



Cross-cultural analysis of Death perception

Tvärkulturell analys av Dödsuppfattningar

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Abstract

This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the culturally-specific meanings of death, manifested in personal stories presented in social media. Content analysis is used to analyse 140 posts, in three languages and from authors from 12 national affiliations. Death descriptions often includes a profound sadness, sense of loss and gratitude for the time shared with the deceased, who is considered to be a hero. Traditional mourning rituals blend with new trends, such as celebrations of life and live-streams from the funeral. In the present study the national affiliation of the blogger seems to have only a small effect on the rituals, values and symbols. Individual needs of grieving the dead person must be taken into account when providing social and psychological support.

Key words: *death, culture, blogs, quantitative, qualitative, social psychology, uncertainty avoidance*

Abstract

Denna studie syftar till att få en djupare förståelse för de kulturellt specifika betydelseerna av död, manifesterade i personliga berättelser i sociala medier. Innehållsanalys används för att analysera 140 inlägg på tre språk, författade av personer av 12 olika nationaliteter. Beskrivningarna innehåller ofta djup sorg, en känsla av förlust men också tacksamhet för den tid som delats med den avlidne, som anses vara en hjälte. Traditionella sorgeritualer blandas med nya trender, såsom firandet av liv och filmade sekvenser från begravningen. I föreliggande studie verkar bloggarens nationella tillhörighet endast ha en liten effekt på ritualer, värderingar och symboler. De individuella behoven hos den sörjande personen måste därför beaktas när socialt och psykologiskt stöd ska tillhandahållas.

Nyckelord: *död, kultur, bloggar, innehållsanalys, socialpsykologi, osäkerhetsundvikande*

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To all of you that are part of my life, especially to my grandmother... wherever you are, thank you for your love and care!

"Our life is a short spark in this beautiful little planet that flies with incredible speed to the endless darkness of the unknown universe. So, enjoy your time here with passion. Make it interesting. Make it count!" ML, Blogger

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Abstract

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"While I thought that I was learning how to live,
I have been learning how to die"
Leonardo da Vinci

1. Introduction

Austria, July 2009, a warm wind blows through the grass, the blueness above me is interrupted by dense white clouds. I contemplate the infinite sky and wish her a happy life. I do not follow any religion but this was the way that I found to honor my grandmother life and wish her a happy journey into the unknown.

In a Buddhist Ladakh, western Himalayas, a 72 year old man, surrounded by a lama, his family and neighbors, is preparing himself to die. A quiet atmosphere is provided so he can leave behind all his emotional attachments for the persons and to the things that he once loved or despised in the present life. For several days after his death the lama will read a short book, Bardö T'ödröl, describing the states that occur between death and rebirth, promoting guidance to the soul from the moment of death until the moment of entrance in a new womb, that is believed to happen a few weeks later (Gielen, 2006). Between 2001 and 2011 most people in Germany died in institutions, mainly in the hospital (Dasch, Blum, Gude & Bausewein, 2015). After the death occurs, family is notified and arrangements to the funeral start. Despite differences within Western cultures usually in the funeral the last words to the deceased are pronounced and the last goodbyes said. In Western Societies a dichotomized view of death prevails over the view of life as a continuum of a repeated life and death cycle.

The biological death is universal to all living creatures, we all have been born and we all will die in an uncertain day and time. This universal trait becomes unique when one looks into the human awareness about its own death. According to Bauman (1992) we know death "by proxy" (p.3) as we experience our own possible death through the death of others, and from that moment on we cannot un-know that fact. Reflecting on those facts Bauman considers that, ultimately, culture exists as a suppression of the knowledge of our mortality and inevitable end. The culture creation mechanism derives

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not only from our mortality but also and mainly from our desire of transcendence and remaining alive. Even when our physical bodies cease to exist, our existence remains alive in the memory of others. (Bauman, 1992, p.4)

Individuals attempt to understand the world by attributing meanings to what they experience and gain knowledge about the world that embrace them (Creswell, 2012, p. 24). Rituals, myths, symbols and religious beliefs that surround death are culturally constructed through social interaction. Taking that into account, death meanings are socially constructed and shared. During our growth we assimilate those meanings and ways of tackling the issues surrounding death. Those shared significances allow us to feel secure, to know how to act in uncertainty moments and how to continue with our lives. With that in mind, death is not just a biological process but a social construction, "culturally and socially embedded" (Brussel & Carpentier, 2014, p.1).

Although a dichotomized view of life and death prevails in Western cultures, the ways of understanding and acting towards death are diverse within those cultures. Even though the biological perspective presents death as a "permanent cessation of all vital functions" (Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary Online, 2016), the socio-psychological meanings of death are not so linear and cross cultural, as the way we respond to death varies broadly across cultures (Gire, 2014). With this in mind, one can formulate two main questions: How do individuals define death? How does culture influences those conceptions of death and dying?

Social media is a domain where ideas, beliefs and identities are formed and reproduced. The population under study are bloggers, that currently have active blogs and have posted about death related issues. Blogs are considered to be online diaries and qualitative research on diaries as been used by researchers as a relevant procedure to collect data and information about daily life events (Toms & Duff, 2002). The complexity of social interactions can be observed in written diaries, thus they can provide the researcher "a window into a complex process that is difficult to observe" (Toms & Duff, 2002, p.1238).

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In an increasingly globalized world the analysis of death meanings, individual and cultural perceptions become, as never before, an important issue as different cultures can live together in the same physical space. By achieving understanding of those cultural differences one also can learn how to respect them and act accordingly. As social psychologists our main concern is with interactions between individuals and between an individual and a situation. It is essential to gain understanding of the meanings of death so that the socio-psychological support can be adjusted to the needs of the griever.

1.1. Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this qualitative-quantitative study is to get a deeper understanding of the culturally-specific meanings of death, manifested themselves in personal stories presented in social media.

RQ1: How do bloggers define and present death?

RQ2: How do the individual perceptions of death vary across different national cultures?

1.2. Disposition

Chapter 2 contains the theoretical framework used to gain understanding of culture and social construction of meanings. Chapter 3 is a review of previous research concerning death, death awareness, narratives, coping mechanisms and religious and non-religious spirituality role. Chapter 4 addresses the study delineation, and the chapter after continues with an overview of the limitations of the study, a description of the method and the study procedures. In chapter 6, the result analysis and the relation between those findings and previous research will be discussed, including also a reflection about the study strengths and weaknesses. This final chapter ends with a conclusion and some suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

Death has been a traditional object of philosophy and theology, however this subject is nowadays increasingly in the centre of attention of social sciences. Thus, social psychology approaches to death studies have been done through the lenses of several theories. In this study the approach that is going to be regarded is social constructionism.

2.1. Social Constructionism

The social constructionist theory considers and analyses the development of jointly constructed meanings, "how knowledge is constructed and understood" (Andrews, 2012, p.44). According to this view, death despite its biological nature is also deeply related with culture and society (Van Brussel & Carpentier, 2014). Individuals, as social actors that make part of a culture act towards death according with their culture and society. Social constructionism considers the meanings of death as rising from interaction between social structures and collective meaning systems (ibid., p. 4).

Van Brussel and Carpentier (2014) argue that these mutually constructed meanings result from the dynamic between social structures, collective meaning systems and everyday social practices that continuously modulate individuals and societies. From those meanings, many different ways in which groups and individuals deal with death evolve. If our individual meanings are culturally constructed, the culture that we are embedded in gains significance in the individual perception and definition of death.

2.2. Culture

Geert Hofstede alone and in collaboration with other colleagues developed a widely recognized social psychological conception of culture in a number of publications. According to his works culture can be defined as "the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p.6). This means that culture is learnable and includes the way people act in everyday life. From how they do ordinary

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tasks like eating, maintaining their personal hygiene, greeting others and positioning themselves physically in relation to others, to how they express or not their feelings and emotions. Moreover, Hofstede considers culture to be a collective phenomenon; it is usually shared by people living in the same social environment. As shown in figure 1 (Hofstede et al, 2010) the expression of culture takes place within different levels of depth and relates with symbols, heroes, rituals and values.

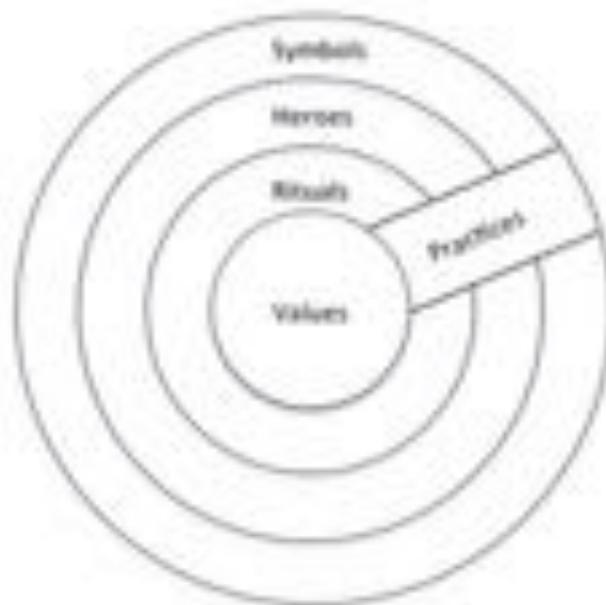


Fig. 1 - The "Onion" - Manifestations of Culture at Different Levels of Depth (Hofstede et al, 2010, p. 8)

Symbols are "words, gestures, pictures or objects that carry a particular meaning that is recognized as such only by those who share the culture" (Hofstede et al, 2010, p.8). Rituals are defined as "collective activities that are technically superfluous to reach desired ends but that, within a culture, are considered socially essential" (Ibid., p.9). Heroes are considered "persons, alive or dead, real or imaginary, who possess characteristics that are highly prized in a culture and thus serve as a model of behaviour" (Ibid, p.8) and the "broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others" are the values according with Hofstede et al. (2010).

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Although we are all different and unique human beings, Hofstede investigated the cultural differences among nations identifying six dimensions of national culture. Those six dimensions are: Power distance index; Individualism versus Collectivism; Uncertainty avoidance index; Masculinity versus Femininity; Long-term orientation versus short-term orientation; Indulgence versus Restrain. (Hofstede et al, 2010)

For the present research the dimension uncertainty avoidance will be considered as a grouping axis of analysis within cultures. Uncertainty avoidance can be defined as "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations" (Hofstede et al, 2010, p.191). The manifestations of uncertainty avoidance can be observed in different spheres of social life. In countries that have a higher score in this dimension, persons tend to be more prone to stress and anxiety, what is different is seen as dangerous, there is a hesitance towards new technologies and there is a need for rules, precision, formalization and superior guidance. Furthermore, there is also a higher expression of emotions within high uncertainty avoidance countries.

Death is a paradox, as it is both certain and uncertain. We know that we will die, nevertheless, and despite all our efforts, we cannot predict or control how or when death will occur. Hofstede and colleagues (2010) suggest that societies make use of some coping mechanisms to deal with uncertainty, among those mechanisms are law and religion. In what concerns religion, high uncertainty avoidance cultures are related with the dominance of Roman Catholic Christian and Orthodox religions. Those religions tend to provide absolute truths which gives the person a sense of guidance to their personal path and purpose in life. Taking this into account, uncertainty avoidance can influence the individual death concepts, depending on the degree of the necessity to control future events, such as how one dies and what happens when someone dies.

Notwithstanding, Bauman (2011) argues that we live in constantly changing globalized times. This globalization involves the dissolution of old national cultural traits and boundaries and the emergence of globalized industrial societies that transcend the national cultures.

3. Previous research

The conceptualizations, attitudes and coping mechanisms associated with death have been widely explored in past decades. Typically, the studies are focused on the death of a relative or close person or on the participants' eminent death due to sickness. Aspects such as death awareness, continuity in the bonds with the deceased, religious and non-religious beliefs as coping mechanisms and culture have been explored.

As the population for the current study are bloggers with no requirements of grieving process or life threatening diseases, although they also can be in that situation, it is important to review studies that explore death awareness in everyday people and their relation with life meanings. Grieving processes, narratives and beliefs also gain relevance if one considers the purpose of this study. In the next sub-sections some relevant studies will be reviewed.

3.1. Death awareness

A hermeneutical qualitative research "Everyday awareness of death: A qualitative investigation" was conducted by Widera-Wysoczanska, in 1999, with the propose of understanding death awareness in everyday live. In-depth interviews with open ended, unstructured questions were conducted in a sample of 12 Polish women. The women were physically healthy and in the past five years did not experienced death of a close relative. The results of this study showed that conscious meanings given to death are connected with the search of meanings in life, or the existent relationship between death awareness and a deeper value to life. Giving a new light on the positive relationship between death awareness and a deeper value and appreciation for life.

3.2. Death narratives

Bennett and Vidal-Hall conducted a study "Narratives of death: a qualitative study of widowhood in later life" (2000) within widowed women aged over 60, with the purpose of investigating changes in lifestyle, morale and social participation after the spouses death. One of the themes that arose, when the interviewees were asked to describe the

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weeks before and after the husbands death, was the "death narrative". A refined content analysis on those narratives was performed and the following results were considered by the researchers: widows narrative constructions of the events that surround their husbands death are highly elaborated. According to the researchers, three processes appear to be present: "the commitment of the events to memory; the continuing bond with the dead; and rehearsal for public presentation" (ibid, p. 425). The authors also refer that death narrative can be a way to develop the new identity as a widow, to make sense of a "senseless" event. Furthermore, the authors conclude that public narratives can be different from the private narratives.

3.3. Role of beliefs as a coping mechanism

In a 2013 qualitative study "A qualitative study of recently bereaved people's beliefs about death: implications for bereavement care" lead by Peter Draper, Margaret Holloway and Susan Adamson with the purpose of investigate the beliefs of recently bereaved people about death and the implications of those beliefs to bereavement care, forty six funerals were study and thirty seven interviews were conducted. The interviewees were recent mourners, with the average length of bereavement being 18 days. A thematic analysis was performed leading the researchers to find three main themes. The first theme is related with people understanding of death accordingly with five positions: religious, dualist, eco-spiritualist, materialist and death-as-transition. The second theme attends to assorted views about the possibility of life after death: resurrection, reuniting and reincarnation. The third theme outlines how personal relationship with the deceased person will continue after death: continuity as sense of presence and continuity as memory, legacy and love. As a conclusion for this study, the researchers acknowledge that people express a spectrum of beliefs about death, and although those beliefs are not frequently connected with formal religious or spiritual perspectives, they appear to have an important role as a coping mechanism to bereavement.

3.4. Religious, non-religious spirituality and death acceptance

In 2011, and after conducting previous exploratory studies, Cicirelli investigated the "Religious and nonreligious spirituality in relation to death acceptance or rejection", with the purpose of exploring the meanings of religious and nonreligious spirituality. The meanings were explored in relation with death acceptance, death rejection, and life extension. The participants were also subjects in an early study, in which their intrinsic religiosity was assessed. The studies explore some religious aspects in relation to death acceptance and rejection.

In the first study (Cicirelli, 2011), sixteen persons, considered to be non-religious, with an age range between 67 and 96 were interviewed and their death attitudes explored. This group non-religious attitudes were compared with the death attitudes of one hundred and sixty persons, with an age range between 65 to 95, which had scored extremely high on the measures of intrinsic religiosity. The instrument used was the Death Attitude Profile, composed by five sub-scales: Fear, avoidance, approach acceptance (death as an entry to a happy after life), escape acceptance (death as an escape from pain and suffering) and neutral acceptance (death as an inevitable fact of life). The researcher concludes that the non-religious spirituality group seemed to have a more neutral attitude toward death, with no fear or desire for it.

The second study (Cicirelli, 2011), pertained the assessment of religious and non-religious spirituality, and its relation to attitudes towards death rejection, extended life and death acceptance. Forty eight participants, age range 58-86, were interviewed using a structured interview-questionnaire. The conclusions reached by the researcher were that many older people have both religious and non-religious beliefs. Those that present stronger non-religious beliefs have more acceptance for the concepts of death rejection and life extension. The participants with higher religious and lower nonreligious spirituality also had a higher degree of death acceptance. Higher non-religious spirituality was related with greater sense of personal control and responsibility for own

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choices. Higher religious spirituality was related with broader sense of life meaning and coherence but also with lack of goals and life direction.

For the participants with religious spirituality the meaning of life is closely related with the preparation for the possibility of an afterlife, being that rebirth, reincarnation or resurrection depending on the religious beliefs. From those with non-religious spirituality, life is here and now and they are lead to live the best enjoyable life for as long as they are alive (Cicirelli, 2011).

3.5. Culture and death

Lobar, Youngblut and Brooten (2006) conducted a qualitative study: "Cross-cultural beliefs, ceremonies, and rituals surrounding death of a loved one", in which participated 14 nursing students from different cultural and religious background. The purpose of the study was to describe death related practices within European, Asian, Central American and South American families living in the United States. As a conclusion, the researchers assert that there are some beliefs about death and dying that appear to be common among different cultures and religions. Nevertheless, culture and religion appear to have a substantial influence in the practices that surround death.

3.6. Death, mourning and technology

Margaret Gibson (2007) examined the expansion of death and grief from private to public spaces. Public sharing of private experiences of death and grief is pointed out to be not only the result of the communications development, but also an expression of the wishes to register and eternalize a loved one's, or significant other's, existence. Online postings, online forums and blogs allow the author to give meaning to a deceased person existence. This also allows a maintenance of a symbolic post-mortem relationship with the deceased that perdures in time.

In addition, De Vries and Rutherford (2004) content analysis investigation: "Memorializing loved ones on the World Wide Web" conclude that virtual spaces, as online memorials, bring private mourning into public spheres. This allows traditional

death rituals and personal expressions of grieving and mourning to blend, giving space for the transformation of individual loss into community supported meaningful experiences.

In the same line, the study conducted by Sofka (2012): "Blogging: new age narratives of dying, death, and grief" concludes that internet has an effect on our personal experiences of death and mourning. Additionally, internet is also a mean of keeping social interaction and identity alive, by allowing post-mortem interactions and ongoing presence of the deceased. Furthermore, blogs provide spaces for self-therapy, allow the creation of meaningful interactions and community support, that goes beyond one's physical sphere of existence.

In conclusion, previous research focused on the relation of religiosity, gender, age and culture, with death awareness, given value of life and death acceptance. Additionally, the role of internet in death and bereavement has been studied in its relation to social meanings and community support.

For the present study, the previous research presented is of utmost importance as it focus on the elaboration process of death narratives and its social significances, how death is perceived in everyday life and the impact of religion, spirituality and culture. These findings are valuable for this study for a further understanding of how death is presented and the factors that may have influence on the individual presentation of death.

Notwithstanding, the present research aims to analyse how death is narrated and described in weblogs within bloggers from different social and cultural backgrounds and with different life and death experiences.

4. Delineation

Previous studies had their focus in homogeneous population groups: non-grieving women, bereaved spouses and bereaved persons. They also focused on death awareness, life value, death acceptance and coping mechanisms. The main difference between the

present study and the previous research is the approach used, both in the participants non-homogeneity and in the fact that their personal stories are collected from social media. The present approach allows to gain a general and deeper understanding of the culturally-specific meanings of death.

5. Method and methodology

This section provides a delineation and justification of the method chosen, followed by a sample description, objectivity and ethical considerations.

5.1 Method

This study utilizes a quantitative-qualitative content analysis research design. Content analysis is defined as a systematic coding and categorizing technique, used for examining large amount of texts, with the objective of detecting trends and patterns of words and themes within the data. Text coding into categories and broader themes allows the qualitative researcher to analyze the process and results through models, conceptual systems, conceptual maps or categories (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p.402). Thus, being appropriate for the present research purpose.

I examined weblogs, which are webpages frequently updated by the user. Usually composed by a brief text, weblogs may also have images and other multimedia elements (Schiano, Nardi, Gumbrecht & Swartz, 2004, p.1143). Weblogs are a low-cost and direct instrument for collecting data (Hookway, 2008, p.107) which allow the researcher to access large amounts of data from geographically and socially distant places (Hookway, 2008, p.93). Also a first person perspective longitudinal view on the dynamics of everyday life can be provided by blog analyzes (ibid.).

5.2 Instrument

The instrument was developed using a coding scheme (see full coding scheme in appendix 1). Coding schemes are systematic tools that allow the researcher to deeply

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analyse data (Bryman, 2008, p. 543). After the careful reading of the initial posts coding units arose, as can be seen in the following example:

"It was so painful, (1) so sad (2) (...) and yet I was so grateful (3)"	1) Pain 2) Sadness 3) Gratefulness	Emotions	Values
"N [deceased] was happy in every circumstance; even leukemia could not defeat her radiant spirit."		Deceased seen as hero	Heroes
"Elijah's unfuneral yesterday was less about death and more about life. Our girls had been calling it "Elijah's party" as they anticipated the day, and it was like a party — the perfect way to celebrate his life."	Celebration of life	Funeral Ceremony	Rituals

Table 1 - Coding example

After an initial coding, the posts were again read through and coding was reviewed. Four main categories emerged from the data and in relation with theoretical background: Symbols, Values, Rituals and Heroes. Those were divided into subcategories. After a first analysis and a deep immersion into the theme, the instrument was reanalysed and adapted to fit the research purpose of the present study.

5.3 Sampling

For the present study, a purposeful sampling technique, with a combination of a convenience and criterion sampling strategy (Creswell, 2012, pp. 156-158) was used.

Free weblogs hosting sites were searched with the purpose of finding blogs that met the following criteria: a) Blogs that were not password protected; b) Blogs hosting posts that narrate personal experiences; c) Blogs that enable location and identification of the author.

The blog posts were collected between the 10th January 2016 and the 30th January 2016. Initial data collection was made through Google.com, About.com and in an

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advanced blog search engine: icerocket.com. The following words were used in the searches: "death"; "morte"; "muerte"; "funeral" and "blog". Around 400 000 blogs appeared in the initial searches. After a detailed analysis, with the intent of matching my research purpose and the previously established sampling criteria, a total of 140 posts were selected, taken from a total of 96 blogs. Between the 22nd February and the 26th February 2016 a new search was conducted, using the same procedures, yielding similar results.

Only blogs that were not password protected, and posts that allowed the identification of the author and narrated a personal experience with death were taken into consideration. From those 140 posts, 109 (78%) were written by women and 31 (22%) by men. Despite the search being conducted in three languages: English, Portuguese and Spanish; the national affiliation of the bloggers (see Fig. 2) was in majority from English speaking countries. Regarding the uncertainty avoidance index, from the 140 blog posts, 99 (70,7%) are from low uncertainty avoidance countries and 41 (29,3%) from high uncertainty avoidance countries.

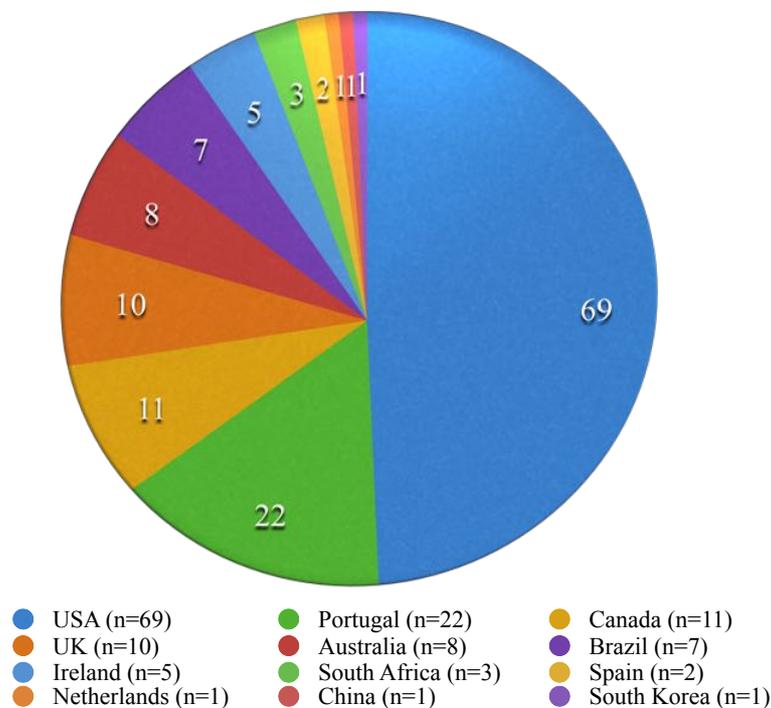


Fig. 2 - National affiliation of bloggers

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For this study the blogs were classified according to their content. Personal diaries were defined as blogs that document day-to-day experiences of the author. Usually they represent a way to share feelings and thoughts about everyday subjects or sometimes they are used to keep family and friends updated on a specific subject as, for example, small children growth and development. Likewise, tribute blogs were defined as blogs that were created before or after death of a loved one with the aim of valuing their life and keeping memories alive. Communities blogs are predominantly websites where many authors can post journal entries under a theme that is previously defined by the blog creator or creators. Shared blogs were, to this study, personal blogs with several authors, as for example, a family blog. Business blogs were defined as blogs where the main objective as to promote the author professional services.

The blog types were distributed in the following way (Fig. 3).

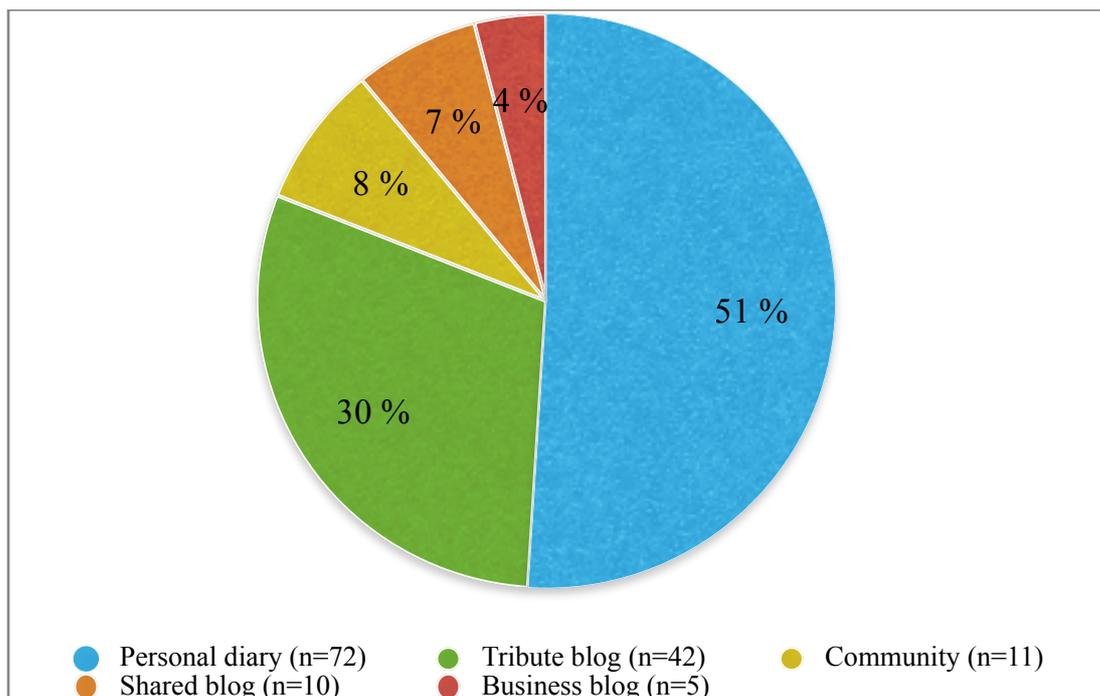


Fig. 3 - Blog distribution

The posts were transformed into word documents and printed to allow a more detailed analysis. All the posts described a first person experience with death. 50% of the posts were about the death of a daughter or son. These 50% split further into 44% connected

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with the death of a minor and the remaining 6% pertaining with the death of an adult daughter or son. The other 50% of the posts distributed in the following way: 14% related to the death of a parent; 10% related to the death of a spouse/husband; 7% related to the death of a close friend; 5% related to the death of a sibling; 5% related to the death of a known person; 9% related to the death of other family members.

The causes of death were mentioned in 86% of the posts and distributed in the following way: long term or terminal illness (42%); sudden death (31%); stillbirths (5%); suicide (4%) and old age related (4%).

5.4 Objectivity

With the purpose of achieving an objective study, criteria for reliability and validity were considered.

5.4.1 Reliability and validity

Reliability refers to the "consistency of a measure of a concept" (Bryman, 2008, p. 149). The present study has only one author therefore in order to meet the internal reliability criteria an intra-coder agreement (Mayring, 2014, p.111) was used. After a preliminary analysis of the material, the instrument was again applied and the results compared.

Trustworthiness in this study was achieved by fulfilling the transferability criteria, providing a rich and detailed description of the study (Bryman, 2008, p.378). Also, by clarifying the researcher bias, so that the readers can gain understanding on the researchers personal experiences and how those could have influenced the study (Creswell, 1998). This was done by disclosing my personal experience with the death of a much loved one.

According to Bryman (2008, p. 376) validity "refers to the degree to which findings can be generalized across cultural settings" and if there is a good correspondence between the researcher observations and the analytical ideas they develop. Additionally, detailed records of all the materials and of all research process steps were carefully kept to meet

the dependability criteria, which is, according to Bryman (2008) a parallel to the reliability criteria in qualitative studies.

To increase the study objectivity I also considered the inclusion of bloggers from different backgrounds and with different life experiences. This was also done by monitoring my own subjectivity from the beginning of the process of analysis until the end. Educational purposes will be achieved by sharing the results of this study in my own personal blog and make them publicly available (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2008).

5.5 Ethical considerations

Blogs are considered to be public domain, meaning that human subjects consent and blogger consent is not required to conduct the blog analysis in research (Carmack & Degroot, 2014, p.320). Pfeil and Zaphiri (2010) explore all the nuances of the public-private debate within content analysis of online support communities. Three main topics are considered important when performing research with human beings: distinction between private and public, informed consent and anonymity.

When considering the distinction between private and public there is a common agreement among researchers that consent is not a requirement for every research project (Pfeil & Zaphiri, 2010, p. 5). While some researchers consider the internet public space, others see the human interactions in the internet as private contents in public space. Regarding this, the authors suggest that each case should be analysed individually considering the emotional content (Ibid.).

It is clear for researchers that informed consent should be obtained when collecting interview and survey data online, but questions arise when considering observational data (Pfeil & Zaphiri, 2010, p. 4). Some approaches suggest gaining informed consent from the subjects, or at least obtain informed consent from the online community moderator as the key member and responsible person for that community. As a

conclusion, Pfeil and Zaphiri (2010) suggest that informed consent should be decided accordingly with the research purpose.

Considering the anonymity question, researchers often hide the true identity of the participants and quotations are sometimes slightly altered so that they cannot be traced down and the authors easily identified (Pfeil & Zaphiri, 2010, p. 6).

Taking this into consideration, and due to the fact that death is regarded to be a highly sensitive topic, informed consent was asked from the blog authors. After a preliminary search for blogs, the authors were informed about the nature of the study, and that they can leave the study at any moment. The blogs names, author names and details that can reveal the authors identities will remain anonymous. This procedure was conducted by email, when the email was publicly available, or through posting a comment in the post itself. Even though the number of responses received from the bloggers was very low, there were no negative responses to the participation.

6. Result analysis

Considering Hofstede's et al (2010) definition of culture and the different expression of it, through symbols, heroes, rituals and values, cultural representation of death in the posts was divided in four parts.

6.1 Symbols

The first part relates with symbols. Symbols represent the outer layer of culture (Hofstede et al, 2010) and in the present study clothing, images, images of the deceased, specific words, food and music were analysed as symbols. Those were considered because they are related with traditional funeral ceremonies and also they commonly appear with the narratives of death from previous studies and also in the blogs.

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Symbols	Frequency	Percentage
Images of the deceased	84	60 %
Flowers	20	28 %
Music	22	15,7 %
Dark/Formal clothes	22	15,7 %
Colour clothes	16	11,4 %
Slide-shows	14	10 %
Symbols that stay with family	14	10 %
Symbols buried/cremated with the deceased	13	9,3 %
Donations instead of flowers	12	8,6 %

Table 2 - Symbols distribution

The most common feature are images of the deceased (60%, n=84) in the post itself, in the funeral ceremony or in the farewell. The personal image of the deceased in the post is sometimes subtitled with acknowledgments to the deceased *"Thank you brave Nicole."*; or comments documenting the life of the deceased *"from a young kid in South Texas"*. Also photos of the deceased can be present during the funeral, farewell or memorial, as well as slide shows that documented the deceased life. Those slide shows (10% , n=14) are created by the family or even by the deceased, when facing a terminal illness *"with a slideshow she created"*. Pictures are present in the service place and sometimes a picture of the deceased is offered to the guests *"a keepsake photo we gave the guests"*. Also, in cases of stillbirths pictures are taken, by family or professionals, as a long lasting memory *"My sister C. accompanies me to offer me comfort and to take this photos, and I'm so thankful to have this record of my last cuddle"*.

Music is also mentioned in 15,7% (n=22) of the posts, from sad songs and lullabies *"we used music throughout the service"*, music with special meaning and memories *"There were so many songs we associated with Maddie. Lots of them were silly and frivolous (...) each song had a different memory attached"*, spontaneous singing from family

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"comecei a cantar para ele" [I start singing to him (deceased)] and religion connected chants *"there were monks praying and chanting"*.

Moreover, only 30% (n=42) of the posts make reference to clothing. Usually, dark and formal clothes are not narrated or are simply mentioned as *"In our funeral clothes"*, but can be seen in 15,7% (n=22) of the posts. On the contrary, when the colour is other than black, 11,4% (n=16) of the posts, is frequently narrated, a member of the family that used the deceased favourite colour *"in honor of his grandmother favourite colour (pink and purple)"* or sometimes is asked to everyone attending the funeral wear the deceased favourite colour *"we asked people to wear red (...) Julian's favourite colour was red"*. Also, in cases of terminal illness, some clothing items that were chosen by the deceased for himself *"I have already chosen my last tie"*. Or clothes that are symbolically used to honor the deceased beliefs *"saris (...)in our unfamiliar outfits"*. The white colour is also frequently mentioned when describing a baby or child casket *"her white tiny coffin"*.

Flowers *"covered with baby pink roses"* are present in 20% (n=28) of the posts, nevertheless 8,6% (n=12) of post authors ask for the guests to make donations instead of flowers *"In lieu of flowers memorial contributions to honor Kai may be made"* to hospices, hospitals, research funds, foundations, public libraries or even to provide funding for the deceased small children.

Symbols that stay with the family are described by the bloggers in 10% (n=14) of the posts: burial sand *"request some of the sand used and the burial and place this in a piece of jewellery"* or cremation ashes *"a piece of jewellery [teardrop shaped necklace] to hold a bit of her ashes"*, memory boxes, books or special places at home *"the memory box will be such a wonderful reminder of our little birdy"*. Also, in 9,3% (n=13) of the posts, have mentions to symbolic objects that were buried or cremated with the deceased: toys *"her monkey"*, images *"photos of each of us [parents] holding her"*, *"photos of Lilly and Charlie [twin siblings]"*, or written words *"they [the deceased children] wanted a copy of these letters to go in the casket with Claire"*.

Balloons that are released into the sky "*Dezenas de balões brancos e rosa no céu*" [Dozens of white and pink balloons in the sky]", and nature "*yellow butterfly*", "*cherry blossom*", "*rainbow*", "*beautiful sunset*" are also mentioned in the death and funeral narratives. The word "*angel*" is mostly mentioned by parents when referring to a deceased son or daughter.

6.2 Heroes

The second cultural layer heroes.

Heroes	Frequency	Percentage
Deceased	84	60 %
No heroes	36	26 %
Religious Figures	11	8 %
Others	8	6 %

Table 3 - Heroes

Three ideas arise from the posts: most frequently (60%, n=84) the deceased is described as a hero "*you are such a courageous and strong fighter*" usually for enduring long term or terminal diseases or for the way they conducted their life "*She was one of the strongest (...) I knew (...) so loving (...) so gentle*"; religious figures are also mentioned (8%, n=11) as heroes "*we can truthfully say the Lord is good in both the joy and the sorrow*"; occasionally (6%, n=8) the heroes are the family members or professional caregivers that helped the deceased or his family to go through the disease or the grieving process. Nevertheless in 26% (n=36) of the posts there are no heroes, in a death process just humans facing natural features of life and death.

6.3 Rituals

For the third cultural layer, rituals, the present work considered the time between death and the funeral ceremony, the funeral ceremony itself and the farewell.

Days between death and funeral	Frequency	Percentage
0-3	25	17,85 %
4-7	35	25 %
8-30	19	13,5 %
More than 30	1	0,7 %
Not possible to know	59	42,15 %

Table 4 - Days between death and funeral

The days occurring between death and funeral ceremony are not always clearly mentioned in the posts but by researching date of the posts, photos and previous post it was possible to gather more information about this. However, in 42,15% (n=59) of the blogs it is not possible to access how many days passed between death and the funeral ceremony. In the others, 25% (n=35) the funeral was held within 4-7 days; 17,85% (n=25) within 0-3 days, 13,5% (n=19) within 8-30 days; 0,7% (n=1) more than 30 days and 0,7% (n=1) there was no funeral or ritual connected with the deceased.

Funeral ceremony	Frequency	Percentage
Service/Memorial/Wake	70	50 %
Burials	65	46,4 %
Cremation	26	18,6 %
Celebration of life	15	10,7 %
Family together after funeral	15	10,7 %
Not possible to know	34	24 %

Table 5 - Funeral ceremonies

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The funeral ceremonies vary between burials, 46,4% (n=65) of the posts and cremation 18,6% (n=26) but also other less common ceremonies are mentioned as "*casket in a mausoleum*". In 24% (n=34) of the posts do not mention the funeral ceremony or call it "*sweet and simple funeral*" or in one post there is no funeral or death ritual. Rituals such as a service, a memorial, a memorial service, a wake or a memorial mass are mentioned in 50% (n=70) of the posts. In 10,7% (n=15) of the cases the funeral ceremony is called a "*celebration of life*" where the life of the deceased is praised "*we are planning the biggest celebration of his life*". Celebrations of life can include playful musics, colourful clothes, balloons, slide-shows and Do It Yourself (DIY) coffins, cardboard or simple wooden boxes that are painted and decorated by the close family.

Farewells can be within the funeral or the celebration of life with words and shared stories "*we listened to Laura's children - Sophie, Charlie and Chris - detail some of their favorite memories of their mother*", ritualistic procedures from one person "*a rosa e o pedaço de terra que atirei para o caixão*" [the rose and the piece of soil that I have thrown into the coffin] or from several "*At the funeral when everyone was walking by her for the last time*". Or after the funeral, close family that stays together, 10,7% (n=15), before "*Before the funeral we spent time together for 3 days*" or after the funeral "*passarmos a noite em casa dela, a desfilar memórias*" [spend the night in her house, sharing memories]. Also, some other ways of saying "*the last goodbye*" are narrated by the bloggers: praying "*I went to kneel and pray*" , in the school yard "*colégio onde ele estudou toda sua vida*" [school where he studied all his life], ballon release "*there was a beautiful balloon release*", ashes spread in nature or in a special place "*we planned to scatter them somewhere my father loved*", flowers in the place the deceased was found death "*I put 2 dozen roses and a card in the spot where they found him*" , military funeral honours or the blog post itself as a way of saying goodbye "*This words are my way of saying goodbye*".

Furthermore, funerals can also include donations to foundations, other public places or to the deceased family instead of flowers. Moreover, some funeral parlours have built in

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music and video systems and live-streams of the funeral and online guest books for those who cannot be there in person.

6.4 Values

The most inner cultural layer are values. Emotions, loss, death as the end or the continuity of life and uncertainty with the future were analysed.

Emotions	Frequency	Percentage
Sadness	110	78,6 %
Fear/Despair/Shock	44	31,4 %
Anger	15	10,7 %
Gratitude	21	15 %
Peacefulness/Love/Joy	25	17,9 %

Table 6 - Emotions

"The animalistic cry that came out of me was a sound I have never heard before; but a sound that everyday since; I am now very familiar with." Deep emotional states are described. Sadness *"so much sadness"* is mentioned in 78,6% (n=110) of the posts. Fear *"scared"*, shock *"I was in shock"* and despair *"Estou desesperado [I am in despair]"* is described in 31,4% (n=44). Anger *"I'm mean and angry at everyone"* in 10,7% (n=15). However, 15% (n=21) of the posts mention feelings of gratitude *"we feel so blessed for every minute we had with Ava [deceased]"* and 17,9% (n=25) feelings of peacefulness *"I had peace"*, love *"rodeado de amor [surrounded by love]"*, celebration *"the perfect way to celebrate his life"*, laughing *"we laughed"*, sharing *"we shared stories"* and joy *"and cried with joy"*.

Loss *"when we lost"* is mentioned in 92,9% (n=130) of the posts *"Loss of another person in your life is one of the most profound, indescribable feelings aside from love."*

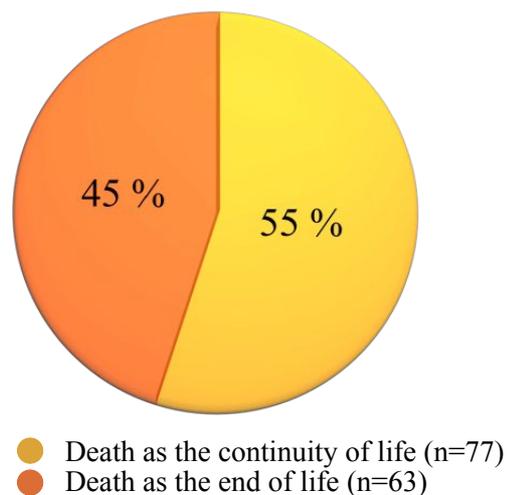


Fig. 4 - Death as end or continuity of life

Death is considered to be the continuity of life *"life does continue after death and that Wyatt is not far from us"* or *"she will never return still she will never leave"* by 55% (n=77) of the bloggers, while 45% (n=63) consider death as the end of life *"it was really, really hard to say goodbye (...) the end"*. At the same time, death is also described as a time marker where there is a before and an after. And nothing will ever be the same. *"Suddenly, without any warning, my life was changed"*. Experiencing a death of a loved one is something that stays with you all your life *"One day you will wake up, and the weight will be a little bit easier to carry. It hasn't gotten lighter – it never will – but you have gotten stronger."*

In table 7 a comparative overview between High and Low uncertainty avoidance countries can be seen. Establishing a comparative analysis in emotions, between High Uncertainty Avoidance Cultures (HUA) and Low Uncertainty Avoidance Cultures (LUA), HUA present a higher percentage of emotions like Sadness and Fear/Despair/Shock. While, Anger, Gratitude and Peacefulness/Love/Joy are more often described by bloggers affiliated with LUA.

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Another difference is the time between death and funeral ceremony. In HUA is often between 1-3 days and 4-7 days in LUA. Furthermore, bloggers affiliated with HUA countries present more often no religious connotations in their narratives.

	High Uncertainty Avoidance Countries	Low Uncertainty Avoidance Countries
Number of posts (n)	41	99
Emotions		
Sadness	82,9 %	76,7 %
Fear/Despair/Shock	39 %	28,3 %
Anger	9,8 %	11,1 %
Gratitude	9,8 %	17,2 %
Peacefulness/Love/Joy	7,31 %	22,2 %
Religious connotations		
Strong	19,5 %	28,2 %
Weak	14,6 %	26,3 %
No	65,9 %	45,4 %
Time between death and funeral		
0-3	34,1 %	11,1 %
4-7	4,9 %	33,3 %
8-30	9,8 %	15,2 %
> 30	0 %	1 %
Not possible to know	51,2 %	39,4 %
Death as the end of life	48,8 %	49,5 %
Death as the continuity of life	51,2 %	50,5 %
Loss	90,2 %	87,9 %

Table 7 - High and Low Uncertainty Avoidance Countries

In essence, death is related with loss, sadness and the presence of images of the deceased, which is commonly seen as a hero. But it is also about celebration, about

sharing and remembering. Furthermore, in the present research the national affiliation of the bloggers seems to have little effect on their definition of death.

7. Discussion

In this section the results will be thoroughly interpreted. They will also be related and compared with previous research findings. A critical reflection about the results and their relevance to a wider social context will also be included. The discussion is then followed by a conclusion and the section ends with suggestions for further research.

7.1 Multidimensional aspects of death narratives

Death is often described, by the blog authors, as loss. It is narrated as an heart breaking experience, where you lose part of yourself, and this is something that cannot be easily translated into words. Loss is also classified under several dimensions: loss of the daily interaction with the deceased; loss of support when related with a spouse/husband or a parent; loss of part of the self. However, loss is a part of the death process that somehow stays with the living ones.

Death is also described as a time marker, where there is a before and an after. Nothing will ever be the same and this is an experience that stays with the grieving person for the rest of his or her life. It would seem that not even time erases, or will ever erase, the marks left by losing someone.

The post authors describe themselves as immersed in a set of deep emotional states that cannot be translated into words, that are completely new and unknown to them. Sadness, despair, pain and anger mix with feelings of gratitude for the time spent together with the deceased. The Portuguese call it "saudade" and, although there is no direct translation of the word to other languages, it can be described as a deep emotional

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feeling of melancholy, nostalgia or profound longing for a loved one. Additionally, "saudade" bears the knowledge that the absent one will never return.

Traditional ceremonies, wakes, burials and cremations are blended with playful musics, DIY coffins, colourful clothes and joyful moments of sharing and celebrating the deceased life. These new trends in funerals also include donations to foundations and other public places, built-in music, video systems, live-streams of the funeral and online guest books for those who cannot be there in person. This can be considered ways of building up community support and bring private mourning into public spaces (De Vries and Rutherford, 2004), besides people gathering in funerals, funerals become an world wide available experience.

Similarly to the study conducted by Draper and colleagues (2013), the present study also could not relate formal religious perspectives with beliefs about death. Likewise, beliefs about death seem to have an important function as coping mechanisms to bereaved persons. Both when considering death as the end of life or a continuity of it.

However, and independently of how the goodbye ritual is performed and if death is the end of life or not, bloggers express the necessity to be present in a ritualistic ceremony with the purpose of saying goodbye or until next time. When the ceremony does not happen, or for some reason the bereaved person does not attend to it, there are feelings of regret and the impression that there is something unfinished. In this sense, funeral ceremonies seem to be an important coping mechanism to bereavement and the need for those seems to be independent from religious and spiritual affiliations. (Circirelli, 2011; Draper et al, 2013).

In line with the research conducted by Bennett & Vidal-Hall (2000), extended and detailed narratives of the death and funeral process are also common, but in the present study, not only from widows but also from bereaved parents or close family members.

7.2. *Cyberspaces and culture*

Despite the fact, already mentioned, that the blog search has been conducted in three different languages and in different blog hosts, 75,7% of posts are from low uncertainty avoidance countries (LUA), with only 24,3% from high uncertainty avoidance countries (HUA). This might be due to the fact that within LUA the acceptance of new technologies is faster and higher than in HUA.

Equally, emotions like sadness, fear, despair and shock are more described by bloggers affiliated with HUA and gratitude, peacefulness, love and joy are more common among bloggers affiliated with LUA. Hofstede's et al (2010) assert that in HUA cultures persons are more emotional and are more prone to feel unhappy. In high uncertainty avoidance countries there is a tendency to have less days between death and the funeral ceremony, and the ceremony itself seems to be more traditional. This can be explained by the higher need for rules and formal procedures within HUA.

However, there seems to be an overall similitude within all the bloggers, that is independent from their national affiliation. As heroes, the deceased often leave "*lessons*" for the living ones: to endure, to smile often, to dream aloud and to share moments with the loved ones. Other similitudes include: images of the deceased; sense of loss; death narratives as a way of developing new identities (Bennet and Vidal-Hall, 2000); internet as a way of keeping a post-mortem and eternal relationship with the deceased; internet as a way of transforming the individual loss into a publicly shared and supported meaningful experience (De Vries and Rutherford, 2004; Sofka, 2012). Therefore, the individual perceptions of death are varied but seem, in the present study, to be only slightly dependent from the national culture of the blogger. As there are more resemblances between the death narratives, considered to this study, than differences.

Taking all similitudes into account, and along with Bauman (2011) views, internet may well be considered as a non-physical space resulting from an emergent globalized

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industrial society, which transcends national cultures. As such, it provides different sharing experiences and identity expressions that can modulate our selves and our actions in the physical world.

7.3 Weaknesses and Strengths

The current study presents several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Due to the limited number of posts and unbalanced number in national affiliations of the bloggers, results may lack generalizability into the general population. That may also occur due to the sample heterogeneity, when it comes to cause of death and relationship between the post author and the deceased. In addition, blogs were used as a narrative source of data and, despite their similarity to diaries, the veracity of the experience cannot be validated.

7.4 Concluding remarks and bridges for the future

All things considered, death can be defined in a multitude ways. However, it often includes profound sadness, a sense of loss, but also a sense of gratitude for the time spent with the deceased, which provides changes in the identity and daily routine of the grieving ones. In the present study the national culture of the blogger seems to have a small impact on the personal definition of death.

As social psychologists and support community, social support to bereavement and grieving processes are of great importance. It is also paramount to meet the individuality of the griever instead of relaying in routined cultural processes of dealing with death. Bereaved persons have unique needs which need to be accessed before providing support.

There is a need for further studies using the internet as research platform to explore the role of virtual spaces and virtual support communities in the grieving and mourning processes, and their influence in cultural identity and the ritualistic processes that surround death, mourning and grief.

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Appendix I - Instrument

Cross-cultural analysis of death perceptions	Date	Post ID
1. Background info		
1.1 Blog type		
1.2 What is the post about?		
1.3 National affiliation of the blogger		
1.4 Blogger gender		
2. Cultural representations of Death		
2.1 Symbols		
2.1.1 Clothing		
Dark clothes		
Formal clothes		
Specific colour clothes		
Informal clothes		
2.1.2 Images of the deceased		
2.1.3 Specific words		
2.1.4 Others		
2.2 Values		
2.2.1 Emotions		
Fear		
Sorrow		
Anger		
Anxiety		
Gratitude		
Others		
2.2.2 Loss		
2.2.4 Death as the end of life		
2.2.5. Death as the continuity of life		
2.3 Rituals		
2.3.1 Funeral ceremony		
Burial		
Cremation		
Other		
Not mentioned		
2.3.2 Farewell		
2.3.3 Time between death and funeral ceremony		
0 - 3 days		
4 - 7 days		
8 - 30 days		
More than 30 days		
Not possible to know		
2.4 Heroes		
the deceased		
religious figures		
others		
3. Religious connotations		
Strong		
Weak		
No religious connotations		

Appendix II - Letter of informed consent

Hello!

My name is Rita and I am studying social psychology at the University of Skövde, Sweden.

Currently, I am performing a study with the purpose of getting a deeper understanding of the culturally-specific meanings of death through the analysis of personal stories presented in social media.

Therefore, I would like to inform you that I will use some of your blog posts in my research. Furthermore, your participation is strictly anonymous, meaning that nobody will be able to find out who you are, and that the results of this study will be used for research purposes only.

Your participation is also voluntary, which means that if you wish your posts can be retrieved from this research at any moment.

For more information, please contact me on:

a14ritca@student.his.se

Thank You for Your time!

Rita Coelho