



# Eschatological Contents of Digital Mourning and Memorial Practices

## 1. Project

Bringing in an explicitly theological perspective, the project «Eschatological Contents of Digital Mourning and Memorial Practices» examines digital expressions of grief in the context of the death of a (close) person. To do so, online memorial pages (gedenkseiten.de) and posts on the social network Instagram tagged with the hashtag #trauer ('grief') serve as empirical data basis for these expressions (see section 3). Theologically we use the empirical data to detect aspects of the experience of losing another person by death, which have not yet been taking into account in the theological discourse on death and on Christian hope for a life after death (eschatology) (see section 2).



s...\_o... I would like to remember a remarkable woman who passed six years ago today. She wasn't a monarch, but she meant the world to me.

That day, 13 September 2016, I cried so hard that my teeth hurt and I almost dissolved. Yet here I am. Remembering.

I miss you, Omi. Every day. ❤️

Fig. 1: Instagram post tagged with the hashtag #trauer with a picture of the deceased person while still alive

## 2. Main Research Questions

- Concerning the **empirical starting point** of our project we firstly want to know what semantic patterns people use when expressing their **grief online**. More specifically, we are interested in the existential and (implicitly) religious dimensions that become tangible when (publicly) dealing with the experience of the death of a close person. What existential and religiously impregnated expressions of this experience are evident in online mourning and memorial practices?
- Our second research question aims in the direction of the **systematic-theological discourse on eschatology**. What aspects of the experience of mourning and loss can be discerned in these expressions of digital Central European (German-language) mourning practices that should be taken into account when considering a contemporary eschatology? And how can such (qualitative) empirical findings be integrated into a systematic-theological discourse?
- Thirdly, we want to shed light on the realm of **digital afterlife**, which emanates from someone's death and relies heavily on religious symbols and ideas. How can various expressions of grief as a reaction to the experience of death be interpreted theologically? To what extent can these theological interpretations serve as heuristics and hermeneutics to better understand the (partial) phenomena of death in the communicative context of digital afterlife?

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Fig. 2: Expression of missing the deceased person

## 3. Data Base and Methods

Our data base consists of two corpora:

- Corpus 1 was compiled in cooperation with P01 ('Mourning Practices on the Internet') and contains data from the online memorial site gedenkseiten.de and tweets from the social network Twitter concerning mourning.
  - Corpus 2 is a qualitative one and contains public posts on Instagram marked with the hashtag #trauer.
- Both corpora contain multimodal data, as they consist of text as well as images, emojis and sometimes even videos and sounds.

To analyse these data, we first resort to the corpus linguistic approach and findings of P01. Further we analyse the single posts qualitatively with a qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker 2022). This method of qualitative data analysis allows us both an inductive and a deductive approach to the data. By bringing theological questions and concepts that are already religiously shaped to the data, we want to take the hermeneutic insight into the circularity of understanding seriously. Finally, this will help us to make our empirical findings fruitful for a systematic-theological discourse on eschatology.

The data analysis serves us as a starting point to highlight aspects of grief which are prevalent in digital mourning and memorial practices but have not yet been integrated into eschatological considerations.

Many (Protestant) systematic theologians claim that the life-world connecting point of eschatological reflection is the experience of losing someone through death. Based on this assertion, we want to explore this experience more closely with what becomes accessible in digital mourning and memorial practices. In order to transfer the empirical findings into systematic theology, we want to clarify and condense them with the help of phenomenological and existential philosophical thinking.

## 5. Open Questions

- How do we categorise mourning practices as belonging to a field of (digital) religion and further to a field of (Christian-Protestant) theology?
- How do we correlate empirical findings with systematic-theological thinking?

## References

- Kuckartz, Udo & Rädiker, Stefan (2022): Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung (Grundlagentexte Methoden), 5th edition, Weinheim Basel: Beltz Juventa.
- Lagerkvist, Amanda (2021): Embodiment. The digital afterlife, in: H. A. Campbell/R. Tsuria, Digital Religion, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 221–229.



## 4. Preliminary Findings

- The **(semi-) public accessibility** of digital mourning and remembrance practices, primarily building a methodological preconditions for our research, also appears to be filled performatively. Publicly posting about grief related to death shows aspects of the micro-validation ('Likes' or very short comments) of grief and of appreciation of the dead person's life lived.
- When people express their grief and appreciation online, they are not only writing about the deceased by (implicitly) addressing the online community or an imagined public. Rather, they often **directly address the deceased** themselves. In this direct communication with the deceased, we often find expressions of missing or longing ('wir vermissen dich', 'du fehlst'). From a theological perspective, it seems particularly promising to examine more closely these expressions and the experience they are based on.
- As a preliminary interpretation of this expression, we suggest that it is also a **person's body** that is constitutive for the **feeling of longing** (Lagerkvist 2021). Here it seems especially interesting how the bodily conditioned feeling of missing is expressed in a digital context – also taking into account the (imagined) location of the bereaved on the one hand and of the deceased on the other. This further points in the direction of the theological-anthropological discourse on the human being as a body-soul being, which is central to reflecting a theological understanding of death and the Christian hope for (bodily) resurrection.
- The trace of embodiment also leads to the multimodal aspects of these practices: When looking at the images used to illustrate the grief posts, we often see pictures of the deceased when they were alive, or of their graves. Here it seems illuminating to focus not only on what is made visible and present through online mourning practices, but also to ask about the **absences** that these practices point to.

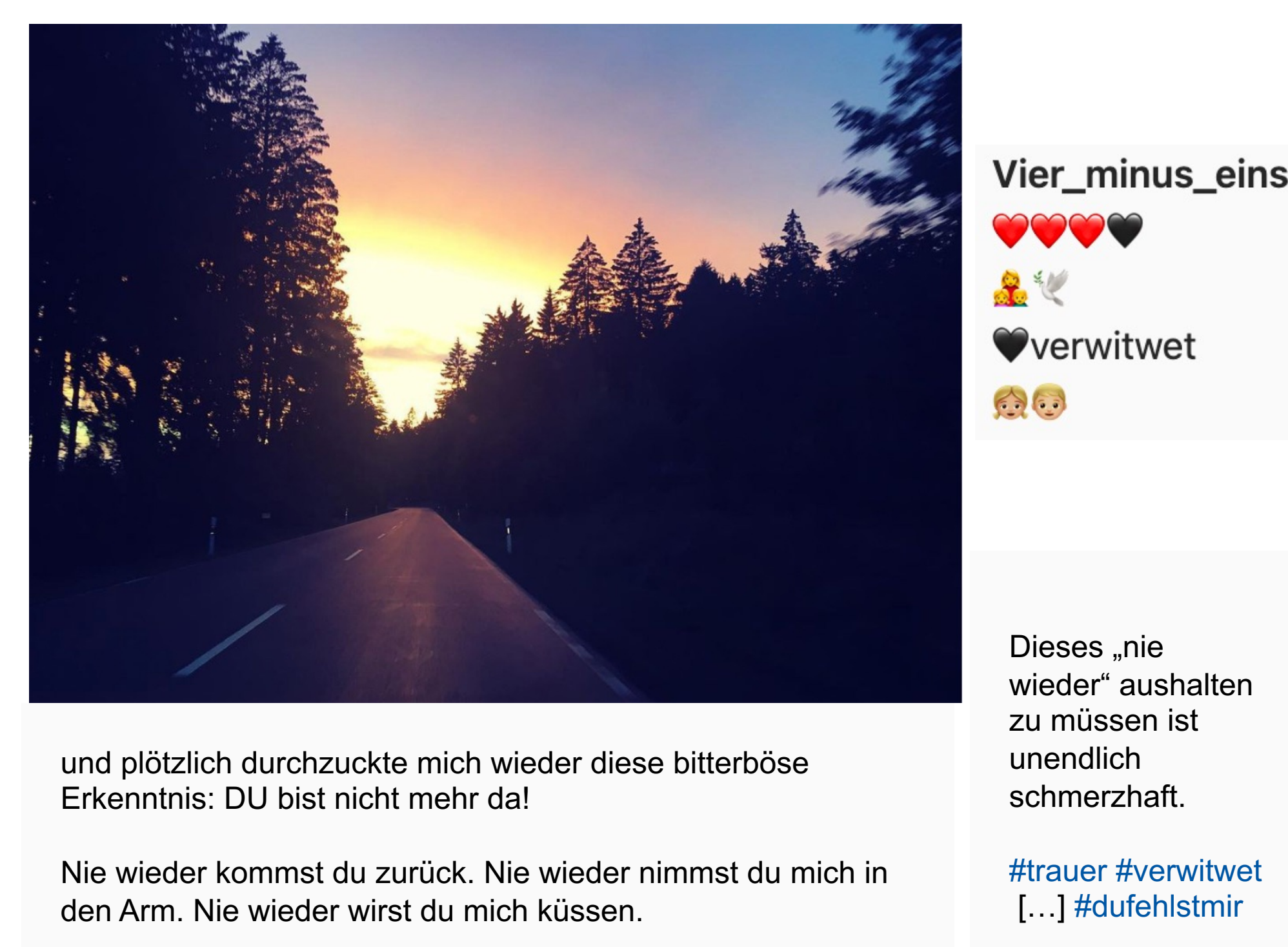


Fig. 3: Identity rebuilding after loss in the profile information ('bio') and bodily dimensions of missing