

NEWS RELEASE

Is there a digital afterlife?



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PRETORIA - What happens when you die? Some believe in the eternal reincarnation of the spirit until deliverance arrives and the spirit unites with the cosmic energy field. Others believe in the soul residing in either a wonderful spiritual place or a place of damnation. Then there are those that believe that there is nothing after death. These views depend on a particular understanding of reality. Either way, technology is part of that reality.

The digital afterlife is a relatively new phenomenon that refers to maintaining an active or passive digital presence after dying. This presence may exist forever or only for a limited period. People can create digital traces intentionally, such as when someone wants to leave unique farewell messages for loved ones, or unintentionally after they die. These traces can take on different forms, ranging from the continuation of social media profiles, digital music or photos and email addresses to digital manuals on how to plan the end of their digital social presence.

After all, from a financial view, we create wills to make our passing easier on those left behind, why should we not create a social media will to address our digital legacy? Each of us has the right to say how we would like to be remembered.

According to [Professor Jaco Beyers](#) of the [Faculty of Theology and Religion](#) at the University of Pretoria (UP), you don't have to be religious to have the desire to remain in the thoughts of those who are still alive.

"Just like tombstones or commemorative plates, digital traces are intended to continue our remembrance of the deceased," he explains. "Through technology, information is communicated to the family and friends of the deceased, and an emotional connection is established between the deceased and the living."

Websites like DeadSocial, Eter9, Eternine, Daden and LifeNaut are examples of the death tech industry, where there are several possibilities of creating a digital presence for the deceased.

"The most extreme example of the digital afterlife is to create a virtual self which, through artificial intelligence [AI], will be able to interact digitally even after someone has died," Prof Beyers says. "An AI-generated image of the deceased person can then be consulted online and can respond with pre-programmed phrases, creating the illusion of being alive."

Maintaining some sort of presence in the immanent world after death is not a new idea, he adds.

"Traditionally, people have left flowers or meaningful objects at significant places to commemorate the deceased," Prof Beyers explains. "The digital afterlife, however, is a new expression of remembrance and can be considered as an alternative way of dealing with bereavement. In this way, a digital afterlife may serve the same purpose as a tombstone."

The concept of a digital afterlife is rooted in multiple layers, starting with digital theology, which is part of the digital human sciences and the fourth industrial revolution. As technology has an impact on every aspect of our lives, it can also influence how we understand death.

"From a theological viewpoint, a digital afterlife reflects our fear of death and the desire for control; this demonstrates our focus on the physical world and sensory experience," Prof Beyers explains. "Creating digital traces of life after death might be an illusion of control, yet it also highlights the need for new rituals and psychological approaches to coping with loss."

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa. Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and

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