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Morbid Curiosity: The Driving Force Behind Success of Necromarketing – Analysing Events after Liam Payne’s Death

Introduction

After years of being a taboo topic, death has re-entered the public discourse and is establishing a presence in mass media (Hanusch 2008). One domain where the influence of death is particularly evident is in necromarketing, a practice that harnesses death and its associated themes to appeal to consumers. While necromarketing has faced criticism for “exploiting death and tragedy” (Wojciechowski & Shelton 2014: 92), it has nonetheless flourished into a multi-million-dollar industry, particularly through the commercialisation of deceased celebrities (Devine 2010).

Our fascination with death and the macabre can be explained by the concept of morbid curiosity, a trait that remains largely underexplored in empirical research (Oostrewijk 2017; Scrivner 2022). While the scientific understanding of this phenomenon is still evolving, its presence is undeniable.

The death of Liam Payne, along with the subsequent publication of post-mortem images by The Thirty-Mile Zone (TMZ), has reignited debates about ethics in journalism, particularly regarding the treatment of deceased celebrities and the lengths to which media outlets will go for “clicks.” While TMZ’s publication sparked public outrage, it nonetheless drove millions to search

for the article online, highlighting the tension between sensationalism and consumer demand (Google Trends 2024a; Krohne 2024).

This paper aims to explore the psychological background of the events that followed Liam Payne's death. Analyse how necromarketing impacts cultural products and why death-related content is so popular, focusing on morbid curiosity as the driving force behind it.

For characterising and analysing the following case, netnography was used. This research method is based on "obtaining cultural understandings of human experience from online social interaction and content" through, among other approaches, social network analysis (Kozinets 2015: 18).

Necromarketing

Necromarketing, or the marketing of death, is a concept in marketing characterised by its explicit or implicit connection to death, aiming to evoke an emotional attachment to the promoted product, service, or cause. It is said to be a "parasite on death and tragedy" (Wojciechowski & Shelton 2014: 92), while integrating marketing practices with death themes that shift it from a taboo topic to the centre of social interest of media and marketing specialists (Mikuláš & Wojciechowski 2015).

Necromarketing can manifest in explicit and implicit forms (Wojciechowski & Shelton 2014). Explicit necromarketing involves directly displaying death and related themes, such as depictions of corpses, autopsies, or death itself. Necromarketing is founded on the presupposition that death and its implications can be leveraged to influence consumer behaviour. The explicit form of necromarketing may hold particular value due to the universality and inevitability of death, which fascinates individuals and elicits strong emotions (Wojciechowski & Shelton 2014). These emotions, in turn, create a powerful connection between brands and consumers.

The second form, implicit necromarketing, employs a more subtle approach, indirectly referencing death through subliminal cues and allusions to its inevitability, rather than depicting it overtly (Wojciechowski & Shelton 2014).

Wojciechowski and Shelton (2014) note similarities between the effects of necromarketing's two forms and the mechanisms described in the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). They emphasise how initial emotions of shock or revulsion evoked by necromarketing can deepen the consumer's evaluation of a message due to heightened emotional arousal. However, a key distinction the authors identified lies in the processing level. Unlike HSM or ELM, necromarketing operates more fundamentally, bypassing rational thought during the brand evaluation process. The primary driver of this difference is the pervasive influence of fear.

Necromarketing is most commonly employed by advertisers who, by leveraging symbols of death, aim to elicit consumers to purchase products. The number of advertisements and public service announcements incorporating themes of death has been increasing since 2009 (Wojciechowski 2010, as cited in Wojciechowski & Shelton 2014). Studies on the presence of necromarketing in American television revealed that advertisements in product categories, such as insurance, films, television network shows, and news promotions, featured the highest number of necromarketing appeals. Furthermore, implicit necromarketing was more frequently utilised than its explicit counterpart (Shelton & Wojciechowski 2020).

The Market of Dead Celebrities

The term “celebrity” was most famously defined by Daniel J. Boorstin, who stated that “celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness” (Boorstin 1992: 57). Mikuláš and Wojciechowski (2015) argue that the concept of a “celebrity” should be understood as a modern phenomenon. An essential condition for its existence is a mass media system, which allows content transmission to a broad audience. Mass media has a critical role in enabling individuals to achieve celebrity status, as the institution of celebrity is the “mutual author’s work of media and its audience according to cultural indications that enable this mutual action” (Rusnák 2013: 52, as cited in Mikuláš & Wojciechowski 2015).

Historically, the only prerequisite for using celebrities in media was their physical existence and presence (Mikuláš & Wojciechowski 2015). However, advancements in media production technology have made this limitation obsolete, allowing celebrities to maintain influence long after their deaths. With the increasing presence of deceased celebrities in the media landscape, D’Rozario and Bryant (2013) introduce the term “delebrities” to describe such figures – celebrities who continue to hold cultural significance even after their physical death. This definition encapsulates how mass media sustain the cultural relevance of well-known individuals, extending their influence beyond the temporal boundaries of life.

Mikuláš and Wojciechowski (2015: 195) identify two ways necromarketing can manifest itself when it comes to the use of dead celebrities: one is the act of dying and the media representations of this, while the other is the presence of a celebrity in culture after their death. Necromarketing does not need any marketers to work, as it attracts the attention of the masses and makes headlines because of the shock that comes with tragedy (Rosca 2011).

The death of a celebrity can become the primary catalyst for financial success through the sale of estates, the creation of tourist events,

or merchandising opportunities (Mikuláš & Wojciechowski 2015). Some deceased celebrities even receive biographical films or posthumous contracts, earning more after death than during their lifetime (Devine 2010; D'Rozario & Bryant 2013). In other instances, a celebrity's death can significantly impact cultural products, such as the financial success of films or songs released by late stars (Evans et al. 2010; Mikuláš & Wojciechowski 2015).

T. Cowen defines cultural products as "man-made artifacts or performances" that move us, expand our understanding of the world, and deepen our knowledge of ourselves (Cowen 2000: 5). The death of a celebrity has been shown to influence the promotion of these cultural products. That is because a celebrity's passing evokes strong emotions, creating a sense of attachment to a brand while simultaneously increasing the brand's notoriety (Rosca 2011). For example, following the death of Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, topics related to his passing, family, legacy, and the brand itself were searched so frequently that, on the day after his death, a Google search for the term "apple" returned only images associated with the company or its products on the first page – none depicted the fruit. Moreover, on the day of Steve Jobs' death, page views on www.apple.com increased by 12.2% (Rosca 2011).

Matheson and Baade (2004) argue that media coverage surrounding an artist's death generates nostalgia, enhancing the value of their products and memorabilia. An example of the impact of a celebrity's death on promoting cultural products can be seen in the case of Heath Ledger's passing and the subsequent success of Warner Brothers' film *The Dark Knight*. While it is difficult to quantify how much this event contributed to the film's success, Evans et al. (2010) suggests it may have boosted box office performance.

A similar phenomenon occurred during the production of *Fast and Furious* when Paul Walker passed away during the filming of the series. Despite this tragedy, the film achieved remarkable success, placing it among the top three highest-grossing films in the history of the film industry (Mikuláš & Wojciechowski 2015).

A pop culture critic, Chuck Klosterman, famously remarked, "Dying is the only thing that guarantees a rock star will have a legacy that stretches beyond temporary relevance" (Voytko-Best 2024). The use of celebrities represents an \$800 million-a-year industry, with opportunities for growth continuing to expand (Devine 2010). As of 2024, some of the highest-earning celebrities include Michael Jackson, Freddie Mercury, and Dr. Seuss. More recently, this list has been joined by Matthew Perry, following the actor's accidental overdose in October 2023 (Voytko-Best 2024). Given the widespread public interest in celebrities, Rojek uses the term "Effect of Saint Thomas." This concept refers to "an urge to authenticate a desired object by reaching, touching, or taking pictures of it" (Rojek 2001: 62, as cited in Mikuláš &

Wojciechowski 2015: 197). A central aspect of this effect is the consumption of experiences associated with a celebrity or delectrity, which helps to explain phenomena such as tabloids and paparazzi culture (Mikuláš & Wojciechowski: 2015).

The Presence of Death in Media and Culture

Becker considered death to be the ultimate form of fear, and thus stated, the “idea of death, the fear of it, haunts human animal like nothing else: it is the mainspring of human activity [...] to overcome it by denying it” (Becker 1973: ix, as cited in Shelton & Wojciechowski 2020). Historically, death was a spectacular ceremony symbolising the transition from one form of power to another. In modern times, however, it has become “something to be hidden away” (Foucault 2003, as cited in Stepputat 2020: 16). Foucault discussed the “gradual disqualification of death” happening since the late eighteenth century. The historian Philippe Ariès also described death as invisible or hidden – particularly from public view – as though society carried on as if death did not occur (Ariès 1981, as cited in Walter, Littlewood & Pickering 1995).

Numerous scholarly works have addressed the concept of death denial, presenting both arguments that support the idea of death as a taboo topic (Becker 1973, as cited in Shelton & Wojciechowski 2020) – exemplified by hospitals and medical practices that “make death unacceptable” (Bregman 1999: 78) – and counterarguments challenging this thesis (see Tradii & Robert 2017).

Regardless of how we perceive death – whether through acceptance or denial – it does not make it cease to exist. Instead, certain psychological attitudes can either help us come to terms with the idea of death or intensify the distress associated with contemplating it. The denial of death has been suggested to be a self-defence mechanism, yet paradoxically, this denial actually intensifies fear and anxiety in individuals. On the other hand, reflecting on death is considered to be beneficial for mental health, as death is an inherent part of a shared reality that is the same for every individual (Jankowska 2018).

In recent years, death has moved back into public discourse, with mass media playing a significant role in this shift (Hanush 2008). Research indicates that newspapers tend to overemphasise homicides, accidents, and disasters while underreporting deaths caused by diseases (Combs & Slovic 1979). Although images of bodies in extreme situations, such as graphic depictions of death, are present in media, these images are typically utilised more cautiously or “sanitised,” except when they depict individuals from distant or culturally different regions (Taylor 1998; Campbell 2004).

Death cannot be eliminated from people's consciousness, not least because of the daily reporting on tragic accidents and sudden deaths depicted in the mass media. Every individual feels an innate need to adopt a specific stance toward the phenomenon of death (Jankowska 2018), whether it is denial or morbid curiosity

An Exploration of Morbid Curiosity

Morbid curiosity is deeply embedded in everyday life. In her research, Oostrewijk (2017) demonstrated that when given a choice between viewing neutral content and content related to violence, harm, or death, people tend to choose the latter. In everyday life, for example, people may slow down in traffic to observe an accident scene (Ruedisili 2023), search online for the consequences of infectious diseases such as COVID-19 (Scrivner 2022), consume true crime media (see Murley 2008; Vicary & Fraley 2010; Bolling & Hull 2018; Vitis 2023), or even seek out photographs of a deceased celebrity's body. Despite its prevalence, there is limited empirical research to further understand this phenomenon (Scrivner 2022).

Morbid curiosity is an interest in negative stimuli or information (Oosterwijk 2017) or, more simply, a curiosity about unpleasant matters, particularly death (Scrivner 2022). Researchers (e.g., Oostrewijk 2017; Niehoff & Oostrewijk 2020; Scrivner 2022) have attempted to explain this phenomenon.

Niehoff and Oostrewijk (2020) highlighted the cognitive and emotional motives behind morbid curiosity. They proposed that individuals seek to improve their understanding of the world and construct a more realistic worldview as part of their need for cognitive closure. Additionally, they suggested that some individuals deliberately seek stimuli that evoke sadness or disgust because they value the experience of such emotions. The authors also explored social motives, such as nurturing empathy and the ability to anticipate the emotional states of others.

Scrivner (2022), drawing on evolutionary psychology, attributed morbid curiosity to the adaptive function of detecting and avoiding predator threats. This trait not only enabled animals to recognise danger in time but also allowed them to inspect and learn from threats, saving energy by avoiding unnecessary flight responses. He also emphasised curiosity as an intrinsic driver of morbid curiosity, noting that some organisms are naturally drawn to threats. Scrivner (2022) further proposed that imagination plays a critical role in developing morbid curiosity. While animals' imagination is limited to simple interactions, humans possess the unique ability to envision future scenarios and make decisions based on what may be beneficial later. Imagination allows people to prepare for dangerous situations and determine

how to respond effectively, which could explain the evolutionary emergence of morbid curiosity and the tendency to learn about death and other unpleasant topics. While excessive imagination about dangerous scenarios can lead to anxiety, a normal level of such imagination is adaptive and protective (Scrivner 2022).

Case Study: The Death of Liam Payne and Subsequent Events

Liam Payne was one of the members of One Direction, a boy band formed in 2010 by five independent contestants during the British edition of *The X Factor*. Despite not winning the competition, the group became “one of the biggest selling U.K. bands since The Beatles, a huge global export and one of the biggest selling pop acts of the 21st century” (Sherman 2024).

In October 2024, Liam Payne was in Buenos Aires, Argentina. On October 16, around 5:00 PM, hotel staff placed a call for assistance, reporting that one of the guests was “destroying his room” and disturbing others while “overwhelmed by drugs and alcohol” (Rackham 2024). The police were too late to prevent the following events. Liam Payne is believed to have fallen from his balcony, situated approximately 14 meters (45 feet) above an interior courtyard, at around 5:07 PM local time. He was pronounced dead at the scene (Rackham 2024).

Hours after the late star’s death, fans faced another shock when the popular American celebrity news website, TMZ, published images of parts of Liam Payne’s body – specifically his arm and abdomen, which bore identifiable tattoos. Although the images were cropped to exclude the face and any graphic details, they were sufficient for identification and left no doubt about the timing of taking them (Kataya 2024). TMZ’s decision to crop the images aligns with the observations of Taylor (1998) and Campbell (2004), who argue that depictions of the deceased are increasingly being approached with caution and subjected to “sanitisation.” Nonetheless, the public outcry was immediate, prompting TMZ to later remove the images from their platform. This incident reignited a broader conversation about the ethics of reporting and the coverage of celebrity deaths, as it was not TMZ’s first controversy involving the publication of sensitive details surrounding the deaths or suicides of public figures (Kataya 2024).

The death of Liam Payne shocked the world. However, the subsequent events appear to have caused even greater outrage. TMZ faced significant public backlash, resulting in the removal of photos of Payne’s body from their website. The article, now stripped of the controversial images, states: “TMZ has seen a photo showing Liam’s body on the deck at the hotel with tables and

chairs nearby” (Garner 2024). Many individuals, including fellow artists, took to social media to condemn TMZ’s actions (Rodger 2024).

Scholars have pointed out that while widely considered unethical, TMZ’s actions were not illegal. John Wihbey, an associate professor of journalism at Northeastern University, commented on the controversy, saying that “while these practices spark outrage, they are technically legal in the United States under the First Amendment, which protects the freedom of the press” (Kataya 2024). Furthermore, as Meg Heckman, another associate professor of journalism at Northeastern University, stated, the published images had no other value “except to shock” (Kataya 2024). Despite public outcry against TMZ’s publication, search trends reveal significant consumer interest. It is evident from an analysis of Google Trends data (2024a), which provides numerical representations of specific search interests relative to the highest point on the chart. A value of 100 signifies peak popularity, while a value of 50 indicates the term was half as popular. A value of 0 reflects insufficient data for the term. On October 17, the phrase “TMZ” was extensively googled (scoring 100 points), compared to earlier dates. The same can be said about the phrases “Liam Payne body” (37 points) and “Liam Payne TMZ” (75 points) (Google Trends 2024a). Naturally, the phrase “Liam Payne body” was not popular prior to his death; however, on the day of his passing, it was searched over one-third as often as “TMZ.” Similarly, searches for “Liam Payne TMZ” nearly matched the popularity of “TMZ” itself (Google Trends 2024a). Overall, Payne’s name was searched over 10 million times, making it one of the most searched topics of the month (Krohune 2024).

The use of photographs depicting Liam Payne’s deceased body exemplifies explicit necromarketing (Wojciechowski & Shelton 2014). This approach involves directly showcasing death, eliciting strong emotional reactions from media consumers and drawing significant traffic to tabloid websites. Referring to Wojciechowski and Shelton’s (2014: 92) description of necromarketing as “parasiting on death and tragedy,” this case offers a literal representation of that concept. TMZ utilised these images to generate “clicks” and drive website visits.

The influence of necromarketing is also apparent in promoting cultural products, such as Payne’s music. Similar to earlier example with Heath Ledger and *The Dark Knight* or Paul Walker and *Fast and Furious* (Mikuláš & Wojciechowski 2015), Payne’s death has increased public interest in his music and likely memorabilia (Matheson & Baade 2004), further illustrating how necromarketing transforms personal tragedy into economic opportunity. On the day of his passing, the search term “One Direction” also experienced a significant spike in popularity compared to previous dates (scoring 100 points) (Google Trends 2024b).

Summary

I argue that the interest in morbid content on TMZ's website, alongside the widespread searches for the photo of Liam Payne's deceased body and the evident success of necromarketing in this case, stems from morbid curiosity.

Morbid curiosity's psychological roots lie in cognitive, emotional, and evolutionary factors. Individuals seek exposure to negative stimuli to enhance their understanding of the world, foster empathy, and satisfy a need for cognitive closure. From an evolutionary perspective, morbid curiosity has adaptive functions, such as enabling humans to identify and prepare for threats. Modern mass media provides a platform for this by curating content – sometimes sensationalised – that caters to this curiosity. The aftermath of Payne's death aligns with these explanations.

Public interest extended beyond mere grief or respect – it reflected a deeper compulsion to engage with the tragic and sensational aspects of his passing. This phenomenon parallels behaviours such as consuming true crime media or slowing down to view accident scenes, reinforcing the pervasiveness of morbid curiosity.

Liam Payne's death, the public's reaction, and the media's coverage reflect the intertwined dynamics of morbid curiosity, necromarketing, and cultural production. These phenomena reveal how our fascination with death continues to shape media practices, drive economic value, and influence cultural consumption.

Much remains to be explored about morbid curiosity and its impact on mass media. This article highlights only a few of the intricate relationships between necromarketing, cultural products, and morbid curiosity, illustrating their dynamics through the example of Liam Payne's death. Further research is necessary to understand the impact of morbid curiosity on media as it is an interdisciplinary issue, drawing from cultural phenomena, ethics, economy, journalism, and psychology.

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Abstract

This article investigates the interplay between morbid curiosity, necromarketing, and cultural products, using the aftermath of Liam Payne's death as a case study. The publication of morbid content by TMZ demonstrated the power of necromarketing in attracting attention. Payne's passing boosted interest in his music, highlighting how tragedy influences cultural consumption and underscoring the psychological allure of the macabre. This paper explores how public fascination with death drives consumer behaviour.

Słowa kluczowe: nekromarketing, makabryczna ciekawość, produkty kultury

Keywords: necromarketing, morbid curiosity, cultural products

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