Application Fields and Innovative Technologies

Grief Practices and Artificial Intelligence: Transformations of the (Im)Perishable L. Bischoff, A. Depner, J. Ewert, K. Kümpfel, N. Merkel, <u>F. Oswald</u>, F. Schrading, F. Wolf. *Gerontechnology* 25(s)

Purpose As new technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) transform the conditions of everyday life, practices of dealing with loss, memory, and grief require renewed inquiry and rethinking. With that, digital technologies enter a space that was formerly categorized as non-technological or distinct from technology. Some examples are virtual memorial platforms, but also AI-based avatars or chatbots that simulate conversations or interactions with the deceased. These developments challenge mourning practices, which have always been shaped by norms, spaces and rituals and now increasingly by technologies [1]. The aim of this study is to examine how mourning practices change when AI becomes part of the way we mourn and commemorate, and how mourning practices and AI-based technologies influence each other. We assume a dynamic relationship: AI can influence grief, and grief can change the way we imagine and design AI. **Method** First, workshops will be held with researchers from various disciplines who deal with the topic of mourning practices and AI. Results of these workshops will be presented and serve to prepare for the main project. In this project, we will use a mixed-methods design: from quantitative surveys on the use of grief technologies to qualitative in-depth interviews The intended sample will cover ca. 15 guided interviews with people who are grieving and use griefbots plus a group discussion with five people from this group to reconstruct and analyze collective patterns of interpretation, normative negotiations, and social dynamics in dealing with grief AI. For comparative analyses another group of 15(5) mourning persons who creatively integrate general AI applications but not griefbots will be examined. Moreover, it is planned to conduct five narrative in-depth interviews with people in the final stages of life who plan to use AI specifically to create postmortem mementos of themselves, for example, by creating digital messages, prepared chat histories, or virtual avatars. Finally, two expert interviews with developers of AI-supported grief technologies are planned. We approach this topic from a socio-cultural perspective and are interested in the cultural imaginaries, ethical tensions, and societal dynamics emerging when mourning becomes entangled with AI, and when the dead persist in interactive digital forms. The research project requires the sensitive handling of vulnerable groups, so ethical standards are adhered to. **Results and Discussion** The results of the workshops to date point to at least two further specific directions for the research project. Firstly, the developmental plasticity of griefbots must be taken into account, i.e. whether they preserve a person forever at a certain stage or whether they develop into independent 'others' and if so, how they become others, depending on their ability to learn and change over time. Secondly, questions arise regarding the time- and access-related use of griefbots. For example, the duration of grief bot use may be linked to the question of how mourning practices change: Do we use AI to 'move on' from or to 'move with' the deceased [2]? Finally, questions of inclusion / exclusion of experts are addressed, e.g., therapists or legal experts. In summary, although this area of research is growing, ageing research on this topic is rare, although it should be a natural topic for gerontology. The project aims to enrich Gerontechnology by underpinning the discourse on possibilities and challenges of grief bots with empirical evidence, rather than leaving it solely to commercial providers.

References
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