birthdays, death anniversaries, or special cultural dates such as World Theatre Day, leaving notes or flowers. These acts are not random expressions of nostalgia but deliberate renewals of obligation; they compose a new ritual grammar of repetition. The mourner enacts remembrance through periodic posts, converting time itself into a medium of relationship.

This shift resonates with what Heidi Campbell (2012, 2022) describes as digital religion not religion merely practiced online, but a field where technological systems and religious meaning mutually shape each other. The Turkish case demonstrates this entanglement vividly: Find A Grave is not a neutral container for mourning but an environment that structures how remembrance can occur. Its persistence, visibility, and asynchronous design provide what Campbell calls affordances of faith practice:

technical conditions that allow cultural obligations to survive in transformed form. Through these affordances, the moral rhythm of remembrance once synchronized by communal calendars becomes individualized yet publicly traceable through a timeline of posts.

Helland's (2000) distinction between religion online and online religion sharpens this observation. Flower and message layers on Find A Grave are not passive reflections of offline piety (religion online); they function as online religion a practice where ritual itself is performed through interaction with the interface. Each return, each textual "dua," each flower icon becomes a micro-rite enacted within a technologically mediated sacred space. The ritual is not only remembered but reproduced, its efficacy grounded in repetition and visibility rather than co-presence.

Temporal boundaries dissolve as mourners can re-enter the ritual whenever they log in, collapsing the separation between "after" and "again." Each post accumulates into what could be called an archive of affect a visible sediment of emotion that turns grief into a living, iterative practice. In this sense, digital repetition does not trivialize mourning but enables a new kind of temporal intimacy, where absence is managed through the possibility of continual return.

From the perspective of deep mediatization (Hepp, 2020), this continuity is not accidental. The technical infrastructure of the platform embeds cultural practice into an always-available communicative framework, producing what Hepp calls "a re-figuration of social relations through digital connectivity." In Find A Grave, this re-figuration operates through time rather than space: the act of remembering is reorganized by the affordance of perpetual accessibility. The "visit" becomes an interface action; the memorial evolves as a chronologically layered dialogue between users and the deceased.

Within the Turkish cultural frame, this produces ambivalent effects. The disappearance of the 7th- and 40th-day gatherings signifies a weakening of embodied collectivity the shared prayer, food, and voice that once anchored communal mourning. Yet the emergence of festival- and anniversary-based postings shows that the ritual rhythm endures, translated into the idiom of digital recurrence. The act of logging in to post a message on a religious holiday re-situates the communal obligation in a personal but still publicly visible gesture. The collective voice becomes distributed across time, sustained by technological persistence rather than shared presence.

Thus, Find A Grave exemplifies how digital infrastructures can host continuing bonds without reproducing traditional ritual form. The platform's affordances of visibility and persistence enable mourners to sustain a moral relationship to the deceased that aligns with Turkish sensibilities of remembrance dua becomes text, ziyaret becomes digital visitation, and repetition replaces closure. In this hybrid temporal order, technology becomes not an external influence but a participant in the ongoing negotiation between sacred rhythm and everyday time.

In Campbell's terms, this is digital religion as lived mediation: the site where spiritual obligation and technological affordance co-produce new moral temporalities. Mourning no longer follows a finite sequence but unfolds as an enduring practice, shaped by both cultural inheritance and algorithmic infrastructure. This is the essence of the digital recalibration of mourning a transformation through which tradition persists, not by resisting media, but by learning to breathe within their time.

### **6.7. Public Visibility and Private Continuity**

Across both datasets, Turkish mourning on Find A Grave unfolds through a shifting balance between public visibility and private continuity between the impulse to document and the need to relate. What appears, at first glance, as a digital archive of the

dead is, in practice, a living network of remembrance and care. Dataset 1, built from non-sponsored memorials, reflects the platform's early ethos as a public repository factual, collective, and display-oriented. Dataset 2, composed of sponsored memorials, reconfigures this ethos into a more intimate and sustained form of mourning, where repetition and personalization transform remembrance into an ongoing relation.

The biography layer crystallizes this contrast most clearly. In non-sponsored pages, life stories are presented like *résumés* structured, coherent, and carefully composed. This style reflects a cultural preference for dignity, control, and composure in the face of loss, turning the biography into a socially acceptable presentation of mourning. In sponsored memorials, however, the biographical mask opens slightly, allowing emotion to surface through affectional detail or collective reflection. Yet the fuller and more spontaneous expressions of grief move beyond the biographical field into the interactive flower layer.

The flower layer shifts mourning from representation to participation. Each flower, short message, or symbolic gesture functions as a micro-ritual, extending commemoration across time. In Dataset 1, these gestures remain relatively generic short, formulaic phrases such as “*Mekânın cennet olsun*” (“May your place be heaven”) or “Rest in Peace”, offered as respectful acknowledgments rather than ongoing dialogue. In Dataset 2, by contrast, messages become longer, more expressive, and personally anchored: “*Bayramın mübarek olsun annem*” (“Happy Bayram, my mother”), “We celebrated your birthday today.” Through these recurring messages, mourning takes on the rhythm of dialogue rather than ceremony.

In memorials dedicated to Dilara Dumru, Tayfun Kuzu, and Hrant Dink, this dialogue turns confessional and morally charged. Mourners write not only to remember but to confront guilt, anger, and complicity. On Dilara's page, users express both

indignation and shame: “Yazık, ailene büyük paralar ödediler, ama dava açmadılar. Bu utançla yaşayacaklar” (“It’s a shame that her parents were paid off and did not sue; they will live with this shame”). Others direct their rage toward systemic failure: “Buyur buradan yak. Yakalayacaksın o yolu yapan adamı bir de temiz raporu veren kontrol mühendisini... Mutlu mutlu yat güzelim sen şimdilik” (“Catch the man who built that road and the engineer who approved it... Rest peacefully for now, beautiful”). Tayfun Kuzu’s memorial echoes this fatalistic critique: “Bu coğrafyada yaşamının bir bedeli var, Tayfun o bedeli ödedi” (“There is a cost to living in this part of the world, and Tayfun paid it”).

The tone reaches its most explicitly moral form in Hrant Dink’s page, where grief becomes civic confession. Visitors write: “Hangi siyasi düşünce bunu açıklayabilir... hangi insan düşünceleri yüzünden bir kaldırım köşesinde cansız yatmayı hak eder?” (“What political idea could explain this... what kind of humanity allows a man to lie lifeless on a sidewalk for his beliefs?”). Others turn mourning into direct moral address: “Nur içinde yat (RIP) için rahatlatır mı bilmem ama, Ermeni olduğun için değil, adam gibi adam olduğun için kıydılar sana.” (“Rest in light I don’t know if it brings peace, but they didn’t kill you for being Armenian, they killed you for being a man of conscience.”)

Together, these messages constitute a confessional mode of mourning, where remembrance becomes moral speech. Users do not only memorialize; they confess, accuse, and self-reflect. This moral layering aligns with the guilt dimension of continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996, pp. 72–74), which interprets guilt as a means of maintaining the relationship with the deceased rather than as pathology. Through confession, mourners attempt to repair unfinished emotional business and sustain moral continuity. The page thus becomes both witness and confessional booth a space where guilt transforms into dialogue. In this sense, Find A

Grave operates simultaneously as a forum of accountability and as an emotional refuge. It becomes a site where affect and ethics intertwine: remembrance is practiced through confession, confession becomes a medium of continuing the bond, and the act of writing itself offers emotional release a mediated space where grief is both expressed and eased. This dual function mirrors what Klass and Silverman describe as the therapeutic power of articulation: by voicing guilt and regret, mourners re-establish both moral and emotional equilibrium.

The symbolic language of emojis further illustrates how emotion and biography are expressed through digital signs. These icons are not ornamental but communicative compressed gestures of identity and feeling. Their use differs markedly between datasets.

In Dataset 1, emojis function as personal codes: a music note for a musician, a Beşiktaş symbol for a football supporter, or a business emblem for a Sabancı family member. Each acts as a small biographical signature linking memory to individuality. In Dataset 2, the emphasis shifts from visual shorthand to verbal intimacy. Emojis persist a heart icon, a rose, a crescent but now punctuate rather than replace text. The expressive labor moves from image to language: longer, warmer, directly addressed messages carry the emotional weight once borne by icons. This contrast shows how the semiotic economy of mourning adapts to the depth of engagement when grief is collective, icons speak; when it becomes sustained and personal, words take over.

Across these layers, the progression from résumé-like biographies to dialogic and confessional flower messages, and from personalized emojis to emotionally saturated text, demonstrates how Find A Grave mediates mourning as a hybrid practice. The platform does not replace ritual; it reshapes it. The public and the personal, the textual and the visual, coexist within the same commemorative field. Through stories,

symbols, confession, and repeated acts of posting, Turkish mourners transform the digital archive into an affective and moral ecology one where memory endures not through closure but through return, reflection, confession, and the quiet relief of being heard.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Turkish mourning practices are not simply transplanted into digital environments but are dynamically reconfigured through the cultural and technological grammar of Find a Grave. By examining how Turkish users compose biographies, post flower messages, and interact with platform affordances such as sponsorship, the research reveals that mourners do not abandon traditional repertoires when entering digital spaces; rather, they adapt, abbreviate, and restage them to preserve moral meaning, emotional continuity, and ritual rhythm. In doing so, the study advances digital thanatology by integrating a non-Western case into a literature largely shaped by Euro-American examples, showing that digital mourning is a field of active cultural translation where inherited traditions are not displaced but re-situated within global infrastructures of remembrance.

The findings show that the movement of Turkish mourning practices into digital space is best understood not as cultural loss, but as a process of selective translation and re-placement. Users preserve traditional expressions, yet subtly recalibrate them to the platform's textual and visual formats such as shortening prayers, pairing them with emojis, or combining them with globally circulating phrases. The expression "RIP," for example, appears increasingly detached from its Christian origins and is used as a culturally "neutral" marker of condolence rather than as a replacement for Turkish formulas. Its frequent co-occurrence with messages like "Mekânın cennet olsun" (May she be granted paradise) or "Allah rahmet eylesin" (May God have mercy on him/her) suggests not substitution but layering, where global and local idioms are stacked to intensify affect and expand the emotional register of mourning. This hybridity extends beyond language. In line with Campbell's conceptualisation of digital religion as an integrated rather than dualistic space, Turkish users exercise ritual agency without

clerical mediation, shaping remembrance collectively through user-driven practices that fuse sacred idioms with everyday digital vernaculars.

The contrast between the biographical and flower-message layers reveals how continuing bonds are enacted through different registers of digital expression. Biographies tend to follow a formal, third-person, retrospective mode that situates the deceased within a coherent life narrative public, static, and oriented toward “who they were.” By contrast, flower messages operate as an intimate, relational space written in the present tense, often in direct address, and oriented toward “who we still are to each other.” This shift from narration to dialogue indicates that the maintenance of the relationship extends beyond commemoration into ongoing interaction. Sponsorship magnifies this dynamic by transforming memorials from static information pages into spaces of sustained care: permanence enables routine visitation, periodic updating, and long-term tending, while enhanced visibility increases the likelihood of continued remembrance by others. For many users, sponsoring a page also carries a moral and affective dimension, offering a sense of fulfilment, duty, or “doing right by the deceased,” which adds an ethical layer to the act of digital tending. In this respect, sponsorship functions as a digital equivalent to tending a physical grave an act of upkeep, visibility, and respect that symbolically “keeps the site alive.” Posting recurring messages especially on anniversaries, religious holidays, or difficult personal dates thus constitutes a form of emotional and care labor through which mourners actively invest time, affect, and moral intent to preserve the bond. Viewed this way, digital mourning is not merely symbolic expression but a continuous practice of relational maintenance that parallels offline forms of caregiving.

The temporal structure of mourning also undergoes a subtle transformation in the digital environment, shifting from finite, event-based rituals to ongoing cycles of remembrance. Traditional milestones such as the seventh and fortieth days once marked

by collective gatherings, bodily presence, and shared prayer appear far less prominently in the digital sphere, indicating a dilution of fixed ritual intensities as these once-central temporal markers lose their singular prominence. In their place, remembrance becomes anchored to recurring dates such as anniversaries, birthdays, religious holidays, and kandil nights, producing a more personalised and sustained rhythm of return. This shift from singular thresholds to cyclical revisitations reflects not a weakening of ritual, but its redistribution across longer temporal horizons. Importantly, the move from embodied, co-present ceremonies to individualised digital gestures marks a clear loss of physicality; the communal act of gathering, reciting, or sharing food is replaced by the solitary yet repeatable actions of clicking, posting, or leaving a symbolic icon. In Connerton's terms, practices that were once incorporated through the body are now enacted through habituated digital behaviours, forming a new repertoire of "incorporated" mnemonic acts suited to the affordances of an always-accessible platform. Rather than occurring at predetermined moments of closure, mourning becomes a re-enactable ritual that can be revisited at any time, sustaining social memory through iterative digital performance.

Symbolic expression on Find a Grave develops its own layered visual repertoire through which mourners condense emotional, cultural, and spiritual meanings into platform-compatible forms. Three broad categories of symbols can be observed: universal affective symbols such as roses, hearts, and candles that communicate empathy and sorrow across linguistic boundaries; culturally embedded religious markers, most commonly in the form of calligraphic representations of sacred words rather than object-based icons; and personal identity markers including music notes, sports emblems, or hobby-related visuals that anchor remembrance in the individuality of the deceased. These symbols do not operate interchangeably; rather, they form a functional hierarchy in which universal symbols convey shared sentiment, cultural–

religious markers assert moral and spiritual grounding, and personal icons evoke biographical specificity. The contrast between memorials for public figures and those that are individually tended and marked by close, ongoing relational bonds further illustrates this semiotic differentiation. Public figure memorials typically display a compact, generic emoji grammar dense clusters of affective symbols functioning as “drive-by condolences” within a fast-scrolling public mourning economy. By contrast, individually tended memorials privilege a more deliberate and selective use of symbols, often limiting visual expression to a single rose or heart, with emotional depth carried through the accompanying text. In line with Walter’s notion of communicative ritual, these symbolic acts render private grief publicly legible, enabling ritual participation through a shared, platform-specific visual alphabet. At the same time, digital symbolism operates less as a direct translation of religious concepts and more as a way of evoking the emotional atmosphere traditionally created through prayer and remembrance. The candle emoji, for instance, does not function as a visual equivalent of any specific Christian concept, but has been culturally neutralised and adopted as a general sign of light, presence, and respectful remembrance. Similarly, angel imagery is used to gesture towards notions of spiritual peace and transcendence. Rather than displacing established symbolic repertoires, this process restages their affective intent in a visually accessible idiom aligned with the communicative norms of networked mourning.

Find a Grave’s technical architecture shapes not only how mourning is expressed but also how it endures over time. The platform’s affordances particularly visibility, persistence, editability, and association (Treem & Leonardi, 2013) do not operate in isolation; rather, they form an interdependent ecosystem that structures the conditions of digital remembrance. Persistence ensures that memorials remain accessible, visibility enables them to be encountered by others, editability allows for ongoing updates, and association facilitates relational linkages through shared contributions. Features such as

sponsorship, the Flowers tab, and photo uploads gain significance precisely through this interaction: sponsorship enhances persistence and visibility, thereby encouraging repeated visits; the Flowers feature enables associative participation by multiple mourners; and editability supports the continual reshaping of the memorial over time. In this way, platform affordances co-produce the temporal, relational, and expressive dynamics of mourning. From a deep-mediatization perspective (Hepp), the platform functions less as a neutral tool and more as an embedded environment that gradually integrates into the routine practices of remembering. Without making explicit cultural claims, the design subtly privileges forms of mourning that are individualised, text-based, and durable. This orientation may sit in partial tension with the more collective, embodied, and closure-oriented nature of traditional Turkish mourning rituals, where practices unfold over designated periods and are culturally expected to reach resolution. Yet the platform's flexibility allows users to navigate this space in culturally situated ways, adapting its affordances to sustain practices of care, continuity, and remembrance within a digital context.

Digital mourning emerges as a domain where relational, ritual, and technological dimensions fold into one another. The continuing bonds that link the living and the dead do not merely persist online; they acquire a different texture as they are archived, resurfaced, and gently reanimated through features such as memorial updates and message cycles. This relational thread intersects with the shaping force of deep mediatization, whereby the platform's routines and affordances settle into the everyday habits of remembrance. Perspectives from digital religion further illustrate how devotional language is adapted in digital contexts through cumulative everyday expression, rather than through conventionally authorised forms of religious articulation, while ritual theory helps register how commemoration is enacted through iterative gestures that echo, without replacing, embodied gatherings. These strands

indicate the value of a culturally situated lens: Turkish mourning online is neither a simple secularisation nor a direct transplantation of religious practice, but a distinctive hybridity that layers inherited formulas, personal feeling, and globally circulating expressions into a coherent repertoire. Centering this case does more than apply existing theories; it widens them, showing how frameworks oriented around bonds, mediation, and ritual can be read in concert to account for forms of grief that are locally grounded yet legible within global networks.

At the same time, this study is not without limitations, which in turn open productive avenues for further research. First, it focuses on Find a Grave as a single-platform case to enable depth of analysis; future work would benefit from comparative research across platforms with different architectures and social dynamics, such as Instagram, Facebook, or dedicated memorial sites, to examine how platform design shapes the expression and endurance of grief. Second, because the analysis draws solely on publicly accessible content, it cannot fully capture contributors' relationships to the memorials or their motivations whether they are bereaved users or hobbyist contributors pointing to the value of qualitative or ethnographic approaches that explore lived experiences of digital mourning more closely. Beyond these methodological considerations, future research could examine how digital mourning practices vary across regional, generational, or diasporic Turkish contexts, thereby enriching understanding of the cultural specificities and internal diversity of Turkish grief expressions online.

Despite these boundaries, the analysis offers insight into how digital mourning is not a uniform or universal phenomenon, but one that takes shape through the cultural repertoires people bring to it. In examining the Turkish context, it becomes clear that digital remembrance does not signal a break with tradition, but a recalibration of existing practices within new communicative conditions. It is hoped that these insights

contribute to a more culturally attentive understanding of how remembrance is being reshaped in the twenty-first century.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how Turkish mourning practices are being reshaped within digital environments through a case study of Find a Grave, a global online memorial platform. It explores how culturally grounded expressions of remembrance are transferred, adapted, and sustained online; how ongoing relationships with the deceased are maintained; and how platform design influences the form and temporality of grieving practices. The analysis is primarily qualitative, examining the language and symbolism of memorial biographies and flower messages. This is supplemented by quantitative frequencies derived from a systematic coding of condolence formulas, temporal markers, and emojis, enabling a comparative analysis of sponsored and non-sponsored memorials. The findings show that traditional Turkish mourning repertoires are not replaced in digital settings but reformulated in ways that preserve cultural texture while accommodating new modes of expression and connection. Digital mourning emerges as culturally inflected rather than homogenised, shaped by the interplay between inherited traditions, individual practices of grief work, and the affordances of the platform. In examining the Turkish context, it becomes clear that digital remembrance does not signal a break with tradition, but a recalibration of existing practices within new communicative conditions; the movement of Turkish mourning practices into digital space is best understood not as cultural loss, but as a process of selective translation and re-placement. These insights contribute to a more culturally situated understanding of how mourning practices evolve within networked environments, highlighting the need to consider local cultural repertoires when analysing digital grief.

**Keywords:** Thanatotechnology; Digital Mourning; Continuing Bonds; Platform Affordances; Turkish Mourning Practices

## ÖZET

Bu tez, Türk yas tutma pratiklerinin dijital ortamlar içinde nasıl yeniden şekillendiğini Find a Grave adlı küresel çevrimiçi anma platformu üzerinden incelemektedir. Çalışma, kültürel olarak köklü anma biçimlerinin dijital ortama nasıl aktarıldığını, uyarlandığını ve sürdürüldüğünü; ölenlerle olan ilişkilerin nasıl devam ettirildiğini; ve platform tasarımının yas pratiklerinin biçimi ve zamansallığı üzerindeki etkisini araştırmaktadır. Analiz temelde nitel bir yaklaşıma dayanmaktadır ve anma biyografilerinin iletileri ile çiçek mesajlarının dil ve sembolizmini incelemektedir. Buna ek olarak, taziye formülleri, zamansal göstergeler ve emojielerin sistematik kodlamasından elde edilen nicel sıklık verileri, sponsorlu ve sponsorsuz anıtlar arasında karşılaştırmalı bir analiz yapılmasını sağlamaktadır. Bulgular, geleneksel Türk yas repertuarlarının dijital ortamlarda yerini kaybetmediğini, aksine kültürel dokuyu korurken yeni ifade ve bağ kurma biçimlerine uyum sağlayacak şekilde yeniden biçimlendiğini göstermektedir. Dijital yas tutma, homojenleşmiş bir olgu olmaktan ziyade kültürel olarak biçimlenmiş bir pratik olarak ortaya çıkmakta; miras alınan gelenekler, bireysel yas çalışmaları ve platformun sağladığı imkânlar arasındaki etkileşimle şekillenmektedir. Türk bağlamı incelendiğinde, dijital anma pratiklerinin gelenekle bir kopuşa değil, mevcut uygulamaların yeni iletişim koşulları altında yeniden ayarlanmasına işaret ettiği görülmektedir; Türk yas pratiklerinin dijital alana taşınması ise kültürel bir kayıp olarak değil, seçici bir çeviri ve yeniden konumlandırma süreci olarak anlaşılmalıdır. Bu bulgular, dijital yasin ağ bağlantılı ortamlarda nasıl evrildiğine dair daha kültürel olarak yerleşik bir anlayışa katkıda bulunmakta ve dijital yas analizlerinde yerel kültürel repertuarların dikkate alınması gerektiğini vurgulamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tanatoteknoloji; Dijital Yas; Süregelen Bağlar (Continuing Bonds); Platform Olanakları (Affordances); Türk Yas Pratikleri