

## The Desire for Significance & Memorability in Popular Culture: A Cognitive Psychological Study of Contemporary Literature, Art, and Media

**Authors :** Israel B. Bitton

**Abstract :** “Memory” is associated with various phenomena, from physical to mental, personal to collective and historical to cultural. As part of a broader exploration of memory studies in philosophy and science (slated for academic publication October 2021), this specific study employs analytical methods of cognitive psychology and philosophy of memory to theorize that A) the primary human will (drive) is to significance, in that every human action and expression can be rooted in a most primal desire to be cosmically significant (however that is individually perceived); and B) that the will to significance manifests as the will to memorability, an innate desire to be remembered by others after death. In support of these broad claims, a review of various popular culture “touchpoints”—historic and contemporary records spanning literature, film and television, traditional news media, and social media—is presented to demonstrate how this very theory is repeatedly and commonly expressed (and has been for a long time) by many popular public figures as well as “everyday people.” Though developed before COVID, the crisis only increased the theory’s relevance: so many people were forced to die alone, leaving them and their loved ones to face even greater existential angst than what ordinarily accompanies death since the usual expectations for one’s “final moments” were shattered. To underscore this issue of, and response to, what can be considered a sociocultural “memory gap,” this study concludes with a summary of several projects launched by journalists at the height of the pandemic to document the memorable human stories behind COVID’s tragic warped speed death toll that, when analyzed through the lens of Viktor E. Frankl’s psychoanalytical perspective on “existential meaning,” shows how countless individuals were robbed of the last wills and testaments to their self-significance and memorability typically afforded to the dying and the aggrieved. The resulting insight ought to inform how government and public health officials determine what is truly “non-essential” to human health, physical and mental, at times of crisis.

**Keywords :** cognitive psychology, covid, neuroscience, philosophy of memory

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