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## Towards a postmortal society of virtualised ancestors? : The Virtual Deceased Person and the preservation of the social bond

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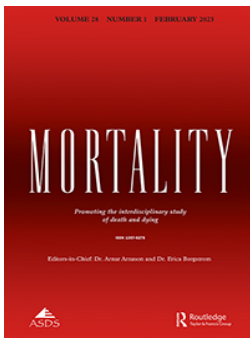
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# Towards a postmortal society of virtualised ancestors? The Virtual Deceased Person and the preservation of the social bond

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## ABSTRACT



Research about digital immortality has grown in recent years, predominantly focusing on either the social effects of forms of digital immortalisation or on the available technologies. Few studies, however, adopt a clear sociological focus that remains attentive to the ontological dimension of digital immortality. Adopting a future-oriented perspective, this article contributes to the sociological study of digital immortality by introducing the concept of the Virtual Deceased Person (VDP), a speculative artefact that convincingly simulates the mannerisms and character traits of a deceased person, allowing them to operate as social actors posthumously and preserve the human social bond. The article draws on anthropological and microsocial theory to characterise the VDP as a persona of the dead given agency and embodiment by future thanatechnologies. By positioning the concept within the digital immortality discourse and expanding the scope of the social bond to the study of digital immortality, I portray the VDP as a manifestation of posthumous personhood, arguing that it might facilitate preserving the social bond between the living and the dead throughout its creation process and its reintegration into the world of the living. I further discuss its implications for the emergence of a postmortal society of socially active, virtualised ancestors.

## KEYWORDS

Virtual Deceased Person; social bond; digital immortality; posthumous personhood; postmortal society; ancestor

## Introduction: the need for sociological accounts of digital immortality

The study of immortality is bound to the study of mortality and the place of death in human life. Death, life, immortality and personhood can be considered co-constitutive notions, with each one framing the other and, simultaneously, deriving its meaning from them (Jacobsen, 2017a). While the sociological study of death and mortality in contemporary societies has had extensive research (Howarth, 2007; Kellehear, 2007; Seale, 1998; Walter, 1994), the sociological study of immortality has received far less attention, with only some works (Bauman, 1992; Jacobsen, 2017b; Walter, 1996) exploring the theme of immortality in a sociological manner. In the last few years, research on the theme of digital immortality has grown (Bassett, 2015, 2018; Sofka et al., 2017), exploring the different mechanisms which generate forms of immortalisation through thanatechnologies – digital technologies and their use in situations revolving around death, grief and tragedy (Sofka et al., 2017, p. 181) – and discussing its psychological

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and sociological implications in the present. However, this literature's anchor on the present restricts analysis to either the social effects of the use thanatechnologies (Bailey et al., 2015; Kasket, 2012), or devotes more attention to the technological dimension of digital immortality (Burden, 2020; Savin-Baden & Burden, 2018), with few exceptions explicitly considering the ontological dimension of digital immortality while exploring its implications from a sociological focus (Meese et al., 2015; Walter, 2015).<sup>1</sup> By shifting the perspective towards envisioned and plausible future developments, I suggest that a stronger sociological focus derived from the ontological assumptions of approaches to digital immortality can be accomplished.

This article introduces the concept of the Virtual Deceased Person (VDP), a speculative future technological artefact that would convincingly replicate the personality and mannerisms of the deceased, allowing them to operate as recognised social actors posthumously and preserve the human social bond. It draws on previous research on personhood and microsocial theory to characterise it as the (digital) persona of the deceased given agency and embodiment by future thanatechnologies. It also positions the concept of the VDP within the digital immortality discourse and related concepts. This research contributes to both the emerging field of the sociology of immortality and that of digital immortality by expanding the scope of the concept of the social bond to the study of digital immortality, illustrating how the VDP could perform a central role in maintaining it. The article argues that, from the creation process to the potential integration of the VDP into everyday life, the social bond could be preserved through identification with imagined communities, forms of revivalism and the performance of resurrective practices, while allowing the digitalised relational aspect of the self to remain in the world of the living. It further discusses the implications of the integration of the VDP into social life for a postmortal society (Jacobsen, 2017b) of socially active, virtualised ancestors, and the preservation and negotiation of the social bond therein.

A future-oriented perspective, while speculative, invites the consideration of presently implausible possibilities that nonetheless remain rooted in the conditions allowed by current social practices and technologies and whose development has at least been envisioned and discussed in other fields (Pérez & Genovesi, 2020; Smart, 2020). The perspective presented here is not intended as a forecast; although the ideas developed here, such as the concept of the VDP, may never materialise, such potential still exists and could result in profound changes for the way human beings relate to mortality, as well as to past and future generations. The future orientation offers the illustrative vision of the dead as convincing and widely recognised active social actors, reanimated by thanatechnologies, in late-modern, Western, secular contexts. By doing so, it aims to further the discussion on digital immortality and its promises for the human confrontation with mortality, and to consider, with a sociological focus, some paradigmatic and structural changes that might result from the realisation of such a vision.

### **The intersubjective construction of personhood and the digital persona of the dead**

This article's approach to digital immortality and the ontological status of the VDP can be better grasped by reviewing two metaphors of personhood compatible with digital immortality that ascribe personhood within a relational network. The first of these is the

metaphor of human beings as machines, which contemporary theories of social robotics situate in structural systems of meaning: 'human individuals become *persons* in the same way that complicated machines come into existence: by being integrated into a meaning-world' (Jones, 2016, p. 48, emphasis in original). The second is the metaphor of a person as a communicating being, with communicative capabilities enhanced by communication technologies, thereby expressing his/her identity through immersion in a network of social relations and information exchanges taking place within social structures (Pecchinenda, 2017, pp. 146–147). These metaphors suggest that the *perceived* specialness of a person rests upon a person's *performance capabilities* in the social world, such as experiencing it through the senses (seeing, hearing, feeling) or acting in it (moving, reproducing, thinking) (Rosenberg, 1998, p. 85). In these metaphors, then, personhood is constructed *intersubjectively*, with *performance and communicative capabilities* that manifest themselves in a relational position contributing to bestowing the category of person to interlocutors.

The relational position these metaphors personify is supported by anthropological research that argues that personhood is always relational and processual, manifesting itself in interaction and as people perform different micro-scale activities in changing domains of life (Fowler, 2004, 2016). Deriving from these microsocial processes is the construction of a person's *persona*, understood here as the impression given to others by the presentation of the self in everyday performance (Goffman, 1959; Leary & Allen, 2011). Whereas people in physical settings engage in conversation, use props, adopt cultural scripts and wear costumes in the creation of their *persona* (Goffman, 1959; Scheff, 1990; Turner, 2002), characterising such interpersonal encounters as transient yet potentially cumulative, people in online settings rely on data-producing practices that leave behind traces of a 'networked self' over time (Papacharissi, 2010) to generate an online, digital *persona*. This kind of *persona* 'is comprised of a particularly wide-ranging spectrum of "publicness" and at each point along its traversal exists the very real potential to go from a small public of close and intimate friends to a massive and global public audience' (Moore et al., 2017, p. 3). Since a *persona* is not the real person but is instead constituted by the 'mental representations and inferences about the person's characteristics, motives, attitudes, intentions, and so on' (Leary & Allen, 2011, p. 889), I suggest that a digital *persona*, i.e. the socially shared representation of a person constructed from the digital data of the 'networked self' in the online world, could be dissociated from the actual physical, data-producing person, yet still be perceived as the person by its interlocutors inasmuch as it satisfies the performance and communicative capabilities that bestow personhood.<sup>2</sup>

This possible dissociation of the digital *persona* from the actual person can be considered a manifestation of 'distributed personhood' (Hockey et al., 2010) and raises questions about the fate and agency of the digital *persona* after the actual person's demise. Stokes (2015) has argued that dead persons can persist in our experiential life world through social network sites (SNS), which embody their data. This might lead to the intentional or accidental recreation of the deceased and facilitate the transmission of automated messages from the dead to the living (Bassett, 2015; Gibson, 2015). Some scholars (Meese et al., 2015; Savin-Baden & Burden, 2018; Sofka et al., 2017) have identified several services available in the digital age that harness the digital *persona* of the dead into thanatechnologies, such as Eter9, an SNS that allows users to create a digital version of themselves (a 'Counterpart') that learns about each user through his/her interaction in

the SNS (Eter9, 2017); Lifenaut, which orients users to create detailed data about themselves to be incorporated into advanced software (LifeNaut Project, 2017); and Eternime, which mines data from other SNS and tries to replicate an individual's personality in an algorithm that users later train through daily interactions (Eterni.me., 2019). These thanatechnological services fulfil 'a dual role in helping someone achieve digital immortality and to cope with impending death and grief' (Sofka et al., 2017, p. 181).

'Digital immortality' is, however, a contested concept because current thanatechnologies are unable to render convincing humanlike reactions and are vulnerable to deletion, as the demise of some of the aforementioned services suggests. Hence, while some (Harbinja, 2020; Stokes, 2015) regard the networked digital data of the deceased as a form of immortality, others remain sceptical of the notion of immortality through digital means and propose terms such as 'digital endurance' (Bassett, 2018; Kasket, 2019). Nonetheless, Meese et al. (2015) argue that adaptive digital presence may offer the deceased the means to maintain active agency in everyday life, and envision 'a time where the dead are making direct interventions into our social lives' (pp. 417–418). The present constraints of thanatechnologies hinder the performance and communicative capabilities of the deceased's digital persona and their recognition as persons. Therefore, the concept of the VDP as a future-oriented approach to digital immortality is worth considering, as the harnessing of the deceased's digital persona by future thanatechnologies and their convincing deployment in terms of performance and communicative capabilities is fundamental for their potential recognition as both persons and ancestors, as well as for the preservation of the social bond.

### **The Virtual Deceased Person (VDP): a form of digital immortality in late modernity**

The form of digital immortality that can be achieved by resorting to the VDP would not establish mind or physical body continuity between the original person and his/her convincing replication as a VDP. Instead, it could be considered what Robert Lifton and Eric Olson name 'symbolic immortality', a form of mastering death anxiety that does not deny the reality of death and offers posthumous connection to the world of the living through different forms of symbolisation (Lifton & Olson, 1974). Though they identify five main modes of symbolic immortality – biological, creative, theological, natural and experiential –, they also emphasised that 'for modes of immortality to be meaningful, they must relate to the particular kinds of experience characteristic of a given historical period' (Lifton & Olson, 1974, p. 79). In late modernity, where the dead have lost their importance in the world of the living and processes of individualisation engender alienation (Baudrillard, 1993; Bauman, 2000), yet, simultaneously, individualism, capitalism and technological innovations have increased the number, visibility and influence of the dead (Kearl, 2017, pp. 221–222), people might be increasingly inclined to engage in digital immortalisation quests as a way of confronting this alienation by leaving behind the elements of the self deemed as worthy of preserving. If symbolic immortality depends on intersubjective recognition (Sherlock, 2013, p. 166), then creating and interacting with thanatechnologies that manifest the persona of the deceased in the social world could be considered efforts to maintain posthumous personhood status in a network of social relations (Meese et al., 2015).

Despite the absence of continuity of mind and body from the original person to the VDP, a partial form of continuity is found in the digital persona of the deceased. If the informational structure derived from data-producing practices constitutes one's individual identity in a system of information exchange and should be considered part of the self (Floridi, 2013, 2014), it would follow that the digital persona can be considered a partial, performative and communicative self that can endure even after the individual's biological demise. Two-way digital immortality, which allows the digital replication of a person to live on and actively interact with posterity (Bell & Gemmell, 2009; Bell & Gray, 2000), is the kind of digital immortality that could be accomplished by integrating the digital persona into the VDP and embodying it. This stands in contrast with most present attempts at digital immortality, where the digital persona functions mainly as a site of memorialisation, where automated messaging was prepared prior to the death of the original person or where it is only the living that communicates with the digital remains of the dead (Bailey et al., 2015; Gibson, 2015; Kasket, 2012). Early attempts at two-way digital immortality, however, are starting to appear, such as the thanabot of Roman Mazurenko (Bassett, 2018).

Although an overview of the different terms used to describe specific forms of digital immortality has been explored elsewhere (Sofka et al., 2017), positioning the VDP within the digital immortality discourse requires comparison with other similar concepts. Table 1 offers a non-exhaustive comparison of some of the terms, which were intentionally chosen according to their similarity and their contrasts. The assessment of the values of the categories for each concept is based on both the authors' explicit statements and the examples they use to illustrate the concept.

Following Table 1, a more precise definition can be developed. The concept of the Virtual Deceased Person refers to a future, two-way form of digital immortality wherein a comprehensive and complex digital persona of the deceased is integrated into highly sophisticated software. It would possess a form of virtual (non-tangible) or physical (tangible) embodiment, as well as a high degree of autonomy that enabled it to behave in a convincingly humanlike manner, although subject to preestablished parameters from its creators and expected human interlocutors. The VDP would be highly adaptable to interactive social situations and would mimic faithfully the mannerisms and personality of the deceased, as expressed through talk and embodied emotionality, making it able to fulfil social roles. Because a VDP would be intentionally created pre-mortem, it would likely only reflect aspects of the deceased's personality belonging to a predetermined temporal demarcation in his/her life in order to behave consistently throughout its interactions.

Although the VDP would be able to learn through computer science methods, through software updates and by integrating inputs from its surroundings (in the case of tangible VDPs), it would *not* be sentient nor possess human aspirations. In this sense, it is similar to Martine Rothblatt's (2014) concept of the 'mindclone', with the key difference that the VDP assumes a limited version of cyberconsciousness: it would be able to accurately display, but not *experience*, emotions, and despite being able to provide insights on numerous issues based on original 'equations' (similar to thoughts), it would lack subjective, phenomenal processes such as internal self-narratives. The VDP concept emerges from considering the possibilities afforded by the current and envisioned development of Virtual Humans (Burden & Savin-Baden, 2019), Paramortals (Onufrijchuk, 2016), Thanabots (Bassett, 2018) and Digital Immortals (Savin-Baden & Burden, 2018).

**Table 1.** Comparison table of the Virtual Deceased Person with other digital immortality concepts.

Categories	Digital Zombies (Bassett, 2015)	Paramortals (Onufrijchuk, 2016)	Thanabots (Bassett, 2018)	Digital Immortals (Savin-Baden & Burden, 2018).	Virtual Deceased Person (VDP)
Data gathering process	Post-mortem recreation based on available data	Post-mortem recreation based on available data	Various, from pre-mortem intentional data creation to post-mortem data gathering based on available data	Various, from pre-mortem intentional data creation to post-mortem data gathering based on available data	Pre-mortem intentional creation of biographical and interpersonal data for post-mortem recreation
Degree of autonomy	Non-existent to low autonomy	High, but not full, autonomy	Low autonomy	Various, from low to high autonomy	High, but not full, autonomy
Expected interlocutors	Non-specific	Non-specific	Person-specific and group-specific	Person-specific, group-specific, and non-specific	Person-specific, group-specific, and non-specific
User interface/form of embodiment	Audio-visual non-interactive embodied data	Various	Text and image based interactive data	Text and audio-visual interactive data	Audio-visual virtual interactive data to physical, humanlike embodiment
Purpose	Various	Various	Maintaining continuing bonds	Various	Maintaining the social bond



The VDP and other digital immortality concepts seen in [Table 1](#), as well as the phenomena they describe, are indicative of the beginning stages of a postmortal society where symbolic forms of immortality are being sought and digital technologies promise to realise them. They reveal how digital infrastructures and cultural attitudes towards death in late modernity drive individuals to engage in digital immortalisation practices that offer posthumous personhood – preventing the loss of self and push for its continuity (Meese et al., 2015, p. 416) – in the world of the living, and facilitate participation in culturally relevant rituals that construct imaginaries of group membership.

### **The social bond and the study of digital immortality**

The concept of the social bond brings a sociological focus to theorising about digital immortality and its consequences. The social bond is a concept from sociology that describes the constitutive fabric of society at the microsocial level. Social bonds are comprised of the relationships and behaviour between social actors as they manifest through alienation, solidarity, attachment and identification with others, thereby motivating the construction of relational endeavours. Moreover, they are helpful for linking microsocial level actors with larger structures and processes (Scheff, 1990, 1997). While continuing bonds theory (Klass et al., 1996; Root & Exline, 2014) has been used to address the enduring relationship between the bereaved living and the dead, analysis is often done in terms of individual relationships (even if they are multiple). In the context of theorising about digital immortality as facilitated by the VDP, social bonds would encompass continuing bonds insofar as they consider human behaviour according to persistent role-specific relationships between the living and the dead. However, they also move beyond this analytical focus by characterising the relationships groups, organisations and future generations maintain with the (digitalised) dead and highlighting issues of cohesion, conflict and cultural memory where the reanimated dead play a pivotal role. A healthy social bond would maintain the persona of the deceased, as data activated and embodied in the VDP, in the network of social relations and as members of a (real or imagined) community, allowing them to resort to structural symbolic elements to affirm membership (their own and that of others) within a group. Hence, focusing on the social bond extends the reach of the VDP beyond the domain of personal relationships and into the domain of group and institutional relationships.

For Clive Seale (1998, 2001), social and cultural life is a human construction that involves the preservation of the social bond in the face of death via the performance of everyday rituals and embodied emotionality. Such preservation is necessary to turn away from death's inevitability and move towards life. Seale highlights three concepts that help maintain the social bond when threatened by the prospect of mortality. The first is a reformulation of Benedict Anderson's (1991) notion of imagined communities, which Seale expands in scope to include the diverse imagined communities available to people in late modernity, such as the workplace, professional expert communities, and the 'healthy' as promoted by medical and psychological discourse, among others. The second is revivalism, institutionalised discourses which in late modernity allow individuals confronting their own mortality or that of others to claim membership to imagined communities of anonymous others. The third is resurrective practice, the practice of affirming the social bond when threatened with dissolution and restoring ontological security (Giddens, 1991)

for the living after it was fractured by death, which can be accomplished through embodied emotionality and the ritualistic aspects of conversation (Seale, 1998, 2001).

The scope of these concepts – imagined communities, revivalism and resurrective practice – can be expanded beyond the study of death, dying and bereavement to include the study of digital immortality as facilitated by the VDP. This is because the pursuit of digital immortality is a domain of social and cultural life, wherein people seek to maintain contact with those already dead and are oriented to embrace opportunities to digitally immortalise themselves and others when confronted with the prospect of mortality. Advanced forms of thanatechnology could lead those who intentionally generate data for the creation of a digital persona to see themselves as part of an imagined community of postmortals who remain active in the world of the living. Complementary to this, discourses promoting digital immortality could be considered forms of revivalist discourse, insofar as they offer guidance to subjects who aspire to connect with their descendants on how to ‘live on’ despite biological death. The resurrective practices of embodied emotionality and the capacity to engage in meaningful talk can be thought of as instances of the performance and communicative capabilities that bestow personhood status, and which could be granted by future thanatechnologies such as the VDP, facilitating their recognition as (partial) persons.

Therefore, the attempts at achieving a symbolic form of immortality through thanatechnologies can be reframed as a desire of those who are confronted with mortality to immerse themselves physically and symbolically in the world of the living, during their lifetimes and, importantly for this paper, posthumously. Hence, pursuing digital immortality with the VDP as a central feature can be considered an attempt at achieving posthumous personhood and preserving the social bond when threatened with its dissolution by death. This is illustrated more clearly by looking at the creation process and interaction situations with the VDP.

### **Preserving the social bond: creation and interaction with the VDP**

An outline of the creation of a VDP can be surmised by abstracting common patterns in the current and foreseen development of devices that aim to retain and reintegrate the persona of the deceased into a network of social relations (Bassett, 2018; Burden, 2020; Burden & Savin-Baden, 2019; Savin-Baden & Burden, 2018). The process encompassing the creation and gathering of data for the VDP up to its integration into everyday life can be separated into four phases: 1) data gathering, 2) data codification, 3) data activation, and 4) data embodiment. Though the following description of each phase is preliminary, insofar as no VDP has been successfully created yet, and hence should not be viewed as a technological guide, the overall trajectory is illustrative of the manner in which the social bond would be preserved since before the death of the original person up to the reintegration of the embodied persona into the world of the living.

In the data gathering phase, the original person, the persona creator, works to produce useful text and audio-visual data for creating a digitally immortal persona, alongside persona receivers, preservers and mediators (Burden & Savin-Baden, 2019). These may be family, friends or other members of the network of social relations of which the persona creator was a part of. In this phase, the social bond would be maintained through both embodied emotionality and interpersonal conversations, both of which help communicate the inner life of the persona creator to an audience

and may operate as resurrective practices (Seale, 1998, 2001). Bodily communication would convey vitality in interactive situations, while talk would operate in a ritualistic fashion by allowing individuals to understand themselves as part of a larger interpretative framework. In this case, the relational pursuit of digital immortality would be such a framework, generating feelings of pride to preserve the bond. The persona creators could place themselves both in the imagined community of the postmortals and in that of their descendants. The persona receivers and preservers, in turn, could potentially experience feelings of moral achievement at caring for the persona creator via the preservation of the digitally immortal persona. However, in instances where the preservation of the digitally immortal persona is felt as an obligation, the social bond could be strained or broken, thus potentially engendering feelings of disappointment or guilt for the persona receivers and preservers.

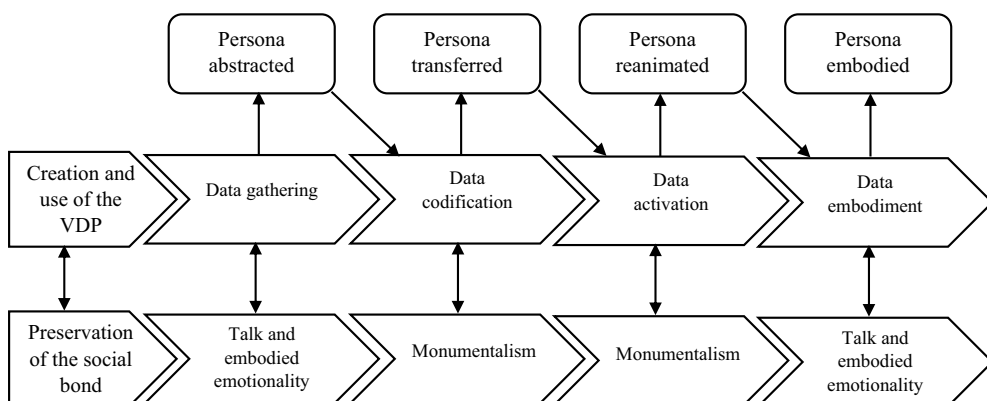
In the data codification phase, the persona preservers would filter, systematise, and order the data obtained in the previous phase, translating it into the functional code of the VDP. In the data activation phase, such code would be strengthened with artificial intelligence and machine learning methods, allowing it to be trained based on the data available and predict the possible responses of the VDP, mimicking the deceased persona creator as genuinely as possible (Smart, 2020). Despite the absence of the persona creator in these phases, the social bond is maintained through a specific expression of revivalist discourse: monumentalism. In monumentalism, the self is bequeathed as a 'monument' to the living, with monuments indicating the desired to be remembered posthumously, as well as the willingness of the living to remember (Seale, 1998, p. 63). Monumentalism, in the process of separating the persona from the original person and reifying it in the VDP, affirms the social bond by claiming the deceased is worth preserving as a member of a network of social relations. The VDP, inasmuch as it can be considered a socially active monument of the deceased, comes into being in the data codification and data activation phases, and the deceased remains linked to the living via communicative and performance capabilities that allow it to be recognised as a partial form of the deceased, such as the deployment of language and responses characteristic of the deceased's now reanimated persona.

The data embodiment phase would generate a convincing form of embodiment for the deceased's persona, capable of conveying emotions through virtual or physical bodily communication in the form of holograms, avatars in a digital environment or humanlike robots. Seale's (1998, 2001) insight about embodied emotionality being a motivating factor in preserving the social bond is crucial here. Through convincing embodied emotionality, a VDP might be able to convey an inner life closely resembling that of the original person and establish strong relationships with its human interlocutors, as well as affirm membership to the groups and communities of the living, despite only being the deceased's reinvigorated persona and not a living being itself. A realistic form of embodiment would complement its natural language communicative capabilities already present since the data activation phase. Together, these performance and communicative capabilities would enable the VDP to operate successfully in physical and virtually mediated interpersonal encounters, as they would satisfy several elements of a social interaction, such as: adopting a specific role according to the interlocutor, co-defining the situation alongside them by adopting and interpreting social scripts, delivering impressions through a convincing performance that mimics the behaviour of the original person,

and influencing other interactants through visual cues and natural language messages (see Goffman, 1959; Turner, 2002). If, as Seale (2001) suggests, the fine details of everyday conversation contribute to affirming the social bond, then these capabilities of the VDP would sustain resurrective practices during social interaction.

Figure 1 depicts the four aforementioned phases and how the social bond is preserved throughout all of them. The data gathering phase maintains the social bond via conversation between two or more living persons, which could occur as part of a commercial service, as a suggested therapeutic practice or as a self-motivated endeavour. The persona, extracted from the original person as data in this first phase, then becomes responsible for engaging with the living in all the succeeding phases. This persona, with the help of computer scientists, software, hardware and the persona receivers and preservers, is transferred from a human being into an artefact via codification, reanimated in multiple data activation processes, and reintegrated into the world of the living in a new embodied form: the VDP. Because the VDP, an embodied persona of the deceased, would essentially be a (partial) person created from the digitalised relational aspect of the self, I suggest that it could be considered in posthumous personhood terms by other social, living actors.

Although, following Meese et al. (2015), the relationship between the VDP and the living could be considered ontological since it is only the embodied persona of the deceased that becomes the social actor involved in preserving the social bond and not the original biological person, it is also possible that the affectivity involved in human-VDP relations may result from the living thinking of the VDP as being a representative of the deceased. Consequently, the preservation of the social bond could manifest as a continuing bond where the performance and communicative capabilities of the VDP function as resurrective practices for the living. The social bond, however, remains a useful concept for addressing further symbolisation processes that link the dead and the living as part of the same imagined community and maintain the dead in the network of social relations, including future generations that did not personally interact with the original person. This is elaborated in the next section.



**Figure 1.** Interlinked processes of the creation and use of the VDP, the integration of the digital persona and the preservation of the social bond.

## Virtualised ancestors in a postmortal society

The creation process of a VDP and its integration into everyday life could be viewed as a rite of passage (Van Gennep, 1960), a transition ritual wherein individuals move from one social status and personal identity to another, of the symbolic approaches to digital immortality. For the dead, undergoing a series of rites of passage is often required to achieve the status of ancestor, and a roughly similar process occurs when creating the VDP. The most complex persona that can be gathered from the first phase of the VDP's creation process represents the separation of the persona from the actual physical person, analogous to the rite of separation from a previous world in the preliminal rite. The codification and activation phases can be considered equivalent to the transitional stage liminal rites, where the persona of the original person (likely dead at this point) is transformed into code and reactivated. Finally, the embodiment of the persona is comparable to the postliminal rite of incorporation into the new world. Although not consciously assimilated as a rite of passage, it is possible that this process could fulfil the same symbolisation process for the persona receivers and preservers, facilitating the consideration of the embodied persona in the VDP as both a (posthumously active) person and as an ancestor in the digital age.

Were this process to become ubiquitous, it could result in a postmortal society (Jacobsen, 2017b) of virtualised ancestors, characterised by new practices of ancestor veneration in the secular, Western, late-modern world. The dismantling of the boundaries between life and death, already occurring in late modernity (Howarth, 2000), could become accentuated and drive the emergence of societies where the dead, as ancestors embodied in the VDP, are socially recognised active participants in the unfolding of real-world events. On a general level, the presence of the VDP in everyday life might lead to the preservation of cultural memory and provide an entry point to examine the beliefs and rationale for action of social groups that have been digitalised, leading to more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of historical contingencies and group-specific worldviews. Similarly, increasingly sophisticated forms of the VDP, as an instance of thanatechnology with advanced communicative capabilities, may create the conditions for the dead to validate existing institutional spaces, construct new social groups and recreate new family and friendship relationships (Walter, 2015, pp. 228–229). Certainly, this could also drive the emergence of new structural problems, like the indefinite perpetuation of power by elites who aim to consolidate their influence and control beyond their biological deaths or the emergence of new inequalities, such as facilitating the digital immortalisation of the wealthy and restricting that of everyone else (Jacobsen, 2017a; Savin-Baden et al., 2017).

This broad overview of the macro-landscape should be complemented by an exploration of the dynamics occurring in the micro-landscape, for which the social bond is again a useful concept to integrate into the analysis, as it brings attention to group cohesion, conflict and cultural memory. Considering the role of the VDP as ancestors in the family, recreation of the dead can lead to what Walter (2017) refers to as care cultures, wherein the living and the dead mutually look after one another in dynamic exchanges, hence offering the latter a socially active role and inviting them into society. The motivation of family members to symbolically immortalise themselves in the form of the VDP can be viewed in light of generativity (Erikson, 1977), the investment in guiding the following generations, that in this context could be reframed as a form of revivalism that maintains a monumentalised person as an advisor. It would manifest via an ancestor VDP advising

descendants in making the right decisions, orienting them on dilemmas they may face by looking at similar dilemmas in the past. Successful resolutions to those dilemmas after receiving ancestor advice could be considered resurrective practices insofar as they would encourage immersion in the world of the living and strengthen the bond among the living and between the living and the dead.

Another relevant domain of analysis is that of family solidarity and conflict. Ancestor veneration in this form of postmortal society could revolve around living according to the general principles and values laid out by previous family generations and adapting their advice for new challenges faced by the descendants. Talk and embodied emotionality, the performance and communicative capabilities that allow the VDP to be recognised as the ancestor, would also be involved in the negotiation of the social bond, with the descendants being driven to seek approval from the VDP whenever an encounter with them occurred; pride would ensue if the VDP's expectations have been met and disappointment or shame would result from intergenerational conflict between the VDP as ancestors and the living. For this reason, it is possible to foresee the requirement of mutual care (Walter, 2017) being present in family dynamics between ancestors and descendants for the preservation of the social bond. Pride-inducing interactions based on talk and embodied emotionality would operate as resurrective practices and orient the living towards life-sustaining endeavours, in this case family solidarity. Consequently, this would also orient them to pursue digital immortalisation for themselves to remain part of the family group.

Given that technology 'expands the potential for ordinary ancestors to move beyond the family to all kinds of formal and informal groups and organisations' (Walter, 2015, p. 227) I suggest that, within formal work-bound organisations, the VDP could become a central technology for maintaining the social bond. Organisational ancestors embodied in the VDP, particularly those in leadership roles, would be key for this purpose. After the demise of an influential leader who has been able to strengthen group boundaries, a reconfiguration of relationships and meanings in line with new structures and realities can be expected (Hyde & Thomas, 2003, p. 1020), leading to the possibility of fractured bonds and new forms of conflict. The recreation of the deceased leader as a VDP would facilitate the symbolisation process of linking together the different organisational members so that they are able to view themselves as being part of the same imagined community, maintaining group relations that were in danger of being dissolved. While such a process could be helpful for sustaining a certain degree of organisational cohesion and vision continuity, it might also lead to an increased commodification of the self, with the digitally embodied persona of the deceased being instrumentalised for profit-seeking enterprises, 'not only depicted the way the bereaved want to remember them, but in accordance with what is profitable, i.e. what is likely to be *consumed*' (Öhman & Floridi, 2017, p. 649, emphasis in original).

### **Conclusion: towards a postmortal society of virtualised ancestors?**

This article has made two original contributions. The first was introducing the concept of the Virtual Deceased Person (VDP), a speculative future technological artefact that would convincingly replicate the personality and mannerisms of the deceased as expressed in interaction, and exploring how it would grant a symbolic form of digital immortality and

become recognised as an active social actor. This was done by considering how the performance and communicative capabilities that contribute to bestowing personhood can still be present in the digital persona of the deceased, positioning the concept in a comparative perspective within the digital immortality discourse, and outlining how the persona can be created and abstracted from the data the deceased produced while still living and then become codified, reactivated and embodied into the VDP. This, I suggest, might allow the VDP to be regarded in posthumous personhood terms in a network of social relations.

The second contribution was expanding the scope of the social bond, a central concept in sociological theory, to the study of digital immortality, thereby developing a sociological account of an advanced form of digital immortality and providing a new perspective to the emerging field of the sociology of immortality in secular, Western, late-modern societies. Because the VDP, as envisioned, does not exist in the present but is derived from the envisioned development of current thanatechnologies and their co-constitution with social practices, a future-oriented perspective was adopted. This allowed some imaginative, yet theoretically based, reasoning to outline how the social bond would be preserved throughout the VDP's creation process and integration into the world of the living. The future orientation of this article also gave the possibility to discuss how the VDP, after undergoing some symbolisation, could operate as an ancestor within a postmortal society, outlining how the social bond would be maintained or negotiated in such a context. By doing so, the sociological focus had a clear, if theoretical and speculative, anchor.

Adopting a future-oriented perspective comes with its own limitations, such as the lack of sophistication and nuance and the absence of empirical data. There is overreliance on theoretically based reasoning that takes as its point of departure present conditions of technology, social practices and structural drives to depict potential societal developments in broad strokes, losing specificity in the process. Despite this, if the claims made in this article – a) that the VDP can be considered a manifestation of posthumous personhood because of its performance and communicative capabilities and because of its embodiment of the persona of the deceased, and b) that the VDP can help preserve the social bond and be integrated into the world of the living as a form of ancestor – are realised, the implications for secular, Western, late-modern societies could be far-reaching.

Beyond driving the re-emergence of cultures of mutual care between the living and the dead and facilitating organisational continuity by relying on the VDP of influential members to maintain group boundaries, the realisation of the perspective advanced in this article could lead to new paradigms of personhood being societally assimilated, expanding the notion beyond the individuality of the physical body and towards its relational position, including viewing a person's data as part of the self. Such a shift might also change thoughts on human mortality, with death no longer occurring solely at the demise of the physical body but until the person's disappearance from the network of social relations. Additionally, transformations can be foreseen in some institutions from this increased, active presence of the dead, such as universities where most of the professors are the dead replicated in the VDP or political parties using VDP replicas of deceased influential leaders to maintain party membership.

Further research on this theme could provide more nuanced perspectives and highlight sources of conflict within a postmortal society of virtualised ancestors, as well as the legal and ethical frameworks for how to treat the VDP and the deceased's data. Current

research is already moving in this direction (Harbinja, 2020; Öhman & Floridi, 2017; Savin-Baden et al., 2017) but adopting a future orientation, as well as a more critical stance, might help foresee both gradual and rapid societal changes deriving from the digital reintegration of the dead into the world of the living and avoid risks that accompany such processes.

## Notes

1. What I characterise as a sociological focus to the study of digital immortality is either a) an explicit focus on social structures and systems or on the aspects of human social interaction and interrelationships between small social units taking place within a larger social system, or b) the central positioning of concepts from sociology.
2. One person can have multiple personae, according to the different social spaces they are part of. For analytical clarity, this article considers that the deceased only has one persona.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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