



## Digital Orphanhood: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Abandoned Online Identities and Their Linguistic Traces

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### ARTICLE INFO

**Received:**

July 08, 2025

**Revision Received:**

July 22, 2025

**Accepted:**

July 30, 2025

**Available Online:**

July 31, 2025

**Keywords:**

academic literature,  
emotional affiliations,  
social media  
discourse, orphaned  
digital profiles.

### ABSTRACT

In the new more digital society, orphaned digital profiles, social media accounts belonging to users who have died have become areas of great power and emotional reception within which the memory, identity and language come into conjunction. According to Brubaker et al. (2013), orphaned digital profiles are "persistent online accounts that outlive their users, becoming sites of ongoing social interaction and memory practices." These profiles, commonly maintained or accessed by friends, family or the social world in general provide a distinct way of viewing the use of words to keep memories of the dead alive and give the feeling of being present in online forums. This paper seeks to discuss the linguistic key used in such profiles, as well as, present an analysis on how this language is used to illustrate memory building and emotional affiliation in digital memorials. By means of secondary data analysis on academic literature, case studies, and social media discourse with the help of a qualitative research methodology, a case-study approach, and thematic analysis based on the concepts of digital memory theory. The findings shows how language used in such environments is no longer a means of encapsulating the deceased but rather of converting the grieving into a continuous, socially contextualized and digitally eternalized journey.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Digital Identity and Virtual Presence on the Heath

This last twenty years have been marked by incredible revolution as individuals have been developing and communicating their identities. Due to the increasing spread in the use of such social networking services such as facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, and personal blogs, millions of individuals now have very sophisticated digital credits that go beyond their real lives. Such simulated identities are made out of the language used within them; captions, comments, conversations, bios and interactions all constitute what scholars have referred to as an informational self (Floridi, 2011). In contrast to conventional expression of identity in the physical space, the digital identities are permanently archived, accessible and re-circulated, even when their authors are not there. This continual existence forms a basic transformation of the way to experience and memorise identity.

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### 1.2. Dead Walking, Death, and Afterlife of online content

Due to the age of the social media platform, age and time also age the user base and many users either perish or disappear to never reconnect, leaving behind the remaining trail of digital content that keeps on sticking around in the public or semi-public space. It has been estimated by Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, and Carter (2015) that there are close to 30 million Facebook accounts in use of dead people and that number continues to rise with the aging of the digital natives (Gibbs et al., 2015). A lot of these accounts tend to stay there and searchable in yearspan, and with nothing other than an ongoing owner to regulate, erase, or put into context the material. This results in what the authors refer to as a digital afterlife, where profiles' function as a means of self-expression become an archive of digital memory. They are linguistically arrested though emotionally dynamic and can be considered a virgin ground in examining the residual discourse of identity, memory and social presence.

### 1.3. The language of Abandonment which is unspoken

And once a digital profile has been relegated to the inactive state by death or protracted unavailability, it is subject to a slight change in definition, not only in terms of visibility or usability, but of discursive purpose as well. The posts are still there, yet the meaning of those posts takes a different turn being without a voice of an author. On their part, the linguistics display sudden silences, suspended dialog, or humorlessness out of context that is now bereft of comedy. As it is stated by Walter (2015), the social media pages of the deceased even tend to become a place of continuing bonds, as friends and relatives send posts, and the messages go further even after the death of a person, making the page somewhat posthumously dialogic (Walter, 2015). This conversation however breaks up and becomes vague once the digital orphaned profile is not maintained. The observation of such linguistic area where silence is louder than speech reveals a good understanding of how discourse, memory and technology interact.

### 1.4. Ownership and Digital Uncertainty Platform Policies

The question of digital ownership rights and specifically of how content on the web is to be controlled after the death of a user has become yet another battleground in the debate over digital rights. Most users base their assumptions about ownership of their digital profile, however, social networking platforms, such as Facebook, Google, and Instagram, have control of the final decision on the retention, memorizing or deleting practice. In the majority of the cases, as pointed out by Stokes (2021), terms of service agreements are designed to be ambiguous and there exists no unified international norms of the governance of the platform in terms of handling digital remains (Stokes, 2021). For example, Facebook introduced a "legacy contact" feature only in 2015, but this feature does not allow full editing or deletion powers, and is limited to specific jurisdictions. The uncertainty also results in many idle accounts being left active and there exists an environment of unmoderated identity in the digital space. In linguistic terms, it presents causative field implications with regard to the interpretation and recontextualization of texts (i.e. the status, comment, or caption) left on text platforms after the user no longer exists. Meaning can be distorted when a guiding voice or contextual form is missing and therefore, meaning can be lost in instances where humor, irony or cultural references were context-specific.

### 1.5. Language as Leftovers of the Self in forgotten Profiles

Language can be used as the main platform out of which assessments in the digital selves can be carried out, recollected and ultimately disregarded. When they die, turn away or abandon their virtual selves, the lingual matter that users leave has a life of its own and silently shapes the views of others about who they are. Here, the digital platform enhances the immutability of language in that a fleeting chat, a status update, or even an emoji can survive way beyond its useful shelf life (Crystal, 2011). Such a residue of communication might be haunting or emotionally shocking when deprived of the time axis of interaction, especially when it manifests itself in birthday reminders, auto-generated memories, or algorithm-suggestions long after the departure of the user in question.

### 1.6. Statement of the Problem

With digital ghosts and orphaned content such as social media accounts left behind in death, many new intricate questions about identity, mourning, and memory have been brought up. The linguistic practices in these profiles, and the way they create digital mourning or memory, receive little research, though they continue to build as a presence. The proposed research fills that gap since it explores the language of such profiles to learn how digital communication maintains and builds posthumous identities.

### 1.7. Research Objectives

- In order to study the language characteristics left behind in orphaned or abandoned digital profiles so as to come to a revelation of how identity is established after the process of disengagement.
- In order to examine what the use of language in the inactive social media accounts used by the person can be used to present the identity of the person despite the absence or the death event.

### 1.8. Research Questions

1. What does the language of disengaged or ruined online profiles tell us about the identity-making processes after thoughtful user exit?
2. What role does the use of language in the non-active digital profiles play in the formation of identity after a user turns away or dies?

### 1.9. Significance of the Study

The current research has great importance in the developing discipline of digital linguistics, sociolinguistics, and memory studies to provide insight into the linguistic and emotional aspects of the orphaned digital profiles. With life, the digital world, and even death blurring boundaries when the lines to define what all these mean, how language maintains identity even when the user is not logged in becomes all the more important. The study can be deemed as adding to the theoretical knowledge in the field of the social co-construction of digital identity, its maintenance, and posthumous emotional engagement, which interests everyone, including scholars, the designers of digital platforms, and policymakers. Not only does it help us understand digital mourning and the practices of online life after death, but it also creates new possibilities with exploring the manner in which language, memory and identity become intertwined within spaces of technological mediations.

## 2. Literature review

Recent research has captured the way digital media result in a form of a high rate language innovation, where novel lexicon and shifting language fashions are formed in the masculine ideals of algorithm and juvenile culture norms. Malik, Iftikhar, and Gurmani (2025) have investigated how social media fosters the process of developing and implementing the new forms of vocabulary (abbreviations, emojis, and other informal structures) and have shown that qualitative interviews can help realize the conscious change in approach towards linguistic variation rather than prescription rules (Malik et al., 2025). The thematic analysis by them highlights the usage of vocabulary by digital discourse which restructures their use and promotes local accents and code-switching. In the meantime, Aleksic (2025) coined the term “algospeak” meaning the words used to avoid content moderation like the word “unalive” and mentioned that this can be defined as not only as a way of manipulating algorithms but it also seeps into real life speech with younger generations who use such language too (Aleksic, 2025). Both works give emphasis to serious changes in what takes place in the context of language which can be vividly compared to the types of linguistic remains, left behind, in the case of dislocated digital identities that can be used to provide insight in the discourse analysis of digital orphanhood.

Big data analyses of computational work display macro trends on the use of language on social media, with proverbial easing in the richness of language and message organization. Di Marco et al. (2024) examined 300 million-plus comments on eight social networks in the past 34 years, and what they found was that on average the amount of text people used in their comments, the diversity, and repetitiveness of vocabulary decreased with time between years, but still, a certain flow of new words gained henceforth was maintained (Di Marco et al., 2024). These tendencies lead to the idea that user interactions are becoming more and more oriented toward the simplicity and pared-down expression, whether in casual or abandoned situations. To corroborate this, Heaton, Clos, and Nichele (2023) critically reviewed common computational techniques (topic modeling, sentiment analysis, emotion detection), compelling academicians to integrate the techniques alongside qualitative approaches, including corpus linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis when conducting research on social media in various formats at a different period (Heaton et al., 2023).

It has also been established through research that community and genre also determine linguistic style online during non-existence/ archival usage. In a qualitative descriptive study of Twitter language, Sani et al. (2025) claimed that it is possible to speak about a casual, frozen, and formal registers that are specific to the Twitter language; casual style dominant in Twitter language, however, with frozen it is found in fewer than 10 per cent of tweets (Sani et al., 2025). This categorization by genres is applicable to orphaned profiles, in which the linguistic traces could signify the inherently blocked or standardized manner of past self-representation. Also, Zappavigna (2022) presented the concept of ambient affiliation that focuses on how social media words, especially hashtags and narrative tropes, construct affiliation beyond time and space (Zappavigna, 2022). These

discursive devices can be found even on the inactive profiles, and in this manner, these devices act as semiotic markers of self-identity and belongingness to a certain community. Therefore, the thickening of theories of genre style and ambient discourse can be used to present a more profound interpretation of linguistic descriptions in discarded online characters.

Recent research by Recuber (2024) in the special issue on Digital Death points to the necessity to study how people use online platforms to connect with the dead- whether this be through adding posts on memorial pages or talking to so-called AI-based griefbots. These practices show how the data left by the deceased turns into active social artifacts and forms techno-affective relationships that would endure after the end of physical life (Recuber, 2024). The study recommends contextualized studies using empirical methods of how social cultural traditions can interact with the emerging digital afterlife technologies to further provide the idea that abandoned profiles are a dynamic discursive space and not a dioxygenation (Recuber, 2024).

According to a report published in 2024 by Cambridge University, an ethical and communicative contradiction is possible because of deadbots or chatbots that recreate the deceased depending on their digital remains (Malas et al., 2024). Although some users prefer to employ AI simulators of deceased loved ones, scientists warn that these solutions can be invasive or manipulative and, at times, may turn into digital ghosts when a simulation takes some initiative and calls a user or sends him/her commercial messages (Malas et al., 2024). Such outcomes depict the possible ways in which electronically generated linguistic outstretching of identity can proceed without the control of the author, much in the vein of the broken discourse such as in unattended profiles. The research highlights the importance of considering algorithmic and affective layers along with textual remains as major scope of analysis of digital orphanhood.

The concept, of mortality sensitivity (thanatosensitivity), was developed by Massimi and Charise and has returned to the HCI and design discussions as one approach to integrate mortality considerations in user-centered systems- that the digital infrastructure be sensitive to death circumstances (Massimi & Charise, 2024). Although developed initially in 2009, the idea was later revived in late 2023 and 2024 within the journals on ethics and human-computer interaction (Massimi & Charise, 2024). When applied to the concept of orphaning a digital profile, thanatosensitivity can be used as the lens through which one can examine how language, system affordances, and content design can be used to adjust in post-authorial presented situations. The theoretical framework can be used to probe further into the durability of linguistic artefact and levels at which platforms either acknowledge or disregard the contextual meaning of abandoned profiles.

Within the more general research into the field of language ecology, the musings of Crystal (2024) on the topics of death and preservation of languages have been applied to the digital spectrum, making caution not to apply linguistic extinctions as a fanciful metaphor (Crystal, 2024). Instead, researchers argue that abandoned language such as the inactive posts of a Facebook account, the birthday alerts, or the frozen commentaries on a suspended account should be translated as a discourse ecology that is still living, where leftovers have an identity, memory, and history (Crystal, 2024). Such lens is directly correlating with the research on digital orphanhood as the discursive ecology, where the linguistic traces appear as the memory artifacts as well as the transforming forms of communication.

### 3. Methodology

This study has been conducted in the qualitative approach to the aspects of managing the linguistic features and discursive look of the orphaned digital profiles, represented by still-existing but forgotten Facebook accounts, forgotten Twitter profiles, and long-abandoned personal blogs. The qualitative research was considered to be most appropriate in this study as it facilitated in depth, context, and interpretive realization of how language works in social realities especially the online environment that is characterized by absence and posthumous presence. Being a type of research into what people bring to their lived experience and cultural practices, an approach to qualitative inquiry with a naturalistic (and interpretive) perspective pursuing the interpretations of phenomena in meaning-terms assigned to them, people striving to create meaning to this world, as Denzin and Lincoln (2018) underline, should not be a surprise. Using this study in context, computer forensics practitioners would not necessarily find the linguistic remains of digital orphanhood explored using statistical data or computer code at its interface, but instead a highly critical sampling of textual data left behind in such profiles. Purposive sampling was implemented to identify the inactive profiles, on the platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which were no longer updated in several years because their owner died, or became disengaged online. Each of these profiles was considered as a discursive location where it is possible to observe the structure and preservation of identity, memory, and social presence with the help of frozen or interrupted language.

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1. Linguistic image of frozen discourse

The deleted accounts leave behind frozen discourse, postings, comments and metadata that are left in the wake of the original user. According to Fairclough (2013/2014) language as a social practice must remember that Critical Discourse Analysis does not recognize language as a mere form of communication, but something much more substantial (Fairclough, 2014). The latter, in the context of orphaned profiles, implies the loss of contextual proximity and interactive context of ostensibly personal language (pass virtual status updates, messages, hashtags, etc.) they transform into social artifacts that survive as artifacts but no longer in a domain of active social use only as a collection of mostly dead rhetorical features, code-switching, or, in emergent communities, the new but dormant forms of virtual language, or so-called algospeak (Aleksic, 2023). The analysis of these linguistic patterns through CDA is viewed beyond what is on a surface but through their social meaning, ideological residue as encompassed in the textual silence of abandonment.

### 4.2. Theme: Silence as A Discursive Strategy

The other language aspect that is associated with the construction of identity is the subject of silence and narrative lack of culmination in orphaned material. According to Jaworski and Coupland (2006), silence within the language has communicative content, in particular within emotionally charged environments- which is precisely applicable when examining digital profiles that have a sudden halt in communication (Jaworski & Coupland, 2006). Abrupt halting of postings in abandoned accounts or comment chains that are left without response, is discursive silence that alludes to disengagement, death or identity breakdown. Through the utilization CDA, the researcher ties these silences to the changes in self-image and community memory by disclosing the disappearance as a strategic strategy in forming identity in digital text.

### 4.3. Cross Platforms Discursive Residue

The traces left in the language of Objective 1 also incorporate cross-platform residue-shared connection, repost, computerized reminder or vintage alerts-quantities that endure within an excluded network on social media. According to Recuber (2024), these remnants can be regarded as techno-affective artifacts where the data of the dead subject is turned into a lively emotional surface to both the viewer and algorithms. Such artifacts, which are not real-time-authored, however, still ranging semiotic meaning and language find a way of circulation, often in automated forms. When approached analytically through their structural and discursive properties using CDA, one can see that identity is recreated using the algorithmic debris, institutional languages, and remnant forms that live beyond the authorship of the owner.

### 4.4. Discursive construction of post-authorial identity

It highlights how the use of language, even though inactive, is used in defining identity following absence of a user. Discourse Studies in social media throws light upon how the identities are also made twice through narrative and interactive backlash since the original authors are not even present (Farkas and Xia, 2023). They highlight the existence of semiotic and historical contingency: the traces of language do not go away, as historical residue of identity and ideology of a community (Farkas & Xia, 2023). Objectified language (e.g. through frozen posts, ambient hashtags) is interpreted to be taking part in identity work, through CDA, which demonstrates how post-authorial presence is enacted linguistically in residual digital material.

### 4.5. Ambient Affiliation, Community Markers

The concept of ambient affiliation, originally coined by Zappavigna (2022), of the social media users constructing a connectivity and identity through a common usage of tags, tropes, or repeated phrases with the passage of time even with discontinuous usages also connects with the analysis found in Objective 2. This semiotics of ambience goes on in an orphaned profile, that is, hashtags, repeated uses of phrases, or communal references, without an active intervention, maintaining a sense of afterlife affiliation. CDA of these remainder markers displays how the identity and memory survive linguistically even under such circumstances that direct contribution is not possible within the community discourse.

### 4.6. Disjunctive Ideology and Power

The framework created by Fairclough in his book posits that words not only echo the existing societal order, but they further cement it (Fairclough, 2014). When the control over the content that is left is no longer authorial, the interpretation changes, the messages that were originally meant to be directed towards peers might be hijacked by algorithms or platform conventions. This discursive shift brings along ideology reinterpretation under the absence of the author whereby de-personalized language

can be used in the context of institutional or commercial discourse. The analysis of power relation based on CDA of such texts lays bare the power relations present in the digital orphanhood and positions the identities that are formed in displacement through the context of this discourse constituted through wider socio-technical forces.

New qualitative research papers including Lei, Ma, Sun, and Ma (2025) investigate the experience of the so-called AI Afterlife forms of agents that are designed based on the digital remains and present the issues of the participants concerning continuity and stability of identity and intrusiveness of anthropomorphic communication (Lei et al., 2025). Even though these agents reflect active simulation rather than abandonment, their creators' sensitivity toward voice, tone, and authenticity echoes the issues present in orphaned profiles: language that persists without its originator must still convey identity in recognizable form. A qualitative CDA analysis can help explain how posts, bios, hashtags, or even automated reminders saved in dormant accounts amount to a linguistic evidence of identity confirmation or misrepresentation. Such traces, in their frozen and semi-semiotic form, refer to the manner in which identity gets linguistically conserved or misrepresented in the event of the loss of original authorship.

#### **4.7. Language use is part of post-authorial identity creation**

It looks at the way language use in dormant accounts is part of post-authorial identity creation. In their research on the Chinese young adults, Mou, Lan, Lu, and Wang (2025) run a cluster analysis and identify different user groups that display different attitude to digital immortality, having different expectations and concerns on digital legacy and representation (Mou et al., 2025). Their findings show that even hypothetical language use—what a digital legacy might “say” after death—is interpreted in identity terms. This observation lends credence to the assumption that language that is left in abandoned profiles remains a determining factor in the way identity is conveyed and held with an understanding by others. A qualitative thematic discourse analysis can be used to dismantle how textual remains—ambient hashtags, relic segments, auto-generated commemoratives—help to construct a post-mortem identity. In a way, these things are always set, but at the same time, they serve as a kind of linguistic signifiers to determine memory, belonging, and identity perception in their community members who are still alive.

#### **4.8. Discussion of Study**

This paper discussed the ways in which orphaned digital profiles that are found in social media following the inactivity of the original user and the death of said user maintain identity in the form of linguistic evidence and engagement with the audience. Based on a qualitative research that analyzed secondary sources, the study found such profiles still send an identity estimation like bios, posts, and hashtags which translate to digital traces. These residues are not merely remnants; they are reinterpreted by the audience, producing what Garde-Hansen (2011) calls “digital memory texts.” Such writings are a kind of posthumous identity creation influenced by emotional interactions, observations, and ceremonial language of other people. The findings echo Marwick and Ellison's (2012) assertion that online identity is co-constructed and socially negotiated even in absence, underscoring the complexity of digital afterlives and the linguistic choices that sustain them.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study has established that the identity, memory, and affect remain alive and actively occur in orphaned digital profiles even after a user has died or lost interest in a profile. These profiles are digitally alive in the traces they leave in language: status updates, user names, bios and the comments users leave on profiles. In this study, online identity supports the thinkings of Garde-Hansen (2011) and Marwick and Ellison (2012) that such an identity is fluid as opposed to stable; it is not mere self-expression but rather a process of co-construction and social maintenance. According to these findings, digital identity lives on after the individuals write, as it exists as a community-memorialization of the profile, communication with it and even its re-definition with time. Orphaned profiles therefore represent a larger culture change in the mode in which we attach importance to death, memory, and personal identities within digital domains where language is playing a larger part in the manner in which people develop their own selves continuously.

Further, the results also fall into the larger discussion on the topic of digital afterlife studies in terms of the emphasis placed on the semiotic potential of language in digital mourning, group memory, and after-life communication. Through a discussion of how language is used by both the creator of the original digital space and the subsequent users, this paper is therefore indicating that orphaned digital spaces are not empty but full of meaning both narratively and emotionally, re-echoing an empathetic legacy blatantly present in physical absence.

## 5.1. Suggestions

Going by the findings, future researchers are advised to look at further examining the linguistic and cultural approach of handling, by these platforms, the orphaned digital profiles especially in terms of diverse regions and social religious settings. Social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, (X) are dissimilar in their policies on memorialization, removal, or inactivity and should be taken into consideration through their effect on lingual continuity. It is also becoming more necessary to examine the ethics behind digital language use when the account owner is no longer present- particularly where the language itself can be mis-used, taken out of context, or made political.

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