

Posthumous events: how audiences experience post-mortem digital concerts

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Abstract

Purpose – Investigate the effects on audiences of musical events based on the digital simulation of artists who have already passed away, utilizing comments on YouTube recordings of these events.

Design/methodology/approach – Comparative analysis of the two most viewed videos of events featuring the singers Michael Jackson and 2Pac, with a combined total of 150,000,000 views and 100,000 comments, employing a quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis of the most frequent words in the comments.

Findings – The Michael Jackson event elicits ambiguous reactions from audiences who appreciate the opportunity to see an artist who has already passed away but simultaneously express unease due to the fact that the artist is deceased. The comparison with the 2Pac event, which is received more positively, suggests that the technological quality of the simulation is a determining factor in making the experience of the event positive or negative. This implies that technology serves to make the event more lifelike.

Originality/value – This is the first systematic study of audiences of digital post-mortem musical events based on YouTube comments. It claims that the simulation of the artist is not merely a reproduction of the artist as they were alive, but a different type of event that can evoke equally strong emotions because it challenges the barrier of death.

Keywords Posthumous events, Post-mortem digital concerts, Mixed-methods, Music events, Virtual reality, Artificial intelligence, Platforms, Online communities, Discourse analysis, Simulation, Memory

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

One of the events that demonstrates the prominent role of technology in events is the digital post-mortem musical event, where the physical and live presence of the artist is no longer necessary for the musical performance to take place. It is no longer simply technology assisting the performers but the possibility of entirely taking their place. Concerts featuring holograms have opened the possibility of creating musical events with artists who have already died, through projected simulations, promising to be a future commercial success (Hughes, 2020). Michael Jackson, 2Pac, Elvis and ABBA are examples of music artists who have passed away or whose musical projects have ended and who have been the subjects of musical events simulating their presence. What once constituted an impossibility of experience has become an opportunity for a new experience with new technologies, which create a different experience. The impossibility of seeing the artist is thus transformed into the possibility of creating new types of technological events to see an artist who cannot be seen in the flesh.

Studies on this type of event consider that it exercises a kind of “techno-spiritualism” (McLeod, 2016), with religious overtones (Sone, 2023; Ralph et al., 2017; Harris, 2013) where the deceased return through technological means, reinforcing a sustained relationship with audiences over time (Brunt, 2015). The death of the artist ceases to be an obstacle for the market to lucratively commodify their digital presence in events, regardless of whether the artist would have accepted such events (Arnold, 2015; Fusco, 2015). Despite various studies dedicated to this type of event,

Received 19 August 2024
Revised 4 November 2024
Accepted 14 November 2024

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Funding: This article is financed by National Funds provided by FCT – Foundation for Science and Technology through project UIDB/04020/2020 with DOI 10.54499/UIDB/04020/2020 (<https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/04020/2020>).

few have examined audiences and their reactions, overlooking a crucial dimension of the event, which is the audience's experience. Two studies on 2Pac's posthumous concert evaluate some online comments on the concert in an exploratory manner but without a specific and systematic method for selecting and analyzing these comments (Santos and Cidreira, 2020; Creswell Jones *et al.*, 2015). Another study conducts a qualitative analysis through participant observation and interviews to understand perceptions of "liveness" in audiences attending hologram concerts, but these are not related to already deceased artists (Chang and Shin, 2019). The objective of this article is to analyze audience reactions to these digital post-mortem musical events to understand the experiences of this type of event.

Materials and methods

The importance of studying the online reception of technologically intensive events as private spaces for evaluating public events is justified because these are spaces where people spontaneously assess the event, whether they attended it or not, and express their intentions to attend physically (Briain, 2015). An analysis of comments serves as privileged material, constituting natural-occurring data (Wang and Alasuutari, 2017), and reducing researcher bias in data collection, as seen in the study of online reviews of festivals on platforms and social media (Stoleriu *et al.*, 2023; Uriarte *et al.*, 2020). YouTube is a crucial space for evaluating audience attitudes and perceptions of post-mortem musical events, as it is through screens and speakers that both the private experience and the public event of the concert materialize. That is, just as the artist is not present at the event, being a simulation created by visual and auditory technologies, the artist is likewise not on the screen of the person watching the recording of the event. Therefore, there is a certain homology in the experience of the event, although important differences remain (e.g. the absence of a collective experience, the experience of being there in person, etc.). However, considering the technological nature of the event simulating a deceased artist, the possibility of watching a recording is closer to the live event experience than it would be for a recording of a living person's event, because in neither case (on YouTube or live) is the living person present. The fact that the video can be rewatched over time also allows different perspectives to accumulate on the event, making it a place where the event remains a possibility of experience, even if limited to a screen. Therefore, a recent history of the reception of an event mediated by YouTube is formed, creating a permanent memory constantly evaluated by users. Videos of events thus enrich the field of event studies, which is often focused on present events, providing a longer-term perspective on the relationship between technology and events, the paths it has taken, and how it has influenced present events (Spracklen and Lamond, 2016a, b).

The videos were searched on YouTube using the keywords "concerts," "hologram," "AI," and "artificial intelligence," selecting those events featuring deceased artists with the most views and comments. In terms of methodology, a quantitative and qualitative language analysis is proposed. Discourse analysis approaches have been employed in the study of events, where the production of linguistic meaning is crucial for analyzing audiences' reported experiences (Kinnunen and Haahti, 2015). The quantitative linguistic tools utilized are Shannon and Weaver's (1963) mathematical theory of communication and Saussure's (1966) linguistic structuralism. These tools have been rarely used in the linguistic studies of events but they allow to enhance the objectivity in the analysis of highly heterogeneous natural-occurring data like online commentaries, whose elicitation is not controlled by the methods of the researcher. Shannon and Weaver's theory enables the understanding of information quantity, while Saussure's approach focuses on the relational dimension in meaning formation. According to Shannon and Weaver's (1963) information theory, the production of information in language depends on the low frequency of a word because it introduces novelty by not being statistically familiar. The meaning of a word depends not only on the word itself, as if the meaning were crystallized like a dictionary "definition," incapable of changing over time and contexts, but also on the relationship it establishes with other words (Saussure, 1966).

The quantitative linguistic analysis of the most frequent words and their associated word networks reduces the researcher's bias in selecting and interpreting the most relevant passages, a risk exacerbated when the textual corpus to be analyzed is extensive. Quantitative analysis thus demonstrates its potential to provide an initial method for selecting the most relevant information, but it also reveals its limitations, as people do not express themselves through isolated words, no matter how frequent those words are. It is necessary to adopt a qualitative method of interpretation to understand, within the context of sentences, the meanings of these three word networks. Quantitative analysis, therefore, allows for the identification of significant centers of meaning within the text corpus, enabling subsequent qualitative analysis to operate with greater certainty on relevant materials rather than being chosen randomly. For the quantitative analysis of comments, the *AntCong* software was utilized. The analysis will conclude with an exploratory qualitative interpretative or hermeneutic analysis (Pernecky and Jamal, 2010; Buissink-Smith and McIntosh, 1999) of the uses of those words in sentence context, a close reading technique that has been used in event studies to extract the complex formation of meaning in events (Clayton, 2016). This exploratory interpretive approach will focus specifically on a thematic analysis to identify clusters of common meaning trends in user comments. Guided by the hermeneutical principle that the interpretability of topics is rooted in a socially shared tradition of meanings, this approach posits that these meanings, while evolving, cannot be entirely discarded; even the formation of new, intersubjective meanings requires a shared basis of established meanings transmitted over time. Any creation of meaning, therefore, is inevitably situated within a sociohistorical context. In this framework, the comments section becomes a digital micro-discursive space for both the formation and contestation of traditions, drawing from a cultural repository of meanings concerning concerts, death, technology, music and other themes. This means that the shared topics that emerge through interpretation are intelligible only within this tradition (including its rejection), connecting interpreter, audience and readers of this paper in a common interpretive context, which otherwise would be unintelligible. The subjectivity inherent in interpretative clustering is mitigated—though not eliminated—by the prior quantitative analysis. Thematic interpretation allows for the unfolding of nuanced meanings that may be missed by quantitative methods, and whose explanatory value depends on forming thematic commonalities that are convincingly aligned with relevant literature. It should also be noted that, due to the extensive corpus and the heterogeneous nature of audience comments, identifying fully unambiguous common topics is impractical. Instead, this analysis aims to provide a plausible, coherent interpretation of this heterogeneity, acknowledging its openness to multiple interpretations and affirming its exploratory character.

Results and discussion

The two most viewed videos to be analyzed quantitatively will be focused on, examining the three most frequent words in the comments of each video, as well as the three words most related to each of those words, due to the considerable quantity of comments included for analysis. The fact that the two videos collectively have a significant number of views ensures that we are analyzing two objects of impactful events. The videos are "Michael Jackson – Slave To The Rhythm" with 98,195,001 views and 46,046 comments, and "Tupac Hologram Snoop Dogg and Dr Dre Perform Coachella Live 2012" with 59,499,440 views and 55,296 comments.

Michael Jackson's video comments

The three most frequent words in the comments were identified after eliminating terms that do not provide significant semantic contribution or do not allow the identification of relevant language patterns to understand the audience's relationship with the phenomenon (e.g. "of," "is," "the," "to," "a"), or terms specific to YouTube (e.g. "reply," "@"). In the case of the Michael Jackson video, the second most frequent word was "He," but after analyzing the context in which this word frequently appeared, it was discovered that it referred to lyrics from the video's song that users

Table 1 Michael Jackson's video comments analysis

<i>Most frequent words (top 3)</i>	<i>Most frequent accompanying words (top 3)</i>
I (601)	Feel (53); wish (33); remember (20)
This (407)	Song (71); good (32); man (27)
Michael (408)	Jackson (231); pop (53), J (49)
Source(s): Author's own work	

sometimes posted in the comments. As such, since it does not constitute a specific appraisal of the event, this word was excluded from our analysis.

The fact that the most frequent word is "I" ($n = 601$) indicates a tendency toward personalization in the comments, including references to the artist themselves ("Michael," $n = 408$) (Table 1). Another dominant expression is "this" ($n = 407$), which points to an undefined object, serving as a means to encapsulate the complexity of the event, encompassing disparate elements such as simulation, death, life, dance, music, etc. This demonstrates that beyond the personal expressions of "I" and "Michael," there exists a triad of artist, audience and event as the minimal units of this type of event, allowing for an analysis of its fundamental aspects. Apparently, the frequencies of the three most frequent words are very low in a textual corpus containing 98 million comments. However, in the spontaneous formation of discourse in YouTube comments, unlike in a questionnaire or interview where responses are more or less directed, the formation of shared meanings, consensus or patterns is rare, highlighting the heterogeneity of linguistic behavior. In this sense, the fact that some repetition of expressions emerges within such uncontrolled heterogeneity indicates that around these words, a collective coherence of meanings has naturally formed without intervention from the researcher's methods or theories, which merits further study regarding its underlying reasons.

If it is established that personalization is a crucial element of this type of videos, however, according to Shannon and Weaver's mathematical theory of communication, something that is repeated frequently is not necessarily informative. It is necessary to understand what is then informative within this personalization. The low number of words related to the most frequent words shows what the meaning in use of the most frequent words is and suggests that they are loaded with information. In other words, what this set of words means is not reproduced massively, becoming familiar, i.e. non-informative, which means that this is where new data can be found to understand this phenomenon. In the first case of the expression "I," the most present expressions "feel," "wish," "remember" point to mental, emotional, and dispositional verbs, rather than pointing to rational or action expressions, showing how the event is emotion in the sense of being moved by. They also point to the desire for something, to a want, and to a past, a memory, a return in time. In the second word, "this," the expressions that form a network of meaning with it are "song," "good," "man," and it is curious that in a technological effort to digitally recreate the artist, it is the song (only one of the elements of the event) to which "this" refers. Comments also evaluate the event through the words "good" and "man" (which as we will see is used as an expression of amazement). In the third most frequent word "Michael," the network of words "Jackson," "pop," and "j" does not add anything really new, pointing to his identity and his musical genre. As the objective of this article is to understand the relationship that users establish with this new technology, we will focus on the qualitative interpretative analysis of these networks of words in the context of the sentences in which they appear.

First meaning network (I – feel/wish/remember)

The personal expression "I," associated with emotional and psychological verbs, suggests an impact on the inner identity of the audiences caused by this post-mortem concert video of Michael Jackson. An interpretative analysis of the uses of the verb "feel" points to an ambiguity in how

audiences feel about this type of event, “I feel like I’m the only one who liked this?” “when I watch is I feel so strange”. In other words, they do not clearly indicate a negative or positive evaluation, suggesting that this type of event, due to its novelty, being a liminal space between death and life, the body and technology, memory and the present, is characterized by the formation of taste for a new type of event. A rich comment in how it combines the verbs “wish” and “feel” shows how the audience also becomes conflicted with themselves, where the pronoun “I” becomes, through the event, a subject in which the predicates show how difficult it is to evaluate the event: “I wish I could enjoy these holograms. This one or Pac’s. I just can’t. It just feels . . . morbid, soulless, empty. I really wish I didn’t feel that way because I loved MJ so much.” There is a “wish” to “feel” good about admiring an artist and now having the opportunity to revisit them. However, this opportunity presents itself as far from the original, as the possibility of revisiting becomes conflicting due to triggering themes related to death (“morbid, soulless”).

The post-mortem concert is received on YouTube as something deserving to be experienced live, despite Michael Jackson not actually being present at the event, and him being technologically reconstructed on stage, much like he is on screen; however, the YouTube screen is insufficient, serving nonetheless to stimulate the need to see the simulation live, and not just a recording of the simulation: “I wish I was there to at least see his hologram.” Despite being an event watched on YouTube, it is still evaluated as an event, demonstrating the possibilities of studying YouTube comments as “proxy-events,” as an object of study after the occurrence of events, both by those who attended and those who did not: “I wish the crowd was more appreciative and energetic of the performance.” Statements of desire also point to a return of the artist from death, with technology reinforcing a desire that technology cannot fulfill, activating a distinction between the “real” artist, present “physically,” and the simulated, non-physical artist: “Real MJ would go insane on that stage. I wish he was still here physically.”

The ambiguity regarding this event is not merely momentary but enduring, creating a memory of the past event, suggesting how the event, when recorded and viewed retrospectively, continues to participate in the memory of the event, extending its experience beyond the moment the event occurred, thus creating a temporally mediated event that constructs the memory of that experience: “I still remember watching it here on YT and crying my eyes off! (. . .) It’s not near perfection as only Michael knew how, but it’s still a beautiful gesture and gift to us fans!”; “I remember seeing this for the first time when I was 5 or 4 and I was obsessed with Michael”; “I remember watching this live on TV as a kid and it scared me”; “I remember being so creeped out when I first watched this.” Once again, the liminality between life and death, presence and absence, elicits emotionally strong comments, not always those associated with the artist when he was alive. This ambiguity was also detected in the study of audiences at hologram concerts even when they do not involve deceased artists (Chang and Shin, 2019), which means that the death of the artist is one of the elements, but not the only element, that makes the experience of simulation emotionally ambiguous. The remembrance also shows that these post-mortem concerts reactivate an important dimension of the event, which is the fact that it is something that happened for the first time, constituting an inaugural moment, making the viewer a witness to something that has never happened before. In this sense, despite post-mortem concerts being based on an artist that everyone already knows, the original way they reproduce that artist via technology constitutes an event in itself and not just a mere reproduction of something that has already happened.

The fact that this event was published on the Internet on May 19, 2014, serves not only to document a history of the evolving relationship between events and technologies and audience evaluations of the visual recording of this relationship over 10 years, which is a privileged space to acquire data that would otherwise be difficult to obtain about a living memory of past events. This possibility of analyzing a history of the reception of recorded events allows for the identification of different technological imaginaries that change over time with the alteration of available technologies: “The current AI can make a much much better Michael Jackson . . . I wish they remaster this one !!”; “I freakin wish they’d do another MJ hologram with today’s tech”. The fact

that the technology has become obsolete does not mean that the event has lost the potential to create desire in the event's audiences; rather, the audiences also participate in the construction of a technical imaginary about possible events in the future, showing how the connection between event, technology and desire is intertwined.

Second meaning network (this – song/good/man)

The second meaning network that forms around the second most frequent word in the comments, "this," which points to the object of the event primarily focused on one of its parts "song," and the evaluations made of it "good" and "man," show that the song, which does not need a visual simulation of the artist's presence to be reproduced since it is primarily sound, is the focus of positive evaluations: "Hologram or not, this song is awesome", "I love this song and the performance was epic!!!". From the comments, it is evident that the music used in the performance was original, demonstrating how a combination of novelties in events, such as a unique visual simulation of the artist along with an original song by the artist, can enrich the experience but also provide more opportunities for audiences to choose the aspect that impressed them the most. As shown in the first network of meanings of the word "I," the appreciation of the object of the performance is also associated with conflicting and ambiguous feelings: "we now can only enjoy a hologram of this wonderful human being. Amazingly done, beautiful song . . . but still makes me sad. :(," "I hate this back then cause leave him alone, right? But this is so him and so good!". When the comments focus on the object of the event, rather than affirming what they feel or desire, more positive comments regarding the event appear, which cease to be ambiguous: "I never heard this song – what a cool idea for this visual tech", "After six years I finally realized this was animated, it's just so good and memorable. I honestly thought he was actually there.", "Man I'd still scream and cry in MJ's concert even if it's a hologram".

The positive evaluation of the music does not necessarily imply that the context and conditions of presentation of the music are equally positively evaluated. Audiences present a nuanced way of appreciating the memory of the artist and criticizing the music industry's investment in posthumous works and performances: "This is a good song but it makes me sad that people are capitalizing off his presumably unfinished music. (. . .) The man has passed on, let him rest"; "I think people nowadays shouldn't try to replicate his dancing and music in such a way that it almost brings him to life. He was a legend and now that he's dead we should all leave his body to rest and just listen to his music on occasions. This is my opinion and watching this video made me quite upset and angry. Good song though". The death of the artist is considered a limit for musicians' events, attempts that "almost brings him to life" are not considered positive. In death, the musical experience should primarily be auditory; it is this that should preserve the memory of the artist, not visual simulations. The recorded voice thus maintains a more genuine connection with the deceased artist because it is not a simulation, which means that the artist's music must have a visual simulation that lives up to that sonic authenticity: "Loved this song since the first I heard it but, these PS3 ass graphics for his hologram were not it." Criticism of the industry is linked to this criticism of a "return of the dead": "It's a damn shame that the industry tore Michael down and literally killed him and objectify this man's very being for a quick cash grab (. . .) they're using this guy's heart and soul against his will"; "I know the industry killed MJ and is whoring his legacy from here on out, so it's hard for me to fully appreciate this production. (. . .) Also MJ never performed this song so there was no blueprint to emulate, so they basically had to piece an entire routine together using different MJ dances". The conjunction of industry interests with a total simulation, i.e. without a real model on which the music performance is based, shows the limits of appreciation of this type of posthumous music events. The digital "resurrection" of music events operates on a fragile boundary, where the capitalization of death and the simulated dimension of the event can make it highly repugnant to audiences, contradicting expectations that being able to witness the impossible, i.e. the return of the deceased artist, is always desirable.

The comments also provide an opportunity to observe how the evaluation of the event is collectively negotiated, contested and not merely individually assessed, serving as a means to gauge the collective response to a recorded event: “so many hate comments, this was an amazing and very respectable performance (. . .) if you focus solely on if it's him, look-a-like, hologram you're not paying any damn attention to the message of the song”. Audiences attempt to propose ways to experience this new type of event, allowing for the observation of taste construction. In a simulated event, trying to compare it with the real artist loses the integrated nature of the experience, which is more than ensuring a faithful reproduction of the original but creating a new technological performance. Another comment also reflects this dispute over event evaluations: “don't care what people say in the comments, this was a great tribute. Yeah, no one can move like MJ but the performer has an almost identical build and is good enough to do the performance justice.” Besides the expression “good,” the expression “man” serves as a way to express displeasure with other users' evaluations: “Man, this video has a lot of idiotic comments. This is supposed to be a tribute. There's no reason for you to be mad at the fact that they made a hologram of Michael Jackson.”

The post-mortem digital concert also provides an opportunity for audiences to distinguish between the real artist and their simulation, asserting the problems of the latter reproducing the former adequately: “Good but Michael is way better than this hologram. Even the spinning is not as energetic as MJ spin. The hologram didn't add enough MJ energy. I can see MJ but the moves ain't as powerful as MJ's moves.” However, audiences remain open to the technical improvement of the performance, indicating that there is room for enhancement. This suggests that there are not only absolute rejections of this type of event; rather, rejection depends on its technical execution quality: “As good as this looks, it wasn't as good as the 2-Pac Coachella hologram. That one looked more believable”; “I'd love to go see a full Tupac or MJ concert done with this technology as long as they are done with good taste.”

Third meaning network (Michael–Jackson/pop/J)

Finally, after focusing on the personal experience (“I”) and the event object (“This”), the focus on the artist (“Michael”) is used to harshly criticize the event. Many of the themes analyzed earlier reappear here, requiring only a summary presentation. Criticisms arise because audiences do not accept simulations on principle, “AI is scaring me Omgosh I don't like it cause it's not Michael Jackson”, “I don't want this dude i want michael Jackson the real one (I know that is a hologram)”, because it is seen as a business, “Even in death Michael Jackson, is being worked like a slave for the music industry!!!”, “It doesn't matter Michael is gone – it doesn't legitimize excuses on justifying treating him as a money machine”, or because the technology does not do justice to the real artist, “Michael Jackson is rolling in his grave after he saw this video and this hologram getting nowhere near his potential. Even with computer tech they couldn't re-create Michael Jackson's talent”, “Cuando ni un holograma de Michael Jackson puede superar al original”, “It is the year 2024 and we have not got to the point of easing technicalities and made hologram music artists for concerts”, “The CGI looks nothing like Michael Jackson and the dance moves are really rough”, “If you're going to make a Michael Jackson Hologram, make sure he sticks his moves better”, “This looks and dances like an idiot. Nothing is like the real Michael Jackson. They can stop making money outta him”, “Michael Jackson would not have ok'd this, it's a money making project for the co-writer L.A.Reid.” As in the first network of meanings (“I – feel, wish, remember”), mismanagement of the combination of emotions, simulation, market and technology can make this experience highly unpleasant.

Despite audiences enjoying this event, “I love this video so much and how Michael looks so much like himself!”, “Michael Jackson made in hologram how amazing”, “This video has always blew me away on how they brought Michael Jackson back to life”, as previously noted, audiences believe that with new technologies, including AI, it would be possible to create a

better show, demonstrating the potential of this type of event: “The current AI can make a much much better Michael Jackson . . . I wish they remaster this one !!”, “I forgot about the Michael Jackson hologram. Almost a decade later, we got AI tech now, imagine how insane hologram tech will get with that”, “Holograma de Michael Jackson me gusto mucho Que quisiera que hagan ahora con la tecnología que tenemos ahora”.

However, when referring to the artist’s name, a significant set of positive appraisals can be observed. The artist, not just the technology, is what makes this technology worthy of a remarkable experience, indicating that not every artist can be simulated: “Only Michael Jackson’s hologram can make people cry”. The technology itself renders this event a historic one, not merely the reproduction of an existing event, but something with its own uniqueness, deserving to be considered an event: “That iconic moment when a lot of artists performed at the Billboard music awards and Michael Jackson’s hologram stole the whole show”, “Michael is larger than life and death. Even a hologram of MJ can make history, make people go insane and cry.” Tears serve as markers that despite the artist being a simulation, the event experience is not, as it elicits genuine emotions. It is in the audience’s reaction that the simulation seeks to prove itself as an event worth experiencing. This event is also something desired and deserving of repetition: “siempre quise que me hagan el holograma de Michael Jackson”, “Mejor deberían de hacer conciertos con holograma para ver a Michael Jackson”, “I think a world music tour with a hologram of Michael Jackson would be a great idea and would attract thousands of fans to the concerts”, “I would like them to put a hologram of Michael Jackson with some classic at every event like this”, “I rather pay hundreds of dollars to see a concert of a hologram Michael Jackson over any artist today”. The possibility of a posthumous digital concert is also the possibility of offering a live event to future generations who could not see the artist live, adding to the sound archive the possibility of enjoying an artist’s show: “will there ever be an official michael jackson holographic concert again? I was too young to visit a real one when he was alive”, “Maravilhoso Michael Jackson, seria maravilhoso se recriassem ele digitalmente pra fazerem a turnê this is it seria meu sonho ja que não tive o prazer de ir no show dele no Brasil porque nasci em 1997”.

2Pac’s video comments

In the second most viewed and commented video of a posthumous digital music event, the analysis of the most frequent words and the word network established by each one presents relevant comparative data with the preceding video. Similar to the Michael Jackson video, the analysis of the most frequent words allows identifying the core of the event experience: the person (“I”), the event (“This”) and the event artist (“Pac”) (Table 2). This means that the analysis of comments focuses on the minimal yet crucial elements of the event. In terms of the networks of meaning formed around the most frequent words, even in the expression “I,” we find psychological verbs (“wish”), with notable differences. In the Michael Jackson video, the verb “feel” is predominant, while in the 2Pac video, the verb “think” rationalizes the recorded experience of the event and includes an action, not just a psychological act, prominently featuring (“cried”). Regarding the word “this,” the visual dimension of a recorded event becomes obvious with the verb “watching.” Similar to the Michael Jackson video, references to the event elicit adjectives, which in the case of the 2Pac video are close to hip-hop slang, notably “shit,” which can be used positively. Unlike the Michael Jackson video, where the “song” was the prominent

Table 2 2Pac’s video comments analysis

<i>Most frequent words (top 3)</i>	<i>Most frequent accompanying words (top 3)</i>
I (420)	Think (20); wish (16); cried (14)
This (311)	Watching (19); shit (17); performance (15)
Pac (252)	Love (15); this (18)
Source(s): Author’s own work	

object of the event, in the 2Pac event, the digital “performance” takes center stage. Finally, regarding the artist, only two words form a relevant network of meanings, with no third word appearing with significant frequency. There is a “positive” appraisal and a relation with the expression “this,” linking the artist to the object of the event, to the performance. The interpretative analysis will allow understanding the reasons guiding the differences and similarities established by the quantitative analysis of the two videos.

First meaning network (I – think/wish/cried)

Contrary to the first video, where “feel” is the predominant verb associated with personal expression (“I”), in 2Pac’s video, the verb “think” is more prevalent, suggesting a greater rationalization regarding the event. This expression is linked to ways of reimagining what happened at the event, of creating new meanings to account for the unexpected singularity of these kinds of events: “I like to think he came down from Heaven and went back home when he disappeared,” “I honestly think when Tupac’s mom saw this, it made her emotional to see her son on stage one last time before she died in 2016,” “Bruh ik it was hard af and occward for snoop to be performing with a hologram and not the real tupac I dont think he looked at it once. Think about it its like if your mother is gne and she comes back,” “i can’t help but think snoop looks scared,” “Bro I don’t think that’s a hologram I think God let Tupac come back for 2 songs.” Snoop Dogg, a rapper who performed alongside the simulation of 2Pac, the figure of the mother, and the topic of resurrection, are used as real examples of the relation with the dead in a simulated form and serve to make that experience intelligible, providing reasons for the strangeness of the event. The rationalization also helps users project how live audiences were dealing with this event, meaning that digital audiences place themselves in the position of the physical event, “I think people thought that was the comeback of the real tupac,” “I don’t think people truly understand what this holographic sht is really all about,” “I don’t think the people in attendance knew how special that was.” The comments thus point to an experience of the excess of the impossibility of even understanding what was happening. This rationalization about the difficulty of understanding what is going on confirms the novelty of the event, thus not being merely a reproduction of a performance that 2Pac might have done in life. The expression “think” is also used, in a few cases, to express repulsion for the event, not attempting to explain or provide reasons for what is happening, “I think it’s disrespectful,” “This honestly feels so wrong. I don’t think he’d even want this.” In an emotional sense, similar to the comments on the Michael Jackson video, the expression “think” serves to articulate feelings, “I honestly think I would’ve shed a tear watching this live after he disappears.” In one comment, the connection between reason and emotion is made, comparing it to the Michael Jackson event, “I will always think Tupac’s hologram is 100× better than Michael Jacksons. Tupac just looks so life-like, makes me emotional,” showing that the technological quality of the event is closely linked to the emotional response, with the fact that it is a digital simulation of someone who is deceased not precluding an impactful, lifelike experience. This is the crucial difference that makes the posthumous concert of 2Pac less ambiguous and more positive for audiences compared to the Michael Jackson video.

Just like in the Michael Jackson video, the personal expression “I” is associated with a “wish,” a desire for something, showing how this type of event doesn’t exhaust what it offers, whether because one wishes for more, wishes for it to be different or wishes for it not to happen at all. In the case of the 2Pac video, the expression of desire is marked by comparatively more positive appreciations than in the case of the Michael Jackson video: “I wish I could find words to describe my feelings . . .”; “Wish I could have been there”; “I just wish I could watch it in 1080p or better”; “wish I was there”; “i wish i was there because i bet nobody expected to see pac turn up”, “I wish that we could’ve had Pac just a little longer even if it is a hologram.” The desire is also expressed for these types of events to continue and be expanded to other artists, “I wish they sometimes did this with other artists at different concerts, perhaps Michael Jackson or Freddie Mercury”, “I wish they’d do more of this type of thing. So many amazing musicians we’ve lost could show off their talents to new generations with this technology.”

Contrary to the Michael Jackson video, the expression “I” is associated with an action, “cry,” showing in the comments how a simulation of a deceased artist turns into real emotion. “I cried when I seen this literally”, “I would’ve fucking cried!”, “I was there. Felt real. People cried”, “i would have been crying if i was snoop dogg”, “My dad cried because he never thought he’d ever see pac perform again”, “I cried I can’t lie”, “if i was there i woulda cried.” It’s important to note how crying is mentioned as a possibility but not as something experienced by those watching the recorded event, indicating that the audience itself perceives a limit in the experience of these types of events. They would have cried if they were there. Even though the Internet is full of simulations of 2Pac, there’s a mark of the live collective experience that persists in its recording. Unlike the Michael Jackson video, the 2Pac event elicited strong emotions that weren’t of repudiation. Contrary to the study of YouTube comments on this video that considered audiences received this event mostly ambiguously, a quantitative and comparative analysis of the cases of Michael Jackson and 2Pac allows for selecting comments with the most dominant expressions, reducing the analyst’s subjectivity in choosing random comments.

Second meaning network (this – watching/shit/performance)

The fact that the event is watched retrospectively in a video recording becomes evident in the recurrent use of the word “watching,” which is a limitation of the senses stimulated by an event. Unlike the Michael Jackson video, where the song is more important than the visual dimension of the event, which is harshly criticized by some, here the viewing and the “performance,” another relevant word, are not disqualified in relation to the song: “I remember watching this for the first time and I got chills cause it made me feel like he was alive”, “I honestly think I would’ve shed a tear watching this live after he disappears”, “Got goosebumps watching this”, “This is amazing.im saving this and watching it whenever I want to hear real rap”, “This gave me chills. I would literally cry watching that in person”, “That gave me chills watching this”, “I still get chills watching this”, “I had goosebumps the entire time watching this”, “almosted cried watching this”, “I’m sitting here with some tears in my eyes watching this”. However, despite reducing the event to its visual dimension, this does not mean that strong emotional and bodily reactions occur in the audience, showing that a video of a post-mortem music event is not the same as watching a simple video of a singer, which shows that the recording of the event retains some of the emotional power of the event.

The expression “performance” shows how the event is not reduced to its visual dimension and points to a more complete experience, “I still remember being so shocked I couldn’t even scream when this happened . . . Best performance ever!”, “Why is this still the perfect hologram performance ever??”, “I watch this performance every 6 months I just find to be incredible”, “It’s a reason this dude had the first hologram performance”, “When i first saw this performance in 2012 i got chills just seeing how realistic this looks. Still get chills now”, “The ending where he disappears this was an iconic performance”, “this performance still gives me chills”, “Coachella did not deserve this performance. They are all high and they probably don’t know what’s happening”. The audiences do not consider, then, that the event is a pure simulation or a mere reproduction of something already recorded, but they consider that something happened live, that it was performed, executed, an appreciation that marks a difference compared to the Michael Jackson video. This type of event, when technologically well executed, is then a kind of paradox, the “real experience of a virtually realized performance” (Chang and Shin, 2019).

One possible interpretation advanced by a study on the 2Pac event suggests that it cannot be considered a performance in the true sense because there is no physical presence of the body. It further asserts that people are aware they are facing a simulation and merely express affection because it is the only way to see an artist who has already passed away (Santos and Cidreira, 2020). However, from another, more sociological perspective, how audiences evaluate an object is crucial in determining whether it is a performance or not. It is difficult to assert that there is a performance “in itself” without an audience participating and evaluating the event (Michaud, 2022). Events such as video mapping or robot fighting, for example, lacking human physical presence, do not imply they are not performances. What distinguishes the post-mortem

concert as a performance and not merely a simulation? The fact of witnessing a performance by someone who has died makes the experience unique in evoking emotions, not because it is a lesser alternative audiences must necessarily settle for due to the artist no longer being able to perform. It is the artist's death that makes the "digital resurrection" exciting. A hologram of a living artist does not possess the force of an impossible return from the dead. Were 2Pac not deceased, this digital post-mortem event would not have its specific power as an event, a happening to be witnessed and experienced; it would not perform anything special that would evoke genuine emotions in the audiences. This is what makes the event a performance, a technological-artistic feat, something that must be executed and experienced live, not merely a reproduction of a living artist who can give concerts, but the creation of something new, a transition in the experience of audiences between life and death.

While in the Michael Jackson video, the appreciations "good" and "man" formed the network of adjectives for the word "this," in the case of 2Pac, the difference in how audiences of pop music and rap evaluate events is noticeable. In the rap genre, the word "shit" serves as a positive evaluation, indicating that a quantitative analysis of discourse must be articulated with a qualitative and interpretative analysis of the discourse. "This shit was absolutely insane at the time," "11 years ago, this blew my mind, now, AI can make this shit in seconds," "This shit is sick," "This shit hard," "Remember when this was the shit?," "gave me the mothafucken chills . . . this some demonic shit," "2023 I'm still like holy fuck this shit should be in the history books how epic this was these youngsters will never understand," "This shit still bring a tear." Unlike the Michael Jackson video, positive appreciations do not focus on the music but on the event as a whole.

Third meaning network (Pac – love/this)

The mention of the artist, "Pac," is primarily used to demonstrate appreciation for the artist, showing how this concert simulation, unlike the case of Michael Jackson, did not generate antagonism between an appreciation of the artist's legacy and displeasure with the technology. "Every time I see the end Pac fading away, I'm in tears man! I love him so much," "Dam pac. They he love it it better rapping with u dead than alive the heart of man. Is pure envy. Great show. . . the great man still come true after death," "Love Pacs lil gangsta dance at 3:40," "4:31 was the part that reminded me that they took away a legendary rapper . . . Rest in peace pac love u man." Parts of the video are identified as moments that audiences associate with the artist, not as a simulation. The expression "this" gathers negative expressions regarding the event, "This makes me want to cry R.I.P Tupac the best rapper of all time," "pac was alive this night but the crowd unfortunately was dead," "SNOOP YOUR A MULTI MILLIONAIR AND REUNITING WITH PAC. THIS SHOULD IN 1080p or 4 K UP YOUR TECH STANDARDS." Unlike the case of Michael Jackson, negative expressions are not meant to attack the event but to affirm the pain that the memory of death brings, to criticize the audience, which should be more enthusiastic, and to suggest that the visual recording of the event should have higher quality. In other words, these negative appreciations point to the predominantly positive dimension of the event in the eyes of users.

Conclusion

The analysis of comments on YouTube videos of music events with a strong technological component, such as digital post-mortem concerts, demonstrates their value for event studies investigating audience reactions post-event. The fact that these videos have millions of views and thousands of comments ensures that the analysis focuses on quantitatively relevant material. The recording of events and the possibility of commenting on them over time provide a privileged space for studying how experience and memory are constructed, indicating that the recording of the event contributes to shaping the event experience. The spontaneity of these comments limits the researcher's subjective bias in selecting individuals to study, as well as the responses they may give to their questions. A quantitative approach to discourse, utilizing contributions from mathematical communication theory and linguistics, allows for delimiting, within a vast quantity of comments, the

zones of linguistic significance that are most relevant for analysis, thereby limiting the subjective nature of the researcher's choice of comments to analyze. In methodological terms, a qualitative interpretative analysis of comments enables understanding that the most frequent words and those with which they form a network of meanings benefit from a close reading that extracts their meanings in the context of the sentences in which they appear.

Regarding limitations and directions for future research, alternative discursive approaches to analyzing comments could serve to test the exploratory findings of the interpretive analysis, specifically through Critical Discourse Analysis methodology, with its emphasis on grammatical structures, stylistic devices, speech acts and rhetoric. On a quantitative level, examining infrequently appearing words in the corpus could help capture the diversity of reactions to the videos. A chronological analysis of the comments would also allow for crucial longitudinal data, treating online events as "living archives" of experience. This could be particularly insightful when audiences request technological updates to these events, such as higher image resolution or the use of artificial intelligence. While language is a key medium for cultural transmission and formation, it would be worthwhile to explore how different music genres and their associated fan cultures influence the appeal of certain artists to broader audiences. More critically, the study's focus on only two of the most-watched videos, although reflective of a significant audience size, limits the generalizability of findings to these cases alone, which are specific to two music genres and certain technologies that have recently evolved. As noted by a reviewer, engaging with death studies in the context of leisure, tourism and event studies—and particularly in dark tourism—though beyond the scope of this article, could enrich future dialogues with socially mediated meanings of death beyond traditional funerary contexts.

The comparison of these two cases, Michael Jackson and 2Pac, demonstrates that digital post-mortem music events are received by audiences in an ambiguous manner, indicating that it is a strange experience not easily framed within familiar forms of interacting with the phenomenon of witnessing the simulation of a deceased artist's performance. The quantitative analysis of comments on experiences with digital events reveals that, despite the technological mediation of screens and the simulated presence of the artist, the interaction remains deeply personal, often using the pronoun "I" in both videos. Both cases also reflect a sense of "wish" evoked by this type of experience. For Michael Jackson, there is a recurring wish that the artist were still alive, a longing to experience the simulation in person, which reflects a desire for physical embodiment of either the artist or the audience. This is similarly present with 2Pac but differs in terms of the verbs "feel" and "think," which distinguish the two audiences: for Michael Jackson, "feel" is frequently linked to an ambivalent reaction, sometimes even expressing discomfort with this type of event, while for 2Pac, "think" indicates complex reflections on life and death, with projections on what the artist and audience might think of the event. However, this intellectual response for 2Pac is also accompanied by "cry," underscoring a complex rational-emotional response to such events.

Critiques of Michael Jackson's simulation and the emphasis on music over visual effects—highlighting the auditory technology that preserves the singer's voice—make technology' quality the significant difference that makes the 2Pac visual experience more positive overall. While it is not feasible to encapsulate the entire study in this statement, it captures a significant distinction between the two cases, highlighting a challenge to traditional divisions between technology and nature—in this case, the "natural" simulation of a deceased artist's life. 2Pac's simulation is praised for its strong emotional impact, whereas Michael Jackson's is criticized for feeling less "natural," evoking a sense of discomfort due to its distance from the original. Despite the technological importance, technology alone does not fully explain the strong emotions these events generate—be it admiration or discomfort. The following factors are essential: (1) an established fan base, (2) the tragic deaths of both artists and (3) the challenge to death's finitude in enabling posthumous performances. Technology thus functions within a cultural landscape where the deceased artist already resists being forgotten. Emotions arise not merely from technological quality, but from reinforcing the artist's ongoing presence and breaking the impossibility of experiencing a live performance from a deceased artist.

Regarding technology, a poor simulation is one that leads audiences to criticize the artificial aspect of the simulation, as evident in the first case. In the case of 2Pac, the simulated dimension of the event is not one of the main topics of discussion; rather, it is the bodily effects, such as crying, that the event elicits in the audience, demonstrating the real impact of a well-executed technological simulation. The simulation technology is not an enemy of a more genuine event experience but contributes to making it more vivid, allowing the performance of the deceased musician, through appropriate technical-aesthetic means, to appear as a new type of admirable event. The difference between a poor simulation and a good simulation of the deceased artist lies in the technological capability to bring the artist to life in the eyes of the audience. People do not necessarily believe that the dead have been resurrected, but rather that a new type of event, which was precluded by death and characterized by questioning the definitive nature of death, has become possible with the right technology. Technology is not the opposite of life but the possibility to make posthumous events more alive.

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