

The Ethics of Digital Immortality: Does It Help or Hinder the Natural Process of Grief?

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Abstract

Advances in generative artificial intelligence have led to the development of 'griefbots', 'deadbots' and other 'digital immortality' services that reconstruct a dead person's voice, image and conversational style from data they left behind in life. These technologies are sold to the bereaved as a comfort, a way to keep talking to those who have died for years after their demise. This paper considers whether such technologies help or hinder the natural psychological process of grief and what ethical and legal safeguards should accompany their use. Drawing on established psychological models of bereavement — including attachment theory, the continuing bonds model and the dual process model — and the diagnostic criteria for Prolonged Grief Disorder in the DSM-5-TR, the paper contends that digital immortality technologies occupy an unresolved middle ground. used transparently and for a limited period, they can support healthy continuing bonds, but they also carry a documented risk of fostering avoidance, dependency, and complicated grief when they substitute for, rather than assist, the psychological work of mourning. It also explores the ethical implications of the practice, especially the lack of consent from the deceased, the commodification of grief, and the global regulatory vacuum around post-mortem data. The study concludes that digital immortality is not inherently therapeutic or harmful; its psychological effects

depend on the design of the technology, the manner of its introduction and the availability (or lack thereof) of professional and legal safeguards.

Keywords

Digital Immortality, Griefbots, Deadbots, Grief, Bereavement, Continuing Bonds, Prolonged Grief Disorder, Artificial Intelligence Ethics, Postmortem Privacy, Digital Afterlife.

Introduction

Death has always created a gap between the living and the dead, and this gap human beings have striven to bridge in one way or another. This gap has long been met with photographs, letters, voice recordings, memorial rituals, and religious practices of ancestor veneration. What has changed in the last few years is not the human desire to stay connected to the dead, but the sophistication of the tools available to stay connected. Generative artificial intelligence—large language models coupled with voice cloning and image or video synthesis—now allows the creation of an interactive simulation of a deceased person that can converse, in the person’s remembered voice and manner, with the bereaved. These tools are sold under names such as griefbots, deadbots, digital twins or ‘digital immortality’ services, and a commercial industry has grown up around them, most visibly in China where companies such as Silicon Intelligence and Super Brain have between them served thousands of clients looking to keep a version of a lost parent, spouse or child ‘alive’ on a phone, tablet or app.

This raises a question that is squarely at the intersection of psychology, ethics, and law: does engaging with an AI recreation of a dead person aid a grieving individual in coming to terms with their loss, or does it interfere with the natural, adaptive process by which human beings eventually accept death? Bereavement researchers have long accepted that maintaining a bond with the deceased – by memory, ritual or symbolic connection – is a normal and often healthy part of grief. The issue with an interactive AI replica is that it doesn’t just mirror the dead, it mimics an ongoing presence, it reacts, it initiates, and in more advanced versions it appears to grow and remember.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

While digital immortality services are now for sale and beginning to enter hospice and bereavement-care settings, empirical studies of their psychological impact are limited, and no jurisdiction has articulated an established legal or regulatory approach. This creates a problem for grief counsellors, technology providers and lawmakers alike: the technology is moving faster than both the evidence and the law. This study focuses that broad problem into two central research questions:

1. Research Question One (Psychological): Does continued contact with an AI-generated replica of a deceased person aid bereaved individuals in adjusting to loss – in line with the continuing bonds model of grief – or does this contact instead impede the psychological ‘grief work’ necessary for accepting the reality of death, thus increasing the chance of Prolonged Grief Disorder?
2. Research Question Two (Ethical/Legal): What ethical principles and legal safeguards, in the absence of statutory guidance, should govern the creation, operation and eventual retirement of digital immortality technologies, in relation to consent, data ownership and the dignity of both the deceased and the bereaved?

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this research is to critically evaluate, from a psychological and jurisprudential perspective, whether digital immortality technologies help or hinder the natural process of grief, and to propose ethical safeguards for their use.

The objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the psychological concept of grief and the models used to distinguish adaptive mourning from pathological grief.

2. To trace the emergence of griefbots, deadbots, and digital immortality services as a distinct category of AI application.
3. To analyse the potential psychological benefits of these technologies through the continuing bonds and dual process models of bereavement.
4. To analyse the potential psychological risks of these technologies, with particular reference to Prolonged Grief Disorder.
5. To evaluate the ethical questions raised by the technology, including consent, data ownership, and commercialisation of grief.
6. To assess the adequacy of existing legal frameworks in addressing postmortem data and personality rights, and to recommend a balanced regulatory approach

Definitions of Important Terms

1. Grief

Grief is the natural emotional or cognitive, and behavioural response to the death of a person to whom one was attached. It is distinguished from mourning, which refers to the outward often culturally shaped, expression of grief.

2. Digital Immortality

Digital immortality refers to the use of artificial intelligence typically a combination of large language models, voice cloning, and image or video synthesis to create a persistent interactive digital representation of a person built from data such as photographs videos voice recordings and text messages, that continues to be accessible after that person's death.

3. Griefbot / Deadbot

A **griefbot**, also referred to as a **deadbot**, is an AI-powered conversational application developed to simulate a deceased individual. It usually functions through text or voice conversations, allowing family members and friends to communicate with a digital version of their loved one. These interactions are generated using the deceased person's digital data and are intended to provide emotional comfort or maintain a sense of connection after bereavement.

4. Continuing Bonds

The **Continuing Bonds Theory** is a psychological approach to bereavement that recognises that maintaining an emotional connection with a deceased loved one is a normal and often healthy part of the grieving process. Instead of suggesting that people must completely detach from the deceased, the theory explains that relationships can continue in different forms, such as through memories, personal rituals, inner conversations, or symbolic acts. Proposed by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996), this theory challenged the traditional belief that successful mourning requires letting go entirely.

5. Prolonged Grief Disorder

Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) is a recognised mental health condition included in both the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR)* and the *International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11)*. It is characterised by persistent longing for the deceased, intense emotional pain, difficulty accepting the loss, and significant disruption of daily life. The condition is generally diagnosed when these symptoms continue beyond the expected period of mourning, typically for at least twelve months in adults, and result in clinically significant impairment (Prigerson et al., 2021).

6. Postmortem Privacy

Postmortem privacy refers to the legal and ethical interest in protecting and controlling the use of a deceased person's personal information, including their data, image, voice, likeness, and other digital assets after death. With the rapid growth of artificial intelligence and digital technologies,

concerns have emerged regarding who has the authority to access, reproduce, or commercialise these digital identities. Despite these developments, many legal systems, including India, still lack clear statutory provisions specifically governing the posthumous protection of personal data and digital identity.

Historical Background

The desire to maintain a connection with loved ones after death is deeply rooted in human history. Across different cultures and civilisations, people have honoured the deceased through memorials, ancestor worship, religious rituals, letters, photographs, and storytelling. These practices demonstrate that remembrance has always been an important part of the grieving process.

However, human memory is naturally imperfect. As time passes, people may unintentionally forget details, misremember conversations, or recall events differently because of emotions, trauma, or the passage of time. This **human error** in memory is a normal psychological phenomenon and often changes the way individuals remember a deceased loved one. For many bereaved people, preserving photographs, videos, letters, and voice recordings has therefore become a way of protecting memories from gradually fading or becoming distorted.

A well-known example can be found in Chinese culture, where families traditionally speak to photographs or memorial tablets of deceased relatives during **Tomb-Sweeping Day (Qingming Festival)** as an expression of remembrance and respect. Modern griefbot companies in China frequently describe their technology as a continuation of these long-established traditions, arguing that artificial intelligence simply offers a new way of maintaining an existing cultural practice rather than creating an entirely new one.

In contrast, early Western psychology viewed continuing attachment to the deceased with caution. **Sigmund Freud's** theory of *grief work* suggested that healthy mourning required individuals to gradually withdraw their emotional attachment from the deceased and redirect their emotional

energy towards new relationships and everyday life. According to this view, prolonged attachment could interfere with emotional recovery.

Later research challenged Freud's approach. Psychologists increasingly recognised that many bereaved individuals continued to feel emotionally connected with the deceased while still adapting successfully to life after loss. This understanding led to the development of the **Continuing Bonds Theory**, which argues that maintaining an ongoing relationship through memories, rituals, or symbolic communication is not necessarily unhealthy but can instead support emotional healing.

The emergence of artificial intelligence has taken this idea a step further. Instead of relying solely on human memory, which can fade or be affected by human error, AI systems are capable of analysing large amounts of digital information such as photographs, videos, voice recordings, emails, text messages, and social media posts to create interactive digital replicas of deceased individuals. While these technologies may help preserve memories with greater consistency, they also raise important psychological, ethical, and legal questions regarding consent, privacy, identity, and the long-term impact of interacting with digital representations of the dead.

pathological. This 'letting go' model dominated clinical thinking for much of the twentieth century and underpinned the popular, though clinically oversimplified, idea of fixed 'stages of grief'.

From the 1990s onward, bereavement researchers led by Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman challenged the letting-go model, proposing instead that maintaining a continuing bond with the deceased is normal, cross-culturally common, and often adaptive (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996). This was followed by the dual process model developed by Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), which described healthy grieving as an oscillation between loss-oriented coping (confronting the reality of the death) and restoration-oriented coping (rebuilding a life without the deceased). Both models reframed grief as an ongoing, non-linear relationship with loss rather than a task to be completed and closed.

It is against this psychological backdrop that AI griefbots emerged in the 2020s. Building on advances in large language models and voice and video synthesis, companies began offering commercial 'resurrection' services; parallel, less commercial applications appeared in hospice and bereavement-care settings, where memorial chatbots and digital legacy tools are increasingly discussed as adjuncts to, rather than replacements for, human bereavement support. The technology has thus arrived at a point where a century-old psychological debate about whether attachment to the dead helps or harms the bereaved has acquired a wholly new, interactive, and commercially available form.

Methodology

This research uses a doctrinal analytical and interdisciplinary methodology, mainly in the field of jurisprudence but with a significant use of literature from psychology and bereavement-studies. The primary material includes recognized psychiatric diagnostic frameworks (the DSM-5-TR criteria for Prolonged Grief Disorder) and reported industry and journalistic accounts of operational digital immortality services. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed literature on continuing bonds theory, the dual process model, and philosophical and ethics scholarship on 'digital afterlife' technologies, and reporting from MIT Technology Review, Hospice News and Scientific American documenting real-world use of the technology and the views of practising grief counsellors and thanatologists. The study is not a piece of original clinical or empirical research but a critical synthesis of existing psychological frameworks and available reporting in order to answer the two research questions identified above.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

In this study, there are two types of theories that are relevant. The first is psychological, in the sense that attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980) posits that there is a need for proximity to the lost figure that leads to great distress after the loss of a close relationship, and continuing bonds theory (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996) and the dual process model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) suggest

that a healthy attachment to a person who has died can continue without being pathological; and the Prolonged Grief Disorder criteria in the DSM-5-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) set up a clinical boundary between adaptive continuing bonds and maladaptive impairing grief. Taken together, these theories imply that the psychological and ethical questions are not independent: a digital immortality tool that is ethically used with consent, transparency and a clear time limit is more likely to lead to healthy continuing bonds, whereas one that is commercially motivated, hails back, or has no end point is more likely to lead to avoidance and dependency, as seen in Prolonged Grief Disorder. The emotional skills and how they can hinder or help in analysis.

1. The Case that Digital Immortality Helps

Even some grief counsellors believe that a suitable griefbot is a modern form of continuing bonds, including keeping a photo of the person, writing a letter to the deceased, or visiting the grave. Some bereaved people find that the use of digital memorials provides a source of continuing bereavement support and connection, and AI has enabled some families to be better informed about the bereavement support and services available when making end-of-life plans (Hospice News, 2026). In one highly publicized example, a Chinese user said that he spoke with an AI-generated image of his deceased mother on a weekly basis as a way to release his emotions, writing in his diary or sharing it with a trusted person, but without necessarily accepting that the AI was actually his mother. (Yang, 2024). Initial results presented by grief researchers also indicate that for some people, communication with a realistic AI persona was followed, over the course of about two years, by a decrease in the severity of their grief compared to what would typically be observed, which provides some evidence that the tool can help with restoration-oriented coping instead of replacing it (Scientific American, 2025).

2. The Case That Digital Immortality Hinders

The focus in the literature that is consistent and stronger is that “interactive AI replicas” can hinder, not aid, the natural process of grieving. Griefbots can create the illusion of two-way

communication where this is no longer possible through the normal digital and physical interactions with the deceased, thereby interfering with the 'internet-scaffolded affectivity' that is sometimes observed as grief unfolds naturally (Lindemann, 2022). A phenomenon they refer to as the 'digital haunting' refers to the emotional bond a bereaved individual can form with a simulation which never develops, morphs or ultimately offers the level of presence needed to navigate grief, thus blocking what doctors call. change, or ultimately provide the depth of presence needed to move through grief, potentially preventing what clinicians call the 'integration of loss' (McDonald, 2026). A tool that provides a ready, ready, always-available, seemingly 'RESPONSIVE' and REPETITIVE alternative to the deceased might predictably lead to the persistent yearning for the deceased, and to difficulty accepting the death and avoidance of reminders of the loss, all of which are part of the criteria for Prolonged Grief Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Some bereaved people – estimated to be seven to ten percent of those already grieving – may be more likely to develop an unhealthy reliance on a lifelike interactive replica of the deceased (Scientific American, 2025).

3. A Qualified Middle Position

There is not enough evidence in the balance of evidence to reach a definite conclusion of 'helps' or 'hinders'. Rather, it indicates a number of factors which can impact the likelihood of which of the two outcomes is more likely: (a) the length of time for and the reason of tool use - short term use, ritual use seems less dangerous than long term use and reliance on the tool; (b) the clarity of interaction - deliberate interaction with the avatar of somebody who died as an instrument for contemplation, rather than as a genuine representation of the deceased, seems to fare better than conflation of the two; (c) the presence of professional supervision - hospice and grief counsellors constantly emphasize that these tools should complement rather than supplant human grief assistance; and (d) individual vulnerability factors including pre-existing attachment patterns and the acuteness of loss. A tool developed for the acute phase of grief, not given with clinical supervision, and not given to a psychologically vulnerable individual is much more likely to

contribute to the failure to adaptively grieve than a tool given in the acute phase, used briefly, and with awareness of its artificiality.

Illustrative Cases

Two known examples of the types of outcomes mentioned above are presented. The China user who referred to his avatar as Sun Kai has been having weekly chats with the avatar of his deceased mother, who died in 2019, for several years now, and reports that the distinction between his memory of the deceased mother and her avatar has become increasingly fuzzy as he describes the experience as a means to release emotions, but not necessarily to believe in her continued existence (Yang, 2024). In the U.S., the family of a homicide victim named Chris Pelkey reportedly used generative video and voice-cloning technology to create an avatar of his voice and image, so that the deceased could "speak" to the court during sentencing, bringing the technology to an unprecedented level of public legal engagement, and leaving additional questions about the evidence and ethics of using a simulated victim statement (Scientific American, 2025). Both cases demonstrate the same underlying technology can be used in a therapeutic way by one user, and an ethically murky way by another..

Ethical and Legal Dimensions

The psychological questions examined above cannot be separated from a cluster of ethical and legal concerns. First is the question of consent: the deceased person whose voice, image, and personality are used to train the AI replica cannot consent to how their data is subsequently used, spoken through, or monetised, and family members may hold conflicting views about whether creating such a replica honours or exploits the dead (Hospice News, 2026). Second is data governance: bereavement-sector commentators have identified a 'governance gap' in digital bereavement services, citing vague data-ownership terms, the absence of clear data-deletion processes, and unclear security practices as recurring red flags (Hospice News, 2026). Third is commercialisation: digital immortality is, in most jurisdictions, an unregulated commercial

product sold directly to grieving consumers, a population widely recognised in consumer-protection scholarship as being in a position of heightened vulnerability and reduced bargaining power (Yang, 2024). Fourth is dignity: scholars writing on 'griefbots, deadbots, and postmortem avatars' have warned that recreation services designed without regard for the rights of both the deceased ('data donors') and the bereaved ('service interactants') risk imposing a standardised, provider-designed way of grieving on individuals whose grief is, by nature, unique and non-linear, and have called for responsible protocols including sensitive procedures for eventually retiring a deadbot (Öhman & Floridi, 2024).

From a comparative legal standpoint, most jurisdictions — including India — do not yet provide dedicated statutory protection for postmortem data, voice, or likeness. Indian law recognises personality and publicity rights for living individuals through judicial precedent, and data protection legislation such as the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 is framed principally around living data principals, leaving the treatment of a deceased person's personal data, and the interests of grieving next-of-kin, largely outside its express scope. In the absence of specific legislation, general principles of contract, consumer protection, and tort law would have to be stretched to address disputes over an AI replica created without the deceased's prior authorisation, or over a family's demand that a commercial provider delete a deceased relative's data. This is not a uniquely Indian gap: commentators reviewing the Chinese and American markets for these services reach the same conclusion, describing the legal and ethical implications of the technology as still unresolved even in jurisdictions where the industry is most developed.

Comparative Analysis

The above psychological questions can't be divorced from a group of ethical and legal concerns. The first one is consent: the deceased who had their voice, image, and personality used to train the AI replica cannot consent to how their data is later used, spoken by or exploited by the AI replica, and family members might have opposing opinions about whether the creation of such an AI replica is a form of honouring or exploitation of the deceased (Hospice News, 2026). Second,

there's a data governance issue bereavement-sector commentators have noted that the 'governance gap' in digital bereavement services is a constant worry, due to unclear data-ownership terms, the lack of clear processes for data deletion and unclear security practices (Hospice News, 2026). Third, commercialisation: Digital immortality, in most jurisdictions, is a commercial product that is directly being sold to the grieving population, who are widely recognised in consumer-protection scholarship as in a vulnerable position and less able to bargain (Yang, 2024). Fourth, dignity: scholars writing about 'griefbots deadbots and postmortem avatars' have emphasized the need to respect the rights of the deceased ('data donors') and bereaved ('service interactants') and have urged some responsible protocols, such as sensitive procedures for the eventual retirement of a deadbot (Öhman & Floridi, 2024). Comparatively, there is no specific legal protection available for the postmortem data, voice or likeness in most jurisdictions, including India. While the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, is primarily geared towards a data principal who is alive, personality data and publicity rights are recognized in Indian law by judicial precedent, and the treatment of data of a deceased data principal and interests of grieving next-of-kin sit on the fringes of the law. Without the specific laws in place, general principles of contract, consumer protection and tort law would have to be extended to apply to disputes arising from an AI replica made without the deceased's express consent, or a family's requests that a commercial entity remove the information of a deceased family member from its library. This is by no means an Indian problem alone: observers of the Chinese and American markets for such services come to the same conclusion about the legal and ethical consequences of technology, and are left with the impression that the issue remains unresolved in the markets where the service has been most successfully developed.

Dimension	Psychological Benefit (Continuing Bonds)	Psychological Risk (Complicated/Prolonged Grief)	Ethical Concern	Governing Principle Needed
Emotional comfort	Reduces acute distress; provides a sense of ongoing connection	May become a substitute for real emotional processing	Comfort obtained from a simulation, not the person	Time-limited, clinically supervised use
Memory and identity	Preserves voice, mannerisms, and shared history	Blurs the line between memory and simulated presence	Risk of the avatar overwriting authentic memory	Transparency about the artificial nature of the tool
Grief trajectory	Can support gradual, titrated exposure to loss	May stall the 'grief work' needed for reorganisation of identity	No clinical consensus on long-term effect	Integration with, not replacement of, bereavement counselling
Consent and dignity	Family may find shared meaning in creating a tribute	Deceased cannot consent to how their data/persona is used	Commercial exploitation of grief and personal data	Explicit ante-mortem or next-of-kin consent frameworks
Regulation	Emerging industry self-guidelines in hospice care	No binding legal standard on data retention or deletion	Absence of statutory postmortem privacy protection	Dedicated 'digital afterlife' legislation and data-deletion rights

Discoveries

The findings of the research are that:

- 1 Digital immortality technologies are not uniform psychologically, but depend on the timespan of use, transparency, professional guidance and individual vulnerability of the bereaved user.
- 2 Short-term and easy-to-understand and ritualised use is more in tune with the ongoing bonds and dual process models of healthy grieving, compared to open-ended, undisclosed and emotionally absorptive use.
3. Clinically there is a risk that lifelike and always available AI replicas of the deceased could exacerbate symptoms of Prolonged Grief Disorder, especially for those with insecure attachment patterns or who are in the acute phase of loss.
4. The commercial afterlife of the digital world has grown faster than empirical study or legal regulation, resulting in insufficient protection for consumers who have lost a loved one and insufficient protection for the data of the deceased.
5. There is no jurisdiction in this study, including India, which has a detailed legislation about post mortem data, consent, and deletion rights in the context of digital immortality services.
6. Across the professions, there is common agreement that these tools should be used as an adjunct, rather than a replacement, for human grief counselling and support.

Limitations of the Study

This research is doctrinal and analytical rather than empirical; it does not include original clinical data, controlled trials, or interviews with users of digital immortality services, and instead relies on secondary psychological literature and journalistic and industry reporting. Because the technology and its regulatory treatment are evolving rapidly, some factual details concerning specific commercial products, prices, or emerging guidelines may change after the date of this study. The analysis is also necessarily comparative and global in places where jurisdiction-specific

law, particularly outside India, China, and the United States, was not independently examined in depth.

Conclusion

Digital immortality technologies sit at an unresolved intersection of grief psychology, commercial innovation, and unregulated data use. The evidence reviewed in this paper does not support a simple verdict that griefbots either help or hinder the grieving process instead supports a conditional answer used briefly, transparently, and alongside professional bereavement support, these technologies can function as a modern, interactive extension of long-recognised continuing bonds practices. Used indefinitely, without disclosure of their artificial nature, or as a substitute for human connection and grief counselling, they carry a real risk of prolonging avoidance and interfering with the psychological reorganisation that healthy mourning requires a risk that maps closely onto the clinical profile of Prolonged Grief Disorder. Because the deceased cannot consent to the use of their data and personality, and because grieving consumers are a uniquely vulnerable market, this is not an area that can safely be left to industry self-regulation alone. The central conclusion of this study is that the ethical and psychological legitimacy of digital immortality depends less on the technology itself than on the safeguards consent transparency time-limitation, professional integration, and data-deletion rights within which it is deployed.

Recommendations

1. Digital immortality and griefbot services should be required to disclose clearly and repeatedly, within the interface itself, that the user is interacting with a simulation and not the deceased person.
2. Providers should build in an intended time-limitation or periodic review point, developed in consultation with bereavement professionals, rather than offering indefinite, open-ended access designed to maximise engagement.

3. Hospices, grief counsellors, and mental health professionals should be involved in recommending, screening for, and monitoring the use of such tools, particularly for bereaved individuals in the acute phase of loss or with a history of anxious attachment.
4. Lawmakers, including in India, should consider dedicated provisions on postmortem personal data, covering consent (ideally obtained from the individual before death), next-of-kin authorisation, data retention limits, and an enforceable right to deletion.
5. Regulators should treat the marketing of digital immortality services to bereaved consumers as a consumer-protection issue, given the recognised vulnerability of this market, and should require plain-language disclosure of data use, pricing, and cancellation rights.
6. Further empirical, longitudinal research is needed to track psychological outcomes among users of digital immortality services, including any association with Prolonged Grief Disorder, to move this field beyond anecdote and journalistic reporting.
7. Providers and ethicists should jointly develop protocols for the sensitive retirement or deletion of a deadbot, since ending an AI replica that a family created can itself become an emotionally significant — and currently unaddressed — event.

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