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Hybrid funerals: how online attendance facilitates and impedes participation

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ABSTRACT

Livestreaming and filming death rites and funeral ceremonies to enable remote engagement proliferated rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many expect these options to remain prevalent going forward. This paper draws on interviews with a diverse UK sample of 68 bereaved people, funeral directors, officiants and celebrants. It illustrates how, and explains why, people's experiences and evaluations of hybrid funerals can vary. In a context when in-person gatherings were limited, hybridisation played a valuable role in enabling more people to engage with funerals. However, virtual attendance was often considered less satisfying than in-person attendance because it did not enable people to participate well in the funeral activities that mattered to them or to participate with others as they would in person. Scope for participation was partly contingent on the functionality and use made of technology, including whether and which steps were taken to facilitate engagement and a sense of connection for those joining online. People's evaluations of hybrid funerals could also reflect their relationships to the deceased and their frames of reference – for example, whether they were comparing virtual attendance to attending in person, or to being unable to attend at all, or to an overwhelmingly large funeral.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, and measures brought in to manage it, disrupted funerary rituals across the globe. In response, individuals, organisations and communities amended and found alternative ways of marking people's deaths. Long et al. (2022, p. 4) have suggested that much emerging scholarship concerning these responses aligns to an 'adaptation model', which 'acknowledges the magnitude of the changes introduced by the restrictions and highlights how individuals and communities are "displaying resilience" and adopting innovative practices'. While they commend such 'acknowledg[ment] that people are not passive victims of restrictions but can respond creatively to their circumstances', they suggest scholarship nevertheless 'needs to account for why some adaptations of funerary practice

yield more satisfying outcomes than others' (Long et al., 2022, p. 4). This paper responds to Long et al's challenge in relation to recording or livestreaming funerals. Specifically, it asks why some found these adaptations of funerary practice less or more satisfying than others. Its focus is on the UK context but the findings and analysis have broader relevance.

The term 'virtual funerals' (MacNeil et al., 2021, p. 1; Muturi et al., 2020) has been widely adopted to describe livestreamed and recorded death rites, rituals and services. It captures well enough those engaging in what Davies (2015, p. 247) calls 'ritual participation at a distance', but not the dual physical and virtual formats which many such funerals have. Contrastingly, the BRIC-19 British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19 study used the term 'hybrid' to describe rituals taking place both online and offline (Edelman et al., 2021). The present paper similarly refers to 'digitally-mediated *hybrid* funerals' to acknowledge both means of engagement, and the technological way in which hybridisation is achieved. For concision, it uses 'hybrid' or 'hybridised' funerals, referring to either their 'virtual' or 'in-person' congregations as needed.

It is difficult to describe a 'typical' UK funeral, as the cultural, religious and socioeconomic diversity within its four constituent nations (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) is reflected in diverse traditions, norms and preferences when people die, including widely varying numbers of attendees. Some broad trends can, though, be identified. For example, market research has indicated the growing, but by no means universal, popularity of framing funerals as 'celebrations of life' rather than sombre events, and of introducing elements reflecting the deceased's personality (Sunlife, 2023). Commercial interests may take the funeral in a more elaborate and costly direction. The UK Competition and Markets Authority high-lighted that in 2017, 84.5% of funerals were purchased at the 'point of need' as opposed to being pre-paid via a funeral payment plan, and has raised concerns about funeral prices, which had continued to rise above inflation for many years prior (Competition and Marks Authority, 2019). The average 'cost of dying' – the sum of a basic funeral, professional fees, and discretionary items – in 2022 was estimated at £9,200, a 3.8% increase on the 2021 average (Sunlife, 2023). In recent decades, environmental concerns have also shaped the range of funeral options offered and the forms of funeral chosen (Robinson, 2021).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was relatively uncommon – though not unheard of – for people to utilise digital media to attend funerals virtually: unless specified otherwise, it would have been assumed that 'going' to a funeral meant attending in person. As such, while the technology required to hybridise funerals has been available in many facilities in the UK for some years, these were seldom used before the COVID-19 pandemic (Davies, 2015, p. 247; Pitsillides & Wallace, 2021). Restrictions upon travel and gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic greatly accelerated both demand and provision in the UK and elsewhere (MacNeil et al., 2021; Muturi et al., 2020; Pitsillides & Wallace, 2021). The pace at which the required infrastructure developed varied. Some crematoria and places of worship were not equipped for live-streaming, lacking Wi-Fi or cameras even well into the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was often more difficult to broadcast from outdoor burial sites. Some bereaved people chose venues precisely because they had the technology to support hybridisation (MacNeil et al., 2021, p. 12). In other cases, hybridisation was possible, but ultimately did not work well or at all. Pitsillides and Wallace (2021, p. 66) described such scenarios as 'disastrous' and 'heartbreaking' for those placing substantial hope in hybridisation. Some, equally, had the option of live-streaming or recording a funeral but did not wish to.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the body of literature evaluating funeral hybridisation has been growing. The UK's Deceased Management Advisory Group (DMAG), which drew upon practitioners' 'collective experience' to 'learn lessons' for the sector, noted the important role streaming played early in the pandemic (2020, pp. 4, 7). Burrell and Selman's (2020) rapid review explored the 'effect of funeral practices on bereaved relatives' mental health and bereavement outcomes', and included assessments of hybridisation to this end. Pitsillides and Wallace's (2021, p. 70) chapter in *Death, Grief and Loss in the Context of COVID-19* considered 'how the pandemic has created new opportunities to evaluate the role of technologies at the end of life'. In addition to theoretical analysis and news coverage, they incorporated conversations with two funeral directors, contributing valuable original qualitative evidence. MacNeil et al. (2021) scoping review summarised the (then) 'existing literature on the emerging use of virtual funerals', incorporating original studies, commentaries, perspectives, opinion pieces, and news articles in English (December 2019 to February 2021). Along with others (e.g. Conway, 2020) this review highlighted emerging suggestions that opinions and experiences of hybridisation were highly mixed (MacNeil et al., 2021, p. 13). Rawlings et al. (2022) investigated the responses of participants in a Massive-Open-Online-Course (MOOC) regarding funerals during the COVID-19 pandemic and reported both positive and negative evaluations. A survey of a sample of adults in the USA bereaved during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that saying goodbye virtually – either using technology to say goodbye before the person died, or attending a virtual funeral – was associated with higher levels of complicated grief and psychological distress than saying goodbye in either of these ways in person (Chen, 2022). Others have noted specific considerations and factors affecting people's assessments of hybridisation. For example, Bear et al. (2020) observed that, for some, '[s]maller [in-person] funerals [. . .] can be experienced positively as more "intimate" and "personal" occasions' (p. 7). Carr et al. (2020, p. 428) noted that some older adults lacked the support they needed to take advantage of streaming options. Similarly, Muturi et al. (2020), while praising the affordability of hybridisation, and its convenience and practicability, highlighted the difficulties some people had navigating the online platforms. Sherman, 2021) Long et al. (2022) highlighted that individuals' perspectives sometimes changed with time, from framing hybridisation as a 'regrettable' necessity, to a creative reimagining of traditions, and a valuable, less-burdensome approach than in-person attendance (p. 10). Arora and Bhatia (2023) noted that evaluations of virtual attendance take different tones when compared to in-person attendance rather than to being unable to engage with funerary rituals.

There remains a need to extend this existing scholarship, including to examine a more diverse range of experiences and in more depth. This paper uses rich, first-hand accounts of hybrid funeral provision to develop understanding of this growing phenomenon and begin to account more fully for why some people find hybrid funerals more or less satisfying than others do. The paper draws on an extensive original dataset of qualitative interviews that primarily covers funerals which took place from March 2020 to March 2022 (though many interviewees also referred to earlier funerals) – a larger time frame than that of most previous studies or reviews. The paper also provides insights from a range of perspectives: of officiants and celebrants; funeral directors; bereaved individuals physically present; and bereaved individuals joining remotely.

Methods

The Care in Funerals project sought to understand the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on UK funeral provision by interviewing bereaved individuals, funeral officiants and celebrants, and funeral directors and those in allied employment. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Aberdeen's ethical review committee for Arts, Social Sciences and Business. Participants were recruited via email, local news outlets, social media and word-of-mouth. We monitored the emerging sample's demographic characteristics (gender, age, nation, postcode deprivation indicator, religion and ethnicity) to identify areas where purposeful recruitment efforts would help ensure better representation or balance, and we asked some professional practitioners to share our calls for participants with people from under-represented groups. We conducted 67 interviews with 68 individuals between April 2021 and April 2022. Participants indicated affiliation to: Christianity (Catholic and Protestant); Spiritualism; Quakerism; Islam; Zoroastrianism; Sikhism; Hinduism; Judaism; Atheism; Paganism; Humanism; and no religion. Additionally, many funeral professionals had worked with people of a range of religious backgrounds. Table A1 summarises the composition of the sample. The mean Index of Deprivation Decile (where known) was 6.3 (out of 10), indicating a sample of below average deprivation, although with a broad range. Interviewees were mostly from England and Scotland, with Scotland somewhat over-represented relative to population size, reflecting the study base and strong local interest. The mode age bracket for the overall sample, and especially for bereaved participants, was 46–60. Since COVID-19 was particularly deadly among the elderly, many of whose children fall into the 46–60 age bracket, this is unsurprising.

Those who expressed interest in participating in the research were sent participant information and a consent form and offered an opportunity to discuss the study before deciding whether to take part. Interviews took place online or by telephone. We received informed consent verbally (recorded) or in writing (by email). Four researchers conducted the interviews, using shared topic guides. After broad opening questions, they followed participants' conversational leads while covering key topics, including: interviewees' experiences of funerals during the pandemic; what they found challenging about these funerals; and what made a funeral 'good' or otherwise. It was not the study's primary intention to investigate funeral hybridisation, but the topic featured heavily in many people's discussions of their experiences. Interviewers wrote fieldnotes summarising the interview, noting key impressions and any information provided 'off tape'. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by an external company, then checked for accuracy and anonymised by members of the research team. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Qualitative analysis was supported by thematic coding in NVivo12. Initial codes were generated inductively from fieldnotes and an initial sample of interview transcripts reflecting diverse examples from all three participant groups. Four researchers contributed to this process and trialled the codes on further transcripts and fieldnotes, noting any difficulties or concerns before comparing their applications. Coding was then primarily undertaken by one researcher, with a sample of coding compared with that of a second. Selected transcripts, fieldnotes and coding reports were shared with the wider multi-disciplinary team for reflection and discussion at weekly meetings. This supported sense-checking and encouraged elaboration and expansion upon preliminary analyses. Several team members drew reflexively on personal experience of UK funerals both before and during the pandemic.

Findings

> Celebrant Rosa was pleased that being able to hybridise funerals during the COVID-19 pandemic gave some of her clients 'a little bit of solace that there are people who can tap into it without being physically present.' Yet she also implied that those joining online were not *really* experiencing the funeral:
>
> > the people who follow the funeral online [will later] want to ask the people who were there, "How was the funeral?" Although they followed it, but of course they want to know from the real experience of it, how it was.
>
> Nancy lost her mother during the COVID-19 pandemic and was unable to attend the small funeral in person due to her own ill health. She felt strongly that she ought to have been there: engaging virtually felt 'surreal' and 'didn't feel right . . . I just couldn't believe what I was seeing, really, that that was my Mum and I wasn't there.'

We open our findings with the brief stories in Box 1 because they illustrate that while hybridisation enabled more people to join a funeral, the experience of virtual attendance was often not very satisfactory. They also beg important questions regarding which aspects of the 'real', in-person experience of a funeral participants did not feel were matched through virtual engagement? Why, for example, did it not 'feel right' to not be 'there' in person for a funeral? In what follows, we consider what our interviews can tell us in answer to these questions. We first illustrate the unsettled discourse surrounding hybrid funerals, which variously emphasised different purposes of funerals and differing opinions and uncertainty regarding how well virtual attendance fulfilled these. We then use the concept of 'participation' to analyse virtual engagement with funerals. Many interviewees recognised that, where in-person attendance is constrained, hybridisation can allow more people to take part in at least some sense. We focus our attention on cases in which the often-unspecified nature of this participation was elaborated upon. In this, we consider two aspects of participation: participation *in* funeral activities and participation *with* other people. In practice these aspects are not readily separable, but the distinction is useful for analytic purposes (Entwistle & Watt, 2006). We use it to consider how hybridisation both enabled and constrained participation in diverse funerals in these respects. This begins to explain why some experiences of hybrid funerals can be more satisfying than others. We then develop this explanation with examples which illuminate how contingencies relating to digital technologies and the way they are used, and differences in people's perspectives and preferences, can result in very different experiences and evaluative judgements.

An unsettled discourse

Interviewees used a diverse range of terms to describe engaging with funerals via digital media, indicating differences of opinion about whether people who engaged virtually could be considered to 'attend', 'be part of' and 'be present' beyond 'seeing', 'viewing' or 'watching' a funeral. These terms are highlighted in bold in the illustrative quotations in Box 2. Some hesitated to use particular words associated with participation, implicitly questioning their applicability in this context, and interviewees varied in terms of which words they considered appropriate. There was both inter- and intra-personal discursive variety. For example, funeral director Jessie – who was herself bereaved during the COVID-

Box 2. ~TC~.

> 'I always ask 'Are there particular family who are **watching**?' And then I will acknowledge the camera, and I'll speak to the camera and welcome them [...] I make sure that during the service I look to the camera frequently enough for them to **feel that they're included**.' - Elaine, celebrant
>
> 'People who wouldn't have normally been able to **attend** still got to **participate** or **view it in some way.**' - Kevin, whose wife died during the COVID-19 pandemic
>
> 'I also had [...] a recording of the funeral service, which I uploaded to YouTube and sent to relatives who **couldn't attend**, so they could **see** the funeral service.' - Ruth, whose husband died during the COVID-19 pandemic
>
> 'It's **not being there in person** but it's a good compromise, it feels like, it certainly **feels like they've attended** the funeral even though they **weren't there in person**.' - Scott, Humanist celebrant
>
> '[I]t was difficult sometimes to get Zoom processes in place [...] And when it wasn't it was quite disastrous for family who **couldn't attend** and [who] very much **wanted to be part of** it' - Joseph, Jewish funeral organiser
>
> '[His funeral was] a really special celebration of his life for us that people **could be part of** [...] [P]eople all over the world could **join it**' - Cynthia, whose father died during the COVID-19 pandemic
>
> 'People can **watch** what's going on in the chapel but they **can't join in** [...] They are reduced to being sort of a **passive watcher rather than a full participant**.' - Ben, spiritualist minister
>
> '[I] **didn't feel part** of the congregation at all' – Gillian, whose father and uncle died during the COVID-19 pandemic
>
> '[S]o much of the benefit of a funeral is in having people **come together** [...] If you're not gonna **come** well then don't, **don't come** at all then [...] [I]f somebody was, let's say, in hospital, was [...] physically unable to travel to a loved one's funeral then to be **able to take part** is good.' – Margaret, whose father died during the COVID-19 pandemic.
>
> 'It can be hugely important for people, **physically, just to be present** at a funeral. [...] just that shared energy that's in the venue [...] to say that they were there, and the memory of what was done is something they've **experienced directly** [...] '[T]here are a lot of other new practical details that come in with Covid, in terms of making sure that everyone **is present, either physically or virtually.'** – Ben, spiritualist minister
>
> '[T]here are people who **can tap into** it **without being physically present**.' – Rosa, celebrant

19 pandemic – suggested that engaging with a funeral online represented both 'attending' and 'watching'. Celebrant Deborah, who also lost her mother during the COVID-19 pandemic, described hybridisation as 'one way of allowing people, not to be present, but to be part of [a funeral]'. Describing his mother-in-law's hybrid funeral, Matthew explained that the livestream had enabled relatives 'to watch it – or participate, because it's like that in a sense'. Like Matthew, several other interviewees stopped just short of describing virtual attendance as participation in the same way they might describe gathering in person. Florence explained:

> I attended . . . not attended, attended online a funeral in June for [a] friend's sister [...] there's no way I would've gone to the funeral because she wasn't close enough to make the effort – and that sounds awful doesn't it, not close enough to make the effort [...] However I felt that I really wanted to show my respects [so] I said to my colleagues, 'I'm taking an hour off [...] and I'm going to attend a funeral' [...] and it was actually really powerful.

Florence was hesitant in her choice of words ('attended ... not attended, attended online'), seemingly keen to differentiate the quality of online and in person attendance. Mary's language was also mixed: she described feeling 'part of' her uncle's funeral, but

nevertheless described 'watching' the webcast. Like Florence, she would not have 'gone' had it not been hybridised:

> I wasn't close to him at all [...] and his service was a long way away [...] but I did watch the webcast [...] That was interesting because I would have never gone to that, but because it was online I was able to just pop on and it was quite nice to be part of it.

This unsettled discourse indicates uncertainty and contestation about what it means and does not mean to engage with a funeral via digital media.

Participating in funerals

Many interviewees appreciated that, when attending a funeral in person was not possible, hybridisation allowed more people to join or take part in funerary activities in at least some sense. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviewees illustrated multiple scenarios in which people might be prohibited from attending in person, including: elderly and infirm relatives and friends less able to travel; people living overseas; and those unable to take time away from employment. Many were hopeful that hybridisation would continue in the future in order to increase access to funeral services. For people who were bereaved at points in the pandemic where the number of people permitted to attend funerals was limited, livestreaming or sharing recordings of funerals meant 'not worrying about leaving people out' entirely, and increasing the numbers of people able to engage with these rites. Joseph, who runs a Jewish funerary organisation, valued the way hybridisation had enabled people around the world to sit *shiva* together – people who would likely have been unable to do so in person. Rabbi Jonathan explained that for some members of his synagogue, hybridisation was the difference between being able to take part in ritual prayers during the pandemic and feeling unable to for fear of compromising people's safety. Christian minister Rhoda described livestreaming as a way of 'enabling people to participate' in situations when 'otherwise people couldn't feel that they were a part of the service'.

While we will further interrogate different forms of engagement below, at a basic level, hybridisation allowed those with access to functioning livestreams or recordings to see, hear and witness those aspects of funerary activities that were captured and shared. For example, several participants described live-streaming diverse forms of funeral prayers. Sahil thus described the funerary prayers and recitations conducted for his mother by a Zoroastrian *dastur*, saying: '[t]he priests go and pray in that hall and then they live-stream that so people got a chance to listen to the prayers'. Not everyone agreed that hybridisation enabled people to engage thoughtfully, reflectively or prayerfully in unfamiliar hybrid and online formats, however. For example, while Ellen, a Quaker, felt that her experience of attending a funeral online '*did* have that depth of feeling that one hopes for at a funeral', she recognised others had different perspectives:

> I think people have different experiences of this. Some people don't want to take part in Zoom and haven't done. Other people have done it very reluctantly and say, 'This really doesn't work for me. How soon can we stop doing this?'

Several interviewees highlighted ways in which those attending funerals virtually were rendered more passive than those attending in person. Ellen, for example, noted that many virtual funeral formats enabled people 'to watch but not contribute [...] verbally'. While there is no guarantee that attending in person would see every member speaking or otherwise actively participating, it nevertheless troubled Ellen and others that many virtual funeral attendees could not contribute, for example by giving a reading, offering a tribute or sharing a memory. Echoing Ellen's language, spiritualist minister Ben suggested that where 'people can watch what's going on in the chapel but they can't join in [...] they are reduced to being sort of a passive watcher rather than a full participant'. Gillian described her experience of attending a funeral online as 'just a really surreal thing, like you were watching a film almost'. She contrasted 'watching' with attending in person and participating in a 'tangible' way, and the passivity of this experience contributed to her view that having 'watched one' she would 'never see [virtual engagement] as a replacement for attending a funeral'.

Recognising that some would find it difficult to participate via digital mediation, several funeral officiants and celebrants described steps they had proactively taken to support virtual audiences' participation in funerals despite their not being physically present. For example, Christian minister Jacob described beginning hybrid ceremonies by 'going to the candle stand and light[ing] a candle for everybody who is watching the service and isn't physically present and encourag[ing] them at home to do the same'. The candles were intended as physical foci and an active way of participating in funerals, 'something tangible [...] you have something to do that will almost be a surrogate [...] that says, "I have made this commemoration [...] I've made this memorial"'. Christian minister Barbara was among several celebrants who was careful to 'make eye contact with the camera' because 'it's really important, if [people] couldn't be there, they need to be part of it'.

The technology that most people mentioned did not enable two-way communication, but even one-way technology could be used to allow those not physically present to make some active contributions. When Cameron's brother was prevented from flying to the UK by travel restrictions, he contributed to his mother's funeral by sending a recording of what he wanted to say. His family were sad not to have him physically present, but as Cameron reported '[a]t the funeral we [had] this amazing recording of his voice. [...] It was very funny and very moving'. Cameron's brother was also able to see and hear his recording being played. In some cases, interviewees described more synchronous communication during hybrid funerals. For example, funeral director Shirley explained that mobile phones were widely used in many African-Caribbean funerals, even before the pandemic. Nevertheless, these had limitations for some people:

> [People who were abroad] could do their tributes at the graveside and reception with the video [...] it meant that grandchildren and grandparents could take part [...] obviously they couldn't be seen [by everyone] but they could still do their tributes.

Participating with others

Interviewees also highlighted the extent to, and different ways in which in-person and virtual means of attendance enabled people to participate *with* others at a funeral. This

was at the heart of some interviewees' concerns about hybridisation. Ibrahim, a Muslim funeral director, explained that hosting Muslim funerals and prayers online 'doesn't seem personal, really; it seems a bit distant and [...] people really wanted to be together and grieve together and make the prayer together and be there for each other'. Jessie thought that:

> being in the same room and feeling that sense of comfort, even if you can't be physically close to people [...] [that physical gathering] is still really important to people, and I know people would love to do that again.

Margaret feared that if she offered people the option of attending her father's memorial service virtually, very few might attend in person, something she felt was important: 'I haven't decided yet because I think people will use [the option of engaging virtually] as 'Oh, well, I'm not coming because I can watch it on Zoom'. She explained that, in her opinion, 'so much of the benefit of a funeral is in having people come together [...] [so] If you're not gonna come well then don't, don't come at all then'. Whereas some (as we have seen above) considered virtual attendance a convenient means of attending funerals to which they would not otherwise have considered travelling, Margaret did not welcome this: she felt the quality of participation for both virtual and physical congregations was compromised by hybridisation, rendering funerals and memorials less communal and therefore less beneficial.

Some interviewees emphasised the physicality and elements of the embodied, sensory experience of attending a funeral in person that were missing from online attendance. While these were salient for considerations of how and how well people experience participation *in* funeral activities, they were perhaps particularly important for experiences of participation *with* others. Spiritualist minister Ben suggested numerous reasons why attending in person might be a 'richer experience' than doing so virtually:

> It can be hugely important for people, physically, just to be present at a funeral [...] just that shared energy that's in the venue [...] to say that they were there, and the memory of what was done is something they've experienced directly. It's a bit like the difference between watching a film and watching a live performance [...] they are very different experiences and you do go away with very, very different memories. [...] Because if you turn up in person, you see who else is there, you see how they're behaving [...] It's a bit like a wedding, you know, you walk in and you enjoy the smell of the flowers [...] And you can't do that over a video link! You can't get a feel for whether the people in the room are happy, whether there's lots of regrets [...] [It's] a richer experience for people [...] [so] I totally understand why people feel they've missed out if they've not physically been present.

Christian minister Brenda suggested that some of the 'deep-seated ambivalence' about hybridisation arose 'because in a sense it heightens the fact that you can't be there [...] and you can't be talking afterwards or hugging'. This suggestion also reminds us that, often, the in-person funerals which took place in the first 18 months of the pandemic in the UK were also difficult because physical interaction was dramatically limited among those physically gathered.

Some interviewees' concerns related to whether they felt that their online participation was valued and acknowledged by others. For example, at her uncle's funeral, Gillian

> didn't feel part of the congregation at all [...] it was quite long, and then they finished whatever the last section was, and then we could just about make out that people were

> leaving, and then, but because you couldn't see all the seats, you thought 'well, have people finished, is it over, are there anybody', and you were just left sort of hanging.

Gillian's attendance was, however implicitly, rendered second rate insofar as those gathered physically were the focus of the service. She felt those joining online were included incidentally, not directly. Several interviewees described interventions which sought to avoid this kind of problem by acknowledging those joining virtually, and extending to them a sense of participation and connection to those gathered in person. As we saw above, some celebrants took deliberate steps to engage people attending online in funeral activities. These and similar steps, especially to welcome and acknowledge those joining online, could also be important for fostering a sense of inclusion and participation with those present in person. For example, just as she would a physical congregation, celebrant Elaine deliberately acknowledged, looked at, welcomed, thanked and spoke to those 'joining' via the broadcast:

> I always ask 'Are there particular family who are watching?' And then I will acknowledge the camera, and I'll speak to the camera and welcome them, thank [them] for joining us this way. And I make sure that during the service I look to the camera frequently enough for them to feel that they're included.

Barbara, quoted earlier, had also been told by people who had watched funerals on livestream, that they had felt included because of the effort she made to look to the camera. Spiritualist minister Dennis described one funeral:

> where the whole congregation got up, turned round to the webcam, and waved at the brother [who was in] Australia, which was nice. And at the end of the service, he rang to say, you know, he said he'd enjoyed the service and it was lovely to see all the family and even though he was thousands of miles away, he was part of the service.

We heard several examples of strategies of, as Thalia described it, incorporating 'a little something to make people feel included' when they joined a funeral online. For example, one family with whom she had worked organised for everyone attending in person and virtually to drink a shot of the deceased's favourite whisky at the same time to create a shared experience. Funeral director Lauren gave another illustration:

> [W]e've got a funeral tomorrow, where instead of having a conventional floral tribute on top of the coffin, the family is having a tray of potted plants […] and as people who are present leave the service, they're going to take a potted plant. But they want that to be shown on the […] broadcast, because […] the plants that are left over are going to be passed to people who are watching online, who aren't able to be present at the funeral because of the restricted numbers. So it's a way to tie the person who is watching on the internet to the service, in a way that I don't think would have been thought of before.

In these examples, objects were used to create a tangible connection to the physical funeral for those joining online, potentially generating some sense of unity despite the physical distance. Drinking whisky simultaneously also had an element of synchronicity, creating a sense of shared time with those gathered in-person. Certainly for some, being divided from the physical service by time detracted from the sense of inclusion. For example, Ruth described relatives who 'couldn't attend' but could 'see' her husband's funeral service because she chose to upload the recording to YouTube. The asynchronous

way these relatives engaged with his funeral perhaps heightened Ruth's sense that they were dissociated from physical funeral, and therefore 'viewing' it rather than more actively participating with others.

Others described the use of 'chat' functions on certain platforms, describing these as means of allowing those joining a funeral online to participate actively, and to have a sense of connecting with others. For example, Hindu celebrant Harshan described one funeral where 'there [were] more than 300 people who were watching online and [...] making their presence felt and passing on messages' using the available chat functions. Shirley, who we quoted above describing the use of mobile phones to allow people to deliver eulogies and tributes live, also noted that by using such functions, 'you could have a lot of people logged into the service and you can actually make a comment while the service is going on'. Ellen described one funeral which employed 'a facility where people could write contributions at the time and [...] it was all recorded and at the end you could revisit this website [and] you could go and read what people had written at the time'. Those revisiting these services could retrospectively (albeit not synchronously) appreciate virtual attendees' contributions, just as virtual attendees might appreciate the opportunity to take a more active role in the service by making them.

Technological contingencies of participation

As interviewees' experiences of chat functions and mobile phones have already begun illustrating, scope for participation and interviewees' experiences of hybridisation were significantly contingent on the availability, quality and use made of technology. Being unable to hear meant some virtual attendees struggled to follow funerals. For example, Cameron described viewing a friend's funeral wherein you 'couldn't hear a thing people said. It was very, very disappointing [...] it was on Zoom and people hadn't switched off their speakerphones – it was just not good'. Insofar as she could not hear what was being said, Cameron did not feel as though she could follow the service, and thus did not feel included. Deborah, whose sister was not able to attend their mother's funeral in person, had been devastated to learn that the arrangements made so that she could 'at least' join virtually failed: 'the iPad didn't work, so there was no sound, so she didn't hear my mum's funeral'.

Filming techniques and approaches also affected people's experiences. For example, the camera angles used at Gillian's uncle's funeral detracted from her experience as a virtual attendee: she could not see the people to whom she wanted to feel a sense of connection, nor enough of the service that she could follow what was going on and feel included: with .

> [I]t was like somebody hadn't really thought it through and just thought, 'Oh well, we'll just put a bit on the priest' [...] I didn't want to see him, I wanted to see everybody else [...] and the coffin, not just the edge of the flowers. It wasn't well-placed.

By contrast, Rhoda appreciated that at least some venue staff and those responsible for filming funerals had

thought it through very carefully and they think about the camera placement so that the camera will focus on where the coffin is placed and where I am and will show me. If you do see any of the bereaved, it's just the back of their heads [...] [they don't] show the bereaveds' faces unless they have requested that [...] so it's actually been done pretty sensitively, and I think we've learned [...] what's good.

The differences between Gillian and Rhoda's views about showing the backs of congregants' heads highlights the plurality of perspectival considerations and complexity of judgement that can be involved in developing a sensitive approach to filming for online funeral provision.

Several interviewees – religious leaders significant among them – also raised concerns about digital exclusion. Ibrahim was concerned that hybridising funeral prayers and burial services would exclude older Muslims in his care who had less familiarity with or access to video conferencing software. Rabbi Jonathan and funeral director Thalia both noted that some Orthodox Jews' eschewing of technology meant that there was no desire to translate rituals such as sitting *shiva* and stone setting onto digital platforms. Christian minister Brenda thought of those in her parish who 'do not have a computer and don't want a computer' and therefore 'can't benefit from [online funerals] because of digital isolation [...] Unless somebody can bring a laptop and sit with them [...] this whole issue of digital exclusion has been huge throughout the pandemic' – not least since household mixing limitations prevented people from offering help. Others raised concerns about digital poverty, citing scenarios during the COVID-19 pandemic in which people were unable to attend a funeral in person, but also unable to afford the requisite hardware or connectivity to engage virtually. However, several interviewees also noted that the costs of in-person attendance might often render virtual attendance more feasible and sometimes prevent attendance in any format other than online.

Evaluative frames of reference

The above findings have shown that various evaluative touchpoints affected interviewees' assessments of hybridisation. Compared to in-person attendance, many had several reasons for evaluating online attendance poorly. Not surprisingly, different people put more or less emphasis on – or gave more and less priority in their evaluative judgements to – different aspects of participation *in* funerals and *with* other people.

The evaluative judgements people expressed about virtual participation could depend not just on the contingencies of technology and the ways it was used, but also on the situation and comparator that people had in mind when commenting. Many people emphasised the positive affordances of hybridisation in contexts whereby there was a very real prospect that some people would be unable to participate at all without it. In contrast, when virtual attendance was considered as an alternative to in person attendance, its downsides (the lesser scope it offered for valued aspects of participation) were viewed more negatively.

Disappointments about the lack of availability of technology for hybridisation and technology-contingent shortfalls of hybridisation grew as the pandemic drew on. Once the possibility and significance of enabling people to attend funerals virtually had been clearly demonstrated, and there had been time to get technology in place, people's expectations were higher. For example, Gemma was disappointed that not only was

livestreaming not an option for her mother's funeral, but that the professionals she encountered did not seem to consider this a problem:

> [W]e asked the undertakers, 'Is there Wi-Fi, what are the technological capabilities?' and they were, like, 'Oh, we don't really know, we don't think there's any Wi-Fi' [. . .] So I phoned the crematorium myself just to double check and [. . .] they said that there was no Wi-Fi, basically [. . .] I didn't feel listened to and I didn't feel that the concern about the lack of technology was taken seriously as a valid point [. . .] [And] if this was at the beginning of the pandemic you'd be, like, 'Fair enough', but this was [several months in, so] you would've hoped that it would've been different.

People have various ideas about what matters for a good funeral, and various personal preferences and concerns. What some people consider disappointing, others can view positively. When large in-person gatherings were precluded, people for whom it mattered to have large numbers attending a funeral were deeply disappointed and often keen to facilitate a large online showing (although numbers could not always be counted or seen). For people who preferred to avoid large in-person gatherings, perhaps especially as mourners who would be thrust into the spotlight, having a smaller in-person gathering, with others engaging with livestreams and recordings, was more positively viewed, and meant that some of the challenges associated with larger in-person funerals were ameliorated. Celebrant Peter suggested hybridisation had allowed some families to have 'an intimate family thing but lots of people can join them online', simultaneously facilitating broad inclusion and local intimacy. While Cynthia was pleased that hybridisation meant 'that people could be part of' her father's funeral, she described the in-person gathering as a 'family, small, intimate, really special celebration of his life for us [. . .] rather than four or five hundred people sitting in a room that you don't know [. . .] half of'. Connie, too, was grateful to avoid the 'difficult meeting people at the door and all that kind of stuff and it was very intimate [. . .] instead of being a full church which would have been far more traumatic'. Echoing both Cynthia's discomfort at the prospect of trying to celebrate her Dad's life alongside many people she did not know and Connie's fear that having to meet people, and greet and mourn in front of a full church might prove 'traumatic', Humanist celebrant Scott suggested that by watching online, mourners could communicate their care to the close family without 'overwhelming' them or forcing them to be 'on display':

> [P]eople can perhaps watch the service online and send a message, send an email but they don't attend in person and [the family] don't have that overwhelming - [. . .] because I've done funerals with 300/400 people at them and it feels like the family are very much on display.

Thus while, as some interviewees noted, being filmed might also be an uncomfortable experience of 'being on display' for some mourners, hybridisation could facilitate a pleasantly intimate funeral.

Discussion

This paper has drawn on an extensive and diverse set of interviews to examine funeral hybridisation in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our data is broadly consistent with points made in the nascent literature from the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic about the patchiness of technology provision, people's varying capacity to utilise it, and the mixed reception with which funeral hybridisation has met (Arora & Bhatia, 2023; Bear

et al., 2020; Carr et al., 2020; Chen, 2022; Conway, 2020; Long et al., 2022; MacNeil et al., 2021; Pitsillides & Wallace, 2021; Rawlings et al., 2022). We have added more varied illustrative examples and extended understanding with two key, empirically grounded analytic contributions. First, we highlighted the varied, unsettled discourse used to discuss hybridisation. Participants' hesitant and inconsistent wording was indicative of the ways that thoughts and experiences of hitherto unfamiliar ways of attending funerals can reflect the plurality and ambiguity of ideas about the ends and purposes that attendance at funerals serves. This can be considered part of a broader picture of both difference of opinion and uncertainty about what constitutes a 'good' funeral and whether and how hybridisation can facilitate achievement of this.

Second, we have responded to Long et al's. (2022) call to account for why some people found hybridisation a more satisfying response to the funerary disruptions of COVID-19 than others. We considered different aspects of participation and suggested that some people found virtual attendance less satisfying because they did not feel as though they were participating *in* important funerary activities, or participating *with* others, as they would have liked, or as they would have been able to had they attended in person. This analytic frame can accommodate and support consideration of a broad range of features of funeral provision that can be seen as important for 'good' funerals in different traditions and by different people. The usefulness of this analytic frame is not undermined by the fact that participation *in* and participation *with* may not always be easily disentangled in practice, nor the fact that other aspects of participation could be identified or considered. We consider it a valuable heuristic frame, with potential to help identify aspects of funerals which may be more and less well achieved when funeral provision is digitally hybridised in different ways. The details of what matters (and most) for good funerals vary extensively, for example, across religious and cultural traditions, but attention to whether and how well people are able to participate in the funerary activities that matter to them, and relate to other mourners in ways they consider appropriate, is important across a range of contexts.

The varied practical examples in our dataset, together with our analysis of the scope offered for participation in funeral activities and with other people, can usefully inform the development and evaluation of the digital hybridisation of funeral provision going forward. Our analytic frame encourages attention to which funerary activities the technologies and practices of hybridisation support engagement with, and how, and what experiences of relationship they can engender among mourners. Insights into the participatory experiences fostered by uses of hybrid technologies in funerary contexts may both inform and benefit from future investigations in other contexts. For example, Rossner (2021) has explored how virtual court proceedings might be viewed not as a less-satisfactory alternative needed during the pandemic, but as a means of creating 'a more egalitarian and inclusive' experience of English justice systems (p. 360).

Ultimately, though, the future place and longer-term popularity of funeral hybridisation outwith pandemic and other emergency contexts remain to be determined, both in the UK and more widely. Market research in the UK has indicated that 37% of services were streamed in 2022, compared to 69% in 2021, suggesting a significant ongoing role for hybridisation, and still at higher levels than before the COVID-19 pandemic, at least initially (Sunlife, 2023). Our interviewees anticipated multiple circumstances in which funeral hybridisation might continue to prove useful, echoing MacNeil et al's. (2021)

note that many see virtual attendance as '[a]n alternative for attendees who would otherwise have been unable to attend due to distance, travel costs, illness, self-isolation, immunocompromisation, finances, work obligations, or other challenges' (p. 14). Burrell and Selman (2020) additionally suggested that hybrid funerals might represent 'an opportunity for immigrants to virtually cross large distances and borders, and to be present at the funeral services for a loved one' (p. 22). The environmental impact of international travel might also weigh in favour of hybrid funeral provision in situations when mourners are geographically dispersed. Similarly, while some participants, as in MacNeil et al's. (2021) observations, welcomed 'the ease of attending a funeral from the comfort of one's own home, without needing to travel' (p. 12), others felt that in scenarios whereby one could choose, one ought to attend in person and 'make the effort' rather than engage virtually. Such differences of opinion may become more significant as hybridisation ceases to be so significantly couched in emergency. Given the multiple reasons in favour of offering hybridisation in such context, we might reasonably anticipate that some virtual provision will continue even though many may prefer to return to in-person funerals.

It also seems likely that technologies and approaches to their use will continue to develop, and that the adoption of these may be uneven. The development and use of funeral hybridisation technologies will need careful study and ongoing reflection. Promising ideas do not always deliver the hoped-for gains in experience. For example, Uriu et al. (2021) found that complementing Zoom and smartphone technologies with their 360-degree Telepresence system only somewhat enhanced funerals held at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to 2D webcasting. In further data from the Care in Funerals project, we also found that the new opportunities that video recordings offer for people to engage with funerals asynchronously and, indeed, to revisit a funeral on multiple occasions, were met with mixed attitudes and experiences (Riley et al., 2023). Research is also needed to investigate the relative grief and bereavement outcomes that may be associated with virtual and in-person funeral attendance respectively (Chen, 2022). The development of longitudinal studies would also be appropriate.

Questions of what matters for good practice will continue to need attention. The various considerations here might include the relevant legal and privacy laws and expectations with respect to permissions to capture people – including children – on film (Muturi et al., 2020, 2021). It will also remain important not to take for granted that everyone will have the option to either arrange for a funeral to be hybridised, or to engage with a hybrid funeral via digital media. While some scholars have highlighted the affordability of the devices and software required for hybridisation (MacNeil et al., 2021; Muturi et al., 2020) this is not the same as their being universally affordable. It remains to be seen how hybridisation may be charged for, and whether it is considered a core aspect of provision, or a 'discretionary item'. Attention to people's frames of reference will also continue to be important when interpreting evaluative assessments. For example, in the future, it is possible that people may be frustrated if they have experienced, or are aware of, good practice, but engage with a hybrid funeral in which inclusion and participation are not facilitated well.

Finally, notions of good practice will need to reflect the diverse cultural, religious and socioeconomic contexts of particular funerals, and indeed to recognise that hybrid funerals may often be transnational and transcultural.

Conclusion

Hybridising funerals can enable more people to engage in funerals in some way, but the scope for those who attend virtually to participate *in* valued funerary activities and *with* other mourners is often less than that afforded to those who attend in person. This scope for participation is partly dependent on the particularities of hybridising technologies and the ways they are used. This paper has illustrated several potential ways of enhancing virtual attendees' participation in funerals and with others. The heuristic analytic frame developed in this paper can support investigation of important aspects of what makes hybrid funerals 'good' for both physical and virtual congregations. It can be valuably applied to diverse religious and cultural traditions and for people in different social – including socioeconomic – circumstances.

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Appendix

Table A1. Sample demographics at time of interview.

Characteristic	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%) of sample
RECRUITMENT CATEGORY*		
Bereaved	39	
Funeral directors	19	
Celebrants and officiants	21	
GENDER		
Male	46	67.6
Female	22	32.4
ETHNICITY		
White	40	59
Mixed	1	1.5
Black/Black British	2	2.9
Asian/Asian British	7	10.3
Not reported	18	26.5
DEPRIVATION DECILE**		
1	5	7.4
2	5	7.4
3	6	8.8
4	5	7.4
5	5	7.4
6	4	5.9
7	5	7.4
8	8	11.8
9	11	16.2
10	9	13.2
Not reported	5	7.4
NATION		
England	39	57.4
Scotland	23	33.8
Wales	1	1.5
Northern Ireland	5	7.4
AGE		
18–30	4	5.9
31–45	12	17.6
46–60	34	50
61–75	14	20.6
76+	1	1.5
Unknown	3	4.4

*Some participants fell into multiple categories.
**Where 1 indicates a high index of deprivation, and 10 a low index of deprivation.