

You Have not Disappeared: Digital Mourning Spaces After a Social Media Celebrity's Self-Obituary

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Abstract

On May 5, 2022, a food blogger named Yishiji (—食纪) with over 700,000 followers on the Chinese social media platform Bilibili, posted a farewell video expressing his struggles as a gay man and his lack of attachment to the world. Shortly thereafter, it was confirmed that he had died by suicide, sparking widespread discussion across social media. Over three years later, his self-obituary continues to foster significant engagement, leading to a unique digital mourning space. Drawing on theories of obituary and digital mourning, this study analyzes the digital mourning spaces generated by self-obituaries on social media platforms through a case study of Yishiji. Employing multimodal discourse analysis and latent Dirichlet allocation thematic analysis, the research identifies four key features characterizing this emergent digital mourning space: sustained spatial content production; precise spatio-temporal dialogue, notably through the danmu feature; functional zoning of semi-open spaces; and its profound capacity to facilitate self-communication and connection among mourners. The study argues that such digital mourning spaces formed by self-obituaries are not merely extensions of traditional physical mourning rituals; rather, they constitute a novel democratic memorial institution co-constructed by the deceased's obituary, user-generated content, and the platform's algorithmic logic. This research enhances our understanding of how digital platforms transform mourning practices. It emphasizes the potential of digital mourning spaces to foster inclusive environments for expression and connection, providing valuable insights into the evolving nature of grief in the digital age.

Keywords

Bilibili; danmu; digital mourning; digital obituary; digital space; mourning; obituary; online mourning; self-obituary; social media; Yishiji

1. Introduction

Prior to his suicide, the Chinese food blogger known as Yishiji (一食纪) posted a final video on the social media platform Bilibili. In this farewell message, he reflected on his life with these poignant words:

My first half of life has been marked by failure....In comparison to my regrets, I have more apologies to offer, and more gratitude to express, but no lingering attachment to this world. Everything I possess will likewise depart with me, and that is perfectly fine, it's fine.... (Yishiji, 2022)

The farewell video, entitled “Thank You, Goodbye,” was made public through a scheduled posting feature at 10 PM on May 5, 2022. Unlike his typical food-making videos (see Figure 1), this presentation showcases a solitary scene: his meticulously organized kitchen where he generally prepares his meals. Accompanied by the instrumental piece “The Last Meal,” the video contains over four minutes of subtitles in which he articulates feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction, particularly reflecting on his disappointment with the world as a gay man. He conveys a sense of acceptance, having let go of past attachments, while extending wishes for happiness to all and encouraging viewers to savor their meals. Following the video’s release, it incited substantial discourse within social media. Remarkably, in the nearly three years since the posting of this self-obituary, users have continued to engage actively with the video’s interface. They have expressed condolences, shared personal reflections, liked and reposted content, and sent virtual gifts, indicating that the creation of diverse forms of content has not diminished with the blogger’s passing. As of May 14, 2025, the self-obituary video has garnered over 5 million views and received more than 50,000 comments. This sustained engagement offers a valuable case study for understanding the roles of self-obituaries in digital contexts and the development of digital mourning spaces.

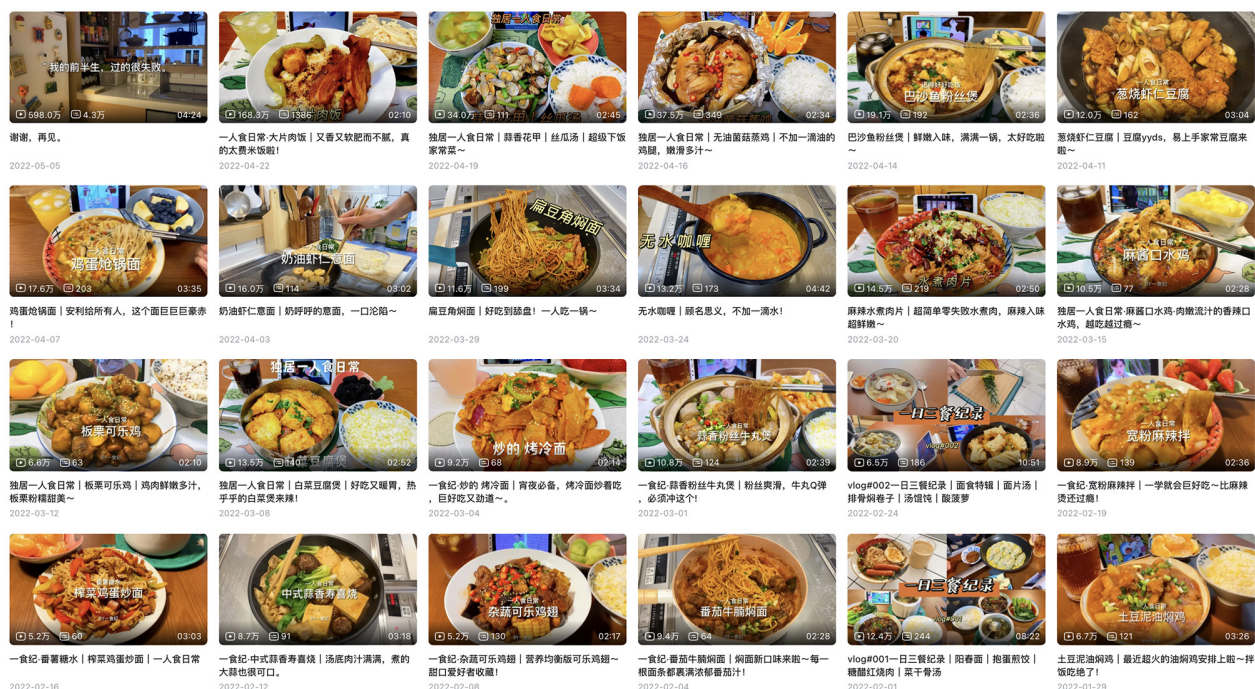


Figure 1. Screenshot of blogger Yishiji’s channel homepage on Bilibili. Source: Yishiji (n.d., retrieved September 25, 2025).

The digital mediation of death and remembrance has profoundly altered traditional mourning practices, giving rise to novel forms of posthumous self-representation and collective grieving (Doyle & Brubaker, 2023; Giaxoglou, 2020). Within this evolving landscape, the phenomenon of the self-obituary, particularly when disseminated through social media platforms, presents a compelling yet under-explored nexus of individual agency, technological affordance, and communal response (Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Moore, 2022; Wagner, 2018). Indeed, the emergence of self-obituaries provides individuals with the opportunity to script their own life stories, challenge traditional narratives, and allow for more personalized reflections on life and legacy. This shift effectively democratizes the obituary genre, enabling previously marginalized voices to be heard and their narratives to achieve a sustained symbolic presence, accomplished significantly through such discursive means. This study approaches the term “self-obituary” with critical sensitivity, recognizing that at its core, Yishiji’s video is an expression of immense pain culminating in self-harm. However, I argue that to label it solely as a suicide note is to overlook its equally significant function as a deliberate, pre-authored act of memorialization and legacy-building made possible by digital media. This dynamic, where online mourning on social media platforms can embed the digital self into the lives of mourners and challenge the norms of physical connection (Kasket, 2012), takes on a unique dimension when initiated by the deceased themselves. While existing scholarship on digital mourning has significantly advanced our understanding of online memorials (Brubaker et al., 2013; Walter et al., 2012), continuing bonds in cyberspace (Klass & Steffen, 2018), and the algorithmic shaping of grief (Robards & Lincoln, 2017), a critical gap remains concerning the specific dynamics through which a deceased individual’s own pre-scripted, self-authored farewell initiates, structures, and sustains a distinct digital mourning space via ongoing, multimodal user engagement. This case, therefore, offers a unique and crucial lens to scrutinize how such self-orchestrated digital departures not only mediate bereavement but also fundamentally reconfigure the architecture of memorialization, challenging traditional control over posthumous narratives and fostering new forms of participatory remembrance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Obituary and Self-Obituary*

Obituaries have long served as public announcements of death, functioning as a vital social mechanism for commemorating lives and reinforcing collective memory (Connerton, 1989; Fowler, 2004). Traditionally, they highlight the social and cultural capital of the deceased, acting as a public valuation of a person’s life and achievements (Perreault et al., 2025). However, the advent of the internet and social media has precipitated a significant transformation in these commemorative practices (Walter et al., 2012). Digital obituaries are unbound from the linear, non-interactive architecture of print media, allowing for richer, more dynamic forms of engagement. This digital shift has facilitated a crucial devolution of editorial gatekeeping, transferring considerable agency from institutions to individuals (Graham, 2017). Consequently, this empowers the bereaved to craft deeply personalized tributes, circumventing the status-inflected or exclusionary tendencies of legacy media and fostering a more participatory, networked form of collective remembrance (Hume & Bressers, 2010; Murrell et al., 2023).

Within this evolving digital landscape, the self-obituary emerges as a particularly potent form of posthumous self-representation. Distinct from obituaries written by family or journalists, the self-obituary grants individuals complete authorship over their final public statement (Bonsu, 2007). At its core, it is an exercise

in narrative sovereignty (Smith & Watson, 2010) driven by a desire for agency and control in shaping one's own legacy (Drought & Koenig, 2002; Kasket, 2019). This is especially pertinent for individuals who feel their unconventional lives might be misunderstood or whose identities might not fit neatly into traditional obituary templates (Srihari, 2022). Social media platforms, with affordances like multimodal content (video, text, sound) and scheduled posting, provide the ideal infrastructure for individuals to pre-author their final narratives, transforming a static final message into an enduring site of interaction and remembrance (Brubaker & Callison-Burch, 2016).

This study employs the term “self-obituary” as a necessary analytical framework that, while sensitive to the tragedy of suicide, captures how Yishiji's final video transcends the traditional suicide note. Although it contains the hallmarks of such a note, namely the expressions of unbearable psychological pain (Lester, 2010; Shneidman, 1993), its deliberate, digitally mediated construction distinguishes it in three critical ways. First, its public audience of over 700,000 followers contrasts sharply with the private address of a typical note. Second, its controlled temporality, achieved through a scheduled posthumous release, frames it as a premeditated performance of self-narration rather than an impulsive final cry (French, 2023). Third, its curated multimodality, a polished video with a specific soundtrack and visual setting, establishes it as a complete aesthetic and affective artifact designed for public consumption (Turner & Turner, 2013). These features collectively justify its analysis as a self-obituary. It is this deliberate fusion of private despair and public performance that pushes the genre into the territory of the digital self-obituary. The act of suicide communication becomes inextricably linked with an act of public memorial curation. This framework allows us to capture the video's crucial dual function: It is at once a poignant cry of despair and a final, authored statement of identity which together catalyze the formation of the unique digital mourning space at the heart of our analysis.

2.2. Social Media and Digital Mourning Space

The immutable reality of death and the human need to mourn have found new expression in the digital age. Social media platforms, initially designed for social connection and information sharing, have increasingly become significant digital mourning spaces (Lingel, 2013). They offer new ways for grieving, remembrance, and the creation of digital legacies, providing comfort and enabling individuals to manage their grief actively (Morse, 2024; Wagner, 2018). Users repurpose these platforms for funerary and memorial purposes, turning personal profiles into virtual tombstones or interactive shrines. This transformation is fundamentally underpinned by the technological affordances of social media which not only serve as communication media but also shape social interactions and cultural practices, including how users innovatively combine diverse semiotic resources for meaning-making (KhosraviNik, 2022). Key affordances facilitating practices in digital mourning spaces include: (a) accessibility and reach, transcending geographical barriers for collective condolence (Walter et al., 2012); (b) asynchronous communication, allowing grief expression at an individual's own pace (Brubaker et al., 2013; Paulus & Varga, 2015); (c) multimodal expression, enabling rich, diverse tributes through text, photos, videos, and other formats (Ai et al., 2024; Proust, 2024); (d) persistence, which creates enduring digital legacies (Brubaker & Callison-Burch, 2016); and (e) the fostering of community and social support through shared experiences and validation (DeGroot, 2014). These affordances contribute to a more democratized and universalized landscape for commemorative acts in the digital age.

When the deceased is an individual known to a wide audience primarily through mediated platforms, the grief expressed by their followers necessitates a distinct theoretical lens. This phenomenon is best understood through the framework of parasocial interaction and grief (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial relationships are the one-sided, mediated connections that audiences form with media personae. The death of such an individual can trigger genuine feelings of loss within their audience despite the lack of a reciprocal, personal relationship (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). Social media environments in particular can intensify these parasocial bonds by fostering a perceived sense of intimacy and authenticity between content creators and their audiences. Therefore, the digital mourning space that emerges in such cases is not evidence of personal attachment persistence but rather a site for the collective performance of parasocial grief by a networked public. To fully understand these digital mourning practices, it is crucial to analyze the affordances of the platform itself—how technological features invite, constrain, and shape user behavior. Recent scholarship emphasizes that digital platforms are not neutral containers for grief but active agents in its ritualization. Sumiala (2021) argues that death in the digital age is performed through media rituals where technologies become tools for vernacular commemorative acts. Furthermore, as Navon and Noy (2023) suggest, a single social media page can function as a constellation of “social media sub-platforms,” each with distinct affordances and social functions. This study adopts these theoretical perspectives to analyze how the specific affordances of Bilibili, particularly its danmu feature and zoned interface, shape the performance of parasocial grief and co-create a unique memorial institution.

Bilibili, a leading Chinese video-centric social media platform highly popular with Gen Z, is distinguished by its ecosystem built around professional user-generated video which constitutes 94% of its views. It significantly influences Chinese pop culture and is consistently top-ranked by QuestMobile as a preferred app for this demographic (Bilibili, n.d.). Through interactive features such as viewing, liking, commenting, sharing, tipping, and especially its signature danmu (bullet comments), Bilibili cultivates a novel mode of video consumption and engagement, fostering a participatory online community centered on user interaction (Wang, 2022). This video-centric digital multimodal discursive space has consequently garnered significant scholarly interest, evidenced by studies such as multimodal discourse analyses of Hanfu videos (Cui, 2023) and videos by Chinese male beauty vloggers (Li & Wu, 2025). While scholarly attention to death and mourning on Bilibili is emerging, it remains limited. Existing research compares mourning remarks between virtual and human uploaders (Mou et al., 2023). However, there is a discernible gap in studies specifically investigating digital mourning spaces as distinct phenomena within this platform.

Based on existing literature, it can be asserted that both online obituaries and self-obituaries are intrinsically linked to the formation of digital mourning spaces. Digital mourning spaces coalescing around such announcements reflect a paradigm shift in contemporary memorial practices, wherein the temporal and spatial boundaries of grief are reconfigured through networked connectivity. Indeed, online obituaries and self-obituaries transcend simple death notices; they function as rich textual sites where individual lives intersect with broader social and cultural narratives. The self-obituary, in particular, affords individuals the agency to craft their final story, engage in profound self-reflection, and potentially challenge established norms. Consequently, digital mourning spaces arising from online self-obituaries possess a distinct significance, representing the deceased’s final address to the world and potentially evoking a more profound mourning response. However, research specifically addressing self-obituaries on social media and the digital mourning spaces they engender remains notably scarce. This study, therefore, investigates the digital mourning space that emerged following the timed release of Yishiji’s self-obituary on the Chinese social

media platform Bilibili. The primary research objectives are to characterize the features of the digital mourning space generated by Yishiji's self-obituary and to explore how this specific case enhances our understanding of mourning practices within contemporary social media contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data

The primary data for this research were drawn from the digital mourning space that emerged around a self-obituary video posted by Yishiji on the Bilibili social media platform. The video, entitled "Thank You, Goodbye," has a duration of 4 minutes and 24 seconds. It is accompanied by the instrumental piece "The Last Meal," composed by LIN Shengxiang, which served as part of the soundtrack for the 2017 dark comedy film *The Great Buddha+* (directed by Huang Xinyao). This film, focusing on the often-overlooked lives of lower-class individuals, encourages contemplation on the meaning of life and societal pursuits. The self-obituary video itself features Yishiji's monologue presented as on-screen text (subtitles) over a static visual of their clean kitchen, a familiar setting from their previous cooking videos. Notably, at approximately the 55-second mark, the visual transitions from color to black and white.

Utilizing multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), the dataset includes the self-obituary video, along with user-generated content such as comments, danmu, and observations of the platform's spatial and functional layout in relation to this content. Furthermore, to analyze the substantial volume of textual comments within this digital mourning space, a web scraping process was conducted on April 15, 2025, using Python. This yielded a corpus of 50,214 valid comments. These comments were subsequently analyzed using latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) to identify predominant thematic categories. It is important to acknowledge that due to privacy settings or platform limitations, the collected comments may not represent the entirety of all comments posted in response to the video.

3.2. Analytical Approaches

3.2.1. MDA

MDA is an analytical framework that extends traditional discourse analysis by examining how meaning is constructed and communicated through the orchestrated interplay of multiple semiotic modes such as linguistic text, visual images, sound, gesture, layout, and color (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; O'Halloran, 2011). This approach moves beyond a purely linguistic focus to understand how these various modes combine to create coherent and persuasive messages within specific socio-cultural contexts. MDA is significantly rooted in social semiotics, which aims to identify signs and interpret their meanings and interactions across various levels (Irimiás et al., 2024; Kress, 2009; van Leeuwen, 2021). Therefore, the social semiotics-based approach to multimodal analysis offers a uniquely valuable lens for understanding meaning-making and communication. According to van Leeuwen (2005), social semiotics scrutinizes how individuals utilize semiotic resources to produce communicative artifacts and events and subsequently interpret them within specific social contexts and practices. Multimodal social semiotics, more specifically, concentrates on the complex array of resources employed in meaning creation. It involves analyzing the detailed practices of how these resources are combined to generate meaning within communicative artifacts

and events as well as how semiotic resources enable and constrain interactions and the construction of meaning across diverse socio-cultural settings (Liu & O'Halloran, 2009).

In contemporary digital environments, particularly social media, "space and discourse are increasingly enmeshed and mutually constitutive" (McIlvenny & Noy, 2011, p. 147). Social media platforms, with their diverse semiotic tools and functionalities, empower users to innovatively employ and combine various semiotic resources for meaning-making, identity construction, and interaction. Given the significant role of digital spaces as both a resource and a precondition for social life and meaning construction therein, a social semiotics-informed MDA becomes particularly pertinent for understanding communicative phenomena on these platforms (Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018). It offers an analytical lens to investigate how various modes synergistically create meaning, thereby facilitating a deeper comprehension of cultural practices and social dynamics within digitally mediated spaces (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2024). Therefore, to address the research questions, this study adopts a social semiotic multimodal approach to investigate the digital mourning space that emerged around Yishiji's self-obituary. The analysis will primarily investigate the salient modal forms present and their intermodal relationships to characterize the digital mourning space which is understood as being constituted by the invocation of multimodal resources, technological affordances, and cultural forms of mourning. This analysis further seeks to elucidate the socio-cultural significance of the digital mourning space generated by self-obituaries and how these dynamics may reshape our perceptions of loss and memory in the digital age.

3.2.2. LDA Themes Analysis

To systematically uncover latent thematic structures within the textual comments collected from the digital mourning space, this study employed LDA, a widely recognized probabilistic topic modeling technique (Blei et al., 2003). LDA operates on the premise that documents are a mixture of underlying topics and each topic is characterized by a distinct distribution of words. By analyzing word co-occurrence patterns across a large corpus, LDA can identify these latent themes without requiring prior human annotation, making it a powerful tool for exploratory data analysis (Gründer-Fahrer et al., 2018). The analytical pipeline commenced with data acquisition followed by rigorous pre-processing. For the textual data, this involved segmentation using the Jieba library along with the removal of punctuation and stopwords to isolate substantive, content-bearing words. Subsequently, a bag-of-words representation was constructed by creating a dictionary and then a corpus from these processed texts, utilizing the gensim library in Python. A critical step in LDA modeling is determining the optimal number of topics (K). This was achieved by employing a dual-metric approach by evaluating models across a range of K values based on both perplexity and topic coherence. Perplexity assesses the model's ability to generalize to unseen data with lower scores generally indicating a better fit. Topic coherence, conversely, measures the semantic interpretability and internal consistency of the identified topics; higher coherence scores suggest that the words within a topic are more semantically related and the topic itself is more meaningful. After careful evaluation of these metrics across various K values, an optimal K of five topics was selected. This number was chosen because it offered a favorable balance, achieving a high degree of topic coherence for human interpretability while maintaining a reasonable model fit (low perplexity) and thus yielding distinct and meaningful themes. The finalized LDA model, configured with five topics, then yielded two primary outputs: (a) the characteristic keywords defining each of the five identified themes, and (b) the probability distribution of these topics across each individual comment. To further enhance the interpretability and exploration of these discovered themes,

interactive visualization was facilitated using the pyLDAvis tool. Figure 2a displays the distribution pattern of five topics within a two-dimensional semantic space, while Figure 2b shows the top 30 related terms for Topic 1.

Additionally, the study examines the top 100 comments by likes under each topic to gain insights into the representative content and expressions of different comment themes within the digital mourning space. This enriches our deep comprehension of the characteristics of this space.

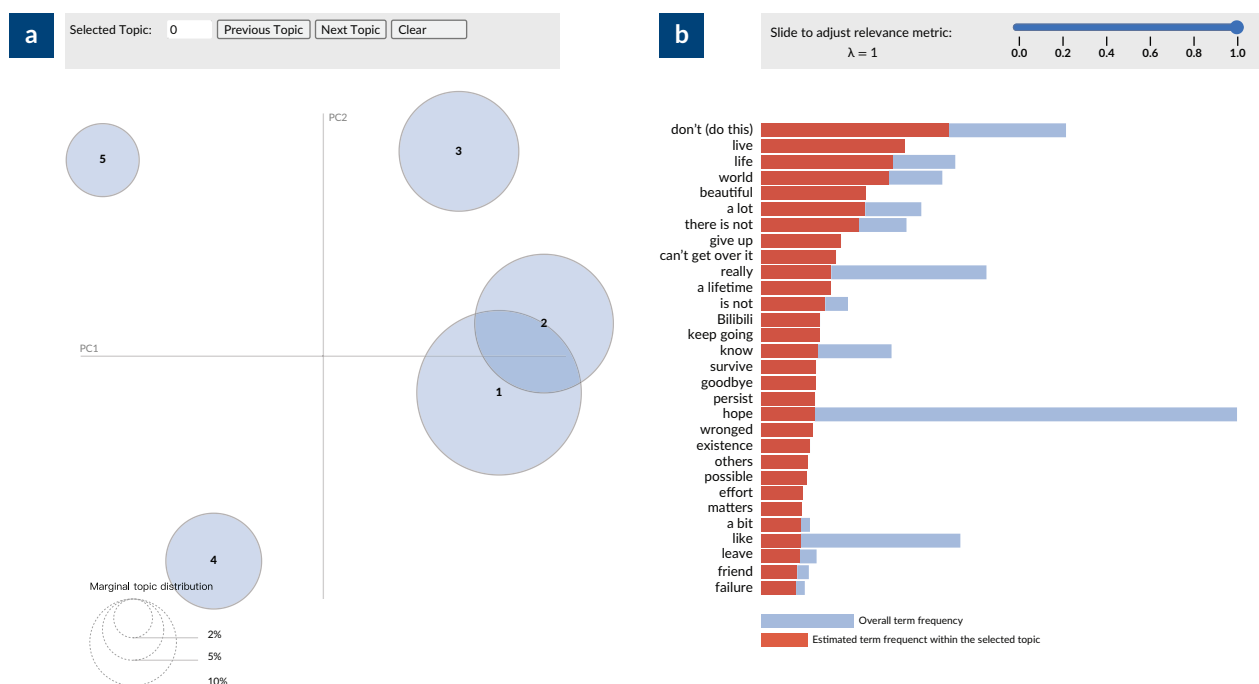


Figure 2. Topic mining and visual analysis with LDA model where (a) is the intertopic distance map (via multidimensional scaling) and (b) is the top 30 most relevant terms for Topic 1 (26% of tokens).

4. Findings

4.1. Sustained Spatial Content Production

Since Yishiji released the self-obituary video in May 2022, user interactions and content production surrounding this self-obituary have been continuously updated. In addition to shares, likes, collections, and the sending of virtual coins (a form of appreciation for videos on Bilibili), related comment data has been consistently refreshed. Figure 3 shows the temporal distribution of 50,214 valid comments collected. It is evident that the highest number of comments, totaling 43,290, occurred in May 2022, the month the self-obituary was released. Although the number of related comments sharply decreased in subsequent months, there have been relevant comments generated every month from May 2022 to April 2025, with a noticeable upward trend in comment volume after 2024. This indicates that users' mourning interactions in this digital space have persisted with the intensity of interaction fluctuating over time rather than consistently declining.

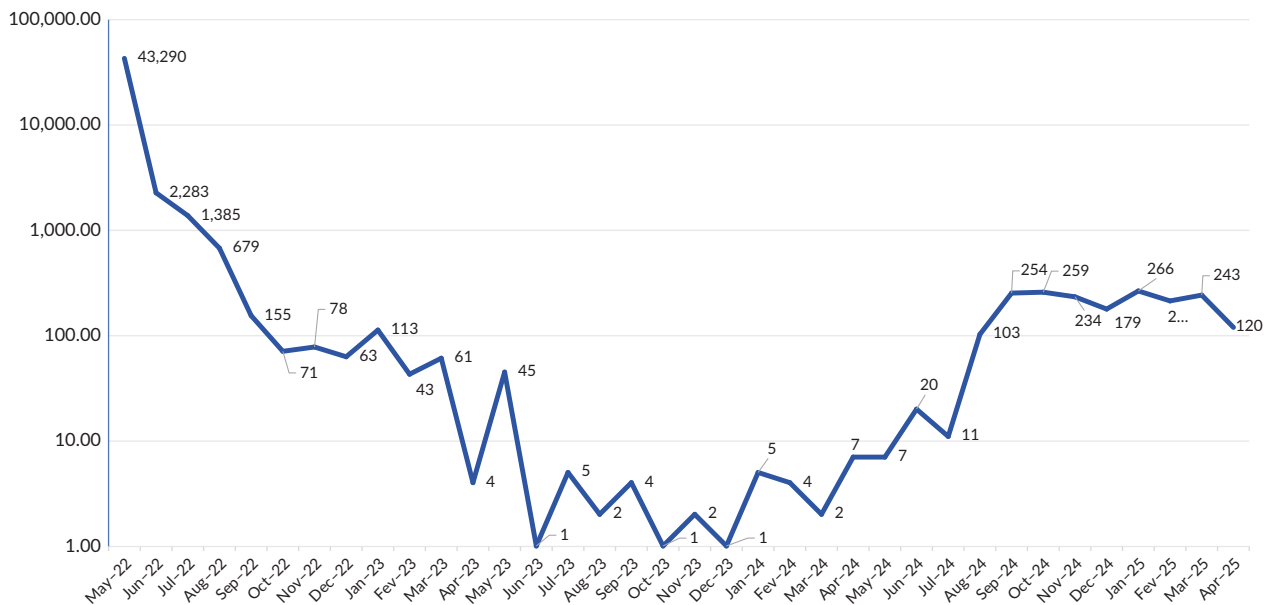


Figure 3. Temporal trends of comments.

Focusing on the types of comment content produced, the results from the LDA analysis are presented. Table 1 details the top 10 keywords for the five predominant topics identified. Through an examination of the specific comments aligned with each topic, this study has distilled five overarching themes, each directly corresponding to one of these topics.

Table 1. Top 10 terms for the five themes.

Theme	Topic number	Top 10 terms (English)	Top 10 terms (Mandarin)
Theme 1: Lamenting and mourning death	1	don't (do this); live; life; world; beautiful; a lot; there is not; give up; can't get over it; really	不要; 活着; 生活; 世界; 美好; 很多; 没有; 放弃; 想不开; 真的
Theme 2: Remembering and appreciating the deceased	2	hope; come back; like; video; thanks; miss; baby; happiness; sad; cook	希望; 回来; 喜欢; 视频; 谢谢; 想念; 宝贝; 快乐; 难过; 做饭
Theme 3: Narrating personal stories prompted by feelings	3	story; video; love; bless; feeling; my family; gay; remember; OMG; certainly	故事; 视频; 爱; 祝福; 感受; 我家; 同志 (同性恋); 记得; 啊啊啊; 一定
Theme 4: Critiquing an unsatisfactory world	4	sobbing; bad; way; unsatisfied; this kind of; situation; meaning; message; don't (do this); sorry	大哭; 坏的; 方式; 不满; 这种; 环境; 意思; 消息; 不要; 抱歉
Theme 5: The living find solace in shared resonance	5	hug; good night; Aji; brother; cuddle; safe and sound; hello; baby; Linyi; passerby	拥抱; 晚安; 阿纪; 兄弟; 抱抱; 平平安安; 你好; 宝贝; 临沂; 过客

Notes: Aji is a nickname used by users for Yishiji; Linyi is the city where Yishiji lived, located in Shandong Province, China.

The first theme identified is “lamenting and mourning death.” These comments were predominantly posted in the immediate aftermath of the self-obituary’s publication. This theme encapsulates comments expressing profound sorrow, disbelief, and regret surrounding Yishiji’s passing, reflecting the immediate emotional impact

of the self-obituary. Many commenters expressed incredulity at Yishiji's passing and attempted to dissuade him from suicide with their texts often employing numerous exclamation or question marks: "Damn! Don't! You can't! I really love your videos!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" (User A, 2022; the usernames have all been anonymized); "?? What's happening? But your cooking is super delicious!!!!" (User B, 2022); "!!! Aji, don't!!! I've liked you since you had over 10,000 followers, don't scare us, you have to be okay!!!" (User C, 2022). Furthermore, users attempted to draw the platform's attention by tagging the official Bilibili account, among other means, in an effort to intervene in Yishiji's suicide attempt and save his life. After his passing was confirmed, numerous users expressed their lamentation and mourning: "Cried for a long time. I felt your despair towards the world....I hope we never have to say goodbye" (User D, 2022); "I don't know why I'm so sad, I hope you could have lived well" (User E, 2022); "I hope that after your rebirth, you can be happy forever and be loved by everyone" (User F, 2022).

The second theme is "remembering and appreciating the deceased." Comments under this theme focus on cherishing memories of Yishiji, expressing gratitude for his life or perceived impact, and offering blessings or well wishes for Yishiji in the afterlife. For instance: "Thank you for leaving this video to let us know your final news. I like your videos, and I won't stop liking them because you're gay...I hope you can live more happily and joyfully in another world." (User G, 2022); "Thank you for the healing you brought me as a content creator. Good night, I wish you happiness in your next life." (User H, 2022); "Aji, thank you for all the warmth and touching moments you brought me. Regardless, I respect your choice..." (User I, 2022).

The third theme, "narrating personal stories prompted by feelings," highlights instances where commenters, moved by Yishiji's self-obituary, were inspired to share their own experiences, reflections, or struggles, often related to similar emotions or life situations. In response to the content of Yishiji's self-obituary, various users identified with similar identity markers or life experiences, which in turn triggered their desire to narrate their own stories. For example, such user comments often began with phrases like "I'm (I've) also":

I'm also gay. Last year, I was depressed and almost did something stupid, but then I thought about how many things in this world I haven't seen...love is love...We have to live well; the good things that will happen in the future need us to verify them ourselves. (User J, 2025)

I'm also gay. My first love was a woman five years older than me. Due to societal pressure, my parents' misunderstanding, and colleagues gossiping behind our backs, we still broke up...I also thought about ending it all.... (User K, 2022)

I've also been caught in this kind of emotion, I know that no matter how much others say, it's useless.... (User L, 2022)

I'm also very lonely, have no friends, even with four people in the dorm, I always feel out of place, like I'm isolated by the whole world. (User M, 2022)

The fourth theme is "critiquing an unsatisfactory world." This encompasses comments that extend beyond personal grief to reflect on broader societal issues, express dissatisfaction with societal pressures, or critique aspects of the world perceived as harsh or contributing to distress:

The prejudice and worldly views in this world can sometimes really make people break down....Everyone has the right to love and be loved....I also hope there are fewer people in the world who wear colored glasses (judge others). We're all human for the first time, there's no need to be so judgmental....May there be no more prejudice in the world. (User N, 2022)

In this world, it's really, really hard to be a "special" person....But this society, and even family, they won't understand you. You have to face it; your surroundings will constantly remind you that you are an outsider.... (User O, 2022)

We should all unite to build a society where all sexual orientations can coexist equally and harmoniously. We should resolutely oppose all discrimination based on sexual orientation and prevent such suicides from happening again! (User P, 2022)

The fifth theme, "the living find solace in shared resonance," captures the emergent sense of community and mutual support within the comment section. It reflects how individuals connect over shared emotions, find comfort in knowing they are not alone in their feelings, and offer encouragement and a sense of collective understanding to one another in the wake of the loss. Beyond finding resonance with experiences and emotions in Yishiji's self-obituary, users also sought resonance and interaction with other commenters in the comment section. This involved affirming others' comments or offering comfort and advice. For example, one user left a reply under another's comment stating: "Please live a little more selfishly, love yourself a little more. The world won't change for anyone..." (User Q, 2022). Others would add supplementary content or build upon fellow users' comments. Indeed, the comment section also evolved into a distinctive discussion space, where debates among users regarding views on life, death, and the world took place.

4.2. *Precise Spatio-Temporal Dialogue*

A significant finding concerning the formation and sustained engagement within Yishiji's digital mourning space is the phenomenon of precise spatio-temporal dialogue, primarily facilitated by Bilibili's distinctive danmu feature. Unlike traditional, static comment sections typically located below or adjacent to a video on social media platforms, danmu are user-generated text overlays that scroll horizontally across the video screen. These comments are precisely timed, either designated by the user or automatically synchronized, to appear at specific moments within the video playback. This feature enables viewers to inject their comments directly into the temporal and visual fabric of the video content itself. In the context of Yishiji's self-obituary, danmu allows mourners to engage in a unique form of perceived dialogue with the deceased. Viewers' danmu comments are not merely general reactions to the video as a whole; instead, they are often triggered by, and meticulously timed to coincide with, specific utterances, visual cues, or narrative segments within Yishiji's self-obituary. For instance, at precisely 0 minutes and 44 seconds into his self-obituary, Yishiji discloses his identity as a gay man and expresses his disillusionment with societal norms, stating:

I am gay.

It feels good not to have to hide anymore.

But even if I weren't,

I wouldn't get married and have children.

The secular world, life, has brought me too much unhappiness.

I don't want to bring another life to go through it all. (Yishiji, 2022)

In response to this highly personal disclosure, numerous danmu appear at this exact timestamp, with users sharing their own similar experiences, offering words of solidarity, or expressing empathy for his struggles (see Figure 4). Similarly, at the 3-minute and 59-second mark (Figure 5), as Yishiji delivers the final sentence of his self-obituary, "May you all be happy for the rest of your lives" (Yishiji, 2022), a dense wave of danmu floods the screen. These comments serve as a collective farewell from the mourners, offering reciprocal blessings, expressing their grief, and articulating their sorrow at his departure.



Figure 4. Screenshot of the danmu at 44 seconds in Yishiji's self-obituary video. Source: Yishiji (2022, retrieved on May 14, 2025).



Figure 5. Screenshot of the danmu at 3 minutes and 59 seconds in Yishiji's self-obituary video. Source: Yishiji (2022, retrieved on May 14, 2025).

These danmu, which vary in content from expressing disbelief at his passing, sharing analogous personal situations, conveying profound sadness, to offering blessings and condolences at contextually appropriate moments—appear on screen at the precise moment they become relevant for subsequent viewers. This process creates a layered and dynamic viewing experience where Yishiji's original message is continuously interwoven with the evolving, real-time reactions of the audience, fostering a powerful sense of communal grieving and interactive remembrance.

The dialogue is precise because it directly addresses the content being presented at any given moment. Mourners use danmu to “speak to” Yishiji in response to his specific words. This specificity transforms the passive act of watching into an active, responsive engagement with the nuances of Yishiji’s final message. Spatially, the danmu comments are superimposed directly onto the visual field occupied by Yishiji. This visual co-occurrence creates a powerful sense of shared space where the mourners’ words are literally alongside Yishiji’s digital presence. This juxtaposition can foster a heightened sense of immediacy and connection, as if the mourners are co-present with Yishiji in the moment of his recording, offering their thoughts and feelings directly to him. This precise spatio-temporal dialogue allows for a form of asynchronous, yet seemingly direct, interaction. While Yishiji cannot respond, the act of placing a danmu at a specific point in his narrative allows mourners to feel as if they are participating in a conversation, reacting to him in the “here and now” of his video.

4.3. Functional Zoning of Semi-Open Spaces

Further analysis of Yishiji’s self-obituary page on Bilibili reveals that the emergent digital mourning space is not a monolithic entity but is characterized by a distinct functional zoning (see Figure 6). This refers to the way different sections of the platform interface, in and around the self-obituary video, serve distinct yet interconnected functions in the mourning process. This space is aptly described as “semi-open” due to a dual characteristic: On one hand, the content of the self-obituary video itself is fixed and unalterable by users post-publication; however, mourners can continuously generate new spatial content around this immutable core text. On the other hand, while the Bilibili platform provides the overarching architectural layout and

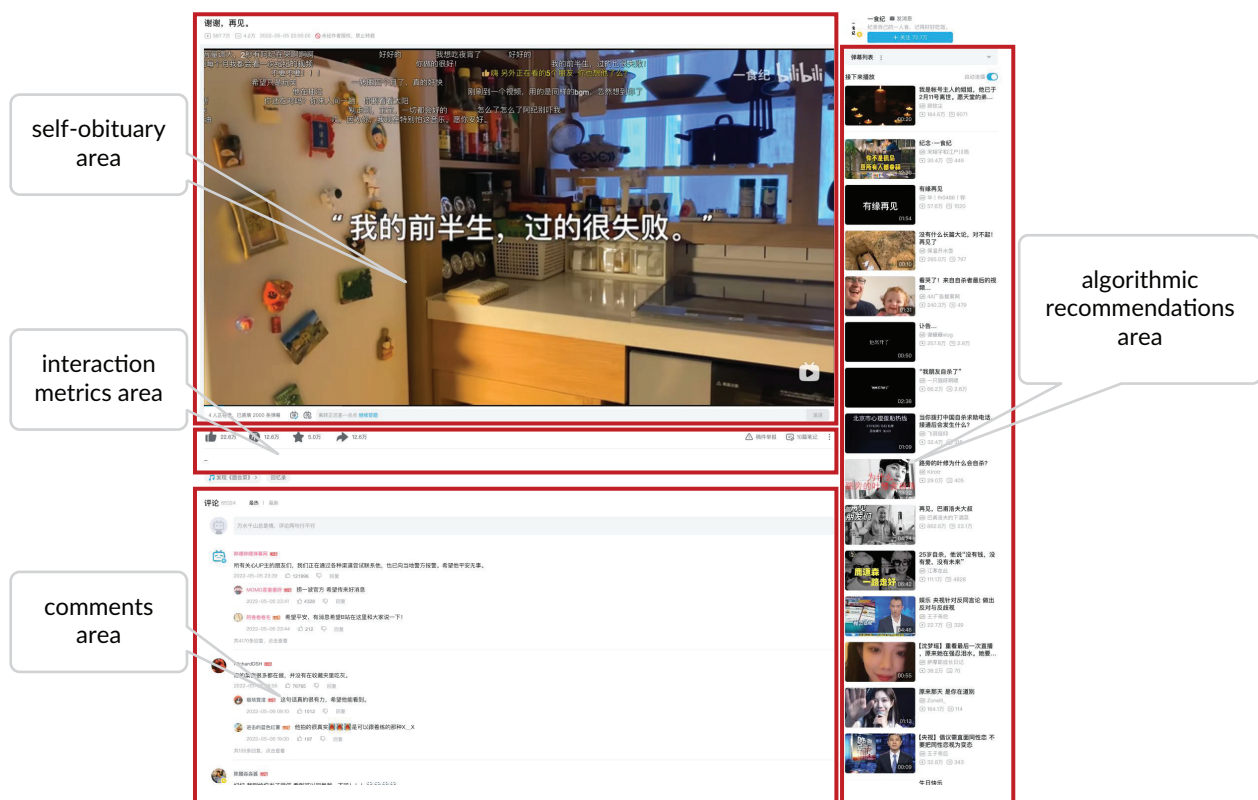


Figure 6. Screenshot of the digital mourning space. Source: Yishiji (2022, retrieved on May 14, 2025).

technological affordances, the specific content and the nature of interactions within these zones are co-created by the deceased (through the initial self-obituary), the users (mourners), and the platform's algorithmic influences.

The self-obituary area constitutes the central zone, prominently displaying the video content originally published by Yishiji and serving as the primary artifact left by the deceased. Its principal interactive affordance within the video player itself is the danmu system. As discussed previously (Section 4.2), users engage in a precise spatio-temporal dialogue here, overlaying their immediate reactions, messages of support, or expressions of grief directly onto the unfolding visual and auditory narrative of the deceased.

Directly beneath the video player lies the interaction metrics area, featuring standardized platform buttons such as "Like," "Send Virtual Coins," "Collect," and "Share." These tools allow users to perform quick, affirmative actions that signify engagement and appreciation. Such interactions not only provide visible metrics of collective sentiment but also contribute to expanding the influence and reach of the self-obituary and, consequently, the digital mourning space.

Below the video and the interaction metrics is the comment area which functions as a forum for more traditional, asynchronous textual communication. This zone facilitates longer-form expressions of grief, detailed personal narratives, tributes to Yishiji, discussions about themes raised in his video (such as LGBTQ+ struggles and mental health), and direct interactions between mourners (e.g., replies, threaded conversations). It serves as a repository for collective memory and evolving communal interpretation, often becoming a site for more deliberative and reflective mourning practices distinct from the ephemeral immediacy of danmu.

Finally, the algorithmic recommendations area, typically found on the right-hand sidebar or in a subsequent feed, represents the platform's curatorial periphery. This zone displays a list of related videos suggested by Bilibili's recommendation algorithm generated based on the content of Yishiji's video, the individual user's viewing history, and the aggregated behavior of other users who have watched this video. While this zone can extend the mourning experience by suggesting other relevant content, it also possesses the potential to divert users' attention. User interaction here is primarily passive viewing or active selection, navigating either deeper into related themes or away from the immediate mourning context.

4.4. Self-Communication and Connection

Yishiji's digital mourning space excels in facilitating deep self-communication and connection among participants primarily through the intricate interplay of multimodal semiotic resources: visual, textual, auditory, and interactive. The video serves as a powerful multimodal catalyst while his self-obituary forms a complex sign system. Mourners actively engage with these signifiers, interpreting the signifieds such as Yishiji's pain, identity struggles, and emotions. This engagement prompts critical self-reflection on their own experiences, identities, and feelings of anomie, as his narrative acts as a mirror for their internal landscapes.

Furthermore, user-generated content, such as danmu and comments, serves as a vital mechanism for symbolic articulation and self-definition. The act of externalizing internal thoughts and emotions into tangible semiotic forms—be it textual content, ideographic emojis, or indexically timed danmu—constitutes a

crucial step in self-communication. This process enables individuals to articulate, and often clarify, complex emotions, engaging in an internal dialogue as they process their reactions to Yishiji's death and its implications for their own lives. For instance, one user's poignant comment on Qingming Festival vividly exemplifies this dynamic of self-communication and the space's role as an emotional resource:

Today is Qingming, I've come to see you, Jiji. Whenever I feel despair, I revisit your Bilibili videos and the comment section. Seeing so many heartfelt comments encouraging you, reminding me of the preciousness of life, I can't help but let go of despair. I love the gentleness of your video's comment section. I'll come see you again next time, Jiji. (User R, 2022)

Here, the user not only articulates their personal struggle with despair but also chronicles their process of seeking and finding solace by engaging with Yishiji's digital legacy and the collective responses within the comment section. This act of commenting itself becomes a testament to an acknowledged aspect of their self and a means of navigating their emotional landscape.

Finally, interpersonal connection within this space emerges from the shared interpretation and application of these multimodal signs, fostering a collective semiotic repertoire. When participants recognize and utilize this shared repertoire, it cultivates a powerful sense of connection and a common social identity as mourners. Importantly, the inherent multimodality of this environment, which extends beyond textual content to include the affective dimensions of Yishiji's presentation and users' varied multimodal responses like visual floods of danmu, generates an affective attunement among individuals. This attunement, in turn, facilitates deeper emotional resonance and connection than purely textual exchanges could typically achieve.

In summary, the digital mourning space surrounding Yishiji's self-obituary transcends its function as a mere repository of messages. Through the nuanced use and interpretation of a wide array of multimodal semiotic resources, it becomes a dynamic environment where individuals engage in critical self-communication by reflecting on their own lives in light of Yishiji's and forge meaningful connections with others who share in the grief and the search for understanding. The symbolic labor performed by users in this space is central to its profound and enduring significance.

5. Discussion

Yishiji's self-obituary on Bilibili, and the digital mourning space it fostered, offer a compelling case study of an emergent memorial institution. This institution is co-constructed through the deceased's final narrative, sustained multimodal user engagement, and the platform's distinctive logics. However, its foundation lies not in personal intimacy but in parasocial relationships. The phenomenon signifies a fundamental reshaping of how grief, remembrance, and community are enacted, particularly when the deceased is a public figure with whom mourners share a mediated, yet emotionally significant, connection. What emerges is a dynamic interplay where personal testimony and collective emotional labor coalesce, creating a potent site for both self-communication and the performance of parasocial grief. Central to this evolving digital space is Yishiji's self-obituary, a multimodal declaration whose power to evoke emotion stems from both its content and presentation. Through a deliberate orchestration of visual, auditory, and textual elements, specifically the calm visual of his kitchen set against a somber melody, he presented an intimate, unmediated account of his life. The message's affective pull lies in its specific texture: a blend of raw vulnerability (his disclosure of

being gay and the resulting unhappiness) and a gentle, almost paradoxical altruism (his final wishes for others' happiness). This act of self-authoring must also be understood as a direct confrontation with societal stigmas. In challenging conventional narratives, he provided a framework that encouraged participants not only to grieve but to engage in deep introspection. This is a clear example of what Recuber (2023) describes as legacy-crafting in the digital age, where a final message becomes a means to assert control over one's own life story and have the last word. By presenting his pain with such quiet sincerity rather than anger, Yishiji created an approachable narrative that fostered connection, not just pity. This process of using his carefully crafted story to navigate their own emotions aligns with theories on how digital self-representations cultivate empathic connection and critical self-awareness (Papacharissi, 2010). The strong affective response from the community can thus be attributed not only to the tragedy itself but to a sense of solidarity with his candid, final act of self-definition.

The vitality of this digital space is sustained by the specific affordances of the Bilibili platform, most notably its danmu feature. This feature functions not merely as a comment system but as what Sumiala (2021) terms a vernacular ritual technology. Its key affordance, the precise spatio-temporal anchoring of comments, enables viewers to perform their grief collectively and in real-time response to Yishiji's message. This process transforms a solitary viewing experience into a layered, participatory media ritual where each comment contributes to an evolving tapestry of collective grief and remembrance. This technologically enabled performance generates two crucial outcomes. First, it creates a profound sense of asynchronous co-presence: New viewers are not only watching Yishiji's video but are also witnessing and participating in an ongoing, layered conversation with past mourners. This starkly contrasts with the detached nature of static comment sections (Wang, 2022). Second, this shared, moment-to-moment engagement cultivates a powerful affective attunement among participants (dos Santos, 2022), fostering a sense of *communitas*. Therefore, the precision of this spatio-temporal dialogue is a critical mechanism that both constructs and sustains the affective intensity of the space, allowing individuals to process their parasocial grief by "interacting" simultaneously with Yishiji's testimony and the like-minded community anchored to his narrative.

This dynamic is further nuanced by the platform's architecture which is best understood not as a single page but as a constellation of interconnected "social media sub-platforms" (Navon & Noy, 2023). While Yishiji's self-obituary video forms an immutable core, the surrounding digital territories—including the danmu overlay, the comment section, interaction metrics, and algorithmic recommendations—function as distinct sub-platforms. Each possesses its own affordances and social logics perpetually reconfigured by user activity and platform governance. This "semi-open" architecture, reminiscent of Margry's (2016) "performative memorials," positions users as active co-creators of the memorial. However, their agency is not absolute; it operates within the structures and algorithmic influences defined by the platform (Gillespie, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2013), highlighting the complex interplay between user participation and platform control. Crucially, this structured environment serves a vital social function. It provides distinct spaces for varied forms of emotional articulation from immediate, ritualized reactions in the danmu to more deliberative narratives in the comments. This process enables the formation of a shared symbolic repertoire, which reinforces a collective identity among mourners and validates individual grief within a supportive, networked framework.

Viewed holistically, Yishiji's digital mourning space exemplifies a novel memorial institution characterized by its participatory nature, multimodal richness, and profound technological mediation. It contributes to a

democratization of memorialization by providing a platform for individuals, including those from marginalized communities, to author their own final narratives and legacies. This process contests traditional power dynamics in commemorative practices, allowing for more nuanced, personal, and even critical reflections on life and society to emerge and be collectively navigated. The sustained engagement, notably facilitated by features like danmu, transforms the self-obituary from a static artifact into a dynamic site of continuing bonds (Klass & Steffen, 2018) where the deceased remains an active presence and the community of mourners finds solace, shared understanding, and a space for ongoing dialogue.

Such digital mourning spaces carry considerable implications. They reshape perceptions of loss by rendering grief more visible, public, and collectively experienced, potentially destigmatizing open expressions of sorrow. They also establish social media platforms as integral infrastructures for contemporary bereavement, their specific affordances and algorithmic logics subtly yet powerfully shaping how individuals and groups remember, mourn, and connect. This case, therefore, calls for sustained critical inquiry into the evolving dynamics of digital communication, the socio-technical co-construction of memory, and the ethical considerations inherent in these emergent forms of collective grieving and online memorialization.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Yishiji's digital mourning space on Bilibili represents a novel memorial institution distinct from mere extensions of traditional bereavement. It is co-constructed through the interplay of his poignant self-narration, sustained multimodal user engagement (notably through danmu and thematic comments), and the platform's inherent affordances. The space facilitates profound self-communication and fosters a palpable sense of "communitas" among participants via shared semiotic practices. Its significance lies in democratizing memorialization, particularly for marginalized voices like Yishiji, thereby challenging conventional commemorative narratives and reshaping understandings of loss and memory in digital contexts. This research thus contributes to digital sociology and media studies by illuminating the evolving role of social media in contemporary mourning and collective remembrance.

This research concludes that the digital mourning space surrounding Yishiji's self-obituary on Bilibili represents a novel and dynamic memorial institution, co-constructed through the interplay of his poignant self-narration, sustained multimodal user engagement, and the platform's distinct affordances. Key findings demonstrate how diverse user-generated content (characterized by thematic expressions of grief, remembrance, critique, and shared experience) transforms the self-obituary into a living archive. This process is significantly enhanced by platform-specific features like danmu, which enable precise spatio-temporal dialogues, fostering a unique sense of connection and perceived interaction. Furthermore, the functional zoning of the platform interface, alongside the rich interplay of multimodal semiotics, creates an environment conducive to profound self-communication and the forging of a strong collective identity, or "communitas," among mourners. Moreover, this study demonstrates a robust and replicable methodological framework. By integrating MDA with computational methods like LDA, it offers a practical approach for analyzing complex, user-generated digital mourning phenomena, providing a clear blueprint for future research and demonstrating the utility of such integrated programs in studying digital cultures. Ultimately, this study elucidates how such digital spaces not only facilitate innovative forms of mourning and continuing bonds but also democratize memorialization, offering a potent platform for individuals, especially those from marginalized communities like Yishiji, to author their final narratives. This underscores the evolving role of

social media in shaping contemporary bereavement practices and the societal understanding of loss, memory, and collective grieving in the digital age.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data analyzed in this study were collected from the publicly accessible social media platform, Bilibili.

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During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used GPT-4 for the purpose of grammar checking and language polishing.

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