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Mailing Address

Universidade de Aveiro
Departamento de Comunicação e Arte
3810-193 Aveiro – Portugal
E-mail: deca-jdmi@ua.pt

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Beyond the Brand's Grave. A Hypothesis of a Digital Afterlife for Defunct Brands.

Francesco E. Guida
Politecnico di Milano, Italy
francesco.guida@polimi.it
0000-0003-3679-3367

Carlotta Bacchini
Politecnico di Milano, Italy
carlotta.bacchini@gmail.com
0009-0008-6980-8493

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Abstract

In 2021, Mark Zuckerberg introduced the Metaverse as the next evolution of the Internet – a vision that, while not fully realised, has sparked new debates about the future of digital environments.

Since its inception, the Web has served as a vast repository of traces, memories, identities, and information for individuals and social entities. But what happens when these traces persist or are reactivated within immersive digital spaces, evoking the concept of a “Digital Afterlife”? By framing brands as complex, living-like organisms, this study explores their persistence through digital memory and symbolic traces, examining how past actions and ethical stances may shape their posthumous identity in immersive online environments.

Through a speculative design methodology supported by a literature review, the research culminates in the Brand Afterlife Meta-Agency (BAMA): an original fictional yet structured design framework in which a defunct brand's legacy is translated into a symbolic 3D modelled avatar shaped by brand data and user perceptions. Rather than offering empirical validation, the speculative scenario opens a space for critical reflection on how memory, ethics, and digital design converge to shape brand identity beyond its commercial lifecycle.

Keywords *Digital Afterlife, Digital Memory, Brand Identity, Speculative Design, Defunct Brand.*

1. From Identity to Extinction: The Lifecycle of a Brand

1.1. Brands as Cultural and Social Living Organisms

Within contemporary culture, the brand emerges as a hybrid construct, simultaneously economic and symbolic, individual and collective (Lury, 2004; Fournier & Alvarez, 2019). By drawing on branding theory, semiotics, and sociology, this study conceptualises the brand as a living organism whose social function extends beyond commercial value. This evolution is mirrored by observable socio-economic transformations: over the last few decades, brands have permeated human existence, shifting their spheres of influence from individual commercial spaces – both physical and digital – to every aspect of life. This has led to a fundamental shift in the objectives, methods, and subjects of brand communication (Holt, 2004). Today, the brand is “an integral part of society and a foundational element of its DNA” (Titterton & Fioroni, 2007, p.6). Brands are therefore recognised as possessing a social identity that leads them to transcend a purely material conception of their existence, moving toward one that is emotional and aspirational: often symbolic, and sometimes even described as spiritual (Ryu, Miller, & Godfrey, 2025). This aligns with the application of Maslow's hierarchy of needs to consumer motivation, where brands address higher-order needs – such as self-expression, personal growth, and self-actualisation – beyond functional or social fulfilment (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2018).

Only in this way can brands emotionally connect with their customers, anchor themselves in their memory, and earn their trust to build a lifelong relationship. This connection is essential because a brand is neither reducible to the product nor to financial revenue. Rather, it represents the position it earns within society, culture, and the individual psyche. It must be capable of telling credible stories, serving as “guiding parables for existence” (Titterton & Fioroni, 2007, p.8). This requires the brand to take a clear stance on cultural issues and social dynamics. As Titterton & Fioroni (2007, p.11) write:

“The creation of a brand culture is therefore a collective phenomenon and, as such, has a significant impact on society, being influenced by its moods but also contributing to the creation of new ones. Thus, the brand increasingly becomes a mutating entity in continuous interchange with its surrounding environment, capable of interpreting every subtle alteration in the social context of reference, to the point of being able to determine itself.” (translation by the authors)

A compelling example of this process is Apple, whose motto “Think Different” symbolised a new way of being and perceiving technology, consistent with its creative, non-conformist, and cutting-edge personality.

The brand thus assumes a powerful social significance, serving as a symbolic medium through which individuals and communities can find shared values and narratives, as well as motivations for cultivating aspirations or assuming stances. This resonance extends beyond consumers, regardless of purchase behaviour. Part of this engagement operates through identification mechanisms. A brand becomes relatable when it is perceived as possessing human-like qualities, enabling individuals to project emotions, identities, and values onto it – a tendency widely documented in brand personality research. Identification often occurs through intuitive forms of humanisation, attributing traits such as age, gender, or attitude to brands (Aaker, 1997). These anthropomorphic projections deepen the emotional bond between individuals and brands, making them feel psychologically alive. To understand this phenomenon more systematically, Aaker (1997) developed a model of brand personality based on five core dimensions combining diverse yet consistent traits: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Such perceptual dimensions, however, gain meaning only when supported by a coherent and intentionally cultivated identity. When these traits are cultivated in depth – through authenticity, emotional sensitivity, and coherence – the brand begins to possess the very traits people need to form and develop relationships (Fournier, 1998).

This relationship-building capacity is what leads to the fundamental conceptualisation of the brand as a living organism – as if it were a human being with a brain and emotions – endowed with an identity and a personality (Kapferer, 1997). And just as any living being, its personality – expressed through its style, character, and attitudes – plays a fundamental role in building relationships with its audience. For example:

“Absolut Vodka personified tends to be described as a cool, hip, contemporary 25-year-old, whereas Stolli’s personified tends to be described as an intellectual, conservative, older man. In contrast to “product-related attributes,” which tend to serve a utilitarian function for consumers, brand personality tends to serve a symbolic or self-expressive function.” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347)

As human beings, a brand’s personality – enriched by its values – serves as a structural foundation, a set of guiding principles that must remain authentic and coherent, even as the brand evolves. Indeed, the value of a brand as a complex living entity is built over time through a system of actions (Kapferer,

1997). This value is embodied in brand equity, or the value perceived by the audience. Consequently, a brand behaves like a real human being across different media: it strives to say something meaningful that the digital society can share, seeks to build its own community – or rather, its own tribe – and works to affirm and showcase its identity by sharing it across various channels (Cova & Cova, 2002). And just like humans, everything they leave behind contributes to the reconstruction of their identity.

1.2. Personality and Identity: Humanising the Brand

If the brand is understood as a living, socially embedded organism, then its identity represents the visible system through which its values, personality, and internal coherence are manifested as a unified presence in the world. As Wheeler (2018, p.18) notes, brand identity is “tangible and appeals to the senses. You can see it, touch it, hold it, hear it, watch it move” and it translates the brand's intangible essence into visible, material, and experiential expressions. In this context, brand and communication design operate as the primary medium of transformation, including visual components (logos, visual systems, typography, colour palettes, packaging), verbal aspects (tone of voice, language), and digital presence – all coordinated to express the brand's values, personality, and cultural stance (Henrion & Parkin, 1967; Wheeler, 2018; Carmi, 2014; Grizzanti, 2020). These elements not only facilitate recognition but also convey the emotional and cultural layers that define the brand's position in the world.

Within this framework, this study proposes interpreting the brand through the extended metaphor of a biological body: a symbolic construct that enables a deeper understanding of its expressive functions and lifecycle dynamics. Just as a human body conveys identity through organs, gestures, and physical presence – revealing not only outward appearance but also inner essence – the brand can be read through a corporeal lens, where each element symbolically reflects its values, legacy, and mode of existence. Each part of this metaphorical body contributes to the brand's overall communicative coherence. The face – often the logo or symbol – offers immediate recognition and conveys a sense of identity. The voice emerges through language, tone, and typography, revealing personality and intention. The attire, reflected in colour palettes and visual systems, communicates style, positioning, and mood. The skin metaphorically holds the brand's legacy and experience, while the hands express its actions and behaviours across different touchpoints. Although metaphorical, this model draws on shared cultural associations to lend the brand both humanity and materiality, supporting the view that brands are expressive and evolving entities shaped by cultural context. This embodied composition not only expresses identity but also enables audiences to engage with the brand as if relating to a person – recognising its ‘face’, interpreting its ‘tone’, and responding to its ‘gestures’.

As in a biological organism, there is a delicate balance between structure and meaning, form and function. The brand's visual and verbal components must work in harmony to convey a coherent and credible identity. Among these, the logo plays a pivotal role: it is the brand's most immediate visual expression, functioning as its “face” in the world. Whether it takes the form of a logotype, pictogram, abstract mark, emblem, or combination mark, the logo must encapsulate and communicate the brand's core identity, values, and personality (Grizzanti, 2020; Carmi, 2020; Wheeler, 2018). The same goes for colour palettes, tone of voice, and other aspects of the corporate image.

Beyond static identity markers, some brands go further by adopting anthropomorphic characters – better known as mascot logos – such as the Michelin Man, the Nesquik Bunny, or Mickey Mouse, to personify their values and enhance emotional resonance. These figures function not only as communicative tools but as symbolic avatars of the brand body itself, highlighting its capacity to assume lifelike features. They provide a hyper-recognisable face, amplify human-like appeal, and enable deeper affective bonds with audiences.

This emphasis on expressive coherence and emotional resonance reinforces the need for intentional, meaning-driven design. As Ciuccarelli (2007, p.5) argues, corporate image design must transcend mere visual consistency:

“More symbol than icon, in Peirce’s terms. Or rather, it primarily serves a symbolic function even when it resembles by likeness, and ideally aspires to the function of the index. Corporate image design can no longer (or should no longer) be disconnected from identity design. We must move beyond graphic identity projects that fail – or refuse –to construct meaning, to communicate, or to transmit anything. It cannot be a mere operation of reuniting the scattered parts of a corporation; it must imbue that process with purpose.” (translation by the authors)

In this sense, the brand’s body becomes its language – a unified structure of signs that generates recognition, empathy, and memory. Since every behaviour is a form of communication, “nothing that the brand-as-organism does is excluded from the discourse on identity and image” (Ciuccarelli, 2007, p.7). This embodied understanding of identity lays the groundwork for a further consideration: that if a brand lives through its body, then its existence, too, may be shaped by time.

1.3. The Mortality of Brands

Just as humans age and naturally reach the end of their days, so too does a brand, as it “is subject to market forces that drive a process of senescence, rather than being in control of its own destiny” (Ewing et al., 2009, p.333). This perspective draws on the organic metaphor developed in the previous section, extending the view of the brand as a living organism composed of interdependent parts. As in any biological system, a brand exists through a delicate balance of internal coherence, responsiveness to external stimuli, and sustained relevance in its environment. When this equilibrium is lost – through internal breakdown, external shocks, or failure to adapt – the brand begins to decline.

The final death of most brands is inevitable. And when a brand dies, the values and essence that made it so glorious in life fall into oblivion, while production ceases entirely or remains only as residual traces. Brand mortality, then, is not just a possibility but a meaningful and revealing reality. If a brand is to “embody a soul” (Grizzanti, 2020, p.226) – a way of being, a philosophy of life – it must also acknowledge its vulnerability. Brands, like any living being, are not immune to decline. And this is perhaps the least celebrated – yet most revealing – truth: brands die, too.

Therefore, like humans, “a brand is destined to fight for survival” (Titterton & Fioroni, 2007, p.72). A brand operates under evolutionary principles strikingly similar to those that govern biological organisms – specifically competition for finite resources and environmental selection (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) – within competitive, volatile environments where survival becomes the primary imperative. In the brand lifecycle – modeled, for instance, by the classic Product Lifecycle Theory, which includes phases of

Introduction, Growth, Maturity, and Decline (Kotler & Keller, 2012) – we can recognise the traits characterising Darwinian evolution. In other words, “the fittest survives, the one that can adapt most rapidly to changing conditions. As the environment shifts, so too must the brand, and those unable to evolve will die” (Titterton & Fioroni, 2007, p.72). Brand death is thus contingent not only on managerial inadequacy but also on external factors that block or hinder the brand’s evolutionary process, meaning the strategic effort to adapt the brand’s core value proposition and identity to continuously shifting environmental conditions. Among these, political and regulatory factors play a critical role: shifting legislation, trade restrictions, or reputational risks linked to geopolitical crises can alter the landscape in which a brand operates. Another critical factor is economic, because “a deep recession or crash can have a significant impact on whether current consumers can continue to afford certain branded products” (Groucutt, 2006, p.103). Technical and digital revolutions radically reshape consumer behaviours and competitive contexts, and the brands unable to reinvent themselves – such as Olivetti and Blockbuster – have ultimately disappeared. Climate change adds another layer of pressure, challenging brands to adapt through sustainable practices and innovation in materials and production.

According to Groucutt (2006), even though a brand’s lifespan can be extended through strategies such as innovation and repositioning, most of today’s well-known brands will be defunct by 2050. Brand death, then, is not solely the result of managerial failure but often the outcome of systemic shifts that reveal a brand’s limits in adaptability. Just as certain animal species, political systems, and national economies are destined to face extinction, so are many brands. Failure – and with it, death – is inherent to both biological and economic systems. Consequently, not all brands have the capacity to evolve and reinvent themselves in their DNA, meaning enduring strategy elements that either facilitate or hinder successful reinvention (Wheeler, 2018). Like animal species, where some are predisposed to evolution and others are anchored to their current form, “the genetic clock ticks, and the brand whose clock has few chimes left becomes extinct” (Titterton & Fioroni, 2007, p.73).

Some of the most well-known brands still thriving today, such as Budweiser and Coca-Cola, represent exceptions. Others, like Microsoft, IBM, GE, Intel, and Nokia, operate in sectors that are completely unrecognisable from fifty years ago and have been able to evolve. However, numerous brands that once held cultural or commercial relevance have since disappeared or faded into obscurity. From airlines like Pan Am and British Caledonian to transportation manufacturers such as Austin Healey and Innocenti; from once-pioneering technology companies like Olivetti, Atari, and Blockbuster to fashion labels including American Apparel and Guru.

Among these, the story of Pan Am remains particularly illustrative. Although it had successfully grasped its audience’s unspoken desires and transformed them into a compelling emotional travel experience, the airline ultimately failed. It ceased to exist, succumbing to the same vulnerabilities that afflict all complex systems. Despite being the world’s largest international carrier in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Figure 1) and revolutionising commercial aviation, Pan Am was forced into bankruptcy in 1991. A convergence of external shocks – such as the 1973 OPEC oil embargo, which inflated fuel costs and slashed demand – and internal vulnerabilities made its survival impossible. These internal issues included rising operational costs, growing debt, and a series of flawed strategic decisions, such

as the acquisition of National Airlines, which diluted resources without producing the expected synergies. The company also struggled to adapt to deregulation, failed to diversify its routes beyond international travel, and did not invest in fleet renewal or service innovation. Additionally, leadership was criticised for lacking a cohesive long-term vision and failing to reposition the brand in a rapidly changing market. A further blow came in 1988 with the Lockerbie bombing of Flight 103, which severely damaged the brand's reputation. In the following years, Pan Am disintegrated and was forced to liquidate assets and cease operations. Pan Am's story is a stark reminder that even the most iconic brands are not immune to decline and death.



Figure 1. Pan Am Advertising, 1957 (The virtual Pan Am Museum).

If brands, like living beings, are destined to die, might they also leave something behind? In a world where society's collective and digital memory is constantly being updated and archived, could digital memory become the space where brands persist, even after their market disappearance?

2. Living and Dying Online: Data, Memory and the Self

2.1. Digital Traces and Identity in the Infosphere

In a society immersed in the infosphere – defined by Floridi (2014) as the informational space of the digital age that encompasses all areas of life – the production of data is no longer an exceptional event, but a continuous and implicit behaviour embedded in daily interactions. Every action performed online leaves a trace, an imprint that contributes to the construction of a distributed individual memory, capable of outlining the individual's digital identity. The connected person – or digital person – generates various types of information depending on their interactions with platforms, devices, and other users. This production is partly conscious and partly involuntary, and over time contributes to stratifying both personal and social digital memory. Between the quantitative collection of big data¹ – harvested by corporations and governments for predictive and behavioural analysis – and the qualitative depth of thick data² – collected by researchers and marketers to interpret motivations and values – the

individual's online life is constantly recorded, encoded, and archived in real time (Wang, 2017). These data include everything shared, selected, liked, ignored, or commented on. It is no longer just about communicating: it is about publicly narrating and constructing oneself (Van Dijck, 2007). This process builds a genuine digital autobiography, where identity and memory overlap, a dynamic shaped both by the individual's narrative intent and by the structural constraints and ownership of the platforms used.

It can therefore be said that, regardless of the level of control each individual has over the data they produce online, the traces we leave behind are engraved, marked, tracked, and etched into browser histories, cloud servers, and databases, like digital tattoos on the body of the web: indelible marks that document who we are, what we've done, and how we want to be remembered (Sisto, 2020). In some way, everything done online becomes visible and contributes to identifying the individual. Goldsmith (2016) compares the digital-self to Pig-Pen, the Peanuts character surrounded by a permanent cloud of dust, which becomes:

"a living embodiment of the idea of cloud computing. Like a fully quantified being, every move Pig-Pen makes – every step, every shake of the head – generates more visible dust. [...] His cloud is networked and interacts with everyone he comes into contact with; he himself is a living social network. [...] Moving through the world, Pig-Pen absorbs the present day into his cloud, layering it atop the many layers that form his historical documentation; he is at once an archaeologist, a geologist, and an archivist".

Actions performed *onlife* (Floridi, 2014) – in that hybrid space between online and offline – accumulate over time as fragments of the self, forming a personal memory composed of posts, comments, searches, photographs, biometric data, and browser histories. A stratified, fragmented, and distributed digital memory that – if analysed in its entirety – allows for the reconstruction of a very precise identity. As Goldsmith (2016) himself notes:

"Gmail stores an exact record of all my correspondence, and social media platforms track every one of my posts, likes, and comments. If I add the dozen or so text messages I sent in that hour and consider everything together, I can reconstruct a fairly accurate self-portrait. Even if there are gaps, one glance at a webpage in my browser history can trigger a chain of reminiscences that lets me retrace my thought processes and reconstruct my memories".

In this sense, Descartes' famous assertion "cogito ergo sum" seems to transform into "I produce and consume information, therefore I am". The web is not just an archive: it is a living repository of memory, constantly evolving.

According to Ostrow (2011), an average Facebook user who posts around 90 pieces of content per month accumulates over 10,000 items in ten years, including posts, photos, links, videos, comments, tags, and stories. These traces – distributed across servers and data centres – constitute a meticulous diary of their existence: from private moments to public events, personal reflections, and aesthetic choices. Everything contributes to forming an extended data body, a documented and searchable identity. Ostrow highlights how today it is possible, with a simple scroll, "to retrace in detail the personal, professional, emotional, and family events of the past ten years, all documented on one's profile". In this ability to unearth every fragment of the past through an interface lies the potential of an external and distributed memory – capable not only of preservation, but of reconstructing the subject. Projects such as Microsoft's *MyLifeBits* – inspired by Vannevar Bush's (1945) concept of the *Memex* – had already envisioned a system to extend autobiographical memory by archiving every experience and

making it retrievable through dynamic associations, where related data fragments are linked to simulate human memory paths. As Floridi (2014) affirms, referring to Brière et al. (2013): “Our madeleines are now digital”. This alludes to Proust's concept of involuntary memory, emphasizing that simple digital traces can now act as triggers for deep, spontaneous recollections. Even the most insignificant memories – ephemeral thoughts, musical tastes, forgotten photos – contribute to constructing a posthumous identity (Stokes, 2011; Sisto, 2020) that can be unearthed, observed, and even reinterpreted by those left behind. Given that the digital self is inherently fractured and context-dependent, friends and family will inevitably encounter gaps, necessitating their active reinterpretation and reconstruction of the deceased's identity from the available traces.

This process of reconstructing memory from partial and often decontextualised fragments highlights the deeply personal yet socially entangled nature of digital inheritance – one that raises complex technological, legal, and ethical questions, including the right to be forgotten and posthumous control over one's digital identity (Carleo, 2022).

It is precisely at this boundary between memory persistence and posthumous survival that the following reflection emerges: if individuals leave behind a digital trail capable of outliving them, what happens to brands, which have long been treated as living subjects? If a person can exist beyond life thanks to their data, can a brand have a digital afterlife? This is where the concept of digital memory intersects with that of branding, opening up new scenarios for understanding the future of identity in the Web and its speculative extensions. Pan Am offers a particularly evocative case: although the airline ceased operations in 1991, the brand continues to circulate in digital form through merchandise, an active website, and social media presence. This revival is not the result of corporate reactivation, but of cultural and emotional investment by individuals and communities who keep its memory alive. It is through these user-driven acts of remembrance and symbolic engagement that the brand is granted a kind of posthumous presence, demonstrating how digital memory can become the space in which brands persist, evolve, or even return.

2.2. Brands as Post-Human Entities: Memory and Survival in Digital Culture

If connected individuals leave behind a trail of data capable of preserving their identity well beyond biological death, the same logic can be extended to brands. In a context where brands are viewed as “entities with a soul” (Grizzanti, 2020, p.226) or as living cultural organisms, the notion of digital afterlife takes on renewed significance – not merely as commercial survival, but as symbolic, relational, and semiotic persistence over time. Just as individuals build their digital identities through traces left online, brands also produce signs, interactions, narratives, images, and stories that contribute to a collective digital memory. Posts, advertising campaigns, audience engagement, UGC (User Generated Content), articles, memes, comments, and visual archives form a structured corpus that gradually shapes the brand's personality. If a brand is a meaning-making device, then its persistence can be interpreted as a form of distributed cultural memory, a digital legacy sedimented across networks, even after being discontinued.

Some brands, therefore, survive in collective memory long after their operational end, giving rise to “brand haunting” phenomena where a brand’s identity continues to echo across pop culture, online platforms, and user imaginaries (Almazayad et al., 2023). This is the case of Pan Am, Atari, Blockbuster, or American Apparel: brands that have ceased or downsized their operations but persist as shared memories, nostalgic references, or even parodies. Their online presence in forums, social media, or vintage marketplaces represents a spectral survival that fully belongs to the realm of digital afterlife.

These phenomena signal a significant cultural shift: the brand is not merely a commercial or communicative object, but a post-human subject inhabiting the infosphere. In this framework, branding is no longer only about recognition or market value but becomes a strategy of permanence and memory stewardship. The intentional archiving of content – from corporate storytelling to digital heritage, from visual archives to retrobranding – reinforces the idea of the brand as a mnestic entity, one that can remember, be remembered, and build relationships over time. This becomes especially evident in digital brand memorialization practices. After closing or going bankrupt, some companies keep their websites online as historical archives, while fans and popular culture commemorate others through blogs, documentaries, tribute social media accounts, or, crucially, through popular streaming series that transform corporate failure into public narrative, as seen with *The Dropout* (Theranos), *WeCrashed* (WeWork), and BlackBerry. These cultural products not only preserve the brand’s narrative in the collective imagination but also transform it into a form of digital and audiovisual memory, accessible, dramatized, and reinterpreted.

Blockbuster, for instance, now lives a second life online through ironic accounts, vintage merchandise, and memes that leverage collective nostalgia for the 1990s and 2000s. In such cases, the brand identity takes on a participatory and ironic form, allowing it to be reactivated and reintegrated into a living cultural context (Ostberg & Hartmann, 2025). Yet, the digital survival of brands is not limited to nostalgic remembrance. Kodak and Polaroid have reshaped their historic identities to reposition themselves within the contemporary digital instant photography market. In these cases, digital brand memory becomes a strategic cultural asset. Unsurprisingly, managing digital heritage is becoming a crucial aspect of modern brand strategy. Just as individuals now consider their digital legacy, brands must also plan how to survive across time, manage their digital traces, and sustain engagement even beyond their active lifecycle (Hoskins, 2009; Sisto, 2018). In a world where brands exist online, their digital archive serves both as an identity repository and as a tool for continuity.

This opens the door to new speculative scenarios. The rise of brand avatars, AI-powered chatbots with distinct voices and personalities, branded AIs, and immersive branded worlds all suggest a very real possibility: that a brand may never truly die but, instead, continue to act and interact in new media ecosystems as Viceverse – the Metaverse of *Vice Magazine* (Figure 2). We are witnessing a shift from brand identity to brand immortality, a paradigm that redefines the very concept of presence in digital marketing and communication. In conclusion, the digital afterlife of brands is not limited to memory or historical documentation: it is about their capacity to maintain an active role within today’s media landscape – even in the absence of an operating company or physical product. In a society that does not forget – one structurally designed to remember – brands must now confront the challenge of infinite

memory: a form of eternal presence, sometimes desired, sometimes imposed, that raises radical questions about identity, temporality, and value in digital culture.



Figure 2. VICEVERSE, the Metaverse of *Vice Magazine*, 2022 (Vice Media).

2.3. Immortality and Performative Memory in Immersive Digital Environments

As brands increasingly inhabit digital environments as mnemonic and post-human entities, it becomes essential to reflect on how memory itself is evolving in the digital age. By looking at the Internet as a vast archive – a decentralised repository of human knowledge, traces, and interactions – it is possible to understand how its evolution toward immersive digital spaces introduces a new spatial and experiential dimension to memory's construction, storage, and performance. This ever-expanding archive grows with astonishing speed: in just one minute, users generate 500 hours of YouTube video and send over 240 million emails (Domo, 2022). A typical Facebook user may accumulate more than 10,000 posts in ten years – a personal chronicle of digital existence. In this transition, we witness a shift from memory as archival to memory as embodied, navigable, and relational. Digital memory ceases to be passive; it becomes active, interactive, and participatory.

Immersive digital environments such as virtual worlds, augmented realities, and connected Metaverses are not merely spaces of interaction: they are arenas in which presence and absence blur, where the living and the digital dead coexist, and where memory finds its most spatialised and sensorial form (Figure 3). It is in these virtual environments that the notion of digital afterlife gains not only visibility but agency. Here, the digital traces of the deceased (or of extinct entities like brands) are not only preserved but can evolve, respond, and reconfigure themselves over time. In other words, memory begins to perform identity in real time. As Sisto (2018) argues, digital immortality can be articulated through two parallel axes. First, as a form of durable fame, it is made possible by preserving and transmitting data, echoing traditional forms of remembrance. Second, and more radically, as continuous interaction and active evolution, whereby the deceased – or the no longer active – can persist through AI systems, avatars, and synthetic agents, sustaining an illusion of presence that borders on the

uncanny. This duality is crucial: while the former refers to digital memento and commemoration, the latter constructs a simulacrum capable of inhabiting digital space.

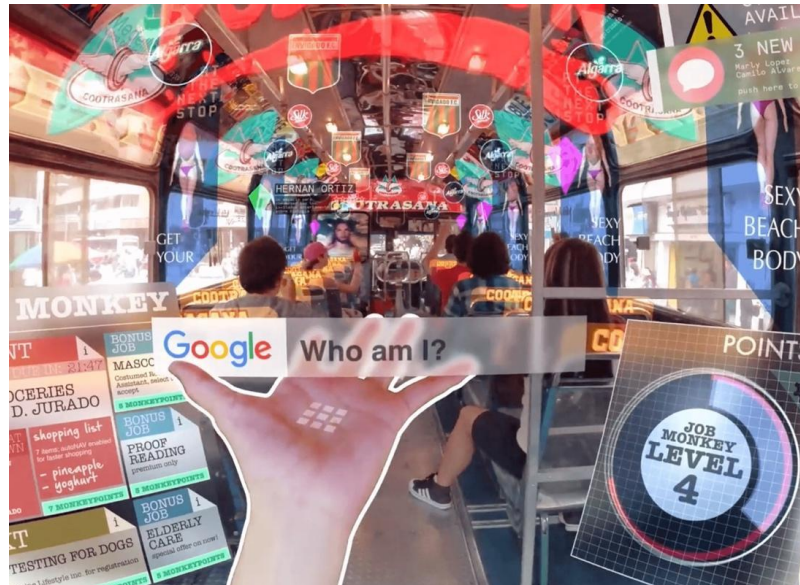


Figure 3. Frame from the "Hyper-Reality" Concept Film, 2016 (Keiichi Matsuda).

Projects like Replika, Hereafter AI, or Eterni.me make clear that the digital afterlife is no longer speculative fiction. The simulation of a person's consciousness, voice, or language pattern, reconstructed through their data, begins to approximate a form of digital being. These avatars are not just commemorative figures; they learn, respond, and adapt. They live in an immersive digital space, where memory is no longer something that is remembered, but something that remembers you back. This opens profound philosophical and ethical dilemmas, such as the ownership and curatorial power over the posthumous identity, the legal right to control or delete an externalized version of memory, and the moral implications of simulating perpetual presence. As immersive technologies embed memory into virtual space, we no longer deal with simple recollection, but with a re-presentation of the self: an externalised, editable, and potentially eternal version of identity. If memory defines the self (as much of philosophical tradition affirms), then what happens when memory becomes external, mutable, and accessible by others? Who owns this digital memory? Who curates it? And most importantly, who decides whether it continues to exist? Indeed, the mere technical possibility of preserving memories forever is not synonymous with immortality. As several critics point out, immortality in digital environments requires both storage and experiential access: the ability to bring memory to life in performative, embodied ways. As noted by Odendaal and Zavala Barreda (2020, p.64), archives "exist only if and when they are recalled by a user." In this sense, immortality becomes conditional, contingent upon attention, algorithms, and computational infrastructure. A memory not accessed is a memory not lived, no matter how permanently stored. Moreover, immersive spaces introduce a new grammar of presence. Memory becomes ambient, ubiquitous, and always-on. Through devices like Apple Vision Pro, HoloLens, Meta Quest, or mixed reality systems, digital traces are no longer locked behind screens: they become layered onto reality itself. This creates what de Kerckhove (2018) calls a "connective memory", wherein individuals are constantly supported by external memory systems,

increasingly unable to forget because forgetting is no longer necessary. Yet this abundance may be perilous. As Baudrillard (2000) reminds us, the obsession with preservation and simulation may lead to a loss of authenticity. What remains, in this context, of the real?

The risk is that the immersive archive becomes a total memory system, an environment in which everything is remembered, nothing is lost, and the past is permanently accessible. This may sound utopian, but it also forces us to consider the strategic implications of permanent digital existence for brands: how does a brand, trapped in infinite and total memory, distinguish between its authentic *history* and perpetual *repetition* of its past identity? This leads to a redefinition of digital immortality itself: not as simple survival, but as a condition of perpetual performativity (Ernst & Parikka, 2013). Immersive environments, unlike archives, are not about stillness. They demand interaction, presence, and narrative. A digital being (or brand) is not immortal because it is remembered, but because it continues to act. Yet this performativity is fragile. Systems can crash. Data can be corrupted. The very infrastructures that promise it may undermine the illusion of eternity. As Sisto (2020) reminds us, the real challenge lies not only in uploading the mind, but in creating the space – emotional, technical, symbolic – where this mind can continue to live.

Ultimately, immersive digital environments represent the new existential laboratory of the post-biological human condition, where memory, identity, and death are renegotiated through the lens of technology. Where the concept of “immortality” no longer coincides with the soul’s eternity, but with the ability to leave a persistent, reactive, and performative trace within the global network. A trace that – whether for better or worse – will continue to act, speak, and be remembered, even after the biological end of the individual.

3. The Brand Afterlife Meta-Agency: Designing Posthumous Brand Identities

3.1. A Speculative Approach to Brand Afterlife

Building on the previous reflections, this section translates theoretical insights into a speculative design proposal. If brands can persist as mnemonic and post-human entities through digital traces and cultural memory, how might we imagine their afterlife in immersive environments? In this context, the project explores the idea of posthumous brand identity: a condition in which a defunct brand, reactivated by user memory and mediated through data, returns as an avatar within the Metaverse. This speculative proposal acts not as a forecast, but as a tool for critical exploration, inviting ethical reflection on identity, responsibility, and digital immortality.

Speculative design, as defined by Dunne & Rabby (2013) uses fictional scenarios and design artifacts to provocatively explore possible futures, opening a debate on the ethical and cultural implications of possible technological and social developments. Rather than predicting what will happen, speculative design asks, “What if?” to open debate, raise ethical questions, and explore emerging technologies’ cultural and social consequences. Dunne & Raby (2013, p.14) explain that these scenarios are “necessarily provocative, intentionally simplified and fictional”. Therefore, the power of speculative design is close to that of bizarre satirical tales, as it deals with scenarios that are not only

imaginable but also seem already present. Whether set in the near future or belong to an alternative present, they can say something about the here and now, the technology already in use, and how it influences society.

This speculative scenario takes place in 2050 – the same year in which Ray Kurzweil¹ (Passatello, 2015) claims that technology will already be advanced enough both to allow the digital society to have an open and interoperable Web and to make mind-uploading possible. Here, we image the existence of the Brand Afterlife Meta-Agency (BAMA): a fictional agency specialising in the reactivation of defunct brands as avatars within immersive digital ecosystems. This process begins with a user request, which recalls the files, memories, and data of the brand, giving life to the digital afterlife (Odendaal & Zavala Barreda, 2020). For this reason, BAMA does not simply create random avatars. Still, it undertakes an ethical evaluation of the brand and its conduct, given its significant influence on society and the individual consumer, and therefore the need to approach their digital afterlife in the Metaverse with care and responsibility.

3.2. Ethics and Responsibility in the Digital Afterlife of Brands

In the digital realm, memory is never neutral (Van Dijck, 2007). As traces accumulate and identities persist beyond their physical or temporal limits, the question arises: who gets remembered, and under what conditions?

This is particularly relevant in the context of brands, whose posthumous presence depends not only on what they did during their lifetime, but also on how their behaviour is archived, interpreted, and resurfaced. A brand's conduct is not always aligned with ethical or responsible standards. While transparency in communication and clarity of identity remain essential, broader factors increasingly shape how brands are perceived and remembered. These include labour practices, environmental footprint, governance structures, cultural positioning, and responses to political or humanitarian crises. Such choices do not merely affect public opinion or consumer trust in the present: they influence the cultural and social fabric, with consequences that can be both positive and harmful. Over time, they define the brand's long-term ethical legacy, which may either reinforce or contradict its original values.

In this sense, a brand's eligibility for a digital afterlife cannot be considered neutral or automatic. If memory is shaped by values, intentions, and infrastructures, then the question arises: should all brands be granted posthumous visibility regardless of their past conduct? Can behavior in life or online life, influence presence in the digital afterlife? When access to the digital afterlife is granted to everyone without discrimination, there is a risk that the digital afterlife may be left to an immoral case (Savin-Baden, 2021). On the one hand, it is necessary to allow everyone the possibility of access. At the same time, on the other hand, it is essential to define a moral value for this system, which affects the most important aspect of both the digital reality and brands: identity. Within this speculative scenario, the project does not aim to provide definitive answers to complex questions – such as at what cost, and under whose responsibility should digital afterlife be granted – but rather to explore the tensions that

¹ Computer scientist, author, futurist and inventor, ex-Chief Engineer at Google.

emerge when the past is reactivated, recontextualised, and made interactable. In this landscape, what persists is not just memory, but a reconfigurable presence that evolves into new forms of digital representation.

As previously discussed, identity is a cornerstone of the digital realm: entirely customizable and differentiable from the real one, not bound by the limits of physics, genetics, or biology, it converges in the avatar. Today, many brands play with shades of themselves to engage users in creating an avatar that brings them together. Coca-Cola with its *Metaversion*, Adidas with *Ozworld*, Microsoft with system avatars, and Adobe with *My Creative Types* (Figure 4). Abstract bodies are vaguely anthropomorphic, and users can recognise themselves through colours, expressions, and descriptions. In short, an embodiment of the most authentic self, conveying identity outward and guiding the first impression and subsequent interactions.

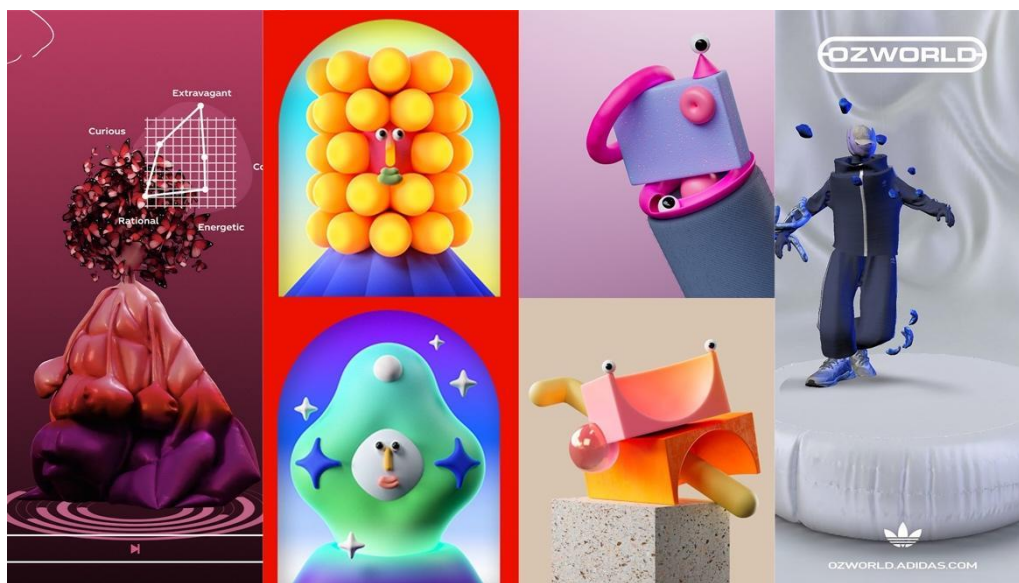


Figure 4. From left to right: Custom Avatar by Coca Cola Metaversion; Adobe Creative Types; Microsoft Avatar; Adidas Ozworld (The Coca Cola Company; Adobe; Microsoft; Adidas).

In the context of a digital afterlife, identity becomes even more complex. No law defines the deceased's belongings when someone or something dies. It can become something public, in continuous evolution, until it detaches itself from the original identity. Or it could represent it in its most realistic form, the one that otherwise would not have been visible. Just as in the case of defunct brands and their digital afterlife in the Metaverse, for which conduct in life influences identity and therefore the avatar in the digital afterlife, bringing out the brand's most real aspect.

The Brand Afterlife Meta-Agency introduces an ethical evaluation protocol to assess whether and how a defunct brand should return as an avatar. This process analyses factors such as transparency, sustainability, communication style, and historical legacy. As part of this speculative scenario, the protocol is not defined by any existing institution, but imagined within the fictional structure of BAMA itself (Figure 5). It is curated by a conceptual panel of algorithmic systems and cultural analysts, designed to reflect the tension between data-driven assessment and ethical judgment. These criteria

aim to ensure that the avatar of the defunct brand does not merely reproduce surface aesthetics, but embodies a synthesis of its symbolic, moral, and emotional legacy.



Figure 5. Brand Afterlife Meta-Agency (BAMA) Web Platform (the authors).

The introduction of an ethical evaluation in the re-exhumation process questions the responsibility of brands with respect to their actions, suggesting the need for more conscious and transparent behaviour. This assessment does not treat the brand as a fixed or singular entity, but as a dynamic narrative, evaluating its original values alongside the actions and decisions that have shaped its trajectory over time, including moments of divergence caused by leadership changes, acquisitions, or shifting priorities. The evaluation draws on a combination of historical archives, public data, and user-generated content to build a nuanced picture of the brand's ethical legacy. At the same time, the platform raises questions about the post-mortem management of digital identity, challenging the notions of ownership, authenticity, and the representation of the digital self. Finally, the project invites reflection on the meaning of digital immortality and its moral implications in a context where memory is no longer limited to remembering but continues to have an active presence. For this reason, the Brand Afterlife Meta-Agency offers a precise and careful service to ensure that the avatar of the defunct brand is as sincere and truthful as possible, both with respect to the conduct of the brand itself and to the opinion of the user, even if this means challenging the brand's original image.

3.3. The Avatar as Brand Legacy: Translating Data into Identity

The project takes shape as a true speculative kit for the re-exhumation of defunct brands, drawing symbolic inspiration from the rituals and aesthetics of funeral agencies. It is not merely a set of technical tools, but a guided and immersive experience: a digital ritual that is both analytical and emotional. At its core, it is a platform that offers defunct brands a second life in the form of avatars, designed based on their ethical and moral conduct. Rather than functioning as a generic avatar generator, it presents itself as a structured and immersive system that combines data analysis, cultural interpretation, and user interaction.

The avatar creation process begins with the algorithmic design system developed by the Brand Afterlife Meta-Agency. This system translates a variety of data inputs into the visual and structural features of the avatar, ensuring that its appearance communicates not only aesthetic traits but also moral, historical, and emotional dimensions. The first input layer involves objective system-level data, such as brand values and the cause of failure. The brand's core values are organised into seven macro-categories explicitly developed for this speculative framework: (1) passion and inspiration; (2) innovation and creativity; (3) simplicity and functionality; (4) diversity and inclusion; (5) authenticity and transparency; (6) craftsmanship and quality; (7) sustainability and social responsibility. Each category is linked to a specific geometric solid based on symbolic associations. For instance, sustainability is represented by the dodecahedron, a shape historically associated with nature. These shapes are then used to build the base geometry of the avatar, which is composed of three distinct modular parts: the head, torso, and limbs. The modular division allows for targeted visual encoding and controlled variation, ensuring that each avatar maintains internal consistency while reflecting brand-specific traits. The visual construction of these parts follows a human-inspired structure: the legs and arms adopt an inverted-U configuration to suggest upright posture and gesture; the torso is elongated and central, acting as the compositional anchor of the body; the head, separated from the body, contains the expression and houses several of the visual signals related to identity and ethical judgment.

CATEGORY OF VALUES	GEOMETRIC SHAPE	RATIONALE
PASSION AND INSPIRATION <i>CREATIVE, PASSIONATE, INSPIRED</i>	SPIRAL 	A THREE-DIMENSIONAL FORM THAT SYMBOLISES CREATIVITY AND INSPIRATION, EVOKING THE IDEA OF ENERGY EXPANDING INFINITELY. IT CONVEYS IMAGINATIVE MOMENTUM AND VISIONARY DRIVE.
INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY <i>INNOVATIVE, VISIONARY, CREATIVE</i>	ICOSAHEDRON 	A COMPLEX POLYHEDRON COMPOSED OF 20 EQUILATERAL TRIANGULAR FACES, REPRESENTING CONTINUOUS TRANSFORMATION AND FORWARD-THINKING. THE IRREGULARITY OF ITS FACETS HIGHLIGHTS NON-CONVENTIONAL INNOVATION.
SIMPLICITY AND FUNCTIONALITY <i>ESSENTIAL, FUNCTIONAL, CLEAN</i>	CUBE 	A REGULAR SOLID WITH SIX IDENTICAL SQUARE FACES, SUGGESTING CLARITY, SYMMETRY, AND RATIONALITY. IT REFLECTS AN ETHOS OF ESSENTIAL, CLEAN, AND ACCESSIBLE DESIGN.
DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION <i>INCLUSIVE, OPEN, WELCOMING</i>	TORUS 	A CONTINUOUS SURFACE ASSOCIATED WITH BALANCE AND UNITY. IT SYMBOLISES SOCIAL INCLUSIVITY, OPENNESS, AND COHESION AS CORE ETHICAL VALUES.
AUTHENTICITY AND TRANSPARENCY <i>AUTHENTIC, TRANSPARENT, TRUSTWORTHY, SINCERE, HONEST</i>	TETRAHEDRON 	AS THE SIMPLEST OF ALL POLYHEDRA, THE TETRAHEDRON CONVEYS CLARITY AND STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY. ITS MINIMAL YET STABLE FORM IS ASSOCIATED WITH TRANSPARENCY, DIRECTNESS, AND TRUST.
QUALITY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP <i>HANDCRAFTED, HIGH-QUALITY, REFINED, LUXURIOUS, ELEGANT</i>	SPHERE 	UNIVERSALLY RECOGNISED AS A PERFECT AND SYMMETRIC FORM, THE SPHERE SIGNIFIES EXCELLENCE, ELEGANCE, AND ARTISANAL PRECISION. IT CONNOTES HIGH-END REFINEMENT.
QUALITY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP <i>HANDCRAFTED, HIGH-QUALITY, REFINED, LUXURIOUS, ELEGANT</i>	DODECAHEDRON 	A COMPLEX POLYHEDRON EVOKING NATURAL HARMONY AND ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS. IT REPRESENTS A BRAND'S COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.

Figure 6. Geometric Representations of Brand Values Through Form-Driven Symbolism (the authors).

The cause of the brand's "death" is also visually encoded. Rather than deforming the entire body, the algorithm assigns a metaphorical accessory to signify this cause. For example, a brand that failed due to poor consumer adaptation might feature a symbolic "cage" around the head, an image of constraint and outdated vision. These visual metaphors do not derive from pre-existing taxonomies but were carefully developed within the speculative design framework to translate abstract brand narratives into expressive, emotionally resonant, and semantically meaningful visual cues.

The second layer focuses on the visual and iconographic identity of the brand. The algorithm scans recurring patterns in the brand's aesthetic language, such as material textures, colour palettes, and

iconic motifs. This process draws from the brand's historical design outputs and public-facing aesthetic language, identifying consistent visual elements that are then translated into the avatar's skin. Colour palettes determine the primary hues of the avatar, while recognisable materials become its surface textures. This translation ensures that the avatar retains a subtle but coherent visual continuity with the brand's original identity, preserving recognisability while adapting it to the speculative language of the project.

The third set of inputs is evaluative, reflecting ethical parameters assessed by the Meta-Agency. This includes transparency, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility. Each is visualised through a specific design transformation:

- Transparency is visualised through the structure of the head: a fragmented or distorted form indicates opacity or inconsistency.
- Sustainability is rendered through layered textures: more sustainable brands have clean, smooth surfaces, while less sustainable ones appear eroded, polluted, or visibly degraded. (Figure 7)
- Social responsibility is encoded via 3D proportional deformation using “squash and stretch” techniques: balanced volumes indicate ethical commitment; asymmetries or imbalances suggest reputational or structural fragility.

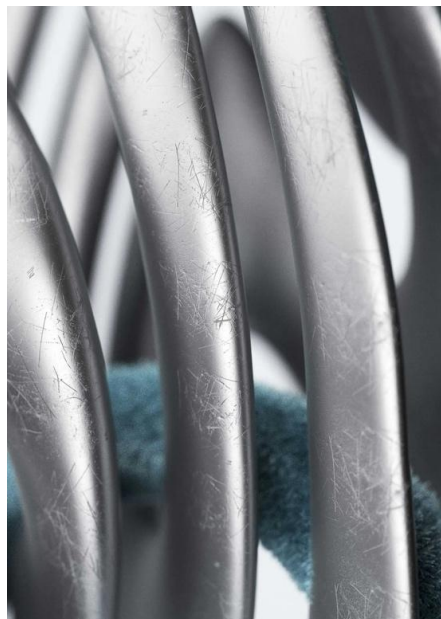


Figure 7. State of Material Degradation Depending on Apple's Sustainability (the authors).

While the evaluation system remains speculative, its logic is grounded in real-world practices. The criteria for assessing transparency, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility are loosely inspired by existing frameworks such as the Fashion Transparency Index and platforms like Ethical Consumer, as well as CSR reports published by companies. Rather than applying fixed metrics, the system reinterprets these dimensions to imagine how ethical branding could be visualised in a

posthumous, avatar-based context. In this way, speculative design becomes a lens through which today's corporate ethics are reimagined as part of a future digital legacy (Figure 8).

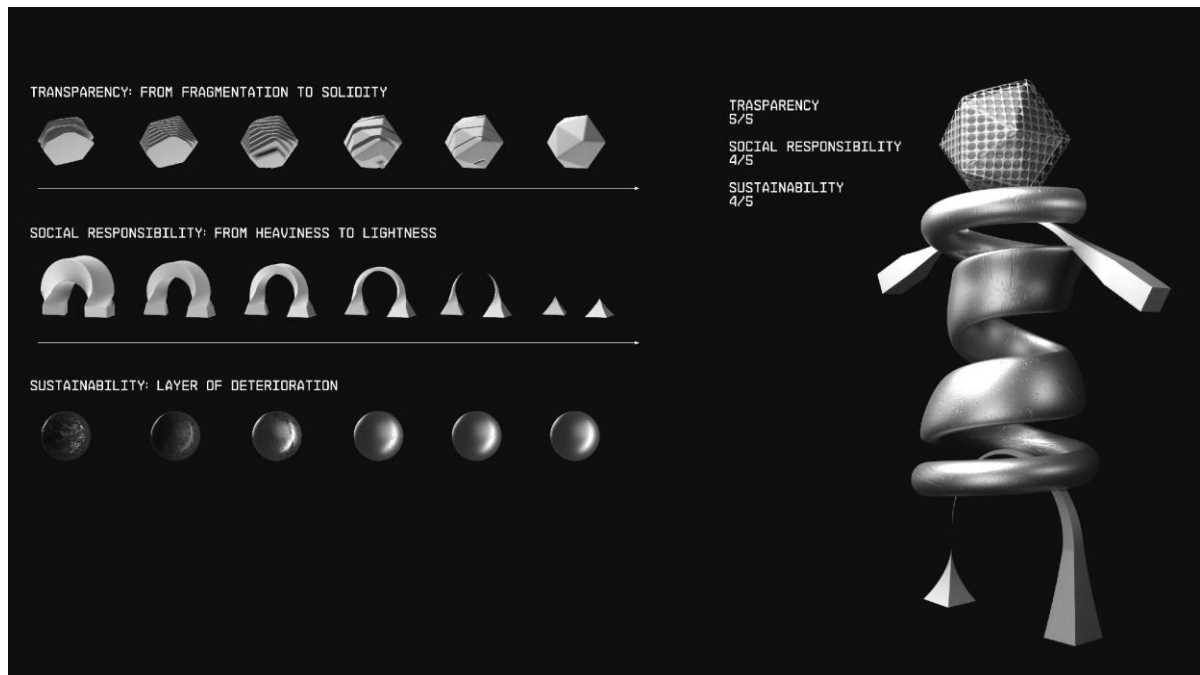


Figure 8. Parametric Translation of Ethical Values into Avatar Morphology (the authors).

The fourth layer involves subjective user input, introducing a personalised emotional layer. Here, the user is asked to answer six questions about their perception of the brand, including five based on Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality framework (sincerity, sophistication, competence, ruggedness, excitement). Each trait is mapped to a corresponding visual transformation, designed to reflect its core meaning symbolically. For example, sincerity and competence are rendered through softened deformations, suggesting openness, trust, and reliability – values that often translate into rounded, smooth, and approachable forms in visual culture. Ruggedness, by contrast, is visualised through surface cloning: a technique that generates thickened, layered, and resistant textures, evoking durability, rawness, and the physicality often associated with tough or 'gritty' brands. Excitement and creativity influence the expressive structure of the face, primarily through the positioning and multiplicity of the eyes – a metaphor for hyper-perception, dynamism, and emotional intensity. These aesthetic encodings are not arbitrary, but aim to make abstract emotional traits visually legible, enabling the avatar to act as a symbolic synthesis of memory, perception, and moral resonance. A final emotional question captures the user's connection to the brand, influencing whether the avatar feels soft and approachable, harsh, cold, or even repelling.

Together, these layers generate a hybrid avatar (Figure 9): part data-driven reconstruction, part emotional co-creation. Avatar design serves as a reflection of past choices, rather than a neutral interface: a narrative synthesis, a form of visual communication that condenses values, attitudes, memories, and contradictions. Even the way the avatar moves, speaks, or interacts can convey a precise positioning. In this sense, the aesthetics of the avatar become the direct reflection of the choices

made by the brand in life, leading the user to actively confront the deeper meanings of posthumous identity and digital memory.

Table 1. Visual Translation Matrix of Brand Evaluation Parameters

DATA TYPE	PARAMETER	VISUAL TRANSLATION	SOURCE
SYSTEM LEVEL DATA	CAUSE OF BRAND DEMISE	SYMBOLIC ACCESSORY REPRESENTING FAILURE CAUSE	BRAND ARCHIVES & PLATFORMS
	CORE BRAND VALUES	GEOMETRIC SOLIDS MAPPED TO VALUE CATEGORIES	
VISUAL DATA	COLOUR PALETTE	PRIMARY COLOUR SCHEME OF THE AVATAR	VISUAL RESEARCH AND DESIGN ANALYSIS
	VISUAL AND ICONOGRAPHY IDENTITY	DOMINANT MATERIALS AND TEXTURES USED IN BRAND'S LANGUAGE	
ETHICAL ASSESSMENT	TRANSPARENCY	FRAGMENTATION ↔ SOLIDITY OF THE HEAD SHAPE	TRANSPARENCY METRIC (E.G. FASHION TRANSPARENCY INDEX)
	ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY	CLEAN ↔ POLLUTED TEXTURES	ETHICAL CONSUMER & ENVIRONMENTAL RATINGS
	SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY	WEIGHT BALANCE THROUGH "SQUASH AND STRETCH" DEFORMATION	
USER DEFINED INPUT	SINCERITY	SHARO ↔ ROUNDED EDGES	BASED ON AAKER PERSONALITIES
	EXCITEMENT	EYE SHAPE, NUMBER AND EXPRESSION	
	COMPETENCE	BODY TORSION	
	SOPHISTICATION	PROPORTION REFINEMENT	
	RUGGEDNESS	SURFACE CLONING FOR ROUGH TEXTURE	
	EMOTIONAL CONNECTION	SOFTNESS AND COLOR HUES	USER EMOTIONAL RESPONSE



Figure 9. From left to right: Apple Brand Avatar; Pan Am Brand Avatar (the authors).

3.4. The User's Role: Co-Creation and Emotional Memory

The user plays a crucial role in shaping the posthumous identity of defunct brands. Through the Brand Afterlife Meta-Agency, consumers can contribute their perspectives, memories, and ethical judgments during the avatar creation process. This participatory dimension ensures that the resulting avatars are not merely system-generated representations, but hybrid artefacts, the outcome of a dialogue between brand history and individual perception. This interaction allows the user to imprint their opinion on the brand, making the avatar more personal, emotionally resonant, and socially meaningful. As a result, each avatar becomes a unique narrative: a fusion of objective parameters and subjective values that challenges the idea of brand identity as fixed or monolithic.

Nostalgia plays a central role in this process (Gibson & Carden, 2018). Defunct brands often retain emotional weight for consumers who have invested time, affection, and personal meaning into them. These brands become symbolic objects, capable of evoking memories and desires for revival. Social media further amplifies this dynamic, allowing users not only to express these feelings but to participate actively in the co-creation of resurrected identities. In this context, the Brand Afterlife Meta-Agency becomes a platform for critical reflection. It makes visible the emotional power that brands exert in contemporary culture and the responsibility they carry, even after their market disappearance. By entrusting part of the evaluative process to the consumer, the project underscores how digital survival increasingly depends on affective memory and participatory rewriting. Each avatar, therefore, becomes a mirror of two intertwined stories: the legacy of the brand and the emotional imprint it left on the individual.

In this context, identity becomes a distributed and co-authored construct, filtered through affect, memory, and interpretation. As each user brings their own perspective, emotional ties, and ethical stance to the process, the same brand may be reactivated in thousands of different ways. Each avatar

thus becomes a unique expression of the user's relationship with the brand (Figure 10). This multiplicity is not a flaw, but a deliberate feature of the system: it embraces the unstable, fragmented, and emotionally charged nature of digital memory. Rather than seeking a single, authoritative version of a brand, the project invites a polyphony of narratives, aligning with its broader aim of challenging fixed identities and celebrating interpretive plurality.

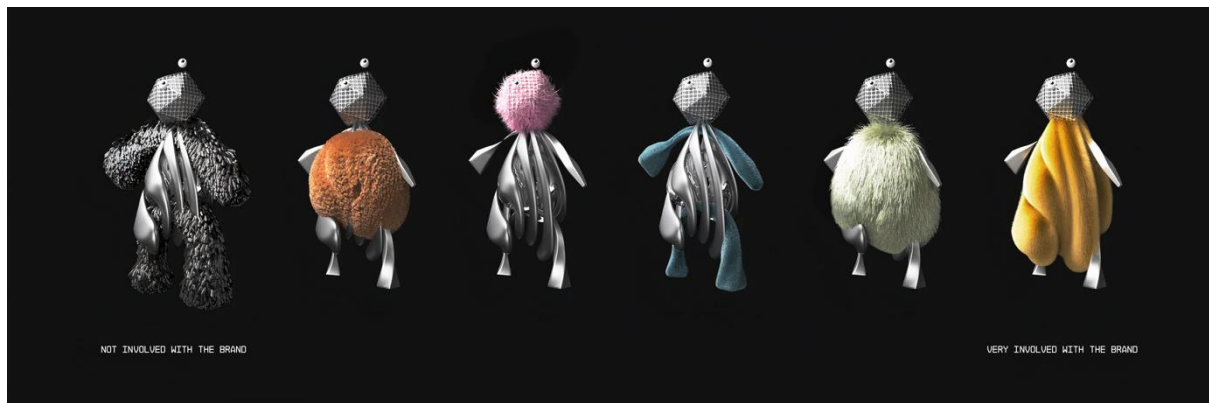


Figure 10. Variants of Apple Avatars, Depending on the User's Emotional Input (the authors).

4. Conclusion: A Critical Reflection on Brands as Living Entities

The Brand Afterlife Meta-Agency is not just a piece of design fiction. It is a speculative gesture that challenges our assumptions about identity, memory, and branding in the age of digital persistence (Dunne & Raby, 2013; Mitrović & Šuran, 2016; Iaconesi, 2019). By staging a posthumous ritual, it reframes branding not as a commercial exercise, but as a deeply symbolic – and even existential – practice. Rather than glorifying the Web/Metaverse or attempting to predict their future, the project treats it as an amplifier: an environment where the unresolved tensions of our current digital condition – between visibility and transparency, memory and manipulation, ethics and aesthetics – are pushed to their limits. It asks what happens when brands are treated like human entities, complete with lives, deaths, and legacies (Groucutt, 2006; Ewing et al., 2009; Almazyad et al., 2023).

Above all, the project reconsiders what a brand is – or can become – in a context where identity is no longer stable, but continuously recomposed through data, perception, and emotional memory. It questions the coherence and permanence of brand identity, revealing it instead as fragmented, negotiated, and haunted. By imagining a system where brands are resurrected not to be celebrated but critically reinterpreted, the project exposes the contradictions embedded in branding itself: the gap between how a brand presents itself and how it is remembered, judged, or felt by those who experienced it. This design scenario is intentionally uncomfortable. It disrupts the myth of brand perfection by exposing the cracks left behind: traces of misconduct, manipulation, or cultural dissonance. The avatar becomes the medium (Tremolada, 2022) through which these fractures are made visible: not to offer closure, but to reopen questions. There is no idealised resurrection here. Instead, there is symbolic reanimation: a system that turns corporate histories into expressive bodies, shaped by algorithms and emotion.

The avatar emerges from the intersection of objective evaluation and subjective memory, reflecting both the brand's conduct in life and the consumer's personal relationship with it. This hybrid nature reveals that the digital afterlife is not simply about preservation, but also about reinterpretation, where ethical responsibility, cultural influence, and emotional bonds converge. In this tension between form and content, aesthetics and judgment, the project's reflective potential takes shape. Crucially, this is neither a testable nor an operational system, nor does it aspire to technological feasibility.

The *Brand Afterlife Meta-Agency* is a conceptual artefact rooted in the tradition of speculative design, intended to stimulate critical discourse on the persistence and reinterpretation of identity in the digital realm. No empirical validation is offered –because none is sought. The aim is not to propose a solution, but to create a space for reflection, provocation, and ethical questioning. The death of the brand does not mark its disappearance, but rather the beginning of a new existential cycle: one in which memory, identity, and technology intertwine to generate new forms of posthumous presence in the digital realm. In doing so, it reveals how deeply brands have become embedded in the emotional, symbolic, and ethical fabric of contemporary life.

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¹ Huge amounts of raw information that are automatically gathered by apps, websites, and devices.

² Rich data capable of conveying context, meaning, and emotion.