Mourning Practices on the Internet

1. Project

Adopting a (media-)linguistic perspective the project 'mourning practices on the internet' examines how people express their grief on memorial sites (e.g., www.gedenkseiten.de) and in social web communities (e.g., Twitter), and how this form of mourning is discussed in public discourse. Subsequently, we want to explore how this public discourse is shaped by and in turn shapes digital grief practices on a meta-level.

In order to answer our research questions (see section 2), we have compiled two multimodal corpora from different online sources where mourning practices take place. In order to examine these corpora, we follow a circular approach (see section 3).
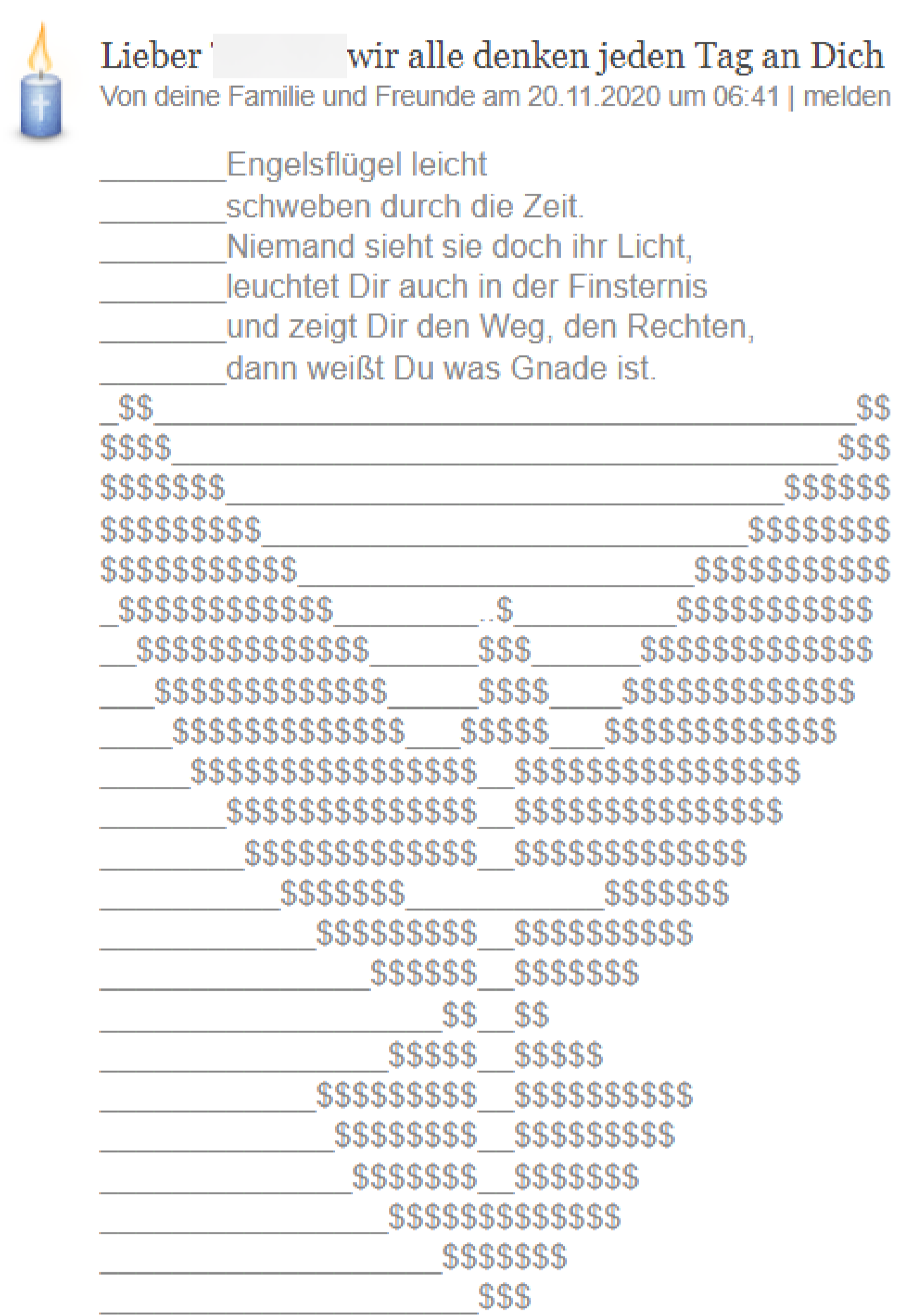

Fig. 1: ASCII art with religious symbols on a memorial site

2. Main Research Questions

Regarding our **data analyses** (corpus 1) we are interested, on the one hand, in the patterned verbalisation of condolences after the loss of a loved one, but also after the death of a famous person (see Frick 2022) or in the aftermath of tragic events such as terror attacks or plane crashes (see Marx 2019). On the other hand, these practices are usually multimodal as they involve different semiotic resources (see Fig. 1). In this respect, the project examines, for example, the use of ASCII art withing the candle texts, different functions of emojis in social media mourning (see point 5), the specific arrangement of images, sound and text on the obituary pages or the interplay of hashtags and similarly reused images on Twitter.

Concerning the **meta-level** (corpus 2), we examine the effects of these new farewell and condolence practices on the social discourse of mourning in the light of their impact on online (and offline) communities. We are, for instance, interested in the perception and evaluation of highly stereotyped expressions of digital mourning. This reflects ideas about mourning norms and their potential change, but it also contributes to the ongoing debate of publicly communicating private topics and the handling of sensitive data on the internet.

Fig. 2: Headlines on online mourning practices

3. Corpora & Methods

Our data base consists of two corpora: Corpus 1 contains data from various web sources (e.g., online memorial sites, social networks), corpus 2 of media reports covering online mourning practices (see Fig. 2).

- Corpus 1 contains two subcorpora: a) text and images of the online memorial www.gedenkseiten.de (roughly 22'000 obituaries and 1.3 million candle texts as of 09/2022) and b) a Twitter corpus (23'997'314 tweets to date)
- Corpus 2 contains press reports about online mourning practices (57'941 articles as of 09/2022) (see Fig. 2)

In order to analyse the data, a circular approach using quantitative and qualitative methods (see Bubenhofer 2009) is used.
1. data-driven inductive approaches (such as frequency lists, keywords or collocations) are applied in order to detect important thematic contexts and patterns.
2. qualitative methods (e.g., hermeneutic and ethnographic approaches) are used in order to examine and interpret the emergent patterns identified by the inductive paradigm.

With this circular approach we strive to capture the dynamics of community building on the internet and to examine not only the linguistic patterns of digital mourning practices but also the impact they have on the societal discourse about grief in general.
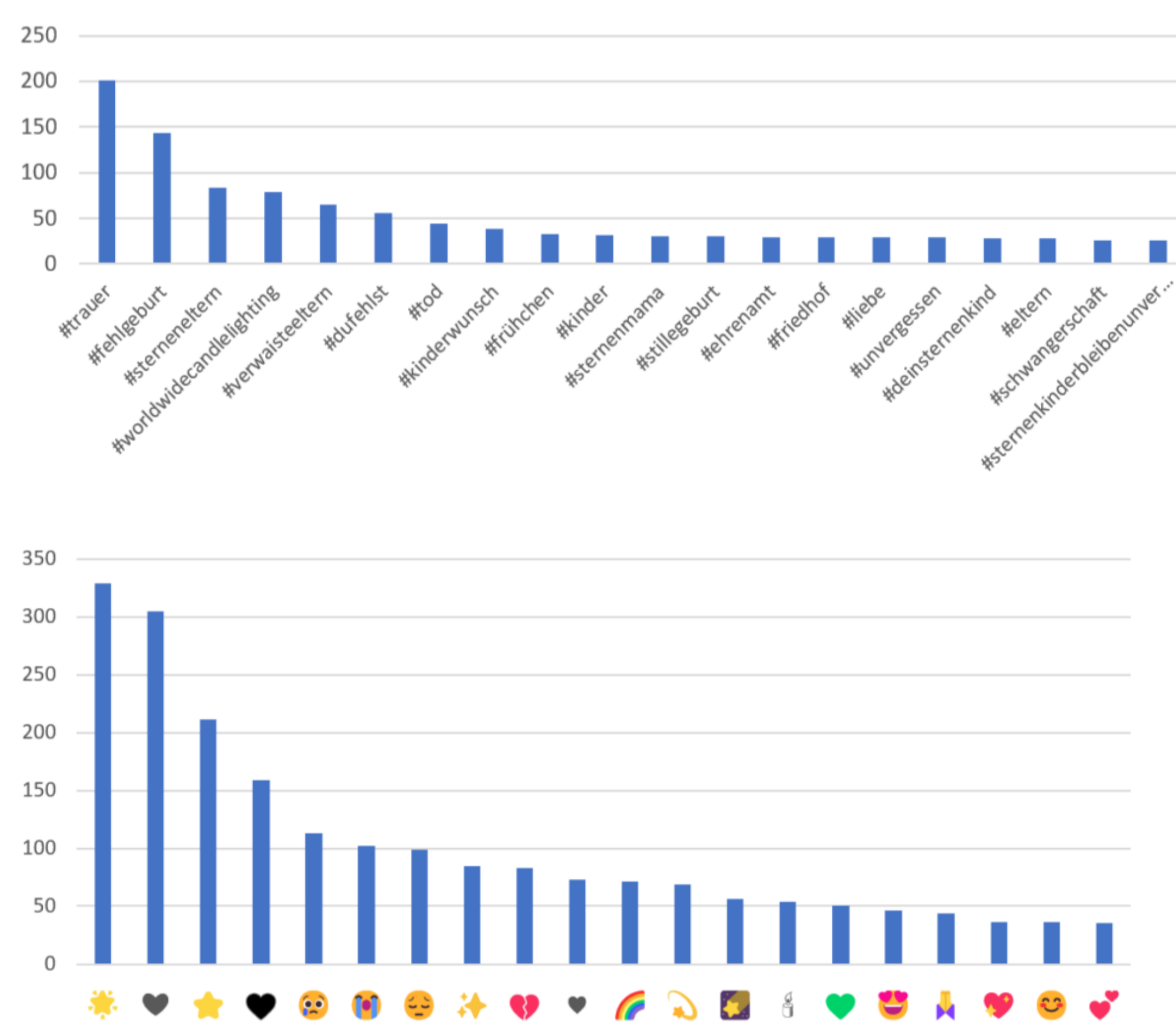

Fig. 3: Hashtags and emojis in mourning for "Sternenkinder"

Fig. 4: Tweet following the terror attack in Berlin (2016)

4. Preliminary Findings

- When expressing grief, people not only write about the deceased, but often **communicate with the deceased** themselves, especially on birthdays or death anniversaries. On the linguistic level this can be shown, for example, by the very frequent use of the deictic pronoun *du*.
- In addition to individual mourning for loved ones, **collective mourning** has become very popular on social networks. People thereby express solidarity and sympathy in the wake of tragic events such as terrorist attacks (see Fig. 4). Strongly patterned Hashtags such as #RIP, jesuisX or #prayforX are becoming emblematic in the process and serve as a means of identification with the mourning community (see Giaxoglou 2020).
- Digital mourning practices often draw on **religious communication and symbols** (see Fig.1). On online memorial sites, both verbal and multimodal references to religious practices (e.g., virtual candles designed like grave lights) can be found. However, the religious function or origin of these references has often faded and may be unknown to the mourners. Nevertheless, religion still proves to be an important reference point for coping with grief.
- Regarding **multimodality**, the frequent use of ASCII art in individual mourning on the memorial pages is striking and seems unusually out of time. A dove with a cross on her body, for example, is represented by a specific arrangement of letters and numbers (see Fig. 1). In social media mourning we often find emojis combined with text; sad faces, for example, but also emojis that represent objects (candles or flowers for example) or serve to express sympathy (like heart shaped symbols).
- The analysis of tweets concerning so-called "Sternenkinder", i.e., children who die before or (shortly) after birth, reveals that the hashtag #trauer (#grief) was used most frequently, followed by #fehlgeburt (#miscarriage) and #Sterneneltern (#parents of "Sternenkinder"). With the hashtag #dufehlst (#youaremissing), the deceased child itself is addressed, whereas the hashtag #love indicates the strong link between the emotions #trauer (grief) and #liebe (love). The graph in Fig. 3 illustrates the typical long-tail distribution of the used hashtags meaning that a few hashtags are used frequently, and a lot of hashtags are used rarely.

5. Open Questions

- Methodological questions: How can we filter the abundance of data to obtain relevant subsets while still following an inductive and data-driven paradigm? How can we make use of our data in an ethically and legally adequate way?
- Research desiderata: How will digital mourning develop and what will it look like in the future? Will it be even more multimodal?

Contact

Prof. Dr. Christa Dürscheid
  duerscheid@ds.uzh.ch
Dr. Karina Frick
  karina.frick@uzh.ch
Dr. Christina Margrit Siever
  christina.siever@uzh.ch

References

1. Bubenhofer, Noah (2009): Sprachgebrauchsmuster. Korpuslinguistik als Methode der Diskurs- und Kulturanalyse. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter.
2. Frick, Karina (2022): „ich heule Rotz und Wasser!" – Metaperspektiven auf Online-Fan-Trauer. In: Meier-Vieracker, Simon/Hauser, Stefan (eds.): Fankulturen und Fankommunikation. Bern: Peter Lang, 105–129.
3. Giaxoglou, Korina (2020): A narrative approach to social media mourning: small stories and affective positioning. New York: Routledge.
4. Marx, Konstanze (2019): Kollektive Trauer 2.0 zwischen Empathie und Medienkritik: Ein Fallbeispiel. In: Hauser, Stefan/Opiłowski, Roman/Wyss, Eva L. (eds.): Alternative Öffentlichkeiten. Soziale Medien zwischen Partizipation, Sharing und Vergemeinschaftung. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 109–130.