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Article:

Westwood, Sue (2025) 'You Have the Right to Be Respected in Death, Just as in Life': LGBTQ+ Funeral Providers in the UK – Pursuing Social Justice or the “Pink Pound”? Omega - Journal of Death and Dying. ISSN: 0030-2228

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228251354822>

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**‘You have the right to be respected in death, just as in life’: LGBTQ+ funeral providers
in the UK – pursuing social justice or the “pink pound”?**

Sue Westwood

Abstract

The funeral market is changing, adapting to increasing personalisation and diversification of ceremonies. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ+) people in the UK have increasing expectations of equitable service delivery, including in relation to funerals. However, they experience inequalities in palliative and end-of-life care, and anticipate associated barriers to equitable funeral provision. Concerns relate to funeral providers’ actual/potential heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions; sexuality and or gender identity invalidation; same-sex relationship non-recognition, and discounting of ‘families of choice’. These concerns are heightened regarding family of origin, who are not LGBTQ+ accepting. This article analyses UK websites marketing LGBTQ+ funeral services. Using queer and feminist approaches to death equity, and Nancy Fraser’s model of social justice, it argues that these funeral services constitute both pursuit of the ‘pink pound’ and resistance to heteronormative and cisnormative funeral traditions. The article proposes research agenda to explore these issues in greater depth.

Keywords: LGBTQ+; funeral; death equity; intersectionality; resistance; social justice

Introduction

With growing legal and social inclusion of sexual and gender minorities in the UK, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ+) people have increasing expectations of equitable services, including at the end of life. However, there are concerns about death equity, particularly in relation to funerals. LGBTQ+ people often experience inadequate palliative and end-of-life care (Almack et al., 2015; Cloyes et al., 2018; Haviland et al., 2021; Hospice UK, 2021, 2023; Marie Curie, 2017). Many LGBTQ+ people are worried about arranging end-of-life care and anticipate encountering heteronormative and cisnormative barriers when seeking to make funeral arrangements/participate in LGBTQ+ funerals (Bristowe et al., 2016; Whitestone et al., 2020). Ipsos (2023) recently conducted a large-scale study involving 27 countries, reporting that on average just under 80% of people identified as heterosexual, while 10% identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual or omnisexual and a further 11% said they did not know or did not want to, Ipsos also reported that ‘[o]n average, 1% of adults describe themselves as identifying as “transgender”, “non-binary/non-conforming/gender-fluid” or “in another way” rather than as “male” or “female”’ (Ipsos, 2023, p. 4), with this rising to 4% among Gen Z (i.e., those born in/after 1997). These figures suggest that at least 11% of the current population – and potentially more – could identify as LGBTQ+. This is a significant proportion of people whose needs, and rights, must be addressed, including in relation to funerals.

Funerals – ‘the ritual or ceremonial disposal of a body’ (SunLife, 2024, p. 2) – are an important part of commemorating the life of a person who has died and assisting grieving (Hoy, 2021). They have significant relational dimensions, including the performance of “family” among those connected to the deceased person (Walter & Bailey, 2020). However, normative understandings of “family” can result in exclusions of LGBTQ+ people from their loved ones’ funerals. Non-legally recognised partners, ‘families of friends’ (i.e. chosen family) (Hull &

Ortyl, 2019) and other non-normative relationship forms can be excluded, resulting in disenfranchised grief (Almack et al., 2010; Bristowe et al., 2016; Bristowe et al., 2023; Curtin & Garrison, 2018; Westwood, 2017). Trans persons are fearful of being, and have been, misgendered at their funerals (Nobel, 2024; Padgett, 2021; Payton, 2014; Weaver, 2020).

There has so far been little academic research in this area. The study reported here examines the contents of seven UK websites marketing LGBTQ+ funeral services. The article analyses themes cohering around identity and relationship recognition; non-normative relationship inclusion; appropriate funeral director selection; and legal mechanisms for funeral control. The findings are considered in relation to resistance and social justice, and the argument is made that the funeral websites combine a commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusion with pursuit of the 'pink pound' (Coombes & Singh, 2022). The article concludes by outlining a research agenda to explore these issues in greater depth.

Background

There were 581,363 deaths registered in England and Wales in 2023, with most funerals involving cremations (Competition and Markets Authority, 2020). While funeral services used to be religious, many are now secular (Thompson et al., 2024) and increasingly personalised (Holloway et al., 2013), with the funeral industry adapting to changing market demand and a shift away from tradition (Beard & Burger, 2017). One dimension of that shift involves funerals which openly celebrate LGBTQ+ lives and relationships.

LGBTQ+ people are increasingly visible and legally protected in the UK. The Gender Recognition Act 2004 permits an individual to change their legal gender from male to female or from female to male (although not to other nonbinary forms). Same-sex couples can form civil partnerships (Civil Partnership Act 2004) and marry (Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act

2013; Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014; Marriage (Same-sex Couples) and Civil Partnership (Opposite-sex Couples) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2019). Under the Equality Act 2010 it is unlawful to discriminate based on nine protected characteristics, including sexual orientation and gender reassignment, with the latter encompassing gender nonbinary and gender fluid persons (*Ms R Taylor v Jaguar Land Rover Ltd*: 1304471/2018). Although the Act only applies to living individuals, it includes individuals wishing to commission a funeral.

It has previously been established in the UK that religious persons cannot refuse to provide services to sexual minorities (Stychin, 2009). However, in both the UK (*Lee v Ashers Baking Company Ltd and others* [2018] UKSC 49) and the US (*Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, 584 U.S. 617 (2018)), both cases relating to “gay cakes”, it has also been established that retailers are entitled to refuse to produce goods which have pro-gay messages on them if doing so conflicts with their religious beliefs. While funeral directors would not be within their rights to refuse funeral services to/for LGBTQ+ people, they could hypothetically refuse to provide pro-gay messaging on religious grounds (Wright-Berryman & Huber, 2023). Funeral directors are instructed by the people (usual family members) commissioning their services and as Ash Hayhurst, a trans man who is also a UK funeral director, has observed,

If a person’s next of kin really wanted to give someone a funeral that invalidates or ignores their LGBTQIA+ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and other diverse gender and sexual identities] identity, there are sadly enough grey areas within the law to make that a very real possibility. (Hayhurst, 2020)

LGBTQ+ people face inequalities in palliative and end-of-life care, cohering around a lack of recognition, understanding and/or affirmation of their identities and relationships (Hospice UK, 2021, 2023; Marie Curie, 2017; Rosa et al., 2023). Trans and gender-diverse persons are

particularly concerned about being misgendered and about staff being unprepared to care for bodies which may not conform to gender binary norms (Hospice UK, 2023; Willis et al., 2021). Many of these concerns also translate into thinking about their funerals and issues of death equity. According to Bristowe and colleagues, a UK survey conducted by Stonewall and the Cooperative Funeral Care found that of 522 lesbian, gay or bisexual adults ‘24% expected to face barriers relating to their sexual identity when planning a funeral’ (Bristowe et al., 2016, p. 731). A UK study about older LGBTQ+ persons’ experiences and concerns about end-of-life issues observed,

Having one’s wishes respected after death was a particular concern. Respondents gave many anecdotal stories of LGB people they knew who had died and whose partners and/or friends had been excluded from the funerals by families of origin. For trans people, particular concerns are expressed about being buried by family of origin under their birth gender, despite knowledge of legal protection of one’s acquired gender identity – concerns here are not only about being cared for and dying where one wishes but to be buried as one wishes. (Almack et al., 2015, p. 5)

Bereaved same-sex partners often experience recognition across a spectrum of overt acceptance, unspoken acceptance, overt exclusion and invisibility (Bristowe et al., 2016; Bristowe et al., 2023). In same-sex couples who are not open (as was often the case among older cohorts of LGBTQ+ people), when one partner dies, the other can experience disenfranchised grief, i.e., ‘the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported’ (Doka, 1989, p. 4). Widowed partners in same-sex couples without formal legal recognition of their relationship may be excluded from decision-making about funeral arrangements, and even with a legally recognised partnership, may have to jump through extra hoops to make the arrangements (Curtin & Garrison, 2018). The leading UK bereavement charity, has observed,

We've heard from clients who've had to sit at the back of their partner's funeral or have been referred to as their spouse's "friend" following their death. Experiences like this can make the grieving process more difficult, and have a long-term impact on mental health. (CRUSE, undated)

Researchers in the US, Canada, and UK have described bereaved women in same-sex couples being ignored and excluded/marginalised from their partner's funerals by their partners' families of origin (Ingham et al., 2017; Jenkins et al., 2017; Millette & Bourgeois-Guerin, 2020; Valenti et al., 2023). In the UK, Almack and colleagues have reported about gay men who had concealed their sexualities and their relationships from biological families, and were then similarly marginalised/excluded from the funeral when one of them died (Almack et al., 2010). Other studies have highlighted concerns and experiences of disenfranchised grief among surviving members of "families of choice" (Hull & Ortyl, 2019) i.e. families comprising very close friends who have no legal status. As has been observed,

Members of the LGBTQIA+ community are more likely to be estranged from their relatives and instead rely on a close network of friends. This is often referred to as a "chosen family". Families of origin may not accept this friendship network and exclude them from funeral planning or memorialising the person. It's important that all those who were close to the person are included in the grieving process and are able to pay their respects. (CRUSE, undated)

In the US, a lesbian's funeral was reportedly cancelled minutes before it was due to commence because the pastor objected to a video showing pictures of the woman proposing to, and kissing, her wife (Payton, 2014). There are growing numbers of accounts about trans people fearing being misgendered at their funerals (Hospice UK, 2023). In the US, there have been several media stories about trans women being dressed as men at their funerals on the instructions of their families of origin (Duffy, 2014; Nolan, 2020; Weaver, 2020). In Australia, a transgender

teenage boy who ended his life was given two funerals, his ashes split in two; one funeral was led by his mother who recognised him as male, the other by his father who did not, where he was deadnamed by using his previous female name and referring to him as she/her (Padgett, 2021). The phenomenon of postmortem non-consensual de-transitioning has been described as ‘transphobic violence’ (Weaver, 2020, p. 4).

Growing awareness within LGBTQ+ communities about the potential for heteronormative and cisnormative exclusions at funerals and associated concerns (Bristowe et al., 2016) has led to a wariness about mainstream funeral services,

Although funeral homes often advertise themselves as “open to all” and capable of conducting services for a variety of belief systems, this and similar statements may not equate to safety for LGBTQIA+ communities... Due to widespread actual or perceived risk of discrimination, LGBTQIA+ individuals will often avoid providers without specific assurances of safety. (Wright-Berryman & Huber, 2024, p. 2)

Researchers recently analysed the website contents of 90 randomly selected US funeral homes looking for LGBTQIA+ safety cues, i.e., ‘inclusive language, symbols, imagery, and LGBTQIA+ friendly collaborations’ (Wright-Berryman & Huber, 2023, p. 962). They reported that ‘none of the selected funeral homes displayed any kind of safety cues’ (p. 972), suggesting,

...funeral homes may view LGBTQIA+ outreach efforts as a threat to the values that undergird their community presence and drive away the business of potential consumers who identify with these traditional established norms. (p. 972)

Some LGBTQ+ funerals can be successful open celebrations of a sexuality and/or gender identity minority life lived openly and well; a UK humanist funeral was described as ‘an authentic way to celebrate the life of a remarkable gay man’ (Humanist Ceremonies, 2024b) and another funeral as ‘a fitting way to remember a unique trans woman (Humanist

Ceremonies, 2024a). Westwood has described how an older gay man, who had been excluded for decades by his partner's family (apart from Ada, his mother-in-law), was invited by his partner's brothers to join them in carrying Ada's coffin when she died, which he described as being 'incredibly healing' (Westwood, 2017, p. 56).

Other LGBTQ+ funerals are carefully and lovingly crafted but with the deceased person's sexuality concealed. UK researcher Jane Traies described attending the funeral of a lesbian friend who died in her 80s, never married, 'with no surviving family except a distant cousin'. Her funeral was arranged by 'her two oldest and closest friends', a lesbian couple, one of whom had been her lover many years ago, both of whom had cared for her in later life,

Our old friend had been a life-long lesbian, though she was always careful not to reveal the fact to anyone outside the lesbian and gay community... Everyone who took part in the service was a member of our old friend's lesbian and gay 'family of choice'; even the undertaker was a lesbian...on this occasion everyone practised a careful reticence, out of respect for her and on the unspoken understanding that you do not 'out' someone in death who was not out in life. And so, like the majority of lesbians in her generation, our old friend died as she had lived: with her sexual identity carefully concealed, her most important relationships unacknowledged and much of her history unknown except among her close friends. (Traies, 2016, pp. 28-29)

Many LGBTQ+ people, like many non-LGBTQ+ people, do not plan for their funerals (Robinson, 2023; Rosa et al., 2023). However, others, especially transgender and gender nonbinary persons, who wish to ensure their gender identities are respected in death as well as in life, are concerned about how their funerals will take shape, and try to plan accordingly (Whitestone et al., 2020). Funerals that are shaped by LGBTQ+ people themselves, respecting LGBTQ+ identities, in/outness and relationships, can be understood from queer and feminist perspectives as acts of resistance to heterosexist and cissexist traditional norms (Radomska et

al., 2020), and as the ‘doing’ of family in subversive ways (Alasuutari et al., 2021). Nancy Fraser’s tripartite social justice model (Fraser, 1996) – comprising resources, recognition and representation – has been applied to a range of contexts including LGBTQ+ ageing (Westwood, 2016). It also has relevance to funerals, i.e., the availability and accessibility of inclusive funeral services (resources); whether and how lives and relationships are acknowledged, affirmed and given equal value in funerals (recognition); and in what ways minority voices are included within the funeral industry’s institutional and organisational structures (representation). These frameworks – queer, feminist and Fraser’s model of social justice – are utilised in this article.

Method

The study comprised a review and thematic analysis of UK funeral services’ marketing LGBTQ+ funerals. A simple internet search was used and the key terms are listed in Table 1. The inclusion criteria were: English language; UK sites; funeral providers, And the exclusion criteria were non-provider funeral guides and academic publications.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• LGBTQ+ <i>and</i> Funerals• LGBTQ <i>and</i> Funerals• LGBT <i>and</i> Funerals• Lesbian <i>and</i> Funerals• Gay <i>and</i> Funerals• Bisexual <i>and</i> Funerals• Trans <i>and</i> Funerals• Transgender <i>and</i> Funerals• Gender nonbinary <i>and</i> Funerals• Gender nonconforming <i>and</i> Funerals• Queer <i>and</i> Funerals
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Table 1. Search terms

The website content was analysed thematically following selection (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in terms of topic, messaging and signalling of LGBTQ+ inclusion.

Findings

Selected items

A total of seven funeral directors marketing themselves as delivering LGBTQ+ funeral services were identified. Their details are outlined in Table 2 below. Two of the funeral director companies identified as being wholly or partly delivered by people who identified under the LGBTQ+ umbrella themselves; five did not. The funeral directors' websites varied in breadth and depth of issues addressed, ranging from a couple of cursory lines – 'We're gay friendly - LGBTQIA' (Poetic Endings, 2024) – to multiple and/or highly detailed webpages (Co-op Funeralcare, undated; Harrison Funeral Home, 2024a, 2024b). All had some kind of LGBTQ+ related images including: a company logo depicting rainbow hearts; a lavender butterfly (lavender being symbolically linked to LGBTQ+ communities); hands wearing rainbow bracelets/making a heart shape, with a rainbow flag backcloth; rainbow confetti; rainbow dove image; rainbow-coloured hearses; rainbow-coloured horse-drawn carriages pulled by horses with rainbow flags and rainbow feather plumage; rainbow wreaths (including one spelling out 'SON'); tealights with a rainbow flag; and a traditionally-clad white, male funeral director with a smiley badge on the top hat and "angels" on tall stilts, dressed in white, walking behind him.

Insert Table 2 here

FUNERAL DIRECTORS MARKETING LGBTQ+ FUNERAL SERVICES				
	Location	Header	Headline(s)	Images
(Adrian Moore Funerals, 2024)	South London	'LGBTQ+ Funerals'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Family looking after Family' (strapline) 'We are LGBTQ+ Funeral Directors' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rainbow dove image Rainbow hearse Rainbow wreaths, including one spelling out 'SON'
(Co-op Funeralcare, undated)	Nationwide funeral providers	'Your guide to arranging an LGBTQ+ funeral'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Why does being LGBTQ+ matter for funerals?' 'Planning an LGBTQ+ funeral' 'Finding the right funeral director' 'Personalising your funeral' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two hands wearing rainbow bracelets, smallest fingers linked Generic white older hands held by white younger hands Generic mixed group of people at a dinner table Small crowd around hearse, rainbow confetti in the air
(Full Circle Funerals, undated)	Funeral directors, offices in North Yorkshire	'LGBTQ+ Funeral Care'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'What is different?' 'Who will make the funeral arrangements?' 'Funeral choices and wishes' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heart-shaped wreath made of twigs with tiny bows in muted rainbow colours Smiling, unnamed white women in plain, smart casual clothes
(Funeral Partners, 2024)	Consortium of funeral directors with members in various parts of England	'LGBTQ+ funerals: how Funeral Partners can support you'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'What if my identity is not honoured at my funeral?' 'Certain family members did not accept me. How can I prevent them from taking over, and ensure my funeral plans are in the right hands?' 'How can you prevent gender identity, relationships or sexual orientation from being disclosed inappropriately?' 'Will the funeral director be accepting of my identity?' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two white hands, clasped, with a rainbow flag in the background Horse-drawn rainbow-coloured hearse, horses with rainbow flags and rainbow feather plumage Lavender butterfly
(Harrison Funeral Home, 2024a)	North London	'Harrison Funeral Home Leading The Way As LGBT+ Funeral Directors'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'GAY BUSINESS ALLIANCE & GAY PROFESSIONAL NETWORK MEMBERS' 'LGBT+ FUNERAL DIRECTORS Year-Round: For us, it is more than just business – it is personal. The people we love – members of our staff, families, and friends – are LGBTQIA+' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tealights with a rainbow flag behind
(Harrison Funeral Home, 2024b)	North London	'LGBT Funerals'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Harrison Funeral Home delivers LGBT funerals in London and across the UK' '...we provide compassionate and supportive funeral care for the LGBTQ community' 'TRANS FUNERALS: ... we recognise that members of the trans community may have unique funeral needs' 'LGBT+ FUNERALS FAQs: Why do you have a separate page for LGBT+ funerals?' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pair of white hands making heart shape with rainbow flag in the background Company logo which includes rainbow hearts Traditionally clad white, male funeral director, with smiley badge on top hat and 'angels' dressed in white on stilts behind him White woman in business suit with clasped hands
(Poetic Endings, 2024)	South East London	'Gay friendly funeral directors in London'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Are you looking for a gay friendly funeral director in London?' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rainbow coloured hearse Rainbow coloured coffin

Table 2. Selected UK funeral director websites marketing LGBTQ+ funeral services

Key themes

Six main themes were identified from the selected funeral directors' webpages: discrimination, dignity and respect; identity validation; navigating in/outness; relationship recognition; and empowered decision-making.

Discrimination, dignity and respect

Several websites suggested that some funeral directors may be under-prepared to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ communities,

Funeral directors are generally kind and compassionate people and want to give people the best possible support. However, like everyone they come with their own personal and professional experiences and some will be more confident in supporting people from the LGBTQ+ community than others. (Full Circle Funerals, undated)

Will the funeral director be accepting of my identity? Many people worry about this. With Funeral Partners, you needn't. Our funeral professionals treat every person with respect, we are ethical and forward-thinking funeral directors and are accepting of all identities. We are sensitive, open-minded and considerate towards every client. Always. (Funeral Partners, 2024)

Other websites went further, alluding to potential prejudice and discrimination among funeral providers,

Our research revealed 25% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people expect to face prejudice when arranging a funeral. (Co-op Funeralcare, undated)

As a proud supporter of the LGBTQ+ community, we recognise that there is still a way to go within all sectors to better communicate and deliver support. Particularly in the funeral sector, discrimination is the last thing that anyone should have to face –

bereavement is difficult enough without having to worry about acceptance. (Harrison Funeral Home, 2024a)

The themes of dignity and respect were also raised,

We believe that everyone should be treated with dignity and respect and have the funeral they deserve. (Adrian Moore Funerals, 2024)

‘If something is really important to you, you could also put it in your will to make sure you’re remembered in all the ways you want,’ Claudia says. ‘You have the right to be respected in death, just as in life.’ (Co-op Funeralcare, undated)

Only one website lacked any substance to its page entitled ‘Gay friendly funeral directors in London’ which comprised a massive image of a rainbow-coloured hearse and just this copy,

If you're looking for an independent funeral director who is sensitive, open-minded and flexible, please get in touch and we'll see if we're a good match. We're gay friendly - LGBTQIA - a member of the Association of Green Funeral Directors... (Poetic Endings, 2024)

The lack of any acknowledgement of relevant issues beyond the use of ‘gay-friendly’ and the LGBTQIA might suggest discretion or a somewhat tokenistic approach.

Identity validation

Several websites emphasised the importance of a funeral reflecting the identity, and life, of the person who had died,

We can help you arrange a send-off to reflect the life of the person who has died. (Adrian Moore Funerals, 2024)

Two of the funeral directors identified as partly/wholly LGBTQ+ themselves,

We are LGBTQ+ Funeral Directors. (Adrian Moore Funerals, 2024)

Family looking after Family. (Adrian Moore Funerals, 2024)

For us, it is more than just business – it is personal. The people we love – members of our staff, families, and friends – are LGBTQIA+. (Harrison Funeral Home, 2024a)

Several websites addressed specific LGBTQ+ identity concerns,

I know that some people worry about how they will be represented after they have died; those that are tasked with making funeral arrangements may not create an event that truly reflects their life and who was important to them (and in what capacity). (Full Circle Funerals, undated)

One of the biggest worries for LGBTQ+ people while funeral planning is their identity not being recognised. ‘I’ve heard of funerals where parents used the birth name and birth gender of the person who died, even if that’s not the gender they lived as,’ Claudia says. ‘That can be really harrowing for their friends, especially their partner, to hear.’ (Co-op Funeralcare, undated)

Family members can often either not be aware of the deceased’s sexual orientation or gender identity, or even not accept it. A funeral director’s role is to ensure the deceased’s wishes are carried out in a ceremony that befits them – from religious to non-religious, discreet to extravagant... It’s also important to refer to the person as they referred to themselves – e.g. woman, man, non-binary, etc. (Funeral Partners, 2024)

One website in particular addressed trans-specific issues,

We have trans-specific funeral protocols in place, such as:

- If requested, our trans mortician and embalmer will care for the deceased. This includes the steps of washing and dressing (which is always conducted privately).

- ... we will always use the person's name and never intentionally dead name. There may be instances where legal paperwork does not reflect a person's name, for example, if a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) has not been issued. Unfortunately, this is outside of the funeral home's control but on all of our Harrison paperwork, where the requirements are not legal, we will always use the name the person used in life.
- We will always use a person's correct pronouns. Please make sure to let us know everyone's pronouns (and we will tell you ours!).

(Harrison Funeral Home, 2024b)

The issue of clothing was also addressed by several websites,

... Your loved one could also be dressed in the 'wrong' clothes for their gender, or the wrong pronouns might be used in the order of service or even on their headstone. (Co-op Funeralcare, undated)

Clothing may also be important to your friends and 'chosen' family. If your loved one was part of the drag community, for example, asking guests to wear traditional funeral attire doesn't exactly honour who they are or who your loved one was. (Co-op Funeralcare, undated)

What we wear can be an important part of how we express ourselves. Your funeral director should offer to dress you in your own clothes, so if there's something specific that you'd like to wear, a particular style you'd like honouring (or one that you'd rather was avoided completely) it can be helpful to record these wishes. (Full Circle Funerals, undated)

Navigating in/outness

The wish among some LGBTQ+ people for their identities to be open and among others for them to be concealed was recognised on several of the selected websites,

Although there is absolutely no difference in the practicalities of losing a loved-one, there may be individual considerations you want understood for funeral arrangements. For example, the person who has died may not have been out and open about their sexuality prior to passing away so discretion and sensitivity is paramount. (Adrian Moore Funerals, 2024)

Some people from the LGBTQ+ community may want the funeral to reflect their relationships and identity whereas others may choose for this aspect of their lives to be relatively private and understated. (Full Circle Funerals, undated)

Many lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people will have experienced intolerance towards their community, and may not have felt comfortable revealing certain details to their wider friends and family... If you're planning a funeral for a close friend or loved one, it's important not to disclose their sexual orientation unless you have the permission of the person who has died. (Funeral Partners, 2024)

Relationship recognition

Several websites acknowledged the importance of relationship recognition and the issue of disenfranchised grief,

For LGBTQ+ people, thinking about death and bereavement can trigger a unique set of anxieties. Some may be worried about not having their relationships acknowledged, while others may be concerned about their sexuality becoming public after death or having their wrong gender identity addressed. (Funeral Partners, 2024)

Another common fear while planning an LGBTQ+ funeral is your relationship not being recognised; some families may try to prevent you attending the funeral altogether. ‘This doesn’t allow you to grieve properly,’ says Claudia. ‘It also denies who they truly were – you, your friends and chosen family may know your loved one better or more authentically than their birth family, so it can be really hard if you’re all shut out of the funeral.’ (Co-op Funeralcare, undated)

Many members of the LGBTQ+ community have experienced their romantic relationships being dismissed or misinterpreted. Often this is by individuals with no ill-intent, but sometimes some people struggle to see the whole picture... Although misrepresentation is often not intended to cause offense, it can cause the feeling of not feeling acknowledged or respected. Extending this to funerals, I believe that the best way to ensure that our funeral needs are met, is to make sure that we do what we can to make sure that the right people lead the arrangements and that our wishes are known. (Full Circle Funerals, undated)

Empowered decision-making

Most of the websites addressed the issue of LGBTQ+ person’s wishes potentially not being carried out,

If you’re estranged from your family, a common concern is that they might take over your funeral plans, so your wishes aren’t carried out. You might worry that your relationship with your partner won’t be respected, or your sexuality could be revealed against your will. (Co-op Funeralcare, undated)

It’s not unusual for family members to disagree over funeral arrangements in general. So it’s not surprising that many LGBTQ+ people have a fear that family members will

railroad the arrangements with their personal opinions and steering the ceremony in an inappropriate direction. (Funeral Partners, 2024)

Some websites emphasised the importance of choosing an LGBTQ+ inclusive funeral director,

If you're planning a funeral for yourself or a partner, it's important to find a funeral director who respects your wishes. If you want some extra support, take a friend who understands you to your first meeting... 'Talk honestly about who you are and what you want,' Claudia says. 'Be clear about the things that matter. If the funeral director doesn't 'get' you, or they're not trying to – such as using the wrong pronouns even when you've told them what you prefer – you can walk away.' (Co-op Funeralcare, undated)

Several websites also highlighted the importance of legally appointing someone to take control of the funeral in LGBTQ+ - inclusive ways,

...you can appoint an executor, someone who is legally responsible for organising your funeral. This could be your partner or a friend who knows you're LGBTQ+ and respects this part of your identity. You can also put your wishes in your will, so your executor can follow them to the letter. (Co-op Funeralcare, undated)

The key is that the funeral choices reflect the person who has died and are helpful for their friends and family – and that they are not made by the funeral director. If you know what you would like (or not like) for your funeral that we would strongly encourage you to write it down and let people close to you know. This may be one or two simple wishes, or a more elaborate plan – any level of instruction is helpful and fulfilling those wishes is likely to be very consoling for the people who matter the most to you. (Full Circle Funerals, undated)

In summary, the websites suggested that some funeral providers may not take an LGBTQ+ approach and emphasised the importance of validating identity, respecting the deceased's

in/outness, including partners and “family” members in the broadest sense of the word, and taking control of funeral planning.

Discussion

Funeral directors run commercial businesses; inevitably some of their marketing involves pursuit of the ‘pink pound’ (Coombes & Singh, 2022). However, in the case of at least two of the websites, where all/some of the directors openly identified LGBTQ+, there was clearly a personal component to the marketing. One had an explicitly emancipatory agenda: ‘we are actively working to implement positive change for the LGBT+ community within the funeral sector’ (Harrison Funeral Home, 2024b). The websites addressed key LGBTQ+ issues and concerns, acknowledging non-normative LGBTQ+ relationships and “family” compositions (Alasuutari et al., 2021), describing how to exercise control over funerals, both legal (writing a will, choosing the right executors, writing a letter of wishes) and strategic (choosing the right funeral director and celebrant).

Only one of the websites seemed somewhat tokenistic and perhaps inauthentic (Ciszek & Lim, 2021), depicting a huge image of a rainbow-coloured hearse, with a single line - ‘We're gay friendly - LGBTQIA’ (Poetic Endings, 2024)). The lack of detailed text and the use of an acronym which includes people who may not identify as gay (i.e. lesbians, bisexual people, some trans and queer people, and intersex persons) possibly indicates a limited understanding of what being LGBTQIA+ inclusive involves. By contrast, several other websites were a riot of LGBTQ+ symbols, suggesting a flamboyance and overtness which might not be to the taste of all members of LGBTQ+ communities, and/or for those whose identities extend beyond their sexualities/gender identities. Nonetheless, the visual cues are important for signalling recognition and acceptance (Hudson & Bruce-Miller, 2023).

Although several of the websites imply that some funeral directors may be less than inclusive in their attitudes towards LGBTQ+ funerals, there has not been any UK research in this field so far. Research in the US has identified a lack LGBTQ+ inclusive cues on funeral services' websites (Wright-Berryman & Huber, 2023) but does not prove that they were not LGBTQ+ inclusive, merely that they were not explicitly demonstrating that they were. However, it is well-recognised that LGBTQ+ people look for safety cues which indicate recognition and inclusion, especially among services perceived as heteronormative and cisnormative (Hudson & Bruce-Miller, 2023).

Most of the websites can be understood, from a queer perspective, as contributing to resistance to heteronormative and cisnormative power within the context of ritualised death and mourning (Radomska et al., 2020). In doing so, they challenge sexuality and/or gender identity minority invisibility in death discourse, bringing LGBTQ+ death and funerals in from the conceptual margins. In emphasising the importance and relevance of “families of choice” they support the subversion of family meanings in death contexts ways (Alasuutari et al., 2021). In this way, feminist understandings of intersectional privileges and disadvantages – in this case relating to minority sexualities and/or gender identities – become foregrounded in relation to death equity.

The websites can also be usefully approached from Fraser's tripartite social justice framework (Fraser, 1996). They act, first and foremost, as resources, both in terms of the services they offer and the information they provide. They also promote recognition, making LGBTQ+ identities and relationships visible, both through addressing them explicitly and identifying strategies to ensure equal social status is accorded to them at funerals. Lastly, in terms of representation, giving voice to LGBTQ+ issues and concerns, citing research about them (as several websites do), seeking to take on an emancipatory role, as Harrison Funeral

Home does, all serve to promote LGBTQ+ representation at both individual funerals and within the industry more broadly.

There is a need for research in this area, and for the following questions to be answered:

1. What, for LGBTQ+ people, constitutes a “good funeral”? How does this break down across LGBTQ+ sub-populations?
2. What have been LGBTQ+ persons’ experiences of funerals? To what extent and how have they been experienced as spaces of inclusion and/or exclusion?
3. What are the ways in which LGBTQ+ persons perform identities, relationships and family (in its broadest sense) at funerals?
4. What are the mainstream funeral providers’ knowledge and understanding about, and attitudes towards, LGBTQ+ people and their funerals?
5. What are the training needs of funeral providers in order to help them to deliver LGBTQ+ inclusive funerals? What are the outcomes of such training?
6. How might it be possible to recognise LGBTQ+ inclusive funeral providers (e.g. a kite mark)?

Limitations

The project has been conducted by a single researcher and as such will be informed by her (white, lesbian, feminist, older woman, cisgender) standpoint. Services which are not explicitly LGBTQ+ inclusive may nonetheless be as such.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the issues and concerns of LGBTQ+ people in relation to funerals, within the wider context of inequalities in palliative and end-of-life care. LGBTQ+ dedicated

pages on funeral directors' websites contribute to resisting heteronormative and cisnormative power in the funeral industry and funeral planning and promoting social justice in death and mourning. More research will help to better understand, and address, the death equity issues affecting sexuality and/or gender minorities, their funerals, and the ritual celebration of currently marginalised lives.

Acknowledgment

The author thanks Shivangi Gangwar for her editing assistance.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding statement

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability

Not applicable.

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