Fans, Media, and the Legacy of Liam Payne:

Exploring Participatory Cultures in Digital Mourning

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how digital fan communities engage in practices of mourning, memory-making, and media critique in response to the death of singer-songwriter Liam Payne. The study is situated within the broader framework of participatory culture, parasocial grieving, affect theory, and media framing, to answer the research question: how do fan communities, as participatory cultures, preserve the (digital) legacy of deceased celebrity Liam Payne, and how do their efforts interact with their perceptions and responses to media coverage? Using a qualitative research design combining online ethnography with thematic analysis, this study examines 500 Tweets and 30 TikToks posted between October 2024 and May 2025. These posts were collected through freshly made accounts to minimise the influence of the algorithm and ensure minimal filter bias. Through iterative coding in ATLAS.ti, four key themes emerged: grief and emotional expression, legacy and memory, media and narrative response, and fan community practices. The analysis explores both the cultural and emotional significance of these fan actions. Findings reveal that fans engage in diverse forms of digital mourning, including tribute art, coordinated hashtag campaigns, symbolic rituals, and affective storytelling. These acts serve as digital *lieux de mémoire* maintaining Liam's legacy through creative, emotional, and communal expressions (Nora, 1989, p. 7). This thesis also highlights the significance of parasocial relationships and how grief felt by fans mirrors traditional mourning processes, even when not publicly or socially acknowledged, illustrating the concept of disenfranchised grief (Harju, 2014, p. 124). Importantly, fan responses were not just expressions of emotion, but also active counter-narratives against dominant media portrayals. Using platforms such as X and TikTok, fans challenged media frames around Liam's death, particularly those that sensationalised or misrepresented his personal struggles. In doing so, they demonstrated Jenkins' notion of fans as active participants in shaping cultural narratives (Jenkins, 2018, pp. 13-14). Ultimately, this study sheds lights on how fan communities respond to loss in a mediatised and globally connected world. It reveals a broader transformation within the topics of memory and grief, where emotional expression, community belonging, and narrative control converge within participatory cultures.

KEYWORDS: *Participatory culture, Digital mourning, Parasocial grieving, Liam Payne*

Preface

Writing this thesis has been both an academic and emotional journey. Besides the fact that this is the last step of completing my studies, the topic has not been an easy one emotionally. Death is never a fun, light-hearted topic to write about and while I was not as emotionally invested in Liam Payne as the fans in my data set, it was still touching to see how many people cared about him and miss him without even knowing him personally. While writing, I enjoyed listened to his music and the realisation that there will never be new music from him touched me as well. The process of writing this thesis made me more aware of how fragile life is and to cherish the time we have on earth.

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Argyrios Emmanouloudis for his guidance and constructive feedback throughout this process. His feedback helped shape this thesis into what it has become. Then, I would also like to acknowledge the fans whose emotions, words, and tributes became the core of this study. Their stories, grief, and creativity provided a powerful lens for understanding the social and emotional depth of participatory cultures. Finally, I want to thank my friends for their encouragement and willingness to listen to my rants when motivation was running low.

Lastly, I want to dedicate this thesis to the memory of Liam Payne. His music and presence meant more to people than any Tweet or TikTok can ever capture. May this work be an example of how much a person can mean to those they may never meet.

Stephanie de Groot

Schiedam, June 2025

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1. Introduction

"You and me got a whole lot of history" – One Direction, History (2015).

This lyric fits perfectly in the profound connection between ex-member of One Direction Liam Payne, the One Direction / Liam Payne fandom, and their shared legacy, reflecting the core of the proposed thesis: exploring how participatory fan communities preserve (digital) legacies and respond to media narratives in the wake of a celebrity's passing. On October 16 2024, Liam Payne fell of a balcony resulting in his unfortunate death. While death is something inherently tragic, there is a deeply human and even beautiful aspect that comes with it: community. Liam's passing brought fans together in a renewed state of solidarity and collective grief. The topic of fan community through a celebrity's passing is especially interesting in this day and age where the fans who grew up with their idol have unlimited access to the internet and are therefore able to interact with the news of their idol's passing. Liam's passing serves as a good case study to illustrate this phenomenon with, due to the events being so recent and One Direction having announced their hiatus in 2015 before all members went solo, yet fans still held on to them as a group while simultaneously supporting the solo careers of the One Direction members.

Liam Payne was born three weeks before his due date on the 29th of August, 1993 in Wolverhampton, England as the son of Karen and Geoff Payne (One Direction, 2012). Liam Payne first stepped into the spotlight when he auditioned for *The X Factor* twice: first in 2008 and the second time in 2010, which ultimately led to the formation of One Direction ("Liam Payne Shows He Has the X Factor," 2010). Although they came in third place on the show, they continued to have hits all over the world becoming one of the biggest boybands of the world in a short time span, reshaping pop music and fan culture in the 2010's (Greene, 2012). Eventually, they had four studio albums that debuted at number one in both the US and the UK which made them the only group in 59-year history of the Billboard 200 albums chart to have their first four albums debut at number one (Caulfield, 2014). Liam's contribution to One Direction is significant in the fact that he co-wrote more than half of the songs on One Direction's third and fourth album, sharing the distinction of being the band's top earner together with Louis Tomlinson (Corner, 2014). After One Direction's hiatus announcement in 2015, Liam Payne started working on solo material and solo collaborations with other artists, and on 19 May 2017 he released his first solo single "Strip That Down" featuring Quavo (Weatherby, 2017). His solo work showed artistic evaluation and personal expression beyond

the band's identity and he released one album before his death. He was planning on releasing the second, but unfortunately his life was cut short before he had the opportunity to release his anticipated second album. Liam Payne had an 8-year-old son named Bear with his former girlfriend Cheryl who he met when she was a judge on *The X Factor* and he was dating Kate Cassidy at the time of his death (Aizin, 2024). He tragically died on 16 October 2024 after falling from a third-floor balcony at the CasaSur hotel in Buenos Aires, leaving his fandom in a state of grief that rapidly unfolded across social media platforms (Heching et al., 2024).

In the broader context for societal and academic relevance, this thesis highlights the social effects of celebrity deaths which gives the opportunity to gain insight into why and how people form emotional bonds with public figures (Bingaman, 2020; Cohen & Hoffner, 2016). This creates an understanding of parasocial grief and this can be of use when informing how society approaches public mourning and the well-being of fans. Furthermore, examining fan responses to media coverage promotes awareness of how narratives are shaped and consumed, fostering critical media literacy skills (Entman, 1993, p. 51). Additionally, the role of digital platforms in shaping mourning practices and collective action is highlighted. The thesis also contributes to the study of fandom dynamics, particularly how fans respond to loss within digital and fragmented fan communities. This is done through concepts such as parasocial interaction and digital memorialisation. On top of that, existing studies often focus on grief within local communities whereas this study focuses on globalised fan communities, providing insights into contemporary mourning practices and a new way of shaping a collective community. With all this being said, the research question is: how do fan communities, as participatory cultures, preserve the (digital) legacy of deceased celebrity Liam Payne, and how do their efforts interact with their perceptions and responses to media coverage?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Participatory Culture

Different theoretical approaches and previous empirical research can be used to answer the research question. First, participatory culture is a concept promoted by Henry Jenkins which focuses on how an audience engages with media (Jenkins, 2018, p. 18). This will be one of the main theories used for the thesis. Jenkins (2018) mainly focuses on how participatory culture is reshaping media audiences. In the book *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, Jenkins' chapter highlights that fans are no longer passive consumers but active participants in shaping media content and its meaning (Jenkins, 2018, pp. 13-14). Participatory culture allows fans to engage with media content through creating and sharing their perspectives which can reshape meanings (Jenkins, 2018, p. 18). The role of fans in using social media is to critique media narratives, according to Jenkins (2018, p. 18). This theory therefore aligns with the focus on how fan communities preserve (digital) legacies and engage with media representation of a deceased celebrity. Fans' participation in creating, sharing and engaging with content is an act of cultural negotiation and community building as well as preserving Liam's memory in online spaces.

Julia Jameson (2021) studied One Direction fans and why they are still an active community. Her article ""Story of my life": Why One Direction fans are still participating" (2021) is helpful for establishing why people are still a fan of Liam Payne as he used to be in One Direction. All five members went solo and reached the U.S. Top 40 during their 18-month hiatus that has now been going on for 9 years (Jameson, 2021, p. 2). Several actions of fan participation mentioned by Jameson are commenting on posts, coding websites, fan fiction, fan art, fan videos, update accounts, and fashion accounts (Jameson, 2021, p. 2). This online participation also goes further offline: offline friendships through the online community and meet-ups with fellow fans (Jameson, 2021, p. 3). The motivations for fan participation are interesting to explore. Fans see it as their job to promote music and even become "micro-celebrities" among the fandom by gaining a large following as a fan account and organising trending topics (Jameson, 2021, p. 3). Fan accounts and fan participation is mostly a way to express the love for their idol in a creative way and to make social contacts (Jameson, 2021, p. 3). It can even go as far as shipping their idol, in particularly "Larry", Louis Tomlinson and Harry Styles, which goes against the theory that fans wish to be in a romantic relationship with their idol (Jameson, 2021, p. 4). In fan fiction, however, these real

celebrities can also be viewed as characters based on their public persona instead of their true lives (Jameson, 2021, p. 4). Jameson found that the main motivations for fans to still participate in the One Direction fan community were nostalgia, the music quality, helping them through difficult times, fun, and One Direction being part of their lives (Jameson, 2021, p. 9). Similar motivations can be expected from Liam Payne's fans as One Direction is part of his career. Jameson also explored the reasons for supporting the solo careers of the members and found that fans felt real-life connections through concerts by being in the same room with their idol, they supported them because they became a One Direction fan after the boyband broke up, they still care deeply about the individual members, they use the support and concerts to stay connected with other (previous) One Direction fans, they get to know more about the individual members, or they make up for the lack of One Direction music (Jameson, 2021, pp. 10-11). All in all, it seems to be nostalgia and connection that make up for the main motivations of fans still participating in the One Direction fan community.

2.2 Affect and Emotion

Fan actions are often driven by affective investments in a celebrity. These emotional connections are central to understanding how and why fans engage in practices of digital mourning and legacy preservation. Sara Ahmed's (2014) theory on affect and emotion can help explore how emotions motivate fans to preserve a celebrity's legacy and explain why fans respond the way they do, as it moves beyond individual psychology and situates emotion as a social and political force. In her dialogue with Sigrid Schmitz, she emphasises the relational and socially mediated nature of affect and emotion (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, p. 97). Traditionally, affect is seen as bodily and non-intentional while emotion is associated with subjectivity and cognition (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, pp. 97-98). However, Ahmed states that emotions are not simply internal feelings but that those are shaped by histories, values and power dynamics (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, pp. 97-98). The most important emotions to highlight in the case of Liam Payne are admiration and grief, and through Ahmed's theory it can be explained how these emotions are a result of cultural practices shaping collective histories. This means that how we feel, and what we feel towards certain figures, is socially conditioned. Ahmed also uses the term 'stickiness' to describe how emotions can be associated with certain objects or figures (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, p. 103). Emotions 'stick' to objects, symbols, and individuals over time, creating a meaning through repeated associations and histories of contact. For example, a fan started listening to Liam Payne from the beginning of his career, creating an emotional attachment associated with Liam Payne that

'sticks'. Emotions can also be attached to lyrics in his music that resonate with the fans' personal experiences, or shared fan experiences such as concerts. These affective investments become sources where memory and identity are forged and sustained. When fans reference Liam's role in One Direction or his lyrics, they are not just recalling facts but also reactivating emotional relationships that have been built over time. This explains how fans emotionally invest in Liam Payne's legacy in attaching meaning to his music and image through their participation.

Moreover, Ahmed's theory helps explain the collective dimension of grief in online spaces. Emotions circulate within and between bodies, and on social media, they do so through hashtags, comments, shared videos, and symbols. The emotional atmosphere of a fan community grieving Liam Payne is therefore not a sum of individual sadness, but a relational, affective space that produces and reinforces communal ties. Grief, in this framework, is not just an individual response to loss, it is also a shared cultural practise that confirms belonging and shared history. Thus, applying Ahmed's theory allows us to see digital morning not merely as emotional expression, but as a form of cultural labour. Fans do not just feel grief, they perform it, reproduce it, and circulate it through acts of remembrance that reinforce their own identities and the continued symbolic presence of Liam Payne. This makes affect theory not just a descriptive tool, but an explanatory framework that shows how emotion underlies the broader logics of participatory culture, parasocial relationships, and collective memory in the digital age.

2.3 Parasocial Grieving

The passing of a celebrity often transforms digital spaces into a place of remembrance, where fan communities can collectively grief the celebrity they are emotionally invested in. Examples are Kobe Bryant and Robin Williams (Bingaman, 2020; Cohen & Hoffner, 2016). Therefore mediatised parasocial grieving in online communities is an element that the thesis will draw upon. The mediatisation of death serves as a framework for analysing how digital platforms support mourning practices. It situates grief as a socially and technologically mediated process, where media affordances such as hashtags, fan art, video montages, and online memorials enable the global community to grief, collaborate, and commemorate (Akhter & Tetteh, 2021, pp. 127-128). Social media platforms facilitate new rituals of grief, allowing geographically spread mourners to engage in effective alignment. Fans can now mourn as a collective in online communities with like-minded people so they can connect

with others, share memories, and reconstruct the deceased's cultural significance within a global context (Akhter & Tetteh, 2021, p. 128). This process illustrates how social media dynamics transform grieving into a participatory act, marked by emotional sharing and the preservation of a celebrity's legacy. The concept of parasocial relationships further highlights the emotional intensity that is the motivation of fan responses to celebrity deaths (Akhter & Tetteh, 2021, p. 130). These one sided relationships, allow fans to form deep emotional attachment to media figures despite the absence of direct, reciprocal interaction. When a celebrity dies, fans often experience a parasocial breakup, which involves profound emotional distress that is similar to losing a personal acquaintance (Akhter & Tetteh, 2021, p. 130). Social media platforms amplify these experiences, offering fans a space to express their grief and maintain symbolic connections with the deceased (Akhter & Tetteh, 2021, p. 130). Parasocial grieving involves various emotional expressions such as sadness, anger, longing, love, and even confusion, which reflects the complexity of these relationships (Akhter & Tetteh, 2021, p. 130). Fans express these feelings online through social media platforms where they can share their fan art, videos and hashtags which also serves as a reinterpretation or a challenge of media portrayals, offering alternative perspectives that align with their emotional investments.

James Bingaman explored the emotional and mental responses of grief posted on Reddit after NBA player Kobe Bryant passed away (Bingaman, 2020, p. 364). This can give an idea of how Liam's fans could have responded to grief. Social media platforms act as a space for fans to grieve the loss of celebrities and accept death (Bingaman, 2020, p. 366). This is the case for both Kobe Bryant and Liam Payne, where fans have responded en masse on social media to the news that their idol passed away. Bingaman mentions that part of parasocial relationships is to have interpersonal involvement which includes guidance seeking, friendship, and the desire to meet their idol (Bingaman, 2020, p. 367). This adds to the previously mentioned one-sided relationship. While the relationship with the idol is one-sided, fans can find support within the fan community who share a similar bond with the idol. When the idol passes, this can be seen as a parasocial breakup. Parasocial breakups occur when the media figure is no longer available to the spectator (Bingaman, 2020, p. 368). Losing the celebrity can result in negative feelings that are similar to those found in personal relationships (Bingaman, 2020, p. 368). This means that the feelings are real, even though the relationship is one-sided. Bingaman found that the most frequently occurring emotional response was sadness and the most frequent mental response was shock (Bingaman, 2020, p.

373). Taken into account that both Kobe Bryant and Liam Payne died unexpectedly and have a large fanbase, it could be expected that fans responded similarly to Liam's death.

Next, Elizabeth Cohen and Cynthia Hoffner add that parasocial grief on social media platforms can also help spread awareness on (mental) health (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016, p. 643). They researched the death of Robin Williams by suicide and how social media platforms have played a role in the parasocial grieving process. While Liam's death was accidental, his mental health issues were not ignored as he had struggled with alcoholism and drug addiction in the past and he was under influence during his death (Land, 2024). Even though (mental) health awareness is not the main focus of this thesis, there might be fans who will touch upon the subject as it was part of Liam's history and connections were found with his death since he was under influence. Celebrities can become associated with health issues because they have made it one of their causes or because they have been personally affected by it (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016, p. 644). With Robin Williams' passing, both traditional media and fans on social media were sources of information about his struggles and suicide prevention among his other struggles (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016, p. 644). This shows that social media can be a powerful tool for spreading awareness and information after a celebrity's passing.

2.5 Mediatised Death and Collective Memory

With digital media being prominent in our lives, news about celebrities and fan participation has been able to spread at a rapid pace. Social media platforms have also become spaces for fans to collectively mourn their idol. Margaret Gibson states that mobile phones make it easier to take photos or videos of catastrophic events (Gibson, 2007, p. 416). This is also the case for Liam Payne since there is footage of him moments before his death and even of him lying on the ground after his fatal fall of the balcony. There is also an archive of virtual cemeteries, memorials, grief chat rooms, grief blogs, and condolence messages online (Gibson, 2007, p. 416). Death is even used to entertain in fiction storylines, but some might even follow the news of a passed celebrity for the sake of entertainment (Gibson, 2007, p. 416). The morality of this leaves room for questioning, but that is not the aim of this thesis. Modernity removed death from the public and instead brought death to the digital spaces (Harju, 2014, p. 124). This digital mourning can take form as Facebook memorialisation pages, but this does mean that the platform itself affects the characteristics of the memorial page and how it is facilitated (Harju, 2014, pp. 123-124). These platforms build upon social

interaction and sharing of affect by offering a space where people can share their experiences of death, dying and memorising, and even speculation (Harju, 2014, p. 124).

With the case of Liam Payne, speculation is definitely a prominent aspect. the story of his death as told by the media is that he fell from a third-floor hotel balcony in Buenos Aires (Cholakian Herrera et al., 2025). There were speculations that it was not an accident and that Liam Payne had been given drugs and this resulted in two people facing charges for this (Cholakian Herrera et al., 2025). This has not been proven yet, so it can still be considered speculation. Other speculations went even further and mention the involvement of Beyoncé. Liam's death was around the same time as the P. Diddy drama of which people accuse Beyoncé of being involved as well. P. Diddy is accused of human trafficking among other things. The speculation goes as follows: Liam Payne was reported to have warned others to ignore Beyoncé and expressed his aversion against P. Diddy (Anna, 2024). There are quite some people who believe that P. Diddy, Beyoncé and her husband Jay-Z are so powerful in the music industry that they are able to end other celebrities' careers (Anna, 2024). Because of that, they think that Liam Payne might have been indirectly murdered since he expressed disliking the trio. These are merely speculations and not confirmed by any trustworthy media outlet, therefore this conspiracy will not be focused on too much. However, speculating is also a form of fan participation and can even be used as a coping mechanism to process Liam's death.

While speculation may be dismissed as mere gossip, in the digital mourning context it serves as an important social function. Mihai Rusu argues that the saying *de mortuis nihil nisi bonum*, ''Of the dead, nothing unless good'', is often bypassed when a celebrity dies as opposed to a non-famous person, especially in media spaces where reputations are shaped by both mourning and judgment (Rusu, 2020, p. 570). Celebrities are frequently subject to posthumous gossip and moral reassessment after they died since their public status invites public scrutiny even when they die (Rusu, 2020, p. 574). Speculation regarding the circumstances of Liam Payne's death, including the Beyoncé conspiracy, can thus be understood as not just a rumour, but as part of a broader process of narrative control and reputational defence (Rusu, 2020, p. 574). Rusu mentions that postmortem gossip may emerge in moments of collective ambiguity, particularly when official narratives fail to satisfy the emotional needs or moral expectations of the public (Rusu, 2020, p. 577). From this perspective, fan speculation becomes a coping mechanism through which fan communities

navigate grief, uncertainty, and collective meaning-making in speculation, asserting their emotional truths in response to both media portrayals and gaps in information.

Fans use social media to collectively grief through fan accounts and other fan forums (Harju, 2014, p. 124). These dedicated online spaces allow fans to express their grief in ways that fall outside the normative realms of acceptable grief or extended public mourning called disenfranchised grief (Harju, 2014, p. 124). Just like social media acting as a space where fans can feel a sense of belonging for idolising their idol, it can be a space with a sense of belonging to share grief. Disenfranchised grief goes hand in hand with "rules" for grieving: how much is acceptable and when is it an excessive amount of mourning (Harju, 2014, p. 125). Outsiders often do not see the level of intimacy and degree of importance of the relationship the fan has with their idol, leading to a lack of empathy towards their grief (Harju, 2014, p. 125). There are three reasons for disenfranchised grief: not recognising the griever, not recognising the relationship between the griever and the deceased one, and not recognising the loss (Harju, 2014, p. 128). Outsiders do not consider the griever as a fan and do not see the feelings of closeness between the griever and their idol regarding their parasocial relationship. Liam Payne's death was covered greatly in the media, acknowledging the loss and thus presenting it as enfranchised grief, but over time the grief becomes disenfranchised since media coverage occurs less and less, but the fans keep grieving (Harju, 2014, p. 129). Memorials help fans to keep grieving with each other and preserve the legacy of the deceased celebrity. Because of online memorials, grief has become an acceptable public emotion and part of our shareable online lives (Harju, 2014, p. 130). The mediatisation of death has brought death into our everyday lives: in the news, in fiction, in video games and on social media (Harju, 2014, p. 131). Through online memorials death also stays in our lives. However, through the active process of remembering, a collective of fans share an understanding of the past (Harju, 2014, p. 132).

Pierre Nora (1989) introduced the concept of *lieux de mémoire*, offering a framework to analyse how digital spaces serve as a place to remember. Nora defines *lieux de mémoire* as symbolic sites where memory is crystallised and secreted, occurring since lived memory is no longer transmitted naturally (Nora, 1989, p. 7). For Liam's case, this means that hashtags such as #RIPLiamPayne and tribute accounts serve the function of digital *lieux de mémoire*. These are spaces intentionally created and maintained by fans to preserve his memory against the fast-paced media cycle. Unlike *milieux de mémoire,* which refers to the naturally transmitted memory, *lieux de mémoire* requires an active effort. As Nora states: "without commemorative

vigilance, history would soon sweep them away" (Nora, 1989, p. 12). Fans curate the digital memory sites by archiving posts, revisiting memories, and narrating shared histories of the fandom. These actions embody a collective memory to preserve the celebrity's legacy. This reinforces a sense of continuity and a sense of belonging in a digital environment. Moreover, Nora argues that modern memory is increasingly archival and shaped by its dependence on trace and documentation rather than lived experience (Nora, 1989, p. 13). Nowadays, in the age of social media, memory is stored through likes, retweets, sharing, highlights, stories, and saved posts, which creates a constantly expanding archive of affective moments. With this approach, fans not only remember Liam Payne, but they also involve themselves into the story of his legacy.

2.6 Framing Theory

Furthermore, framing theory by Robert Entman will add insights on how media can also be used to frame a certain narrative. The way media frames certain news influences the way how fans respond to the news such as Liam's death. Entman states that the concept of framing consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text (Entman, 1993, p. 51). The media holds a lot of power in being a messenger thus it is important for them to be mindful about how they bring the message. An example of this is mass media slowly covering news about mass killings and genocide while the events are taking place in third world, postcolonial countries in real time (Gibson, 2007, p. 416). Another key concept of this theory is fans responding to the frames based on their own perspectives and values. Framing theory can therefore help answer the research question by helping to analyse how media narratives about a deceased celebrity influence fans' responses and how fans actively critique or reshape these narratives.

2.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the combination of participatory culture, online communities, affect and emotion, parasocial grieving, mediatised death and collective memory, and framing theory provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding how fan communities preserve Liam Payne's digital legacy and respond to media narratives. Each theoretical perspective offers a lens to examine fan behaviour in the context of a celebrity death: from the emotional motivations behind fan participation to collective memory. These frameworks collectively highlight the processes through which fans engage in mourning, meaning-making, and memorialisation in online spaces. They also explore the social and cultural significance of

digital grief with a focus on how fans cope with loss as a way of building a community and preserve a legacy. Together, these concepts provide a necessary theoretical foundation to investigate the research question and understand the evolution of public mourning in the digital age.

3. Research Design and Methods

To explore how fan communities, as participatory cultures, preserve Liam Payne's (digital) legacy and engage with media narratives, a qualitative research design will be adopted. Qualitative research is a way of exploring and understanding social phenomena in depth, focusing on the complexity and the context of participants' experience (Leavy, 2020, p. 2). This approach is fit for unpacking the meanings fans ascribe to Liam Payne's passing and their efforts to preserve his legacy, providing a rich understanding of their emotional and cultural dynamics. In order to achieve this, qualitative researchers use a range of tools for data collection (Leavy, 2020, p. 5).

3.1 Data Analysis Method: Thematic Analysis

The data analysis method will be thematic analysis, which will be used to analyse fan-created content such as social media posts, videos, fanfiction and fan-art. Thematic analysis draws on the qualitative content analysis as outlined by Margrit Schreier, qualitative content analysis is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data (Schreier, 2014, p. 170). This is done by coding and assigning categories of a coding frame to the data (Schreier, 2014, p. 170). An important aspect of qualitative content analysis is the ability to reduce data while focusing on selected aspects of meaning that relate to the research question (Schreier, 2014, p. 170). Besides this, this type of research method is highly systematic by relating the coding frame to the research question (Schreier, 2014, p. 171). It allows the identification of patterns and themes in fans' participation and responses to media coverage as well as helping to uncover underlying emotions such as nostalgia and grief, values, and narratives shared by fans. Thematic analysis complements online ethnography, as observation and document analysis often intersect in qualitative research (Hewson, 2020, p. 650). Johnny Saldaña supports a process for thematic coding lead by pattern detection and analytic memo-writing to guide the construction of meaning (Saldaña, 2020, pp. 882-883). He outlines strategies such as process coding and values coding to help researchers understand both actions and motivations within the data (Saldaña, 2020, p. 883). These strategies may be especially useful in identifying how fans express grief or critique media through affective digital practices.

Thematic analysis is particularly useful for this study because this research method offers flexibility in interpreting nuanced emotional data while maintaining methodological accuracy. As Nowell et al. note, this method allows researchers to identify both explicit themes as well

as more hidden ones, making it ideal for studying emotionally layered content such as grief, memorialisation, and fan resistance (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). Its accessibility also makes it appropriate for analysing short-form, user-generated texts such as Tweets and TikToks. Moreover, Nowell et al. emphasise that thematic analysis is especially effective for capturing shared meaning patterns across participant experiences, which is crucial for studying digital mourning communities (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2).

3.2 Data Collection and Online Ethnography

Data will be collected through online ethnography, which involves immersive observation of fan communities on social media platforms such as X and TikTok. Ethnography traditionally involves participant observation within a community (Harrison, 2020, p. 330). Online ethnography acknowledges that online spaces like fan forums, hashtags, and comment sections are vibrant cultural fields. This means that I will observe participants within the fan community of Liam Payne through social media platforms, providing insights into the behaviours, practises, and interactions of the fans. It will show how fans preserve Liam Payne's legacy and how they respond to media coverage of his passing. Through this form of participant observation, I can gain insights of both an insider's (participant) and an outsider's (observer) perspective aiming to grasp people's understandings of their world (Harrison, 2020, p. 344). This type of ethnography is also known as netnography (Kozinets et al., 2014, p. 262). Netnography emphasises the role of the researcher as an instrument and the immersion of the researcher in the online context (Kozinets et al., 2014, p. 263). Data through a netnographic approach is collected through the researcher's observation of and participation with people who socialise in an online environment (Kozinets et al., 2014, p. 263). An advantage of this approach is that data is easily accessible, however, it is simultaneously an overload of data which can be overwhelming. Online ethnography, or netnography, is appropriate for this project because this method allows the researcher to observe naturally occurring cultural practices in digital spaces.

I will collect posts related to Liam Payne's passing or legacy after which I will code them in ATLAS.ti for categorisation of the data into themes such as grief and fan participation. To code is to assign a symbolic meaning to each datum for purposes of qualitative analysis (Saldaña, 2020, p. 882). Based on the categories and theoretical framework I can make connections between those. Some social media platforms also incorporate multimedia exchanges, such as the sharing of photographs and music, and this opens possibilities for

expanding observational research beyond the purely linguistic (Hewson, 2020, p. 651). Platforms X and TikTok offer such multimedia posts, hence why I will focus on those two platforms. These platforms are particularly relevant due to their contrasting formats: X offers mainly fast-paced textual content, while TikTok focuses mainly on audio-visual content with text as a supporting element. However, due to the limits of this research, the main focus will be on textual elements. Hashtags such as #LiamPayne will be searched on said platforms to analyse the interaction, language, themes and sentient of posts and comments. Within fan communities samples will look like dedication posts, responses to Liam Payne's death, fan-art and interactions with other fans on the topic through comments. The context of the participants will also be considered since their interaction and responses can be impacted by historical, local, political, economic, and religious factors (Harrison, 2020, p. 337). In many cases online observation will be publicly available, thus direct recruitment of participants is often not required (Hewson, 2020, p. 656). This ethnographic approach involves lurking where passive observation without engagement is key, which raises ethical considerations which will be covered further in this chapter. A (digital) field journal will be kept to record observations, researcher reflections, and contextual notes, and these notes will be incorporated in the results and conclusion sections of this thesis. This will support transparency and awareness of my positionality as a researcher.

To maintain a manageable and focused dataset, I will collect 500 tweets and 30 TikTok videos to have a rich dataset to do my analysis on. This offers a wide range of fan perspective and responses using multiple platforms. The chosen samples will be picked based on popularity and engagement with relevant hashtags such as #LiamPayne. Sampling of data sources from online interaction and communication spaces for observation is often simply a case of using tools that allow a search for topic relevant sources (Hewson, 2020, p. 656). Since Liam Payne passed away in October 2024, posts will be selected from around that time up until now since there is still news coming out about his death leaving room for more nuanced fan responses. By selecting posts from this timeframe, it will also provide insights in the longer-term impact Liam's death has on fans. (Social) media posts and fan-created content will be coded for recurring themes, such as emotional expressions and challenges to media narratives.

3.3 Operationalisation of Key Concepts

The key concepts for this study are participatory culture, media framing, collective memory, and media responses. Participatory culture is measured through fan activities such as content creation and engaging with hashtags. If a fan dedicates a lot of posts to Liam or they interact with other fans, this means that they are considered a part of the participatory culture around Liam Payne. This includes the use of creative practices such as fan edits, remixes of Liam's performances, and collaborative mourning rituals like trending tribute hashtags. Interactivity, production, and circulation are the main indicators of participation.

Furthermore, fans' narratives about Liam's cultural significance, shared memories, and emotional reflections on his life and work will add to the concept of collective memory. Collective memory will be identified by posts referencing past milestones in Liam's career, shared fan experiences such as attending concerts, and quotes or media references from earlier stages of his life. These signify how memory is constructed within the community.

Media framing will be operationalised by analysing media content for narrative frames, tone and the inclusion or exclusion of specific themes such as Liam's personal struggles. Responses to this media will be identified by fans leaving comments or raising discussions that challenge or support media representations of Liam Payne. For instance, if a media outlet emphasises Liam's substance abuse history while fans highlight his artistic growth or charitable actions, this dynamic illustrates how framing is received and resisted. Fan responses will be categorised according to whether they accept, reject, or reframe the dominant narrative. This fits with Simons' notion that the richness of detail and contextual interpretation in qualitative case studies allows researchers to represent experiences in ethically sensitive, co-constructed ways (Simons, 2020, p. 683).

3.4 Justification for Methodology

A qualitative research approach is best suited for this thesis not only due to the emotional symbolic nature of fans grieving, but also because of its capacity to uncover layered meanings in digitally mediated interactions. While a quantitative research approach might provide statistical insights into fan behaviours, these methods are limited and would not be able to capture any nuance of parasocial grief, media critique and mediatised death. This nuance is necessary due to the emotional symbolic nature mentioned prior. Qualitative methods do allow for a contextual, interpretive understanding of how fans cope with the loss of Liam

Payne, fan identity, and digital legacy across social media platforms, a thematic analysis of online ethnographic data in particular.

Helen Simons emphasises that qualitative case study research is particularly well-suited to exploring complex cultural phenomena within real-life contexts, especially when the research seeks to represent multiple perspectives and understand meaning-making processes (Simons, 2020, pp. 680-681). Therefore, this thesis focuses on Liam Payne to serve as a case study. Case study research offers a way to uncover the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution or system in a 'real-life' context (Simons, 2020, p. 681). In the context of fans grieving a celebrity, this exposure is crucial for interpreting not only what is said or created, but how and why it is shared by participants.

Choosing a qualitative lens allows this thesis to remain aware to the affective and symbolic meanings behind online fan activity, elements that would not be addressed in a quantitative framework. This approach aligns with existing research into digital mourning, fan communities, and cultural memory work, where nuance, affect, and cultural context are central.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethics are typically referred to issues such as preventing harm to the people involved in the study and avoiding exploitation of research participants in combination with consent, disclosure of the nature of the study, purpose of the findings and confidentiality (Leavy, 2020, p. 6). In online qualitative research, privacy has been a particular issue regarding online data (Traianou, 2020, p. 90). Therefore, it is important to ensure that data from social media posts are anonymised. I will avoid quoting identifiable user handles and paraphrase where necessary to protect user anonymity. Although a web user is responsible for the consequences of publicly posting information on the Internet (either with an original name or a pseudonym), re-publication or citation in an academic publication may have unexpected consequences for the individual and/or the community (Kozinets, 2014, p. 268). If there is a situation where direct interaction with fans would occur, I will have to obtain consent and fully inform them what data will be used and its purpose. However, I will mostly use data that is publicly available and exclude private or sensitive information of the creators. People in public online environments often act as if these were private (Traianou, 2020, p. 90). Thus, it needs to be assured that the data that is open for legitimate use should be openly accessible to anyone, meaning no use of data that is behind a paywall or on a private account. Since social media

blend the public and private into a novel hybrid form, netnography demands new thinking and methodological innovation on issues of risk and privacy (Kozinets, 2014, p. 268). Given that this is a sensitive topic, I will also acknowledge this emotional significance and approach the data with respect by minding my wording. Special care will be taken when dealing with emotionally vulnerable posts that may involve discussions of mental health, addiction, or trauma. Finally, to ensure data integrity, all collected posts will be archived and securely stored. Coding decisions and theme developments will be documented systematically in ATLAS.ti.

3.6 Researcher Positionality

As a researcher who used to be somewhat culturally involved with the One Direction fandom, it is important to reflect on how my positionality could influence the research process. Acknowledging the insider-outsider dynamic is essential in ensuring ethical sensitivity and analytical rigor. While my background may provide cultural insight and empathy, I must remain critically aware of how personal biases may shape the interpretation of the collected data. I will practice ethical reflexivity, remaining aware of my own position as a researcher, biases, and emotional responses to the material, particularly given the sensitive subject matter of death and grief.

Finally, emotional labour will be acknowledged as a potential risk during the research process. I will set boundaries on screen time by not working past 20:00, avoid emotionally intensive data collection sessions without breaks, and reflect regularly to process my emotional engagement with the material.

3.7 Possible Challenges

Although this study aims for depth and reflexivity, several possible challenges must be acknowledged. The use of public social media posts could restrict the ability to explore more private or semi-private fan spaces, where more intimate or emotionally intense mourning practices may take place. The exclusion of these private spaces could skew the findings toward more performative or socially acceptable expressions of grief since people could be more aware of their posts being so public.

Another limitation is platform bias. X and TikTok each promote particular content through their algorithms, often favouring popular, viral, or algorithm-friendly material. As such, the

dataset may disproportionately represent louder or more visible voices in the fandom, potentially overlooking more marginal or dissenting narratives.

Finally, as a qualitative project, findings from this study will not be generalizable to all fans or to other celebrity death contexts. The aim, instead, is to offer a rich, interpretive understanding of how grief, memory, and participation converge in a particular moment of digital fan culture in the case of Liam Payne.

3.8 The Data Collection Process in Practice

First, I created a new X account to start with a clean algorithm. For this I even created a new email address so my personal email would not influence the algorithm either. I turned on only necessary cookies. Algorithms are designed to generate increased traffic and interactions and are thus designed to show what the user likes based on the posts they interact with (Harner et al., 2022, p. 119). Eventually this creates a filter bubble in which content is filtered by what gains traction from the user (Harner et al., 2022, p. 119). Therefore it was important that I could start collecting data with an account that was not already engaged in a filter bubble. Simultaneously, the algorithm could have possibly influenced the collected data while I collected data as this was done over the course of multiple days and by refreshing X. This is an important detail I wanted to mention since it is something I do not fully control, yet I did take precautions to limit the filter bubble as much as I could.

X requires you to follow at least one account before you can get started so I chose to follow X's account to reduce bias in the algorithm as it is a neutral topic. When I could finally start searching, I started following Liam Payne's account that is still up and unfollowed X. This way, I could steer the algorithm towards Liam Payne. I started searching on "Liam Payne" in the search bar. X has the function to filter on top posts so I used that to find Tweets for my data collection. I started scrolling from top to bottom. There were also posts in other languages besides English, but since I can only understand Dutch and English, I focused on English posts as it is an international language and Liam's mother tongue. Interesting to note is that there were also a lot of posts that were throwbacks from Liam's Instagram. I did not use too much from those as I am interested in fan participation and their feelings. With advanced search I was able to further filter by date. I started searching for posts from 16 October 2024 up until the date of collection (April-May 2025) to collect posts from when he passed away while taking time zones into account up until now.

Originally, I would search for fan accounts, however, it turns out that it is quite hard to determine which fan accounts to include. I found the top posts filter a better method since it already filters on popularity and an algorithm. A downside is that top posts are not only written by fans, but also news outlets and even haters or people who dislike Liam.

As for TikToks, I looked for Liam Payne in the search bar on a brand new account and looked at the top posts for similar reasons as on X. My focus is on textual aspects so I chose top posts which included text. However, due to the larger volume of Tweets, I mainly chose to use those as examples with TikToks being an additional feature.

3.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research design presents a nuanced and ethically grounded qualitative approach to examining how fan communities respond to and preserve the digital legacy of Liam Payne following his passing. By using thematic analysis and online ethnography, this thesis aims to uncover the emotional, symbolic, and cultural meanings embedded within fan practices on platforms such as X and TikTok. Focusing on key concepts like participatory culture, collective memory, and media framing, the research seeks to explore how grief and remembrance are expressed, contested, and co-created in digital spaces. While the scope is necessarily limited by platform-specific constraints and the public nature of online data, the chosen methods allow for an in-depth exploration of how fans engage with loss, legacy, and identity through creative and affective practices. Reflecting on the data collection process itself also provides methodological insights. Creating new accounts was essential to start with a clean algorithm. Precautions were taken to minimise the influence of the algorithm such as only following Liam's X account and using the top posts search function of both platforms. Ultimately, this thesis highlights the significance of fan participation in shaping cultural narratives and preserving memory in an increasingly mediatised and participatory digital landscape.

4. Results

Ultimately, there were four main themes discovered: grief and emotional expression, legacy and memory, media and narrative response, and fan community practices. Each theme is also categorised in sub-themes. The code overview is shown in figure 1 and a coding tree is added in figure 2. I also kept track of the month and year the posts were from to see if the amount of posts per month were similar. October and November have the biggest amounts with 120 and 112 posts which can be explained by Liam passing away mid-October. December, January and February all are about 62, but then there is a peak of 70 in March again. I am not quite sure what the reason for this could be, but I do have suspicions that this could have to do with me starting to collect data mid-April and the algorithm pushing more recent posts rather than posts from 2024. Finally, I also tracked whether the usernames were related to Liam Payne or One Direction as this indicates the user being a fan, but I did not find the results relevant to this study.

The rest of this section will expand upon the results per theme and sub-themes. This will be done so by embedding them within the theoretical framework discussed earlier. Each theme and sub-theme will be revisited and analysed through the lens of participatory culture, affect theory, parasocial grieving, collective memory, and media framing as touched upon prior. By drawing connections between the empirical data and the theoretical concepts, this section seeks to deepen the interpretive value of the findings and offer insights into the research question: how do fan communities, as participatory cultures, preserve the (digital) legacy of deceased celebrity Liam Payne, and how do their efforts interact with their perceptions and responses to media coverage?

4.1 Grief and Emotional Expression

Grief and emotional expression was coded a total of 519 times. This theme was split in three sub-themes: grief and sadness, shock, anger or denial, and spiritual signs. Grief and emotional expression align strongly with the concept of parasocial grieving and affect. The expressions of grief observed were not only personal, but collectively resonant, facilitated by digital affordances such as hashtags, reposting, multimedia tributes, and algorithmically curated visibility. In line with Ahmed's theory of affect, these emotional responses showed how grief becomes 'sticky', attaching to certain symbols, lyrics, and even dates (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, p. 103).

Grief and sadness was coded 227 times and Tweets and TikToks in this category all signified some kind of grieving feelings, heartbreak, sadness, or sympathy towards grieving loved ones of Liam Payne. Expressions that signified these emotions are: "I'm not ok rn" (@v3nus444, 2024, Tweet 201), "I have cried everyday for a straight month almost" (@Louloukeets1, 2024, Tweet 206), or "My heart is broken" (@rudbergflorals, 2024, TikTok 19). These emotional expressions reflect the affective intensity of one-sided relationships that feel so real for the fans. According to Akhter and Tetteh (2021, p. 130), these parasocial relationships go hand in hand with intense emotional reactions and symbolic attachment. The fans' grief which is publicly available, carries personal weight for them and reflects real psychological processes as if a close relative passed away. This aligns with Bingaman's findings that parasocial grief mirrors traditional grief responses, especially when the death is unexpected or traumatic (Bingaman, 2020, p. 368).

Shock, anger or denial was coded 100 times and is tied to expressions such as explicitly saying "Liam's death shocked me" (@LouisTommo1D28, 2024, Tweet 44) or "I still can't believe this is real" (@paynecxkes, 2024, Tweet 107). The intensity of these feelings can be similarly explained as the feelings of grief as described prior. However, an additional shock factor can be the unexpectedness of his death or Liam's age as he was only 31 years old. The circumstances surrounding his death can also play a role, as will be explained further in this study. As expected, the loss of Liam resulted in negative feelings that are similar to those found in personal relationships (Bingaman, 2020, p. 368). This data set also confirms that frequent emotional responses are sadness and shock (Bingaman, 2020, p. 373).

Anger was expressed when the user was angry at the situation: "This is all BS" (@HarryMeAndLouis, 2024, Tweet 218). In this particular Tweet, the user describes inconsistencies regarding the news that is brought to the public about Liam's passing. Another Tweet explicitly mentions wanting "to scream out my anger from my gut that we have to live the rest of our lives without him" and calling the situation "unfair" (@boyfriendspark, 2024, Tweet 304). One Tweet expresses anger towards people who were photographing, posting and even livestreaming Liam's loved ones at his funeral, it is unclear if this was aimed at fans or journalists: "its already highly disturbing and disgusting that liam payne's loved ones are being photographed & plastered all over social media at his funeral but i just found out that there is literally a livestream of the funeral on youtube, I don't know what the fuck is wrong with people" (@LISAE0K, 2024, Tweet 226). Anger towards others is also expressed regarding whether they mean their grief: "Liam Payne, he got hate for literally everything that

he did, even for breathing. And now that he is gone everyone is sad, freaking hypocrites!!!" (@paynoismyworld, 2024, Tweet 113).

Spiritual signs refer to symbols used in Tweets and TikToks. In total, this was coded 192 times. The most interesting one is the 'arrow symbol': >>>>. This symbol matches a prominent tattoo Liam has on his right underarm (figure 3). This symbol is placed by a significant amount of users in their username. One Tweet even referred to themselves and their fellow fans as "Arrow Warriors" (@VickyNicole3, 2025, Tweet 466).

Other spiritual signs that were found in the Tweets and TikToks were the use of emojis. Emojis are picture characters to represent emotions, ideas or objects (Xu et al., 2021, p. 257). Emojis that were found often in the data were dove emojis, wing emojis and some candle emojis. These are all emojis that signify some kind of spiritual connection to death. Wings, angels, doves, candles and folded hands emojis can be seen as religious (Siever, 2023, p. 225). The act of lighting a candle is a common practice within various religious beliefs (Siever, 2023, p. 225). The flame can symbolise the soul of the deceased in the context of death and remembrance (Siever, 2023, p. 225). Folded hands are a gesture that can be interpreted in various ways. For example, humility or respect, but it can also signify praying and in some cultures this emoji is used as a high five (Siever, 2023, p. 225). Wings, doves and angels all have in common that it has to do with wings. This could refer to the deceased as angels in heaven, or rising to heaven, or even a guardian angel (Siever, 2023, pp. 225-226). However, it is not known whether the people who used these kinds of emojis are religious or not. Additional common emojis were broken heart emojis and crying emojis which signify sadness (Xu et al., 2021, p. 261). Interestingly, heart emojis in different colours were also common. The classic red heart signifying love was also used to visualise love towards Liam Payne.

Some spiritual signs were references to Liam's personal life such as explaining the symbolic meaning of fellow One Direction members having Batman stickers on their car's windshields: "ZAYN, HARRY, LOUIS, AND NIALL'S CARS HAVE BATMAN STICKERS ON THEIR WINDSHIELDS FOR LIAM PAYNE. [face holding back tears emoji] "for those of who have doubted me and now turn to hate i'd like to say one thing… i am batman."-liam, 2013" (@versacegrqnt, 2024, Tweet 211). Another Tweet referred to the symbolic meaning of flowers at Liam's funeral: "A floral arrangement depicting bowling pins and a ball has been placed outside the church for Liam Payne's funeral. This tribute reflects

his final birthday celebration, where he enjoyed bowling with his parents and girlfriend, Kate Cassidy." (@milka_sahotra, 2024, Tweet 212).

There were also spiritual signs that are more personal for the users themselves. Two Tweets depicted a picture of the sky with clouds that looked like Liam's arrow tattoo: "I met you when I was 11 and you were 20, now I'm 20 but you'll always be 31" (@El_OjitodeLouis, 2024, Tweet 111) and "Thank you angel Liam for the sign today" (@LiamJRomania, 2025, Tweet 500). Referencing to Liam as an angel can also be seen as a spiritual sign, but this is also personal to the person grieving.

Ahmed's theory on affect and emotion provides an understanding of why emotions 'stick' to public figures such as Liam Payne. Emotions are not simply internal feelings, but those are shaped by histories, values and power dynamics (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, pp. 97-98). The emotions experienced by fans expressed in shock, denial, anger, grief and sadness are shaped by the fact that Liam has become a part of their lives as Tweet 111 has illustrated, for example. This explains why the loss of Liam Payne, who is embedded in many fans' adolescence, provokes such reactions. Fans are not just grieving a celebrity, they are grieving what he represented in their personal lives. This double layer of personal memory and public mourning is a characteristic that defines parasocial grief. Additionally, the expressions in the examples given illustrate how digital media platforms act as a space where immediate and unfiltered responses can be supported. Social media does not mediate grief in a traditional way, but it enables, amplifies, and archives it, supporting Harju's concept of disenfranchised grief which is unrecognised by traditional systems but validated within peer networks (Harju, 2014, pp. 124-125).

4.2 Legacy and Memory

Within the category of legacy and memory, there were 335 quotations coded in total. This category was split into the three sub-themes of art and creative tributes, justice for Liam and truth-seeking, and remembering Liam or personal memories of him. This theme connects to participatory culture as outlined by Jenkins' chapter "Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture" in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*. Jenkins emphasises that participatory culture involves low barriers to engagement and strong support for creating as well as sharing creations (Jenkins, 2018, p. 18). By sharing fan art, fans are contributing to participatory culture and platforms such as X and TikTok create a low barrier to do so. Jenkins also argues for fans being active participants in shaping media content and its

meaning (Jenkins, 2018, pp. 13-14). This means that fans can decide what Liam's legacy is. They get to decide the narrative of Liam's persona, what kind of person he was. Of course people who knew Liam in person have a much more accurate impression of Liam, but fans are the loud majority that is willing to share their experiences and beliefs of Liam Payne publicly.

Art and creative tributes were coded 48 times and varied from fan art and poems, to physical memorial tributes. The fan art consist of drawings "this is my drawing of liam please be kind hahaha I know im not that good but yeah I miss him so much" (@fuqkinlwtxash, 2024, Tweet 294) or fan edits which seems to be more popular within the sample: "Final tribute, good bye Payno" (@ifgracecouldfly, 2024, Tweet 219). Edits are especially popular on TikTok since edits are often made in a video form: "they will never be the same without you…" (@justsimplysarry, 2024, TikTok 28) and "How much did you cry while making this?" (@ccdirection, 2025, TikTok 26).

Poems are another creative outlet fans use to cope with their grief: "Wasn't sure whether to post this, but thought maybe it might give someone a shred of comfort. Whenever someone I love has died, I've always written a poem to say goodbye, just as a way to process it. Anyway, this is for Liam. Goodbye Liam Payne. Sleep tight" (@CopyOfACopyJen, 2024, Tweet 38) and "He took the stage first, just a boy, Now the first one to leave, just a boy. Nothing's right, hearts are torn, For Liam, we mourn — Knowing Payne means we got to know joy." (@larrylimericks, 2024, Tweet 64).

Physical tributes mentioned in the data set were fans coming together to sing songs and share their grief: "rest in peace Liam Payne" (@realerzlifez, 2024, TikTok 7). Fans even take certain actions to honour Liam such as streaming his songs: "22 weeks since you've been gone, but in honour of you, we're streaming 'Live Forever' all day today, because you will live forever, Liam." (@nessaiyaa, 2025, Tweet 469). One Tweet in particular stood out since this was a public action performed by one fan and her daughter where they put red ribbons all over East London to pay tribute: "One week on and me and my daughter turned East London red for liam !! Did we get get some looks?... yes Do we care ?? ... no This is for you payno !!" (@Gemma_Silk, 2024, Tweet 99).

Fans organised memorials all over the world to come together to grief and pay tribute to Liam Payne: "LIAM PAYNE MEMORIALS AROUND THE WORLD - Update 6 Europe & North America Share to warn as many people as possible" (@HS_News_, 2024, Tweet 101). Eventually, there has been an official place dedicated to Liam installed at the British

Cemetery in Buenos Aires since he passed away in Buenos Aires: "The place dedicated to Liam, has officially been installed at the British Cemetery in Buenos Aires. Thanks to the girls who made it possible. We'll have a permanent place to remember and honor him" (@lileeyum, 2025, Tweet 473). Some Tweets categorised in this sub-theme even mentioned tributes done by others: "Zayn has left the stage and has once again paid tribute to the loss of his brother from One Direction Liam Payne while Stardust plays in the background" (@OT5loveupdate, 2024, Tweet 215).

All these fan contributions in the form of art and creative tributes reflect collective memory, or what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989, p.7). These acts of appreciation function as a modern *lieux de mémoire* deliberately curated to keep Liam's presence active after his passing in the collective consciousness. This aligns with the theoretical framework on mediatised death, where digital technologies provide space for fans to continue engaging with the deceased. Digital mourning extends the lifecycle of celebrity memory by archiving sentiment and enabling future participation. Nora's idea that modern memory is archival is especially visible here, as fans store and circulate Liam's image through retweets and engagement with others (Nora, 1989, p. 13).

The second sub-theme calls for justice for Liam and is seeking for the truth regarding his death. There is even an hashtag #JusticeForLiam that is associated with this theme, however, Tweets including the hashtag are also coded with this theme but do not always include contextual relations to the theme. Including these Tweets, this theme has been coded 122 times. Fans believe that Liam's death is more than an accident and speak of justice when they want answers on their questions:

> "oh so now the hotel masseuse claims Liam Payne was having 'a psychotic episode' and was foaming from the mouth. In what world do you carry someone IF that was happening back to a room that has a balcony? U don't have phones on that level? You forget how to call 911? They think they can keep giving the GP these lies and details and these news outlets will print these headlines blaming liam for everything and we will shut up. When the entire time everyone involved in this has either not spoken up or lied and changed their stories multiple times. The truth never changes....Why the lies? It is because they know they are guilty and they did something...even the hotel saying he was smashing things and on a 3 day bender? Why not call the police and get him removed? Lots of

celebs get kicked out of hotels...the reason they didn't want the police is obvious..”
(@LT18HS16, 2024, Tweet 299).

People who seemingly were involved in Liam's death have been imprisoned and one
Tweet calls it justice: “Justice is being served for Liam!! Ezequiel Pereira and Brian Paiz were
imprisoned for the death of Liam Payne! and Roger Nores, Esteban Grassi and Gilda Marin,
were officially accused, that is, they are no longer suspects but formally accused”
(@YZJustice4Liam, 2024, Tweet 276). This sub-theme reveals how legacy-building is also
oppositional. Fans push back official narratives released by the media to establish their own
version of what they believe actually happened, while safeguarding Liam's image. This
overlaps with Entman's concept of counter-framing, meaning challenging dominant discourse
and inserting alternative truths (Entman, 1993, pp. 54-55).

Finally, the sub-theme regarding remembering Liam and personal memories of him was
coded 165 times. This theme consists of people sharing what they loved about Liam: “i'll
remember you as the kind man that you are! ily @LiamPayne” (@judeb4e, 2024, Tweet 92),
“Liam Payne was a fantastic singer, a talented songwriter. He was good at drawing. When he
was young, he was a national team-level runner who had opportunities for the Olympics.
Liam was exceptionally talented in everything he did” (@SunriseFIN, 2024, Tweet 98), and
“Liam Payne, an artist, who combined amazing vocal abilities, sense of rhythm, dance skills
and a perfect stage presence. The level of his talent was insane. Besides that, he had an open
heart and a kind soul” (@dpwvsn, 2024, Tweet 307). Some people shared more personal
memories: “I've met so many lovely people solely because of Liam and the friendship
continues till today.” (@Ls28_Zp25, 2025, Tweet 497), “you may rest in peace legend you
have helped out billions of ppl get through life ik for sure you helped me out the hardest times
I still listen to yalls music till this day that will never change yall have helped me out alot
through the hard times” (@CassandraP1767, 2025, Tweet 356), and “Remember when a fan
told Liam that he saved her from bullying and Liam got so emotional so he went on to hug
her” (@scommessad4more, 2024, Tweet 182). These examples reflect the deep emotional
investments the fans have, demonstrating the core of parasocial relationships. These fans are
not just merely reflecting on Liam's public persona, but they are narrating their perception of
him where his music and persona are intertwined with their formative experiences. This
embodies Nora's concept of emotionally charged, individually situated collective memory
(Nora, 1989, pp. 12-13). Furthermore, these Tweets that remember positive traits and
memories of Liam position Liam not just as a figure of admiration, but as a model of morality,

illustrating the fans active role in legacy-building. Fans are involving themselves into the story of Liam's legacy by sharing memories on a social media platform. Modern memory is increasingly archival and shaped by its dependence on trace and documentation rather than lived experience (Nora, 1989, p. 13). This sub-theme also confirms Jenkins' argument about fans being active participants who shape media content and its meaning (Jenkins, 2018, p. 13-14). Fans are steering a narrative in a positive direction to illustrate the kind of person Liam Payne was. Jameson's point of nostalgia and connection being the motivation for fan participation are also being supported with Tweet 497 and Tweet 356 (Jameson, 2021, pp. 9-11). Fans keep Liam alive by posting about him after his passing. In this data set, legacy-building is a communal act that responds to both personal mourning and collective remembrance.

4.3 Media and Narrative Response

The next theme was media and narrative response, a theme about how Liam Payne was framed by the media and the image surrounding him. Three sub-themes therefore include media critique and misinformation, protecting Liam's image, and speculation and theories. The overall theme was coded 255 times. As Jenkins argues, the role of fans in using social media is to critique media narratives, according to Jenkins (2018, p. 18). Thus it is expected of fans to criticise the media. At the same time, there is also speculation and posthumous gossip about Liam. Celebrities are frequently subject to posthumous gossip and moral reassessment after they died since their public status invites public scrutiny even when they die (Rusu, 2020, p. 574). Fans can steer the narrative in a positive direction by protecting his image, but others such as the media and haters even can steer the narrative of Liam's image in a negative direction. Furthermore, Entman's framing theory is a concept that fits this theme very well since the concept of framing consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text (Entman, 1993, p. 51). In the theme of media and narrative response, this means that a communicating text about Liam Payne holds power over how Liam's image is created.

The sub-theme of media critique and misinformation captures instances where fans perceive media reporting to be sensationalist, disrespectful, or untruthful. Tweets accusing media outlets of pushing a prewritten narrative or exploiting Liam's image illustrate a fundamental distrust of established narratives, which Jenkins also associates with participatory cultures that seek autonomy over meaning (Jenkins, 2018, pp. 13-14). In doing

so, fans are actively reshaping Liam's posthumous narrative. This act of resistance highlights the interplay between media power and participatory response. Through fan-led discourse, narrative agency is reclaimed, supporting Entman's principle that media power can be contested when counter-framing occurs (Entman, 1993, pp. 54-55). This sub-theme was coded 45 times and targeted Tweets that criticised the media for giving (seemingly) false information: "LIAM IS DEAD FOR 23 DAYS WITH 25 INJURIES THAT AREN'T CONNECTED TO FALLING FROM A BALCONY. LET'S FOCUS ON THIS. LET'S FOCUS ON WHY HIS BODY SEEMED TO BE MANIPULATED AND WHY TMZ HAD PICTURES OF HIM BEFORE THE FAMILY KNEW ABOUT HIS PASSING. WHO'S BEHIND HIS DEATH?" (@Nise_ZIAM, 2024, Tweet 205) and "Now why is media making this into a tv show with false plots and insignificant interviews??" (@yellowheartLWT, 2024, Tweet 135). Some even call it a "smear campaign against Liam Payne" (@katiescarlettx0, 2024, Tweet 232; @letwordsfallout, 2025, Tweet 27) or believe that there was a "narrative ready to go" (@Payno_LJ, 2024, Tweet 243). Another part of this sub-theme is critique because the media offers a "sociopathic lack of empathy and respect with the way the entire media world is treating liam's passing" (@boyfriendspark, 2024, Tweet 141). This is based on creating an allegedly false narrative according to the fans and the way photos and reports are shared almost immediately after the incident: "liam payne died and within the hour of his death tmz had photos and reported it. a man dies in edinburgh and photos of his remains are all over social media we live in a world now where we are so desensitised to such trauma that this is becoming the norm and it's sickening" (@amikagott, 2024, Tweet 172). This sub-theme especially is playing into Entman's framing theory. The media has the power as the messenger as a communicating text can be extremely powerful (Entman, 1993, p. 51). While the way the media is communicating does not come to light through the data set, the response they provoke does. In the data set it becomes clear that many fans are rejecting the dominant narrative as framed by the media. This means that this so-called counter-framing is active (Entman, 1993, pp. 54-55).

The second sub-theme of protecting Liam's image was coded 149 times. This theme overlaps a bit with remembering Liam as remembering the good parts about him add to the protection of Liam's image and painting him as an amazing person. However, there are also Tweets that defend Liam when he is getting hate: "It's honestly heartbreaking to see people suddenly proud of supporting Liam after his death. Just weeks ago, they were editing him out of 1D photos, destroying his album CDs and publicly sharing it all for him to see."

(@ljpsupporters, 2024, Tweet 233), "Those who falsely accuse Liam Payne of abuse, even after he isn't here, are truly vile and repulsive monsters, devoid of any shred of humanity. Their detestable actions are a testament to their own moral bankruptcy and lack of basic decency" (@Osamugoldy, 2024, Tweet 184) and "IM SORRY IF I DONT WANT LIAM PAYNE TO BE REMEMBERED AS A JUNKY WHO FELL FROM A BALCONY, I WANT JUSTICE. HE DIDN'T DO IT. IF YOU DONT WANT JUSTICE, THEN GET OUT OF MY SIGHT. YOU NEVER CARED ABOUT LIAM BEFORE AND DEFINITELY DON'T CARE ABOUT HIM NOW" (@teaandfrozenpea, 2024, Tweet 133). There are even cases where Liam is depicted as the victim instead of an abuser: "He was abused. HE WAS ABUSED. Look at his poor face and the bruise under the eye. My heart is breaking for him. I promise to never give up on your case Liam." (@arinizzley, 2024, Tweet 247) and "people being like "but liam was an ab*ser" - where's your proof? no one has it. and whatever happened, we won't find out. ALL we know is a HUMAN dragically died, being left & abused himself & he was a son, a dad, a friend, an idol. you've got no right to judge so keep quiet" (@whateveralena, 2024, Tweet 261). Some even go as far in protecting Liam's image by attacking his (ex-)girlfriends: "Looks like Kate is happy and living her best life with a new sugar daddy when the cameras are off. Selling her tears in the media, but laughing behind the scenes" (@ClariceX1111111, 2025, Tweet 13), "Liam Payne was the victim of Maya Henry, Roger Nores and the music Industry" (@PayneIsLove28, 2025, Tweet 472), and a Tweet where the name of Liam's ex-girlfriend is ridiculed: "Geoff Payne claims that Liam had no control of his phone (of his own free will) so that means that alleged "harassing" messages that were sent from his phone towards mayonnaise and her dressings were sent by Nores or Kate, a whole narrative. They were sent to justify a cease and desist, but not for a restraining order, because that would have involved more investigation and that was not convenient for them, also the issue was to keep Liam out of everything, so that he would not defend himself. Thank you Mr. Payne for bringing more light to your son's cause" (@YFJustice4Liam, 2025, Tweet 322). By protecting Liam's image, fans are confirming Jenkins' theory about fans being active participants who shape media content and its meaning (Jenkins, 2018, p. 13-14). Fans are shaping a narrative of the kind of person Liam Payne was.

On the other hand, there are people who are / used to be fans of Liam Payne who criticise fans for defending Liam: "sorry i don't feel an ounce of sympathy for an abusive predator? liam payne was a piece of shit who took advantage of MINORS. he abused his ex. stop using 1D nostalgia to cloud ur judgement" (@M4RGOTROBBIES, 2024, Tweet 63) and "oh btw

this isn't a safe space for maya and kate haters, nor for liam apologists who excuse the abuse he put women through. i used to be a big fan of liam, even met him & went to his events, but no more. i'm sad he's no longer w us bc he was a big part of my childhood and he -" (@TALKFASTSPIDEY, 2024, Tweet 301). However, there seem to be fans or ex-fans who are able to see the situation more nuanced: "i think it's an undeniable tragedy if liam payne is dead for his family & loved ones. that can exist at the same time as he was/is an abuser who physically, mentally, and financially abused his ex girlfriend and she was right to share her story" (@saturnretcrns, 2024, Tweet 58), "this is not the time for liam payne fans to use his death as a gotcha moment he still abused his ex girlfriend and forced her to get an abortion and tried to suppress her story and his untimely death doesn't erase that" (@oceansjonas, 2024, Tweet 59), and "It's so fucking tragic what happened to Liam Payne (as a fan saying that) but because Maya Henry came out and told her story of what he done to her doesn't make her a monster or the reason for Liams death. You can love Liam and accept he did some wrong things." (@martih97, 2025, Tweet 395). Defending Liam's image, particularly in relation to past allegations or media attacks, reveals the parasocial relationship the fans feel. As seen in posts condemning (ex-)girlfriends or journalists, these actions are not only defensive but also reconstructive. Fans curate Liam's memory to align with their emotional truths, once again reflecting a collective memory as discussed earlier.

The final sub-theme speculation and theories were coded 61 times. This code refers to people speculating about what really happened with Liam. As Rusu clarified, speculation occurs when the emotional needs of the public are not being met (Rusu, 2020, p. 577). Fans have a lot of questions, but little to no answers. There is also a lot of uncertainty surrounding the circumstances of Liam's death. Fan speculation is used as a coping mechanism to process their grief. One theory goes on how Liam was actually murdered instead of it all being an accident: "Just to straighten things out..Liam Payne did not commit suicide, did not jump, did not faint then accidentally fall from the third-floor balcony! HE WAS NOT ON DRUGS.. I'll repeat it... HE WAS NOT ON DRUGS. LIAM PAYNE WAS KILLED... IT WAS A PLANNED MURDER" (@Payno_LJ, 2024, Tweet 223) and "This has to be the first time a murder is caught on cam and still gets passed off as accidental death @FiscalesGobAr Why does the man in white sneakers and sleeves rise up then bend over and bash a lying man,you can even see the splatter?" (@noraall77316734, 2025, Tweet 30). There are theories that people were after him: "So Liam Payne was actually named dropping and exposing and what makes it so crazy is that he was dropped from his label right b4 before he died and get this

before his "accident" his hotel was destroyed by someone else laptop, destroyed, and whatever evidence he had" (@SagittariusN2U, 2024, Tweet 148) and one Tweet talks about Roger Nores allegedly being involved: "Is there proof of Roger leaving the hotel? They have footage of 'Liam' walking in, and they have pictures of them dragging him to his room. Is there proof that Roger ACTUALLY left? Someone said they saw him in the midst of everything." (@sweetmotivs, 2025, Tweet 19). The motif could be that Liam dropped names that he should not have, or him wanting to speak out about the music industry: "LIAM WAS SILENCED, HE WAS MURDERED. It was all staged to stop what was going to come, the truth about Music Industry abuse. All was set up from Book girl to Roger and his manipulation. Staged in a country with a corrupt law enforcement system" (@patri11275, 2025, Tweet 366).

4.4 Fan Community Practices

The final theme was fan community practices. In total, this theme was coded 357 times. The three sub-themes for fan community practices were anniversaries or mentioning of dates, fan interaction and a sense of belonging, and hashtag movements. Jenkins' chapter highlights that fans are no longer passive consumers but active participants in shaping media content and its meaning (Jenkins, 2018, pp. 13-14). Through hashtags and fan interaction, fans can shape media content around Liam Payne.

Anniversaries or mentioning of dates, occurred when people were realising that it was x weeks or months since Liam Payne died: "9 weeks without Liam Payne. I will always love him!" (@LiamJ_Romania29, 2024, Tweet 274) and "4 months.. you will live forever" (@liam.paynooo, 2025, TikTok 27). Furthermore, some specific dates were mentioned such as October 16, the date of his death (@BolbhaiChandra, 2024, Tweet 50; @dpwvsn, 2024, Tweet 256; @illicitaura, 2024, Tweet 220). Other dates or anniversaries mentioned were the "1 year since this last release" (@LJPayneItalia, 2025, Tweet 451) of his last song or remembering certain posts: "1 year ago Liam Payne posted another video on TikTok. Blind Karaoke pt. 2" (@LiamJ_Romania29, 2025, Tweet 436) as well as the ending date of One Direction "March 25, 2015" (@BolbhaiChandra, 2024, Tweet 50). This act of tracking and remembering dates is a ritualistic act of remembrance. These dates not only help remember Liam's milestones, but also fans' shared grief timelines. Such rituals mirror Nora's theory of commemorative vigilance since digital rituals maintain Liam's place within everyday life (Nora, 1989, p. 12).

Next, fan interaction and a sense of belonging was coded 90 times. This includes fans asking to share their post or asking each other questions: "Rt this tweet if you love Liam Payne's smile" (@comfortforliam, 2025, Tweet 3), "Have you ever bonded over Liam's music and ended up with a real-life bestie?" (@music_liampayne, 2025, Tweet 22) and "One of Liam's amazing fans, @stillgoodtime, started this project to provide food and shelter for stray animals in Turkey in memory of Liam [white heart emoji] You can donate here" (@ljpsupporters, 2025, Tweet 311). Additionally, there were also Tweets of fans appreciating each other: "I want to thank everyone who went to meet him & show him love during his stay" (@Liam_P_Forever, 2025, Tweet 8) and "It was a lovely memorial filled with tears and singing in Stockholm. It felt good to not be alone, to all be there together" (@emmli28, 2024, Tweet 47). One TikTok also showed a heartwarming video of fans coming together to sing "Night Changes" by One Direction: "rest in peace Liam Payne" (@realerzlifez, 2024, TikTok 7). By including One Direction, fans are also being bonded by nostalgia. As Jameson has illustrated, participation often stems from nostalgia, the desire to maintain connections, and the band's collective history which are mirrored by this action of singing a One Direction song to pay tribute to Liam (Jameson, 2021, pp. 9-11). It was also interesting to see that a lot of Tweets include "we" to refer to them as a fandom, creating a sense of belonging: "Liam, it's shit right now. But we are fighting for you however we can. We miss you dearly" (@pollybild, 2025, Tweet 36), "Geoff, Karen, don't forget, we are here with you, until the end. We won't stop fighting for Liam" (@VickyNicole3, 2025, Tweet 327) and "The only team Liam Payne has is US" (@teaandfrozenpea, 2024, Tweet 303). Fan interaction and a sense of belonging highlight the fandom as a supportive affective community. As Ahmed suggests, emotions are socially mediated (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, p. 97). Fans do not grieve alone, but they grieve together and with a group that goes through similar feelings, they reaffirm a group identity through shared expressions. Community practices such as coordinated rituals, date-tracking, shared playlists or experiences, and symbolic hashtags reveal the communal dimension of parasocial grief (Akhter & Tetteh, 2021, p. 130). These digital mourning practices illustrate how public, collective grieving can emerge organically through affective networks. In these spaces, fans found solidarity, constructing a emotional support system that helped them process their loss and reaffirm their identities as members of a community. These findings resonate with Bingaman's article on parasocial break-up's, showing that fans experience loss in ways that mirror personal loss and express that loss within communal, digital frameworks (Bingaman, 2020, p. 368).

Finally, hashtag movements were coded 222 times. Common hashtags that were found were #JusticeForLiam, #LiamPayne and #RIPLiamPayne. Hashtags are a way to get picked up by the algorithm and act as mobilisation tools, which aligns with Jenkins' emphasis on affective publics of networks organised around shared emotional investments that drive collective action (Jenkins, 2018, pp. 13-14). #JusticeForLiam was mostly used in the context of defending Liam or demanding the truth of what happened to him: "The truths are out there and they're going to come out,I can feel it. #JusticeForLiam #WeStandWithThePaynes #WeWillNotBeSilenced #WeWantAnswers #LiamPayneAppeal #LiamPayne #ArrowWarriors #WeStandWithGeoffPayne #ForLiam #ExposeKateCassidy #ExposeRogerNores #OpenTheDevices" (@Jaz29Ca, 2025, Tweet 18). #LiamPayne is used to imply that the Tweet is about Liam Payne, but #RIPLiamPayne is more specific to his death: "Today's memorial in London for liam. #RIPLiamPayne #RIPLiam #LiamsLaw" (@Gemma_Silk, 2024, Tweet 93). This Tweet also uses #LiamsLaw, a law that would safeguard the mental health of artists and fans created a petition to propose this law (Tolentino, 2024). This fan practice supports Cohen and Hoffner's argument that parasocial grief on social media platforms can also help spread awareness on (mental) health (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016, p. 643). With Liam's Law, mental health among artists can be taken more seriously. Eventually, hashtags can improve the quality of the derived topic in a social media environment, in this case Liam Payne (Nugroho et al., 2020, p. 2496). These community-driven hashtags create meaning and social bonds around Liam Payne as a shared public figure. Fan community practices such as these hashtags and interacting with others illustrate Jenkins' argument that fans shape media content to align with their community values and emotional investments (Jenkins, 2018, p. 13-14). Simultaneously, the use of hashtags make it easier to find posts surrounding a certain topic (). Thus these hashtags function as digital shrines aligning with fans using social media to collectively grief through fan accounts and other fan forums (Harju, 2014, p. 124). They create modern grief spaces that challenge norms of private morning. Not only does grief become public, it becomes participatory.

4.5 Crossing Themes

While each theme has its own internal interpretations, several elements reappeared across multiple thematic domains, serving as a connecting vessel for the fan community's collective mourning and participatory practices. These crossing themes are not just repetitions, but they aim to reinforce a discursive power across the fan network.

For instance, some of the Tweets conveying anger are also aimed at the media and can thus be combined with media critique. An example of this is mentioning the lack of respect the media has for Liam: "seeing such sociopathic lack of empathy and respect with the way the entire media world is treating liam's passing is filling me with unbridled rage. i feel completely disgusted for all of humanity. so many reporters should feel nothing but deep never ending shame" (@boyfriendspark, 2024, Tweet 141). This Tweet functions both as a personal vent as well as systemic critique of the media world. Anger becomes a mobilising force, aligning with Harju's concept of disenfranchised grief (Harju, 2014, p. 124). Fans are already grieving and on top of that they feel betrayed by a media system that they deem exploitative.

Another crossing theme are the symbols for 'arrow warriors' and a sense of belonging. By adding arrow symbols to a username or in a Tweet, fans can immediately spot other fans and gain a sense of belonging through a shared interest in Liam Payne. This practice resonates with Ahmed's concept of 'stickiness' since these symbols carry affective weight and become a sign of emotional investment (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, p. 103). These icons become a badge of loyalty and proof that someone is a fan. It also becomes a way of saying "I am one of you" to other fans, fostering a sense of solidarity that strengthens participatory culture among fans.

Finally, hashtags are the biggest crossing theme throughout all the themes. As mentioned prior, hashtags are a way to get picked up by the X algorithm which makes it make sense that people often use hashtags in their Tweets. Especially hashtags such as #LiamPayneForever, #JusticeForLiam, and #RIPLiamPayne were common to use. From grief expression to media critique and a sense of belonging, hashtags mainly function as an algorithmic tool but also as an affective one. They signal some kind of emotional investment with the topic and mobilise visibility. These linguistic markers fit into Jenkins concept of participatory culture and serve to engage with media content as a way of sharing the fans' perspectives which can reshape meanings (Jenkins, 2018, p. 18). The dual function of using hashtags to get picked up by the algorithm and to share perspectives confirms the participatory and performative nature of digital mourning since expressing emotions in the form of hashtags is both for communal and algorithmic purposes.

What we can imply from these crossing themes is that emotional expression, critique and a sense of belonging are not individual processes but they are interwoven. One post can

simultaneously express grief, critique the media, and have a sense of group identity. Fans also do not just share texts, they additionally use hashtags, symbols, and visuals which reflect the layered nature of digital communication on social media platforms. These themes collectively form an emotional infrastructure that supports grieving fans, sustain a fan community, and reclaim the narrative. These crossing elements do not weaken the individual themes but they reinforce them. They indicate that fans mourning in the digital age is not only emotional but also strategic, symbolic and social.

The results of this study demonstrate that grief, identity, and memory within Liam Payne's fan community are not individual experiences, but deeply intertwined affective, cultural, and communicative processes. The themes of grief and emotional expression, legacy and memory, media and narrative response, and fan community practises interact as overlapping spheres of meaning that reflect the multi dimensionality of digital mourning. At the heart of this processes lies affect which, as Sara Ahmed explains, moves through cultural texts, symbols, and bodies, accumulating 'stickiness' through repetition and social circulation (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, p. 103). Emotions expressed in the data, ranging from sorrow and nostalgia to anger and solidarity, are not individual outbursts but social orientations. They guide fans towards Liam Payne and each other, reinforcing a shared cultural position and emotional alignment. In this way, collective memory emerges not as an institutional artefact but as a living, negotiated construct. Fans function as active participants of memory supporting Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, symbolic places where memory is preserved, especially when traditional continuity is lost (Nora, 1989, p. 7). In the digital landscape, these sites manifest through hashtags, tribute posts, digital art, and even usernames, showing that memory today is mediated not true monuments, but through social media algorithms, comment sections, and shared rituals. The emotional intensity of fans' mourning, often expressed through daily remembrances and symbolic language, sustains this memory over time and across networks. The findings also revealed that fan discourse does not exist in a vacuum, but it emerges in tension with media narratives. As Entman argues, framing defines not just what is told, but how it is told and what is left out (Entman, 1993, p. 51). Fans responded critically to media portrayals of Liam Payne that emphasised scandal or failed to acknowledge his humanity. These responses show how media frames are actually contested with fans reshaping narratives through counter framing, humour, correction, and solidarity. In this sense, the framing process becomes dialogical rather than uni-directional.

At last, the grief on display is distinctly digital and often disenfranchised. As Harju notes, mourning public figures is frequently devalued in traditional spaces (Harju, 2014, p. 124). Yet, online platforms allow for affective visibility and recognition, fostering what Akhter and Tetteh describe as parasocial grieving, emotionally intense responses to figures with whom fans shared deep, symbolic bonds (Akhter & Tetteh, 2021, p. 130). This digital mourning practises resist marginalisation by creating communities of validation, demonstrating that grief in participatory cultures is both culturally significant and socially generative.

5. Conclusion

The passing of a public figure such as Liam Payne does not only represent a deeply personal loss for individual fans, but also a complex cultural moment that intertwines grief with fan identity, media representation, and participatory culture. In an era where digital platforms serve as a social outlet for interacting with others and collective memory-making, understanding how fan communities navigate through these experiences is important. This thesis set out to explore the question: how do fan communities, as participatory cultures, preserve the (digital) legacy of deceased celebrity Liam Payne, and how do their efforts interact with their perceptions and responses to media coverage? With the use of a qualitative approach through online ethnography and a thematic analysis, this research aimed to examine fan-created content surrounding the topic of Liam Payne's passing, with a focus on social media platforms X and TikTok. The analysis offered various insights into how affective, symbolic, and cultural practices intersect within digital mourning, fan community participation, and responses to public narratives.

In this chapter, I reflect on the findings of the analysis and draw final conclusions. I will also assess limitations of this research and suggest elements for further research. Additionally, I will too link back to the theoretical frameworks of participatory culture, parasocial grieving, affect theory, media framing, and collective memory. As final aspects, I will consider how this thesis contributes to broader scholarly debates about digital mourning and fan culture in the age of mediatised death, finishing off with final reflections and an answer to the research question.

5.1 Summary of Findings

The findings reveal how grief, identity, and memory-making are co-constructed through participatory acts of mourning and resistance, offering new insights into the contemporary experience of celebrity death. The data set initially revealed four broader thematic categories: grief and emotional expression, legacy and memory, media and narrative response, and fan community practices. These themes are all deeply embedded within the framework of participatory culture. Fans do not just react to Liam Payne's death as passive audiences, they are actively engaged in the symbolic reconstruction of his legacy. These practices include creating and sharing fan art, tribute threads, personal stories, digital rituals such as streaming Liam's music in memory of him, and the strategic use of hashtags to gain visibility on the platforms. This is in line with Jenkins' chapter on participatory culture since these action

demonstrate that fans become co-authors in the creation of cultural memory, practicing creative agency to not only express grief, but also to shape how Liam Payne is remembered and represented in the public sphere (Jenkins, 2018, p. 18). This participatory mourning also intersects with fan identity, as many fans use their posts to communicate their personal connections to Liam Payne, his music, public persona, or broader cultural relevance. In this way, their grief is not just about losing a celebrity figure, but also about sharing personal and collective identities grounded in shared emotional history. Drawing on Ahmed's affect theory, this shows how Liam Payne becomes a 'sticky' figure as his image, music, and symbolism become elements for individual and communal emotions that continue to circulate long after his passing (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, p. 103). These affective investments shape how fans construct meaning around loss and belonging in the digital world. The findings also support Jameson's article on why fans are idolising One Direction members, in which she found that nostalgia, the music quality, helping them through difficult times, fun, and One Direction being part of their lives, were the main reasons (Jameson, 2021, p. 9).

The fan community around Liam Payne actively preserves his legacy through a wide range of practices, once again deeply rooted in participatory culture. These include posting tribute art, engaging in coordinated hashtag campaigns such as #JusticeForLiam and #RIPLiamPayne, writing memorial messages, and organising both online and offline memorial events. These activities are all supporting Henry Jenkins' argument that fans are no longer just passive media consumers but they are also active participants who shape the narrative and memory surrounding media figures such as Liam Payne (Jenkins, 2018, p. 13-14). Through these practices fans take symbolic ownership over Liam's legacy, asserting their emotional authority and reframing his public narrative in ways that align with their lived experiences. Additionally, memorial practices can be understood as contemporary forms of ritualised remembrance. Fans' creative contributions such as artworks, poems, edits, and even their memories of and personal encounters with Liam Payne also embody Pierre Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire*, spaces created with the purpose of preserving memory when "real" collective memory begins to fade (Nora, 1989, p. 7). These acts of digital remembrance, which have now been archived across various platforms, timelines, feeds, profiles, and hashtags, show how fans sustain Liam's legacy as an ongoing practice of turning memory into an affective archive.

At the core of this digital remembrance lies parasocial grieving. As seen in the analysis, fans expressed emotional sentiment such as intense grief, disbelief, shock, and anger. These

emotions are not only performative but also genuine responses rooted in long-standing parasocial relationships. Many fans described Liam Payne as being a positive light who helped them through difficult times in their lives, demonstrating the role he played as a symbolic figure of emotional support. He was also a big part of their formative years, creating a sense of nostalgia surrounding Liam Payne. This grieving is also disenfranchised (Harju, 2014, p. 124). Traditional systems may not validate mourning for public figures, but online fan communities provide that validation, support, and acknowledgement. Social media enables real-time emotional expression and community support through Ahmed's notion of affective stickiness as emotions 'stick' to Liam Payne, his image, and his symbols such as his arrow tattoo, which in turn become main aspects for digital mourning (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, p. 103).

A significant portion of fan discourse is dedicated to resisting media framing as Robert Entman defined (Entman, 1993, p. 51). Fans expressed distrust towards media portrayals that emphasised Liam Payne's personal struggles, such as substance abuse or prior allegations of abusing his ex-girlfriend. Instead they counter-framed these narratives by highlighting Liam's kindness, creativity, and other positive traits about him. This counter-framing took many forms: from correcting misinformation to advocating for justice regarding the mysterious circumstances surrounding his death. Many Tweets accused the media of disrespect, invading Liam's and his loved ones' privacy, or manipulation. Fans therefore act as narrative agents, confirming Jenkins' argument that participatory culture is supposed to criticise the media (Jenkins, 2018, p. 18). Interestingly, while many fans were protecting Liam's image, some also critically acknowledged his flaws. The latter group expressed nuanced understandings that resisted both idolisation and condemnation. This finding is especially interesting since a fandom is usually a community and they have a sense of belonging, but this finding proved that there can also be oppositions within the community. This demonstrates that participatory culture does not require unanimity but it accommodates internal dialogue and contestation.

Fan communities created a shared ritual space through commemorative posts, remembering dates ("X weeks without Liam"), and symbolic actions such as streaming his songs. These rituals mirror traditional mourning practices but they are now also embedded in platform-specific behaviours such as using hashtags on X and making fan edits on TikTok. These practices illustrate the emergence of hybrid mourning where grief is expressed across digital spaces through these kind of posts as well as physical spaces through memorials.

Moreover, the thematic categories identified in the data set also have a tendency to overlap with each other. For instance, media critique often got coded together with emotional expressions of grief, anger in particular, showing how mourning can simultaneously involve acts of media resistance. Fans' grief turns into anger when confronted with media narratives that go against their truth. Similarly, legacy work is often done through community practices such as comment threads and reposting, illustrating how digital mourning not only conserves memory but also social cohesion. This intertwinement of themes reflects the hybrid nature of contemporary mourning where remembrance, critique, emotion, and identity are not separate acts but part of a continuous process of meaning-making carried out in real time on digital platforms. Furthermore, social media platforms such as X and TikTok allowed for a fast-paced information stream and users can respond quickly as well. Fans who had never interacted with each other before were able to easily share their grief, validate each other's emotions, and co-create memory archives. This sense of belonging and support, even among strangers, is central to both fan identity and digital mourning.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions and Broader Implications

This study contributes meaningfully to broader theoretical conversations by showing how digital mourning, participatory culture, and parasocial relationships intersect when a celebrity has passed away. The case of Liam Payne reveals how fans take on different roles as mourners, curators, critics, and community members. Their activities demonstrate that contemporary grieving is not a private or individual event, but rather a collaborative and performative act within the digital world. This extends to Nora's theory of *lieux de mémoire* by showing that modern *lieux de mémoire* are not static monuments but ongoing participatory practices that are shaped by algorithms, hashtags, and affective expression (Nora, 1989, p. 7). Rather than being fixed, these modern memory sites are fluid, dynamic, and socially produced through fan content such as reposts, fan art, and hashtags. As demonstrated by the Liam Payne fan community, digital spaces can serve as affective archives where memory is not only stored but also reactivated through sharing, interaction, and ritualised online behaviours. This new definition of a *lieux de mémoire* challenges traditional ideas of static memorials, suggesting that memory is constantly co-constructed and emotionally sustained by fan communities. It also expands affect theory by Sarah Ahmed by illustrating how digital symbols such as emojis and the arrow symbols become containers of collective emotion. Ahmed argues that emotions are relational, they 'stick' to objects, figures, or symbols through histories of contact (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, p. 103). Within the case of Liam Payne, fans attached strong emotions to

digital artifacts such as the arrow symbols and emojis. These digital markers became affective anchors that carry an emotional weight and enable users to share and recognise their grief collectively.

Finally, the findings offer an example of how media framing is not only going in one direction anymore, but has shifted in a hearing and response dynamics. While traditional media outlets may still shape the initial framing of a celebrity's death, digital fan communities now play a significant role in offering counter-frames. Fans not only push back against what they perceive as disrespectful or even untrue, but they also construct and circulate alternative narratives that highlight different aspects of Liam's life such as his struggles, kindness, musical impact, and the emotional support he offered. The hearing and response dynamics between traditional media outlets and participatory fan culture thus represents a broader cultural transformation. Fans are no longer passive recipients of media framing, but they now are engaged cultural agents who mobilise affect, technology, and collective memory to shape how public figures are remembered. Social media platforms enable fans to challenge, reframe, and even reverse dominant narratives. This reflects this shift in cultural power dynamics from media gatekeeping to a co-authorship of a celebrity's legacy.

5.3 Limitations

Despite this study's contributions, this thesis also faces several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, there can be a case of platform bias and algorithmic influence, which I did not have full control over. With the reliance on platform features such as the top posts filters, the data set may not be a full or accurate representation of all perspectives. This could have led to possibly neglecting other perspectives that could have been useful for this research. Algorithms still influenced what content came to the surface and what was hidden for me. However, I did do what I could to minimise the influence of the algorithm.

Second, the posts I chose for the data set were all written in English, which means that non-English speaking fan expressions were excluded even though Liam Payne has a global fanbase. This could have limited the scope of a cross-cultural analysis. Some regions have different mourning practices which could have been excluded by focusing on English written posts.

Though TikTok was included, the analysis focused mainly on the Tweets and not so much on the TikToks. This is due to the larger volume of Tweets and the challenging aspect of analysing audiovisual content when this study aims for a text-based thematic analysis, but for

future research TikTok could be a bigger focus point. The data set relied on publicly available content too, which means that vulnerable mourning expressions could have occurred in private posts, direct messages, or closed groups. This could have led the data set to have more socially acceptable expressions.

5.4 Suggestions for Further Research

Building on these limitations, several suggestions for further research emerge. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, TikTok could be a bigger focus point. It could also be interesting to see if there are any differences of grief expression across these and other platforms. A comparative study of mourning practices on X, TikTok, Instagram, and Reddit could highlight platform-specific dynamics in how grief is expressed. Another suggestion is to explore cross-cultural differences in digital mourning by analysing Tweets in other languages than English. This way the study can be made more inclusive and representational for Liam's global fanbase. Analysing private spaces such as direct messages and private accounts could also give a more representational image of how fans deal with grieving a celebrity. This should be conducted with permission from the fans and anonymity, of course, but it can provide more personal perspectives that they might not want to share publicly. Lastly, a quantitative complement could be insightful to dive into more layered insights. This could take form in engagement statistics or a sentiment analysis to provide statistics based on sentiment.

5.5 Final Reflections and Answer to the Research Question

The case of Liam Payne illustrates how celebrity death in the digital age is no longer a momentary event but an evolving, participatory process. Fans do not just receive news, but they also shape, contest and memorialise it. They curate memory, resist media narratives and express grief in creative, communal and symbolic ways. Ultimately, this thesis shows that digital fan communities are emotionally powerful cultural outlets. They play a significant role in shaping how we remember public figures, how we grieve in a globally connected world, and how we collectively construct meaning from loss. Their practices point to broader transformations in how society engages with death, memory and identity in the digital age. In answering the central research question, it becomes clear that fan communities, as participatory cultures, preserve Liam Payne's digital legacy through emotional expression, creative content and communal rituals, while actively resisting or reshaping media narratives that do not align with their affective truths. Their efforts in doing so reveal a shift in cultural

memory-making from institutional authority by the media, to participatory co-authorship by fan communities. This demonstrates how mourning has become a digitally mediated, emotionally driven and socially negotiated act. This case is a good reminder that grief is not only personal, but also public, collective and participatory. As digital cultures continue to evolve, so will the ways in which we remember, and continue to live with, the figures who shape our cultural history.

Thus, to answer the research question of how fan communities, as participatory cultures, preserve the (digital) legacy of deceased celebrity Liam Payne, and how their efforts interact with their perceptions and responses to media coverage: fan communities, as participatory cultures, preserve Liam Payne's digital legacy on X and TikTok by engaging in emotionally expressive, creative, and communal mourning practices such as tribute posts, hashtag campaigns, symbolic rituals, and fan art. These practices transform grief into acts of cultural memory-making. They also involve resisting or reshaping media narratives that fans perceive as disrespectful or inaccurate, demonstrating how participatory fans not only memorialise, but also co-write the legacy of public figures through digital platforms.

"So don't let it go, we can make some more, we can live forever" – One Direction, History (2015).

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7. Appendix: Tables and Figures

	Data Collection Thesis Stephanie de Groot 743471 Gr=530	Totals
○ 1 Grief / Sadness Gr=227	227	227
○ 1 Shock / Anger / Denial Gr=100	100	100
○ 1 Spiritual Signs Gr=192	192	192
○ 2 Art / Creative Tribute Gr=48	48	48
○ 2 Justice for Liam / Truth-seeking Gr=122	122	122
○ 2 Remembering Liam / Personal Memories Gr=165	165	165
○ 3 Media Critique / Misinformation Gr=45	45	45
○ 3 Protecting Liam's Image Gr=149	149	149
○ 3 Speculation / Theories Gr=61	61	61
○ 4 Anniversaries / Dates Mentioned Gr=45	45	45
○ 4 Fan Interaction / Sense of Belonging Gr=90	90	90
○ 4 Hashtag Movements Gr=222	222	222

○ **April 2025** Gr=38	38	38
○ **December 2024** Gr=64	64	64
○ **February 2025** Gr=63	63	63
○ **January 2025** Gr=62	62	62
○ **March 2025** Gr=70	70	70
○ **May 2025** Gr=1	1	1
○ **November 2024** Gr=112	112	112
○ **October 2024** Gr=120	120	120
○ **Username Liam Payne related** Gr=174	174	174
○ **Username One Direction related** Gr=60	60	60
Totals	2230	2230

Figure 1: Code overview.

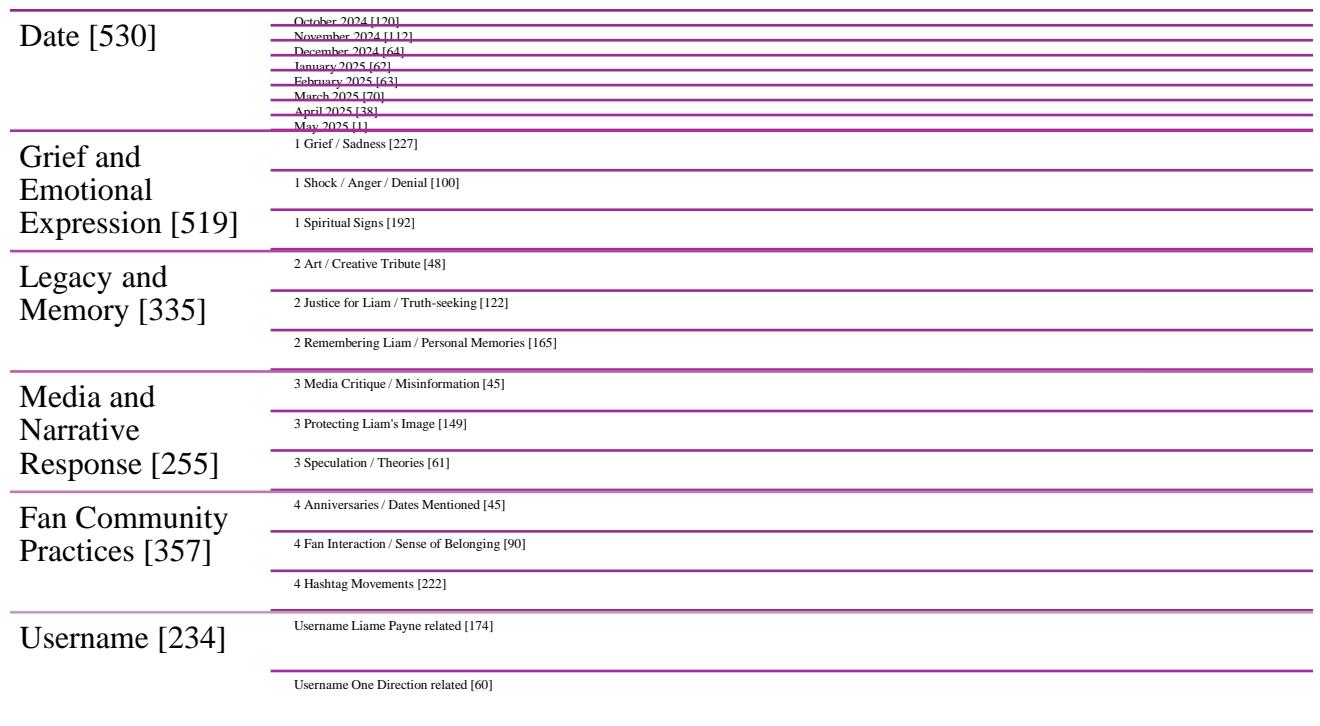| Date [530] | October 2024 [120] |
	November 2024 [112]
	December 2024 [64]
	January 2025 [62]
	February 2025 [63]
	March 2025 [70]
	April 2025 [38]
	May 2025 [1]
Grief and Emotional Expression [519]	1 Grief / Sadness [227]
	1 Shock / Anger / Denial [100]
	1 Spiritual Signs [192]
Legacy and Memory [335]	2 Art / Creative Tribute [48]
	2 Justice for Liam / Truth-seeking [122]
	2 Remembering Liam / Personal Memories [165]
Media and Narrative Response [255]	3 Media Critique / Misinformation [45]
	3 Protecting Liam's Image [149]
	3 Speculation / Theories [61]
Fan Community Practices [357]	4 Anniversaries / Dates Mentioned [45]
	4 Fan Interaction / Sense of Belonging [90]
	4 Hashtag Movements [222]
Username [234]	Username Liame Payne related [174]
	Username One Direction related [60]

Figure 2: Coding tree.

Figure 3: Liam Payne's arrow tattoo (Getty Images).

8. AI Use Declaration

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Stephanie de Groot

Student ID: 743471

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Dr. Argyrios Emmanouloudis

Date: 23 June 2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).

- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)

- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.

- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)

- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☐ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Name of the AI Tool(s) or Framework(s) Used], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☒ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature:

Date of Signature: 23 June 2025

Extent of AI Usage

☐ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☐ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material

have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]