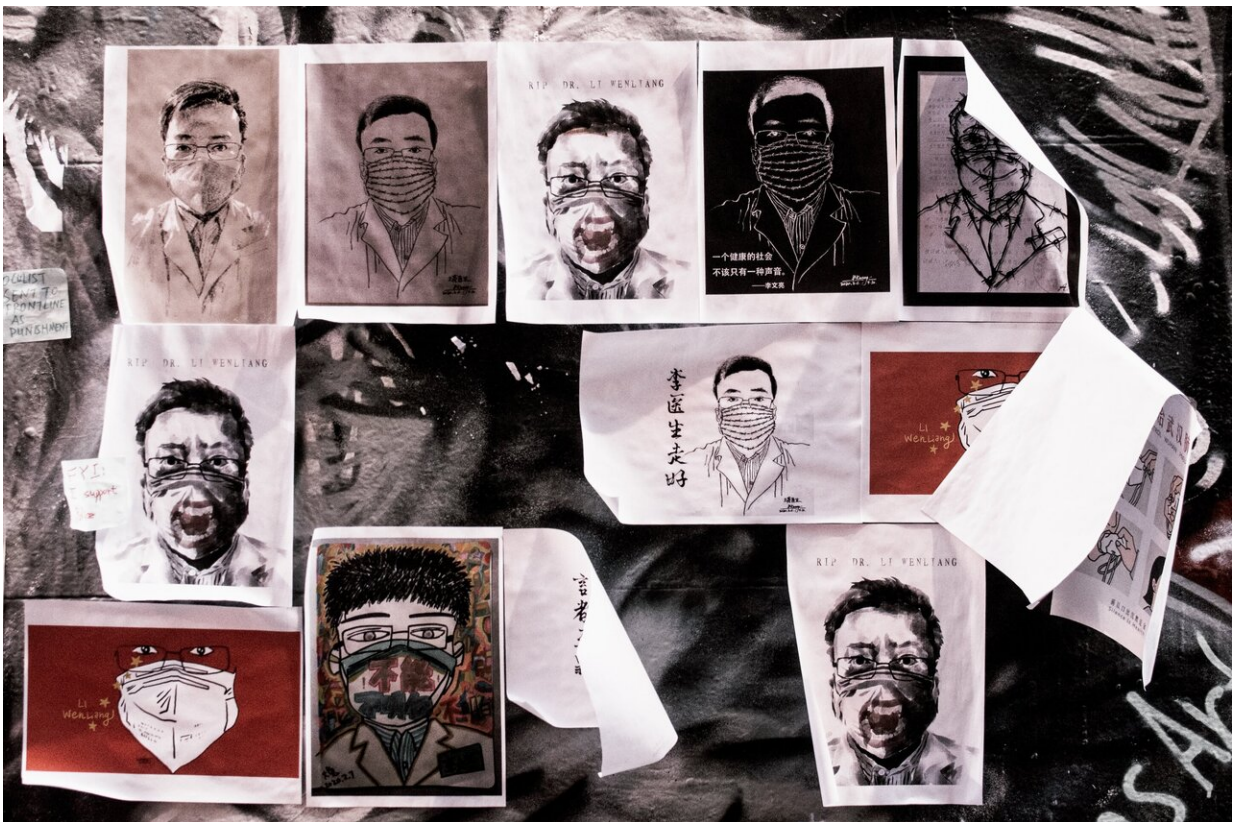


Researchers expose the limitations of digital technologies in commemorating COVID-19 victims

October 7 2020, by Carlos Sadovi



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As COVID-19 surpasses the milestone of more than 1 million deaths globally, many families continue to grapple with the brutal reality of

saying goodbye to dying loved ones over the phone or via an iPad. Two University of Illinois Chicago marketing professors investigated how service providers and families are using digital technologies to adapt to the disruptions in health care and death rituals the pandemic has created.

The paper, "'Don't give us death like this!' Commemorating Death in the Age of COVID-19," by Benét DeBerry-Spence, professor and head of the department of marketing, and Lez Trujillo Torres, assistant professor of marketing, both in the College of Business Administration, appeared recently in the *Journal of the Association of Consumer Research*.

Through an investigation of social and news media materials in nine countries, DeBerry-Spence and Trujillo Torres expand on previous research that looked at how commemoration is a means for consumers to honor and memorialize their loved ones after a traumatic event.

"For relatives of COVID victims, the pain is perhaps unlike any other. A loved one has died alone. If you are lucky, a health care professional has shared a video. Commemorating, then, becomes a key way to remember the dead," the authors write.

The authors highlight the important role that [health care](#) professionals take on when family members have limited access due to protocols that restrict physical contact with COVID-19 sufferers and the deceased. Digital technologies such as mobile phones, iPads and laptops may be the only means of sharing information with family members.

"Today, a variety of interactive social network sites allow consumers to honor the deceased through online memorialization," they write.

Bereaved consumers use [digital technologies](#) to personalize funerals, livestream burial services and memorialize loved ones. As a result, their findings show that digital technology is both a "subject of consumer death memories and a means of managing COVID-19 related

disruptions."

Yet, there are limits to how technology may be used to respond to the devastating consequences of the pandemic, the authors write. Digital technologies do not fully meet the needs of consumers when performing religious practices and rituals that involve directly interacting with and/or touching the deceased body. There are similar inadequacies when [family members](#) must deal with loss without the physical presence and comfort of family and friends.

"Surprisingly, despite the scale of the coronavirus pandemic, many feel COVID victims and bereaved have been made to feel invisible... [and] charting deaths daily is not the same as mourning and honoring the dead," the authors remark. Consequently, the pandemic has resulted in a rise in consumer digital activism. Examples of this are found in a variety of social media campaigns and memorial sites like www.COVIDmemorial.online and www.mourningamerica.org. The authors also find consumers use virtual mourning in video games, like Animal Crossing, to publicly commemorate COVID-19 victims through personalized altars, shrines and cemeteries.

DeBerry-Spence has more than 20 years as a global business expert and has led global commercialization efforts for Fortune 200 companies. She also works extensively with African entrepreneurs and microbusinesses. DeBerry-Spence's research, which explores everyday life, race, Africa and markets, is featured on marketsengaged.com.

Trujillo Torres' research focuses on how consumers and institutions value ideas, products, people and experiences in the marketplace. Her research revolves around consumption topics with broad societal and public policy implications, such as marketplace disparities, health markets and social responsibility.

More information: Benét DeBerry-Spence et al. "Don't give us death like this!" Commemorating Death in the Age of COVID-19, *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1086/711832](https://doi.org/10.1086/711832)

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