Reconnecting with the Dead via Facebook:
Examining Transcorporeal Communication as a Way to Maintain Relationships

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Doctor of Philosophy

Jocelyn M. DeGroot
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This dissertation titled

Reconnecting with the Dead via Facebook:
Examining Transcorporeal Communication as a Way to Maintain Relationships

by

JOCELYN M. DEGROOT

has been approved for

the School of Communication Studies
and the Scripps College of Communication by

________________________________________
Laura W. Black
Assistant Professor of Communication Studies

________________________________________
B. Scott Titsworth
Associate Professor of Communication Studies

________________________________________
Gregory J. Shepherd
Dean, Scripps College of Communication
ABSTRACT

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Reconnecting with the Dead Via Facebook: Examining Transcorporeal Communication as a Way to Maintain Relationships (282 pp.)

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The purpose of this study was to examine the grief-related communication on Facebook memorial group walls. Three research questions guided the study as I sought to explore general characteristics of messages posted, how people regarded their own participation in the groups, and characteristics of Transcorporeal Communication (TcC), the communication between the living and the deceased.

To respond to the research questions, I used grounded theory methods and asynchronous online interviews. I also utilized several of Goffman’s notions of human behavior to provide a more thorough analysis of the communication in the groups. In the pilot study, I used grounded theory methods to examine messages directed to the deceased on 10 memorial group walls. Analysis of a second set of walls challenged and tested the initial themes discerned in the pilot study. This resulted in the identification of 12 message themes. In addition to writing messages to the deceased, people wrote to other group members, utilizing task and relational messages as well as identity statements. People who did not know the deceased, the Emotional Rubberneckers, also wrote on the walls. To explore people’s participation in the groups, I conducted online, asynchronous interviews with five people who wrote regularly on Facebook memorial group walls. Interviewees indicated that their relationship and communication with the
deceased remained similar to the relationship and communication that they had with the deceased before he or she died.

Wall analysis and interviews revealed that people posted messages to multiple audiences: the self, the deceased, group members and “lurkers.” Due to the numerous audiences, the wall posts served various functions. These overarching objectives included grieving, maintaining relational continuity, giving or receiving social support, and Rubbernecking.

Analysis of the walls and interviews also indicated that individuals utilized a unique form of communication, TcC, as they wrote messages to the deceased. This act raised theoretical questions about the nature of the communication. I posited a model of TcC and its components, including continued bonds, the deceased’s presence, and the inner representation of the deceased. The study concludes with a discussion of its limitations and suggestions for future research.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Laura W. Black
Assistant Professor of Communication Studies

B. Scott Titsworth
Associate Professor of Communication Studies
And Short-Leg Sue strolls down the street
Hand in hand with Slow-Foot Pete,
And they take small steps and they do just fine,
And no one’s in front and no one’s behind

~ For my friends, who continue to walk beside me ~
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This dissertation represents patience – certainly not patience on my part, but patience of everyone around me. I want to thank those of you who have helped me throughout my education and the dissertation process, demonstrating your utmost patience with me.

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In addition, I must thank my parents. They have been patient and incredibly supportive throughout my 23 years of education. While they have problems identifying my major, they do know that I love my job and I love my research. Also, thanks to my sister who provided me with encouragement and Dakota Style sunflower seeds when I needed it most.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“OH shoooooooot! HAPPY BIRTHDAY FRIEND...miss you like whoa! Xoxo”
–Facebook user

We would not be surprised to learn that the preceding remark was a message from one friend to another friend. Friends often find it customary to converse online, especially via Facebook, a popular social networking site (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In this case, however, the intended recipient of this particular message happens to be deceased. Following the death of her friend, the Facebook user continued to write to her friend and wish her a happy birthday even though the friend was no longer a part of the physical world. This type of communication, between the living and the deceased, is not rare. For example, researchers have found that many widows and widowers talk with their deceased spouse regularly (Rees, 1971; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993)

In this dissertation, I examine the communication that occurs on Facebook memorial walls. I find that many people join Facebook memorial groups to honor and memorialize deceased loved ones. A quick search on Facebook using the term, “in memory of,” yields over 500 memorial groups (Five hundred is the maximum amount of results given by the Facebook search engine). Facebook users establish and utilize Facebook memorial groups for many reasons. Creating or joining a memorial group is one way to memorialize the deceased, much like a physical memorial. The group also provides a common space for the deceased’s friends and family to assemble and share information. In addition to these two functions, the online-based groups have become virtual memorials for the bereaved and function in a way that no physical monument
could. Within Facebook memorial groups, people post messages on the “wall,” or message board as if the deceased friends could read the messages. These messages, particularly the nature of the communication within them, serve as the focus of my dissertation. I examine how people’s messages exemplify the phases of grieving, why people choose to write on the message boards, how people use the message boards to maintain a relational bond with the deceased, and how the communication between the living and the deceased differs from the traditional views of communication as a transaction.

When managing their grief, more and more members of the millennial generation rely on mediated channels (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Walker, 2006). Young people utilize online websites, such as Facebook, when grieving because social networking sites have a significant presence in young people’s lives. Facebook has over 200 million active users and is the second most trafficked site on the Internet (“Facebook|Statistics,” 2009). Increasingly, individuals choose to grieve the loss of their friends online via Facebook memorial groups. With so many users, it is somewhat expected that the younger generation utilizes an online community to express their grief after a friend or family member has died (Clough, 2006; St. John, 2006). In a newspaper article on Facebook memorial groups, a psychotherapist in North Carolina described how the younger generation uses technology to manage grief. She said,

For this generation, the computer is so much a part of their lives. We would do things that would be more traditional grieving. Our young people have found a way to grieve in a way that fits with them and their generation. (para. 5)
Facebook essentially became what Stingl (2007) termed as an “electronic grief counselor.” Facebook and other social networking sites also provide an opportunity for people who knew the deceased to convene in an easily accessible space.

This project was inspired by recent news articles that reported about online memorials, such as those on Facebook, used to pay tribute to deceased friends and family members. Numerous journalists have written articles about the deaths of young individuals and the resulting grief that affects their friends (Abraham, 2007; Cox, 2007; McKanna & Poe, 2006; Mendoza, 2007; Ross, 2006; Stingl, 2007; Walker, 2006). Journalists widely reported that people created numerous Facebook groups as a tribute or a memorial to the victims, and reporters frequently discussed Facebook’s role in young adults’ online grieving (Jones, 2007). Most notably, the use of these online memorial groups came to public light in the wake of the Virginia Tech massacre. Following this tragic event, young adults’ use of Facebook as a grieving outlet became public knowledge (Grossman, 2007; Jones, 2007).

Previous research has examined the grief of people who have lost a spouse (Field, Gal-Oz, & Bonanno, 2003; Morgan, Carder, & Neal, 1997; Shuchter, & Zisook, 1993), a child (Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986), or a parent (Lehman et al., 1986). Few researchers have investigated how a significant loss affects friends of the deceased or the communication surrounding the death of a friend.

Newspaper journalists reporting on the Facebook memorial groups have noted that young adults utilize Facebook to express one’s grief as well as write directly to the dead (Abraham, 2007; Clough, 2006; Cox, 2007; Grossman, 2007; Kolowich, 2006; McKanna & Poe, 2006; Mendoza, 2007; Ross, 2006; St. John, 2006; Stingl, 2007;
Walker, 2006). It is the academic community that has yet to explore it more comprehensively. Foot, Warnick, and Schneider (2006) examined web-based memorializing in an effort to propose a general conceptual framework of online memorials, but the researchers did not necessarily focus on the communication present in the memorials. In this dissertation, I focus on how grieving young adults create and communicate on Facebook memorial groups to grieve and reconnect with the deceased.

Purpose of Study

In this study, I aim to examine the intersection of friendship and grieving, as a unique relationship exists between friends. The voluntary nature of friendship contributes to the relationship’s uniqueness, as individuals decide to participate in and maintain friendships as opposed to relationships within the family where obligatory commitment is a factor in the relationship’s status (Rawlins, 1992). Rawlins (1992) further contended that a friendship is an especially significant and important relationship to young adults. Because of this unique relationship bonds between friends, people often attempt to maintain relational continuity in one party’s absence (Sigman, 1991).

I argue that the living continue to maintain relational continuity following the death of a loved one. When examining a traditional interpersonal relationship between two living people, one researcher proposed that relationships could be maintained even though one party might be physically absent (Sigman, 1991). Sigman further argued that the physical co-presence of two individuals is not a necessary component of relational continuity, and the relationship ends only when communication between the involved parties ceases. Because co-presence is not necessary for a relationship to exist, the permanent, physical absence caused by the death of one party in a relationship does not
necessarily mean that a relationship no longer exists. The living individuals often continue to talk or write messages to their deceased loved ones (Attig, 1996), perhaps in an attempt to continue a relationship with them. The living might choose to write letters to them, speak aloud to them, or speak to the deceased silently. As the result of technological advances, individuals now have the opportunity to post messages to the deceased on Facebook memorial group walls. While the bonds between the living and the deceased do decrease over time, the relationship continues, provided that some form of communication remains (Parkes, 1998).

Prior research has indicated that many people engage in maintaining a connective bond with deceased loved ones (Attig, 2001; Field & Friedrichs, 2004; Field et al., 2003; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Stroebe & Schut, 2005). Bowlby’s (1980) foundational work on grief processes stated, “the resolution of grief is not to sever bonds but to establish a changed bond with the dead person” (p. 399). Marwit and Klass (1994-1995) found that continuing bonds with the deceased play many roles in providing comfort and direction. For example, the deceased act as role models, offer guidance, assist in clarifying morals, and aid in the formation of positive memories. Field et al. (2003) said, “A continuing bond provides the bereaved with a sense of continuity and meaning in his or her new life” (p. 110).

Following the death of a friend, individuals must make sense of their new identity as it now exists without the deceased. In order to renegotiate their identities, and as part of the reorganization and recovery phase in the grieving process, the living often try to maintain a bond with the deceased (Attig, 2001). Many times, someone’s identity still includes the deceased friend, but in a different context. They continue a relationship with
the departed loved one. The continuing bonds with the dead serve to provide important meanings in bereaved individuals’ physical and social worlds. Marwit and Klass (1994-1995) further concluded that the continuing bonds expressions had the capability of regulating grieving individuals’ moods, adding order to a chaotic worldview.

Traditional interpersonal communication models tend to emphasize corporeal communication. That is, the research focuses on the communication that occurs as two parties, who have a physical presence, create and share meanings (Buber, 1956; Goffman, 1963; Weiner, 1967). Shannon and Weaver (1949) posited a linear model of communication where information flows in one direction, from the sender to the receiver. Schramm’s (1954) interactive model of communication allowed for a two-way exchange of messages. In this model, the sender transmits a message to the receiver who then provides feedback to the sender. In transactional communication models, communication is multidirectional, as the parties involved equally influence the communication of the other parties. (Barnlund, 1970). As evident, these models of communication involve people who actively participate in the communication process. The models fail to account for a communicative situation in which one of the parties involved cannot actively participate nor do they have a physical presence, as is the case when people talk to the deceased.

While Goffman (1963, 1967) discussed immediate presence as occurring between two people who are face-to-face, I contend that many of Goffman’s arguments can also be applied to issues of online presence. Sigman (1991) argued that communication does not necessarily need to occur while the parties are in each other’s immediate presence; the communication can occur through a mediated channel. Additionally, researchers often
emphasize that people communicate by creating and utilizing shared meanings (Duck, 1994a, 1994b). When one person in the relationship is deceased, he or she is no longer able to create or utilize shared meanings with others, but the living do continue to use previously created shared meanings when writing or talking to the deceased. Weiner (1967) described communication as a process where message receivers provide the speaker with feedback; however, it is obvious that when one party in a relationship is deceased, no opportunity for feedback directly from the receiver exists. Existing interpersonal communication literature also identifies mutual recognition of the relationship as a criterion of an interpersonal relationship (Buber, 1956; Goffman, 1967). Although mutual recognition is impossible when one party is no longer able to recognize the relationship (because he or she is dead), a relationship between the living and the deceased clearly exists and demands further inquiry.

Introduction to Facebook

Facebook is a social networking website that allows users to post personal profiles and communicate with others. Each Facebook member has an individual profile to which the member can upload photos and videos as well as communicate with other members on his or her “wall,” which is similar to typical online message boards. The individual profiles also list the groups to which the members belong.

Within Facebook, members have the opportunity to create and join groups centered on a common topic. Some are serious (e.g., “Support the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation”) while others are lighthearted (e.g., “I wish my homework was asexual so it would do itself”). Facebook states that more than 25 million active user groups exist on the site (“Facebook|Statistics,” 2009). Part of this 25 million includes
groups that members have created to memorialize their deceased friends. Facebook users create the memorial groups to both honor their deceased friends and serve as a common place for the deceased’s acquaintances to congregate and share information. Within these groups, members can upload photos and videos to the group. Others choose to use the group to quickly spread news about topics related to funerals, memorials, or fundraisers (Abraham, 2007). Additionally, people can post messages on the group’s wall. Most wall postings are addressed to the deceased individual, and nearly every Facebook memorial group wall includes examples of public storytelling, as described by Harvey (1996). Screenshots of a Facebook memorial group are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1 displays the first half of a memorial group’s page. The uppermost part of the page includes the group’s name, its categorization, and description of the group. When someone joins the group, the group name is displayed on the individual’s Facebook profile. The next section displays recent news. The group photo is shown in the upper right corner of the page. To join the group, Facebook members can click the “Join the Group” link located directly below the group photo. Only the administrator(s) (indicated on the right side) can make changes to the group photo, description, and news. A random assortment of eight group members is displayed under the recent news. Facebook members can view all of the group members by clicking on the “See All” link in the members section. The group wall follows the member’s section. Five of the wall’s latest posts are displayed on the main group page. Again, members can view all of the wall postings by clicking the “See All” link in the wall section.
Figure 1. Screenshot I of Facebook memorial group.

Figure 2 presents the second half of a memorial group’s page. This half follows the wall postings. Here, all group members can upload photos, links, or videos to the group’s page if the administrator sets the options to allow these actions. The photos section displays five random photos, and people can view all photos by clicking the “See All” link. The links section displays links to various webpages, articles, and YouTube videos.
Figure 2. Screenshot II of Facebook memorial group.
While all components of a Facebook group can affect one’s grieving in the group, in this study, I focused solely on the messages posted on the group’s wall. In Chapter Two, I discuss how various aspects of Facebook and characteristics of CMC can affect the communication on the walls by enabling or constraining it.

Overview of Dissertation

Chapter Two explores issues of continuing a relationship with a deceased loved one as a part of the grieving process. First, I examine literature related to grieving. Particularly, I focus on phases of grieving, influences on the grieving process, and various ways of coping with a death. Then, I review issues of interpersonal communication, highlighting themes of the deceased’s online and offline presence, separation anxiety, and maintaining relational continuity with the deceased. I also discuss computer-mediated grieving including virtual memorials, online support groups, and Facebook’s role in the grieving process.

Chapter Three describes my pilot study, which I conducted as an initial examination of the grieving-related communication present on 10 publicly accessible Facebook memorial group walls to explore the topics discussed as well as the nature of the communication present. Using grounded theory techniques, I identified message themes and investigated the communicative functions served by messages posted on the Facebook memorial walls. On the walls examined in the pilot study, I observed that the type of communication found on Facebook memorial group walls was unique. The communication was neither interpersonal communication nor intrapersonal communication. Group members typically directed nearly all of their comments to the deceased individual. The living wrote messages to the deceased as if the deceased could
respond, which would be the case in a standard conversation on Facebook. Since feedback from a deceased person is impossible, the communication is, essentially, one-way interpersonal communication. I argue that this particular type of communication should be designated as transcorporeal communication (TcC). “Trans” refers to the communication occurring in a different state, and “corporeal” designates a relationship to or with a physical form. Because deceased people no longer maintain a physical presence, the messages written by group members are directed at someone who is in a different state of being physically present. The communicative trend raised theoretical questions about the nature of the communication.

Additionally, during my analysis in the pilot study, I discovered that some communication and behaviors could not simply be categorized into the themes or communicative functions that I posited. Rather, some of these issues are best described by also applying a Goffmanian framework to the communication and behaviors observed on the walls. Many of Goffman’s observations about human behavior can be applied to the behaviors appearing in Facebook memorial groups. Issues of roles, behavior in public forums, scripts, and politeness are just a few examples of Goffman’s concepts that I observed. To provide a more thorough analysis, I identify and offer an application of Goffman’s notions as appropriate throughout my analysis of Facebook memorial group walls and interviews with active group members. This analysis is found in Chapters Five and Six.

Following the pilot study, the remainder of the dissertation is an effort to build on, confirm, extend, and refine the findings of the pilot study. Chapter Four provides an overview of the methods used to this end. I discuss the grounded theory methods that I
drew from to corroborate and challenge findings initially discerned in my pilot study. I also discuss methods of in-depth online asynchronous interviews that I conducted with people who regularly wrote on the memorial group walls in order to explore meanings attributed to individuals’ participation in the online groups and how the communication on these groups compared to interpersonal communication.

Chapter Five provides the first part of my research effort beyond the pilot study, as I sought to extend my initial research that revealed the presence of a unique form of communication. This study attempts to substantiate my previously determined themes and communicative functions through the process of selective coding (as described by Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this process, I examine an additional set of Facebook memorial group walls with respect to the originally discerned themes and functions to determine if these themes and functions persisted. I modify and add to the themes’ descriptions of elements as necessary. I also identify and examine communication with other group members and communication posted by people who did not know the deceased (the Emotional Rubberneckers).

In Chapter Six, I provide findings from interviews conducted with those who participate in posting on Facebook memorial group walls. I use these interviews with the intention to unearth additional information about the nature of transcorporeal communication, as well as how the living’s relationships with the deceased changed, or remained the same, after one party in a relationship dies. Using the wall analyses and interviews, I seek to challenge current assumptions of interpersonal relationships by examining transcorporeal communication and identifying ways in which transcorporeal
communication differs from interpersonal communication, as scholars currently conceive of interpersonal communication.

Chapter Seven contains a discussion of the multiple audiences that exist when one composes messages to the deceased in a public online forum. In Chapter Seven, I also propose my model of Transcorporeal Communication. I ultimately argue that the communication between the living and the deceased follows a different model of communication than the transactional model of communication generally put forth by communication scholars. I also contend that transcorporeal communication is utilized as a part of the grieving process. Finally, Chapter Eight summarizes my research and presents the study’s implications, limitations, and areas of future research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As people mourn the loss of a loved one, they often engage in the process of grieving. Specifically, I look at the phases of grieving as described by Parkes (1970b, 1972) and Bowlby (1961, 1969, 1972, 1980). Their conceptualization of the grieving process included the stages of shock and numbness, yearning and searching, disorganization and despair, and reorganization and recovery. Various conditions affect how intensely one grieves, including the age of the deceased as well as the abruptness of the death itself (Charmaz, 1980). People also cope with the death of a friend or family member in various ways. Creating memorials, joining support groups, writing and talking with others, and talking to the deceased are the principle ways in which people manage their grief (Foot et al., 2006).

As people grieve, they must also learn to live without the deceased in their lives. Learning to live in the absence of a loved one often includes maintaining a relationship or friendship with the deceased. Although the deceased no longer have a physical, demonstrable presence, they continue to possess a social presence in the lives of their loved ones. The deceased individuals might also retain an online presence if they previously had an online presence before their death. The presence of the deceased in some form appears to facilitate the continuation of a relationship between the living and their deceased loved ones.

Facebook memorial groups offer an opportunity to view how group members enact the grieving process. The online discourse aimed at deceased individuals allows others, including researchers, to observe a seemingly authentic performance of grief work. Additionally, the mediated and asynchronous aspects of computer-mediated
communication (CMC) can influence how people express their grief through words. For example, people tend to be less inhibited in their communication due to the anonymity and reduced interpersonal risks afforded by online communication (Finn & Lavitt, 1994; Scott, 2004).

Central Claims

Through the literature review, I make several assertions with regard to grief-related communication, relational maintenance with the deceased, and communication on Facebook memorial group walls. I argue that people write to the deceased’s online presence in order to maintain a relationship with the deceased. People sense the presence of the deceased online and envision them when posting messages to them on Facebook memorial group walls. I also contend that the communication between the living and the deceased does not fit into any of the communication models previously posited by scholars. These arguments will be further developed throughout this chapter. To understand the idea of maintaining a relationship with a now deceased loved one, I examine grief, interpersonal communication literature, and computer-mediated communication.

Grief and Grieving

When someone close to us dies, we find ourselves overcome with grief, an emotion. Most people then engage in grieving, which is a coping mechanism. Attig (1996) defined grieving as a process of accommodating to loss. Grieving serves as a coping response to the disruption of our lives that occurs when we are bereaved or have experienced a loss. Neuberger (2004) defined grieving as:
a process of coping, which involves working at freeing oneself from total involvement in the loss of the person who has died, re-adjustment to the environment in which the dead person is no longer present, and forming new relationships, or establishing new ways of dealing with the old ones. (p. 19)

Attig (1996) maintained that we have a choice following the death of a loved one. We can choose to immerse ourselves in grief and desolation, or we can choose to come to terms with a new pattern of life. Some people choose to linger in their extreme grief as a way to hold on to the deceased’s memory because they believe it is the only way to continue loving their deceased loved ones. Others choose to actively come to terms with the death through the process of grieving. Attig insisted that the bereaved should make the decision to overcome their grief, as extreme grief can prevent people from actively grieving and coping with the death. When people do not cope appropriately, they can behave in unhealthy ways. For example, some people mummify, or refuse to make changes to, the deceased’s bedrooms. People might also avoid certain places or events because they remind them of the deceased, much like certain objects trigger memories of the past, experiences of the present, or plans for the future for those in traditional interpersonal relationships (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

The central challenge of grieving is learning to love the deceased in his or her physical absence. As we grieve, we struggle to discover how to love the deceased in absence (Attig, 2000). Attig further maintained that our presence is the most valuable gift we can bestow upon someone else. When someone dies, we realize just how precious one’s presence can be. After the death of a close friend, people’s worldviews often change because the worldview has changed in the absence of a significant other.
Following the death of a significant loved one, the survivors’ lives become chaotic (Attig, 1996). The death of an exceptionally important figure in one’s life disrupts how he or she views the world and him or herself. Because we establish our habits, behaviors, thoughts, and expectations in and through our relationships, our worldview and reality becomes significantly altered when a relationship changes or terminates due to a death (Attig, 1996, 2000; Neimeyer, 2000). People’s habits, behaviors, thoughts, and expectations no longer “make sense” in the absence of someone. The sorrow that accompanies the loss of a loved one is complex and affects people in many different ways. Some people have an intense desire to be reunited with their friend while others feel angry at the deceased’s departure. Some people feel both emotions (love and anger) simultaneously (Bowlby, 1980). To begin coping in a healthy manner, people must first let go of the unreasonable and illogical desire to bring the deceased back to life (Bowlby, 1980).

The phases, stages, or tasks that one goes through when grieving have been meticulously documented by researchers (Bowlby, 1980, DeVaul, Zisook, & Faschingbauer, 1979; Harvey, 1996; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993; Weiss, 1993). The literature on grief phases is useful for helping us understand the communication on Facebook memorial walls because it reveals the emotions that the bereaved are experiencing as they mourn the loss of a loved one. Being aware of the grieving process also facilitates an understanding of the emotional and psychological trauma that can lead to certain behaviors, such as talking to the deceased. The following section reviews grief-related literature and discusses conditions that can affect the grieving process and coping behaviors.
Phases of Grieving

Researchers’ individual concepts of the phases of grieving or coping with dying might be stage-based (Kübler-Ross, 1969) or task-based (Corr, 1992) in nature. Although various researchers posited anywhere from three to seven specific stages, many agree on three broadly defined phases of grief or mourning: shock, emotional and cognitive acknowledgement, and reconstruction (Bowlby, 1980, DeVaul, Zisook, & Faschingbauer, 1979; Harvey, 1996; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993; Weiss, 1993). These phases might overlap, but the first stages generally precede the reconstruction phase (DeVaul, et al., 1979; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993; Weiss, 1993).

Grief occurs instinctively and focuses on resolution and adaptation, which usually occurs in the form of restructuring and reinterpreting aspects of an individual’s life devoid of the now deceased friend or family member (Attig, 2001; Bowlby, 1960, 1979). The death of someone in an individual’s intimate sphere conflicts with the individual’s perception of reality. Consequently, people attempt to make sense of the death in order to restructure their reality (Pennebaker, Zech, & Rimè, 2001). People really never get over the death of a close friend. Instead, the loss becomes part of one’s identity as the bereaved combine past assumptions of their worldview with tenets of their new reality (Harvey, 1996; Harvey et al., 2001; Janoff-Bulman & Berg, 1998). Through an acquaintance’s death, a part of the web of connections is missing; a loss of wholeness is experienced. In grieving, perceptions of the world are re-evaluated and the web of connections is “re-woven” (Attig, 2001). The third phase, adaptation, becomes more difficult for people to attain when their loss is that of a young person. People are not
supposed to “die young” (Charmaz, 1980). When they do, it can be more difficult for survivors to comprehend the situation and recover from the loss (Harvey, 1996).

In addition to phases of grieving that one goes through, researchers also address the tasks that grieving individuals accomplish as they cope with a death. Parkes and Weiss (1983) identified three tasks: acknowledging and explaining losses, emotionally accepting the losses, and assuming a new identity. The idea of tasks illustrates that grieving is an active process. People do not simply sit and let grieving occur; they must actively engage in the challenges and accomplish tasks in the process.

I find Parkes (1970b, 1972) and Bowlby’s (1961, 1969, 1973, 1980) concepts of the phases of grieving to be the most useful for my research project. Their conceptualization of the four stages are parsimonious while acknowledging all of the processes that someone progresses through during course of grieving. Bowlby (1961) suggested three phases that comprised the process of grieving. These included yearning and searching, disorganization and despair, and reorganization. The first phase in the current model, numbness and outbursts of anger, was added later (Bowlby, 1980). Based on Bowlby’s (1961, 1969, 1973, 1980) research on grieving, Parkes (1970b, 1972) built on and identified four phases of grieving: 1) shock and numbness; 2) yearning and searching; 3) disorganization and despair; and, 4) reorganization and recovery.

**Shock and Numbness**

The initial phase of grief is one of shock, denial, and disbelief (Weiss, 1993). The living often seek to understand why something happened before they move to accept it (Pennebaker, 1997a). This can include questioning the person’s death and why their friend or family member had to be the one to die. Feelings of shock and numbness are
evident in the initial phase of grieving. Most people are shocked when they first find out about their friend’s death, as they find it difficult to accept the news. A small number of people might have outbursts of anger (Bowlby, 1980). People are often stunned at the impact of loss and have a sense of disbelief. Survivors struggle to comprehend their loss, as they have difficulty cognitively realizing that a death has occurred (Bowlby, 1980). People are thought to be “out of face” because they are thrust into this emotional event of having lost a friend, and they do not know the proper script to follow (Goffman, 1967, p. 18).

The impact of the death of a loved one is traumatic. The numerous instantaneous changes to one’s reality can make the grieving individual feel “overloaded” or unable to take in much external stimuli (Parkes, 1970b). Widows have described this sensation as being “numb” (Parkes, 1970a, p. 448). For example, following the death of his wife, C. S. Lewis described feeling like an “invisible blanket” laid between the world and him (Lewis, 1989). Feelings of shock and numbness can last anywhere from a few hours to a week. Additionally, these feelings might resurface at other times during the grieving process (Parkes, 1970a, 1970b).

_Yearning and Searching_

Next, death is acknowledged cognitively and emotionally (Shuchter & Zisook, 1993). In the second phase, yearning and searching, survivors are unable to accept the loss of a loved one and, consequently, suffer from separation anxiety (Parkes, 1972). In this phase, people begin to understand the reality of the loss and begin to search for their lost attachment figure. People who are yearning or searching suffer from pangs of intense distress and sobbing. Anger often results when people search for and cannot find
evidence of the person who has died. In a study involving widows’ grief following the
death of their husband, many women described how they went from room to room
searching for evidence of their husbands (Parkes, 1970b). They became frustrated and
very angry as a result of not finding the deceased.

When working through grief, the bereaved individual’s feelings might vary
between the two extremes of longing for reminders of the deceased to avoiding reminders
altogether (Bowlby, 1980). Often, mourners are preoccupied by thinking about the
deceased person. They might constantly scan their environment for indications that their
loved one is present (Bowlby, 1980; Parkes, 1970b, 1972). People who choose to linger
in one’s death hold on to the hope that the deceased will return. In their hopeful state,
people might repeatedly call the deceased’s phone number, purchase gifts for the friend’s
birthday, or contribute to a dead child’s college fund (Attig, 2000). People hold on to the
reality that includes the deceased as a living person to no avail. Some prefer to deceive
themselves rather than face the permanence of a loved one’s absence (Attig, 2000).

Again, in this phase, people are not yet accustomed to the lack of one’s presence.
The living must come to terms with the physical possessions left behind by the deceased,
places they have visited with the deceased, and the absence of the deceased during
special occasions. Survivors must decide what these things, places, and events now mean
in the deceased’s absence (Attig, 2001). They often yearn for the reality that used to be,
and they continue to fall into their habitual patterns. For example, some people continue
setting a place at the table for the deceased because it is a routine. Others might pick up
the phone to call the deceased as they typically would only to remember a second later
that this is not possible. Nearly every bit of one’s physical surroundings can stimulate
more distress and sadness because they remind the bereaved of their loss. Items such as photos, work clothes, or a favorite chair can rouse memories of the deceased (Attig, 2000). Additionally, music, dreams, and meaningful places can bring the deceased to mind (Howarth, 2000). The sadness tends to lessen as we continue to encounter surroundings or daily routines that remind us of the deceased (Attig, 2000).

In the same time frame, people might also choose to “protest” the death by ignoring the deceased person completely. They do this by avoiding places where the deceased was or by occupying their time with an activity (Bowlby & Parkes, 1970; Parkes, 1970b). People often try to “keep busy” so they do not have to wholly comprehend the death of a loved one (Frantz, Trolley, & Farrell, 1998). In Frantz et al.’s (1998) study, grieving individuals said that keeping busy took their minds off their grief and helped them to avoid dwelling on their loss. The phase of searching and yearning can last months or years (Bowlby, 1980).

Disorganization and Despair

People in the disorganization and despair phase are beginning to cope with the present reality as it exists without the presence of his or her loved one. A person’s identity might be compromised as he or she questions how to define him or herself. Identities tend to be uncertain as survivors question how they now define themselves in the absence of someone who was so important in their lives. For example, a man might be unsure that he is a father now that his only child is dead. Likewise, a woman might not know if she is a wife now that her husband is gone (Attig, 2001; Bowlby, 1980; Parkes & Weiss, 1983). Because the self is bound up with the deceased, the loss of someone essentially results in a loss of self (Howarth, 2000; Marris, 1974).
Hopelessness and despair might accompany the bereaved individuals’ emotional status (DeVaul et al., 1979). Emotional acceptance of the death follows cognitive acceptance, as individuals work to reduce the pain associated with memories of the deceased until tolerance is achieved (Weiss, 1993). People in the disorganization and despair phase of grieving are easily distracted and experience difficulty concentrating. This seems to be a logical occurrence, as they are now focusing on their changed identity. Furthermore, the living might have additional responsibilities now that someone has died. For example, if the now-deceased wife used to be in charge of taking the dog to the vet, the husband must now take on this task in addition to grieving the loss of his wife and adjusting to his new identity without her. People become overloaded by grief and new responsibilities. As a result, they are easily bewildered by the new demands.

**Reorganization and Recovery**

People coping with a loss are often inclined to make sense of it, which coincides with the final stage: reorganization and recovery, when the living ultimately recognize what their loss meant to them (Bowlby, 1980, DeVaul, Zisook, & Faschingbauer, 1979; Harvey, 1996; Neimeyer, 2000; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993; Weiss, 1993). Attig (1996) noted that, “Loss of another through death affects, often profoundly, the entire fabric of our experiencing and acting in the world” (p. 106). Following a death, we are challenged to understand the newly altered world. We must learn how to act and exist in a now distorted reality. After people acknowledge the death of their friend or family member, they begin to restructure their lives and their perception of reality. They must find a new way of living without the deceased. This occurs in the reorganization and recovery phase. People can no longer experience the world with someone they love; instead, they need to
learn to experience the world without the deceased. To reconstruct their new worldview, people search for meaning and attempt to make sense of the traumatic event (Pennebaker et al., 2001). According to Attig (2001), as people grieve, they respond in two ways. They manage the pain that accompanies the sorrow in their lives, and they reshape their lives and “relearn” how the world is without the deceased. In order to make sense of a loss, people need to rebuild their worldviews. The final step in managing loss lies in the need to redefine aspects of sense of self (Davis, 2001; Weiss, 1993).

Relearning the world involves the cognitive emotional, psychological, behavioral, social, and spiritual aspects of our lives. People must relearn the experiences of physical surroundings, relationships with fellow survivors, their selves, places in space and time, and spiritual places in the world. Relearning the world is a complex process. As people grieve, they redefine aspects of the world as well as their place within it, and many adjustments must be made. The death of a foundational person in one’s life disrupts the very core of how they understand the world. We have to find new ways to interact or connect with others as well as relearn what we can depend on in the world. This does not necessarily mean that grieving individuals must define and discover ways of existing in the world. Rather, it means that those who are grieving must recover trust in particular facets of the world (Attig, 1996).

The final step in coping with a significant loss includes redefining particular aspects of one’s sense of self (Davis, 2001; Weiss, 1993). As people grieve, they manage their sadness and essentially strive to “relearn” the world as it exists in the deceased’s absence (Attig, 2001). The living develop “new normals,” or new patterns of behavior, in a world without the deceased person. Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson (1998) and
Weiss (1993) argued that people eventually develop an identity where the deceased is now part of the survivor’s past self instead of the present self. In this phase, people discover that it is okay to laugh, and it is acceptable to not think about the deceased person all of the time. Attig (1996) explained, “Part of what we do when we relearn the world is learn how to sustain a loving connection with the dead…We must relinquish our concrete loving of the presence of those we have cared about and replace it with abstract loving in separation…” (p. 187).

A grieving person can experience several phases simultaneously (Parkes, 1970a; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993; Weiss, 1992). For example, they can be in shock while yearning to see the deceased. These phases also do not necessarily follow a fixed order. People can shift from one stage to the next and back again. People might be having a “good day” one day and slip back into having feelings of shock and numbness the next day. These are what Parkes (1972, p. 39) called acute episodic “pangs” of depression.

A death disrupts our selves and how we view the world. The death of someone leaves holes in our day-to-day world. We ground our habits, behaviors, thoughts, and expectations in our relationships (Attig, 1996). When one of those relationships changes or terminates due to a death, the world no longer looks the same, as our habits, behaviors, thoughts, and expectations no longer make sense in the absence of someone. Attig (1996) argued that “we experience ourselves as suspended between a reality where we were at home and knew how to be ourselves and a reality transformed by loss where we have yet to find our way” (p. 147). As a result, the bereaved work to establish new patterns of living in their new reality. They redefine their expectations and thoughts. People must, as Attig (1996) said, “secure new self-identities” (p. 149).
Summary

As people grieve, they go through the phases of grief. Initially, they are shocked and stunned at the loss. People then begin to acknowledge that the death occurred but often suffer from separation anxiety. This is the yearning and searching phase. As people cope with their reality as it exists without the loved one, they enter the disorganization and despair phase. Finally, people make sense of the death in the reorganization and recovery phase. While these phases appear to be linear, they are not; people can jump back and forth between phases, depending on how they feel at any given moment (Parkes, 1972). The research on the stages of grief tells us that as people grieve, they experience various emotions and distress. Recognizing the emotions experienced by those who are grieving is important for understanding the communication on Facebook memorial walls. People writing on the Facebook walls also go through the phases of grieving, and the emotions experienced in each of the phases has the potential to affect the bereaved individual’s behavior and communication.

Conditions Affecting the Grieving Process

The grieving process can be more difficult, depending on the age of the deceased, as well as the nature of the relationship between a person and the deceased and the manner in which he or she died. Charmaz (1980) listed three variables that affect the grief felt by the survivors: 1) the structure of the relationship; 2) the intensity of involvement or relationship with the deceased; and, 3) death expectations (e.g., if the death is sudden, or if the death is anticipated).

The trauma and shock of the death of a loved one is more intense for the living when the death occurs as a young adult or child (Harvey, 1996). The death of someone
who is quite young violates survivors’ beliefs about reality (Pennebaker et al., 2001). As a result, grief and mourning can be more intense and prolonged for the death of a relatively young person as compared to an expected death of someone who is older (Harvey, 1996). People hold expectations about the “appropriate” type of death with the “correct” timing. They believe that a natural death at an old age is an acceptable death (Charmaz, 1980). Dying young can be considered as “dying out of turn” (p. 28). We can generally accept the death of someone older dying, but the death of a young person is incongruent with the order in which we anticipate people to die. The reaction to the death of a young person is further antagonized because the emotional pain is due to the injustice of the situation as well as the loss itself. Further, much of the pain is due to the lack of knowledge as to how to cope with the unexpected situation (Neuberger, 2004). This grief and distress further intensifies when the death event includes the sudden passing of a close friend (Yates, Ellison, & McGuiness, 1993). People’s realities generally do not consist of what life would be like without a close friend or family member. Servaty-Seib and Pistole (2006/2007) found that grief is more intense when the deceased is a friend as compared to the death of a grandparent.

A sense of disbelief and lack of knowledge also surround the death when it is sudden or unanticipated. Because friends and family are usually not present when someone suddenly dies, they never get the opportunity to say goodbye, as they might have preferred (Howarth, 2001). The sudden loss of a young close friend or family member has an enormous impact on one’s perception of reality. Consequently, any individual’s sudden death violates the previously created view of reality. A person’s “sudden death leaves the survivor without preparation, without anticipation” (Charmaz,
Reorganization and recovery can prove to be a more difficult stage for the bereaved to attain due to the abnormality of the situation. Survivors are left to “integrate” the loss and its impact into their identities and worldviews. Additionally, when lives are intertwined, such as the case of spouses or close friends, sudden death is likely more painful. It is easy to see that the combination of factors (i.e., age, type of relationship, suddenness of death) can significantly affect one’s reality.

Because I examine the communication on young adults’ Facebook memorial groups, it was important to identify particular conditions that affect the grieving process, such as the closeness or intensity of the relationship and death expectations. The memorial groups that I studied were created for people who died unexpectedly when they were young. Likely, the conditions surrounding the death made the process of grieving more difficult, influencing the communication in the memorial groups. To help aid in the development of their reorganization and recovery following a death, many people turn to various methods of coping with the death.

Coping Behaviors

People cope with their grief by engaging in various behaviors or activities during the grieving process. Ceremonies, memorials, and donations in the deceased’s name can help the living begin to cope with their loss. As time goes on, some people choose to engage in any assortment of coping activities, such as exercising, holding feelings within, weeping privately, writing in a diary, or reaching out to others (Attig, 2000). However people choose to grieve, or cope with the death of a loved one, grieving remains an important factor in recovering from the loss of a loved one (Attig, 1996). A staff counselor at the University of Minnesota stated that expressing grief and connecting with
other people is beneficial, and any medium that aids in the expression is effective (Ross, 2006). Examples of activities or behaviors that people utilize to cope include visiting or creating memorials, joining support groups, communicating with others about the loss, and talking to the deceased as if the deceased could or would respond.

The Facebook memorial group walls could potentially be recognized as possessing characteristics of all four coping behaviors. First, people create the group as a memorial for the deceased. They also utilize the walls to communicate with others about the deceased and gain social support. Finally, group members potentially use the walls as a way to aim their communication directly to the deceased. Understanding what we know about how people engage in coping activities in general can be useful in framing the research questions for this study.

Memorials

Memorializing accomplishes many objectives. Memorializing allows people to mourn the deceased, lessen one’s guilt and grief, talk with others who have lost a loved one, and recognize people involved in attempting to save the deceased (Foot et al., 2006). Commemorating the life of someone can bring consolation to grieving individuals (Eisenhandler, 2004). Generally as people grieve, they try to give the deceased “symbolic immortality” by remembering loved ones in various ways (Attig, 2000, p. 55). Some memorials are formal and large-scale, such as the Oklahoma City National Memorial or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall (Schwab, 2004). Other memorials are smaller and more individualized. Sometimes we formalize our grieving by creating memorial structures or gardens (Harvey, 1996). These memorials enable the living to move toward
lasting love; they support the survivors as they let go of the deceased’s presence (Attig, 2001).

Commemoration of a life can be expressed in a variety of forms (Eisenhandler, 2004). Generally, memorials, events, and ceremonies help support our remembering, and headstones, monuments, and urns identify the deceased’s physical remains. We also might choose to mark where the person died. Dedicating benches, making donations in the deceased’s name, or donating the deceased’s organs serve as additional ways for the living to honor the dead (Eisenhandler, 2004; Schwab, 2004). Additionally, people leave objects at “shrines,” or places where a tragedy happened. Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti (1998) examined sites of public tragedy including where the Oklahoma City bombing occurred and where the Dunblane massacre transpired. They found that people often left flowers, toys, and balloons, among other objects, at the public shrines. Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti (1998) argued that people leaving objects at the shrines indicated a “sense of continuing involvement with the dead” (p. 162).

Memorials of all kinds also contribute to the formation of public memory. Bodnar (1992) described public memory as “a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication its future” (p. 15). Scholars have examined the public memory surrounding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci, 1991) and the shrines that cropped up at the site of the Oklahoma City bombing and the Dunblane massacre (Jorgenson-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998). Memorials such as these allow people to congregate and share their own views of the deceased, creating public memory of the deceased.
People in Western societies, such as the United States are now establishing new ways of commemorating or marking a death (Howarth, 2000). The Internet provides various ways for people to memorialize the deceased and connect with others who have suffered the same or a similar loss (Roberts, 2004a). Virtual memorials have also gained prominence in our electronic culture (Jones, 2004) and are discussed later in the chapter.

**Support Groups**

Many people choose to join a support group or spend time with their remaining social networks especially following a sudden or untimely death (Howarth, 2000). When people experience a major life event, they often require help from their social support system. Social support groups offer companionship as well as give ongoing meaning to the death (Rock, 1997). Additionally, they can result in a decrease in stress (Rook, 1987). The presence of friends positively affects an individual’s grieving, as bereaved people need social support to get them through this traumatic time (Davidson, 1984; Frantz et al., 1998). Support groups also prove to be useful because the grieving individuals can be encouraged to retell stories in order to make the deceased’s lives real while refreshing the memory of the deceased (Attig, 1996). Attig (2000) argued that recalling memories of deceased friends helps people sustain their connection with them.

Morgan et al. (1997) found that widows shifted their social networks to include others who had also experienced a loss, even though this did not necessarily affect their quality of support received. The researchers found that the widows preferred to associate themselves with people who experienced the same life event: the loss of a husband. Recognizing that there is a shared experience can cause a sense of relief, as many people might believe they are the only ones who feel as they do about the loss of a loved one.
Remembering the deceased together can help grieving individuals fill the gaps in the stories that are told to others and themselves about the deceased (Attig, 2000). Together, the group members collaborate to create a shared understanding of the deceased, which can help deepen the group members’ connection with the deceased as well as strengthen bonds between the group members (Rosenblatt, 1996; Rosenblatt & Elde, 1990). Like memorials, support groups have also materialized on the Internet. I discuss online support groups in the section on computer-mediated grieving.

Writing and Talking to Others as a Way to Cope

While it can be difficult, people often talk with others about the loss in order to cope with the intense grief that they experience following a death. Communicating about the death is a natural occurrence as we have a fundamental need to express ourselves (Pennebaker, 1997a). After the basic physiological needs are fulfilled, people have a predisposition toward self-expression. Writing about an emotional experience helps individuals both mentally and physically, as emotional responses to memories become less intense when one constantly writes about or addresses a traumatic event (Pennebaker, 1997a). People who write about their traumatic incidences experience consistent and significant health improvements (Pennebaker, 1997b). Additionally, disclosing emotional issues results in lower ratings of hopelessness and depression (Segal, Bogaards, Becker, & Chatman, 1999).

People can continue to explore the stories of the deceased alone or with friends. These stories might cause laughter or tears. They might also provoke us to examine our lives more closely, appreciate others’ contributions to our own lives, remind us of the fragility of life, or remind us of tragedy and heartbreak (Attig, 1996). Harvey (1996)
argued that storytelling, as well as other public recollections, are valuable. In a story-
action model for grieving developed by Harvey, public storytelling serves as a vital part
of constructively addressing a loss. Storytelling or confiding in others releases emotions
that accumulate following a death (Harvey, 1996). By remembering their deceased
friends and family together and constructing a new understanding of the deceased’s life,
people reconnect with the deceased (Attig, 2001; Howarth, 2000). Exchanging,
discussing, and exploring memories of the departed with others causes those memories to
continue. Telling stories also help people make sense of their loss (Barnhill & Owen,
2007).

In a variety of settings, writing about traumatic experiences resulted in significant
health improvements (Pennebaker et al., 2001). Pennebaker (1997b) argued that people
continue to live with their trauma if they do not resolve it. People often write or talk
about the deceased friend as a way to understand and make sense of the death. Talking
with others also helps individuals organize and come to terms with the experience
(Pennebaker et al., 2001). Rosenblatt (1996) argued that the bereaved turn to others to
understand themselves and their grief. This discourse is important, as making sense of a
friend’s death was linked with decreased levels of emotional distress (Davis, Wortman,
Lehman, & Silver, 2000).

The act of writing about an emotional incident is a way to externalize that
traumatic experience. Pennebaker (1997a) believed that because the distressing event has
been written down and “preserved,” individuals were less likely to recurrently mentally
rehearse the event. Ruminating over a loss might worsen grief and depression (Stroebe &
Schut, 2001). Those most likely to benefit from revealing emotional experiences are
those who might not typically talk to others about their experiences (Pennebaker et al., 2001). In Pennebaker’s (1997a) own experience, writing about upsetting events led him to a new understanding of them, and overwhelming problems seemed more manageable. Spera, Buhrfeind, and Pennebaker (1994) linked writing about emotional topics with behavioral changes. In the study, students were asked to write about emotional topics. In the months following this task, the students’ grades improved. Segal et al.’s (1999) study found that disclosure of emotional issues results in lower ratings of hopelessness and depression. Their study demonstrated the mental and physical health benefits that result from writing about death-related topics.

Frequent discussion of an emotional experience (such as the death of a friend or family member) causes that particular memory to lose a portion of its emotional load. A gradual reduction in an emotional response to a death can be the result of repeatedly writing about or addressing a traumatic event (Pennebaker, 1997a). Eighty-nine percent of respondents in Pennebaker et al.’s (2001) study stated that talking about such an experience is liberating and therapeutic. People who resist discussing traumatic experiences often suffer from a variety of health problems (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988). Correlational findings suggested that verbalizing an emotional experience does not aid in emotional recovery. On the other hand, participants directly reported that sharing their emotional experience was ultimately beneficial. Although socially sharing emotions might not bring emotional relief, it could serve alternative cognitive, psychological, and social functions (Pennebaker et al., 2001).
Talking to the Deceased

In addition to talking with others about a death, people have also reported talking to their dead loved ones to maintain a sense of a relationship with the deceased. Howarth (2000) discovered that the boundaries between life and death are becoming “blurred.” The living can breach the boundaries in numerous ways, including talking about the dead, noting anniversaries, and talking “with” the dead. de Vries (2001) described the communication with the dead:

Many individuals report ongoing communication with the deceased at just such daily junctures. This is not just the stuff of seances or extrasensory experiences; it is a sort of “checking in” and wondering what the deceased would think or do at a particular occasion. It is dreaming of the deceased and believing that they are watching over the activities of the bereft. (p. 76)

People often refer to the deceased in day-to-day life and live their lives in ways that would please their now absent loved one (Attig, 1996). The living continue to rely on the dead for advice and might engage in an internal dialogue with the deceased when making decisions (Attig, 1996). Attig (1996) argued that these obligations do not need to include excessive or constricting actions. Instead, a sense of responsibility to continuing with unhindered living should accompany the survivor’s actions. While people are probably influenced by the deceased in their absence, they should not devote themselves excessively.

As discovered in numerous studies, many people sense the presence of the dead and consider conversations with them to be meaningful (Glick, Weiss, & Parkes, 1974; Klass & Walter, 2001; Parkes, 1970b; Rees, 1971; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993). People in
the yearning and searching phase often have a sense of their loved one’s actual presence. They report hearing their spouse’s keys in the door or hearing other sounds that indicate the presence of the deceased. Shuchter and Zisook (1993) investigated how people behaved following the death of their spouse. The researchers found that more than one third of the widows and widowers surveyed admitted that they talked with their deceased spouse frequently. In Parkes’ (1970b) study on widows, he found that 19 of 22 widows reported being preoccupied with thoughts of their husbands during the first month after their passing. After one year, 12 of the widows reported the continued thoughts of their husbands. This indicates that aspects of a continued relationship exist even after the death of one party in a relationship.

Hsu, Kahn, Yee, and Lee (2004) found that in Taiwan, widows and children who have lost their husbands and fathers often make a significant effort remembering the dead and restoring representations of the deceased. The Taiwanese customarily try to maintain their sense of wholeness by establishing and maintaining a relationship with the deceased. They talk to physical symbols of the deceased (e.g., urns or pictures) in order to accomplish this objective. The communication between the living and the artifacts reportedly help reduce the anxiety that one feels while grieving.

As discussed, writing and talking about the deceased, off- or online, serves as one means to cope with a death. People participate in numerous activities in order to cope with the death of a loved one. These activities also include joining groups such as Facebook memorial groups to fulfill the need for social support and communicating one’s grief. As indicated, people do not necessarily converse with each other within the memorial groups in order to cope with their grief. Instead, they often write messages to
the deceased. I contend that writing directly to the deceased functions as course of action that one utilizes to cope with a death and continue a relationship with the deceased.

Maintaining Interpersonal Relationships with the Deceased

Attig (1996) argued that deaths challenge us to maintain a connection with the deceased. The dead still very much remain a part of our lives (Mitchell, 2007). People struggle to reconstruct their worlds without the deceased because, as Giddens (1984) argued, “the self cannot be understood outside ‘history’” where “history” is defined as the temporality of human practices (p. 36). Goffman (1967) offered his view of continued relationships: “When a person begins a mediated or immediate encounter, he [sic] already stands in some kind of social relationship to the others concerned, and expects to stand in a given relationship to them after the particular encounter ends” (p. 41). The deceased friend continues to remain an element in the survivor’s sense of self because the friend remains a part of the survivor’s history (Hallam, Hockey, & Howarth, 1999).

In a sense, the Facebook groups serve as transitional objects for the bereaved. Some people cling to the deceased’s possessions as a way for people to become “anchored in the world” and help the person ease into the world that exists without the deceased (Belk, 1991, p. 124). Gentry, Kennedy, Paul, and Hill (1994) found that people develop strong ties to objects that were associated with the deceased. Participants in their study became attached to the deceased’s toys, clothing, and photographs. The attachment objects were noted as being painful to be around, yet the objects were occasionally helpful in moving the bereaved individuals through their grieving, depending on the grieving person. It seemed that people have strong ties to Facebook and the fact that their deceased loved one used to “appear” on Facebook. As a result, Facebook functions as the
transitional object. While it can be painful talking to the deceased or talking to others about the deceased, the Facebook memorial groups might offer help to people as they grieve.

In an essay on grieving, Julius Lester (1994) declared, “Death ends a life but death does not end a relationship” (para. 8). In this respect, people attempt to continue a relationship with their friends even after a friend has died. Friends, or people in relationships, create routines, as all social systems do (Giddens, 1984). As in the case with many young adults, friends’ routines involve conversing via Facebook. The individuals in the relationship then maintain these routines, even in death.

Because Americans are dependent on few significant others, the loss of a significant other has a massive effect (Charmaz, 1980). Grief is more intense when people lose the one person he or she turned to in emotional times as compared to grief following the loss of a mere acquaintance (Parkes, 1988). Neuberger (2004) explained, “Grief is painful. It is lonely, soul-destroying, difficult, depressing” (p. 22). It only seems rational that grieving people would appreciate having their friends, dead or alive, help them through their grief. Because a person’s very close friend or family member is now dead, the living can feel as though there is no one with whom to talk (Parkes, 1988). People generally share intimate details of their lives or with close family members, spouses or significant others, and close friends. When one of these people dies, it also means that the living person has lost a confidant (Pennebaker et al., 2001). Harvey (1996, p. 37) argued, “There simply is no substitute person for those closest to us.” Others cannot fill the social role or void that the bereaved now encounters. Essentially, people lose the one person with whom they would talk with about the death of someone so close
to them (Attig, 1996). The loss of an important person can be tremendously hard on an individual because one’s life and sense of self are embedded in activities that involved the people who are no longer living. Essentially, Charmaz (1980) and Howarth (2000) argued that we symbolically lose a part of ourselves when someone close to us dies.

In the immediate days following the death, people withdraw from the world to guard against additional damages. When people are ready, they then begin to cope by grieving. At this juncture, some people do not continue with their lives. Instead, they are unable to deal with reality and remain withdrawn. When grieving, people confront life as it now exists without the deceased. People who do not continue with their lives stay in their grief to avoid the unknown, life without their loved one. People do not abruptly adjust to the new change that has occurred in their lives; they often remain in the mindset that they occupied prior to the death. They still desire to care about and exist alongside the person who has died. Some choose to remain in grief because they believe that if they stop pining for their friend or family member, their love for the deceased will end (Attig, 1996).

Constructive grieving is an important process to undergo in order to continue loving the deceased although he or she no longer maintains a physical presence. Attig (1996) argued that the bereaved must transition from dwelling in the pain of losing someone to tolerating the pain while adopting new living practices. This transition allows us to constructively care about the deceased in their absence. Dwelling in our anguish can interfere with our memories of the deceased and attempts to continue a relationship with him or her. When people do not understand how to continue with their lives loving the
deceased in their absence, they tend to cling to the deceased in unconstructive ways (Attig, 1996).

People seek to maintain a relationship with the deceased for a variety of reasons. They continue to sense a connection with their loved one. People’s friendships and the importance of significant others in our lives trigger this deeply rooted connection and sense of the deceased’s presence. The connection encourages grieving individuals to try to maintain relational continuity with the deceased as a way to preserve their friendship, even in death. The idea that relationships are based in linear time brings with it the aspect of continuity. Due to a relationship’s continuity, aspects of the past are brought forth into the relationship’s present and can be projected into the future of a relationship as well. Generally, people’s thoughts regarding the deceased are past-oriented. They focus primarily on that time period and project aspects of the relationship to the present as a way to continue including the deceased in their lives (Werner & Haggard, 1985). Giddens (1984) described the idea of continuity: “The fundamental question of social theory, as I see it…is to explicate how the limitations of individual ‘presence’ are transcended by the ‘stretching’ of social relations across time and space” (p. 35). The living continue to stretch their relations with the deceased across a friend’s timeline that includes the friend’s death and beyond.

Attachment and Separation Anxiety

Although Bowlby (1969, 1972) first focused on children’s separation anxiety following a separation from their mother or other attachment figures, his concepts hold true for young adults and their attachment to their friends. Bowlby examined children’s responses to the absence of a mother figure, or someone to whom a child directs his or
her attachment behavior. When a child becomes separated from the mother figure, he or she becomes distressed and display behaviors related to intense separation anxiety. While the attachment between friends might not be as strong as the attachment between mother and child, it does exist. Following his initial studies, Bowlby (1980) admitted that attachment and affectional bonds are also present beyond childhood. As we get older, trusted companions serve as attachment figures in our lives. When a friend dies, he or she becomes permanently “separated” from the living. Because of the attachment and bonds between friends, the living individuals have feelings of anxiety and uneasiness when separated from a friend through death.

A child’ reaction to being separated from his or her mother mirrors Parkes’ proposed process of grieving. This parallel is clearly evident in Bowlby’s (1972) description of a child being separated from his or her mother:

At first he [sic] protests vigorously and tries by all the means available to him to recover his mother. Later he seems to despair of discovering her but nonetheless remains preoccupied with her and vigilant for her return. Later still he seems to lose his interest in his mother and to become emotionally detached from her. (p. 26)

Adults follow a similar process as well following the death of a loved one. They protest the death through yearning and searching. Next, they experience despair and preoccupation with the deceased. Finally, the grieving people reorganize their sense of self by cognitively and emotionally recognizing the loss of a friend. Although the preoccupation with the deceased lessens, it cannot be determined if an absolute emotional detachment occurs.
Attachment roots us in connections with places and routines. People thrive in interacting within established patterns (Attig, 2000). Attig (1996) explained this further:

Attachment is vital for the survival and flourishing of the social vertebrates, especially the higher primate and human species. On this view, when we mourn, our retreat from activity in grief is an organic, evolutionarily reinforced, protective defense mechanism employed in the face of something we perceive as threatening. (p. 37)

People who are grieving show an attachment toward an object. In most cases, the object is a deceased friend. Many scholars, including Bowlby (1980) believe that effective mourning involves a withdrawal of an “emotional investment in the lost person” (p. 25). When the attachment figure is no longer accessible or responsive, grief ensues. Although many people direct their anger at the attachment figure that has died, the anger sometimes becomes redirected at the self; people become upset with themselves for not saying goodbye to the deceased or for failing to tell the deceased that they loved them. While grieving individuals might have a diminished emotional investment in the deceased, some emotional bond still persists (Bowlby, 1980). This attachment to the deceased might be bolstered by the deceased’s perceived presence online. Bowlby (1971) argued that an attachment figure must be both accessible and potentially responsive in order to be available, or have a presence.

Online, the deceased appear to be readily accessible, but not necessarily responsive. Because people experience the imagined presence of the deceased through mediated channels and seldom notice the nature of the mediated objects (the deceased), Lee (2004) would consider the deceased to have a physical presence. Likewise, the
deceased maintain a social presence because the living experience them as “actual social actors” (Lee, 2004, p. 45). Lee questioned if people disregard the virtual nature of one’s presence due to a willing suspension of disbelief caused by technology. This willing suspension of disbelief is likely one explanation as to why people choose to write to the deceased in the Facebook memorial groups. The deceased remain socially present online, on a medium that symbolized their physical presence when they were alive. As such, I deem it necessary to examine issues regarding the deceased’s presence and how it can affect individuals’ relationships with the deceased.

The Deceased’s Presence

Although the deceased are physically absent, they maintain a social presence in the lives of those who loved them. Because of this, the presence of the deceased remains an important aspect to consider when examining issues of attachment and separation anxiety and attempts at maintaining relational continuity with deceased loved ones.

On a macro-level, life and death appear to be highly separate dichotomies. The relationships between life and death appear more fluid, as does the relationship between the body and the self (Hallam et al., 1999). Sometimes, the deceased’s self is so intertwined with the living’s self, as in the case of spouses or very close friends, that it is difficult for individuals to understand who they are now in their deceased friend’s absence. As a result, to maintain his or her own identity, the living must preserve a sense of the deceased’s presence (Hallam et al., 1999).

Scarry (1985) maintained that people often manage the pain of another’s absence by trying to create their presence. In this sense, people attempt to make an absent friend present as a way to cope with the pain of their friend’s absence. The bereaved think of
their deceased friends because imagining their friends is better than living in a world devoid of them (Scarry, 1985). People imagine the presence of their friends as a last resort. When the physical world fails to provide the presence of a friend, people nevertheless retain their imagination and the ability to conjure up an image of their deceased friend. It is with this image that people continue their relationship. Scarry (1985) continued her argument, “Imagining a companion if the world provides none, may – at least temporarily – prevent longing from being a wholly self-experiencing set of physical and emotional events that, emptied of any referential content, exist as merely painful inner disturbances” (p. 167). Imagining the deceased helps those who are grieving to survive their emotional pain. These imagined loved ones provide the living with a sense of the deceased’s presence, which, in turn, helps the living continue a relationship with him or her.

Researchers argue that the deceased can maintain a social, physical, and online presence (Bennett & Bennett, 2000; Glick et al., 1974; Hallam et al., 1999; Klass et al., 1996; Markham, 1998). As defined by Bowlby (1972), “presence” indicates “ready accessibility,” and “absence” refers to “inaccessibility” (p. 23). For example, using Bowlby’s conceptualization of presence, when an individual (dead or alive) is socially accessible, they are thought to have a social presence.

*Social Presence*

A person becomes a body at physical death but not in the eyes of those who loved the deceased. They still view the body as a person (Hallam et al., 1999). Many people have a strong social presence that lingers after their biological death in the same way that people who are physically alive have experienced a “social death” and no longer have an
embodied corporeal presence, due to an illness. A social death does not necessarily coincide with a biological death. Hallam et al. (1999) defined “social death” as depending upon “the extent to which an individual continues to be an active agent in the lives of others” (p. 148). Social life depends on the social continuation of a person, regardless of his or her biological life (Mulkay, 1993). As a result, someone with a biologically dead physical body could, nevertheless, maintain an active presence in the lives of loved ones and resist being socially dead.

According to Hallam et al. (1999), some social scientists argue that the dead are social beings to the degree that loved ones believe them to be social beings. In this sense, the social scientists believe that the deceased only exist in the minds of the living. Hallam et al. (1999) argued that society should recognize the deceased’s presence as something more than a notion imagined by living loved ones. Hallam et al. (1999) explained, “In the absence of the body, social presence may still persist and it is this continuity which most radically challenges the current sociological claims that we become social beings only through our embodiment” (p. 16).

Hallam et al. (1999) argued that the current theoretical principles of the embodied self do not encompass ideas of the ageing, dying, or dead bodies. Rather, these theoretical orientations conceptualize the self as body-based and possessing agency. Hallam et al. (1999) also questioned the constituents of self and death’s role in the continuance or discontinuance of self:

When the flesh ceases to be, when it is cremated or when it rots, we are left with the question of how ‘self’ and ‘flesh,’ as conceived of by social scientists, actually relate to one another. If self and body are identical or mutually constitutive, does
this mean that the self is discontinuous, something which is repeatedly reinvented as change takes place within and on the body’s fleshly surfaces? If this is the case, is the self entirely dissipated once the body has been pronounced dead? (pp. 142-143).

Although Hallam et al. (1999) problematized the notion of a discontinued self, there is no arguing that people continue to live their lives with regard to deceased loved ones. Klass et al. (1996) considered this act to be akin to people living in the disembodied social presence of the dead.

Often, society disregards the continued social presence of the deceased. Hallam et al. (1999) explained, “We suggest that the omission of the disembodied self from social theories of the body mirrors the beliefs and practices of dominant social groups and institutions which disavow the continued social presence or participation of the dead” (p. 18). The dominant discourse often defines one’s sense of the deceased as being hallucinations or pathological aberrations. Due to the negative connotations associated with these views, individuals often refrain from publicly discussing their awareness of the deceased even though the awareness does exist. It appears that Facebook and other online memorials make it socially acceptable for people to talk to the deceased in a public forum where others can observe the communication.

*Physical Presence*

In some studies involving widows, researchers have discovered that the widows occasionally sense the deceased’s physical presence. Hallam et al. (1999) argued that the deceased’s presence is experienced through sight, smell, sound, and touch. The living reported sensing the deceased in various ways, such as in smells, photographs,
anniversaries, music, and the sounds of steps. Widows used their deceased husbands’ possessions or photographs of them to maintain a connection with them. The same group of widows also reported sensing the deceased person in their presence frequently (Bennett & Bennett, 2000). In other studies, participants also reported sensing their loved one’s physical presence. Experiencing these sensations links the deceased to the physical world (Hallam et al., 1999). Essentially, the agency of the biologically deceased individuals is situated within the bodies of the living who remember them. Csordas (1994) considered this continuing relationship to be one of shared “dialogical physicality.” Howarth (2000) further explained,

> They may continue to surprise us with their presence – suddenly brought to life on hearing a special piece of music, encountering the waft of perfume, the fleeting sight of a familiar face or expression. For the dead are mobile, resisting practices that ‘pin them down’ in cemeteries or consign them to past relationships, fading photographs or lost memories. The dead may also impose themselves where they are not wanted, their presence being neither welcome nor comforting. (p. 135)

Glick et al. (1974) found that widows reported sensing the continued presence of the deceased. Widows explained that thinking of and sensing their husbands allowed them to have comfort. In fact, some widows deliberately evoked the dead person’s presence when depressed. Rees (1971) found a similar situation with widows and widowers in his study. Nearly two thirds of the 227 surveyed people in this study described how they continued to experience their spouse’s presence. They described the
experiences as comforting and helpful. Over 10 percent of the widows and widowers in this study reported having conversations with the deceased as well.

As evident, the deceased appears to continue to influence and have agency on the survivor’s lives. In this realm, Hallam et al. (1999) argued that dead people who continue to influence the living retain a form of self. Mulkay (1993) believed that these actions “served as mechanisms to extend the social existence of the deceased” (p. 40). Although the opportunity for what Goffman (1963) calls “true encounters”, has ended with the end of a friend’s life, people who are grieving online can continue to act as though they are co-present with the deceased. Goffman (1963) argued that the “full conditions of co-presence” only exist in unmediated contact between people who are physically present (p. 17). Although he promotes physical co-presence, Goffman admitted that electronic communication allows for some intimacies of co-presence to exist, and Sigman (1991) agreed that telecommunications media (including the Internet) permit relationship co-presence. It is important to note that Goffman wrote about co-presence before the advent of CMC, which allows a much closer approximation of FtF communication than any of the electronic communication forms than Goffman would have witnessed.

*Online Presence*

With the advent of the Internet, and more specifically, Facebook, people now have an online presence as well as a physical presence. When one’s physical presence ceases to exist (i.e., they die), the person’s online presence continues. This online presence exists, whether the person is physically alive or deceased. Because people are accustomed to conversing with their friend’s online presence when he or she was alive.
and had a physical presence, it seems natural for people to continue conversing with the online presence even after the person no longer maintains a physical presence. This online presence appears to be what people talk to when communicating in Facebook memorial groups. In this sense, communicating with someone’s online presence is what makes TcC possible and different from other forms of grieving.

Some users view online communication as valuable for communicating with people all over the world, yet they indicate that they do not experience the online environment as a way of being (Markham, 1998). This reveals that users view the Internet as a useful tool that allows them to communicate with others, but it does not take the place of an actual presence. While this might be true, when a physical presence ceases to exist, it seems reasonable to assume that users might revert to talking to one’s online persona. Even though the online persona does not answer questions or comments posted to them, the living often consider their deceased friends to have gotten the message but not responded (Mendoza, 2007). Because people perform an embodied self while communicating online (Markham, 1998), the deceased’s self appears to continue existing virtually even though the self might not physically exist any longer (Hallam et al., 1999).

People write on the Facebook walls as if they are in the presence of the deceased. They communicate with the representation of other humans whose presence is manifested in the imagination of the bereaved. When Markham (1998) asked a participant about her online interactions with others (who are alive), the participant explained that experiences online seemed quite real, in the physical presence sense, because being online is a part of her life. One participant in Markham’s study indicated that the self of the Other must be perceived offline, as he or she might exist, in order to be seen as authentic. This suggests
that people often envision the Other’s physical self while talking to them online. Steuer (1992) defined presence as “the extent to which one feels present in the mediated environment, rather than in the immediate physical environment” (p. 76). Lee (2004) introduced the idea of people having a valid connection with the actual object that the mediated object represents.

Leder (1990) argued that the body and the self are constitutive of human being. I disagree and contend that the body and the self are separable. The self continues to live through the living’s memories and discourse even after the body ceases to live. When one dies, the physical body ceases to function as it normally does. At the same time, some semblance of a person’s presence continues to live on through friends’ memories and friends’ communication as they strive to continue relational bonds (Klass, 1993). Although one’s body no longer acts or continues in the world following death, the deceased individual’s self, or presence, continues through memories and others’ attempts at continuing bonds. In the Facebook memorial groups, people utilize the walls to discuss memories with others as well as maintain bonds by posting messages to the deceased. In this sense, the group members help to continue the deceased’s presence through communication. It is this communication on which this project focuses.

In the case of Facebook walls, grieving individuals attempt to maintain a connection with the deceased individual as the deceased appears to be present on Facebook walls. Lee (2004) termed this type of virtual object as “para-authentic.” The physical experience becomes virtual “when the act of experiencing actual physical objects is mediated by technology or when the experienced physical objects are artificially created by technology” (Lee, 2004, p. 39). One’s imagination, or visualization
of the deceased friend, helps to stimulate sensory cues and create a genuine awareness of the imagined object. I argue that when people write on the walls, they feel present in a virtual space online with their deceased friends. By engaging in this behavior, the bereaved people often fail to perceive or acknowledge the medium they are using to communicate and maintain relationships with the deceased. Instead, they envision that they are in the physical presence of their friends, conversing with them and maintaining their relationships.

Friendship and Maintaining Relational Continuity

Prior research has indicated that many people engage in maintaining a connective bond with deceased loved ones by continuing their relationships with a loved one, even following the loved one’s death. (Attig, 1996, 2001; Field et al., 2003; Field & Friedrichs, 2004; Glick et al., 1974; Hallam et al., 1999; Klass et al., 1996; Mitchell, 2007; Parkes, 1970; Rees, 1971; Seuchter & Zisook, 1993; Stroebe & Schut, 2005). Bowlby (1980) explained, “Almost all societies, it seems, believe that, despite a bodily death, the person not only lives on but continues his relationships with the living, at least for a time. In many cultures these relationships are conceived as wholly beneficial” (p. 123). Bowlby (1980) also argued that the outcome of grieving is not to sever bonds with a loved one. Additionally, individuals must make sense of their new identity as it now exists without the deceased. In order to do this, and as part of the reorganization and recovery phase in the grieving process, the living often try to maintain a bond with the deceased to renegotiate their identities (Attig, 2001). Many times, that identity includes their deceased friend who still exists – but in a different context. They continue a relationship with the departed loved one. When people actively remember their departed loved ones, they are
brought into the future (Attig, 2000). By loving the deceased, people redefine who they are and “rewave the threads of [their] lives” (Attig, 2000, p. 61).

The intersection of friendship and grieving is an important concept to investigate due to the unique relationship that exists between friends. Part of this uniqueness is due to the voluntary nature of the relationship between friends (Rawlins, 1992). For example, individuals decide to participate in and maintain a friendship-based relationship as opposed to family-based relationships where obligatory commitment is a factor in the relationship’s status. Rawlins (1992) further remarked that a friendship is an especially significant and important relationship to young adults because “friends may provide crucial input regarding one’s self-conceptions, career options, mate selection, community involvement, and recreational activities” (p. 103).

Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007) argued that individuals utilize Facebook to maintain relationships with friends that they interact with offline as well. Haythornthwaite (2005) described this as activating weak ties. I argue that Facebook is also used to maintain relational ties between the living and the deceased. This perhaps is not what Ellison et al. (2007) first conceptualized in their article, but the memorial groups do appear to aid in preserving connections between the living and the deceased.

As a result of the unique relationship bonds between friends, the living often attempt to maintain relational continuity (Sigman, 1991). Duck (1990) argued that all relationships should be conceived as unfinished business because a relationship is an ongoing process. He explained, “relationships are unfinished business conducted through resolution of and dialog about personal, dyadic or relational dilemmas, through talk” (p. 9). The same relationships continue to exist as unfinished business when one person in
the relationship dies. When one person dies, it is up to the living person to continue the relationship, and people generally accomplish this by talking or writing to the deceased in a manner similar to how Duck (1990) described relational maintenance between two living people.

Continuing to love a deceased individual can lead to psychological, physical, intellectual, and social benefits (Field & Friedrichs, 2004; Marwit & Klass, 1994-1995). Remembering the deceased and maintaining bonds with them also benefits those who have died. Attig (2000) and Howarth (2000) argued that the deceased do not want the world to continue as if they had never existed; they want the living to remember them. Attig (2000) further discussed how grieving helps the bereaved continue to love the deceased and maintain bonds with him or her:

Grieving is a journey that teaches us how to love in a new way now that our loved one is no longer with us. This journey from loving in presence to loving in separation is possible because the lives of those who have died remain real in the lives of those of us who knew and loved them. The times we spent together are not erased from history. We retain our unique acquaintance with those we love. We still hold memories that we can review privately or share with one another. We still feel the imprints of their lives on us where we hold their practical, soulful, and spiritual legacies. (p. xviii)

Marwit and Klass (1994-1995) found that continuing bonds with the deceased play many roles in providing comfort and direction. The deceased act as role models, offer guidance, aid in clarifying morals, and in the formation of positive memories. Field et al. (2003) said, “A continuing bond provides the bereaved with a sense of continuity
and meaning in his or her new life” (p. 110). The continuing bonds with the dead serve to provide important meanings in bereaved individuals’ physical and social worlds. For example, widows reported that they experienced more instances of a positive disposition when they utilized continuing bonds expressions (Field & Friedrichs, 2004). The researchers concluded that the continuing bonds expressions had the capability of regulating grieving individuals’ moods. The deceased continue to play a role in the lives of the living, and survivors often think of the dead as giving moral guidance. Individuals also call on the dead for guidance in specific situations (Klass & Walter, 2001; Marwit & Klass, 1995).

Loving someone while not in his or her presence occurs daily. Although we might be physically separated from living friends and family, we continue to love them. The same type of love occurs between the living and the deceased (Attig, 2000). Sigman (1991) investigated how people negotiate the discontinuous periods of physical and interactional co-presence in relationships. Social relationships extend beyond physical, face-to-face interactions, which is why the relationships are considered to be continuous (Sigman, 1991). People engage in behaviors before, during, and after face-to-face interactions that create the continuous nature of a relationship.

Sigman (1991) divided the continuity behaviors into prospective units, introspective units, and retrospective units. Prospective units are behaviors that precede the physical separation, such as saying, “see you later.” Introspective units occur when the physical interaction in a relationship ceases. These can be reminders of the relationship such as wedding bands or mentioning the other party in conversation with someone else. Essentially, introspective units function to identify the existence of
relationships when the parties in a relationship are apart. Retrospective units refer to the behaviors that ensue when the parties in a relationship reencounter each other after an absence. Examples of retrospective units include having conversations to “catch up” with the other party in the relationship following a separation.

In the case of continuing relationships with the deceased, people engage in continuity behaviors before and during the absence of the other party in the relationship. I am interested exclusively in the introspective units that arise during the absence of face-to-face interactions with the deceased. In the case of sudden deaths, people do not often have the opportunity to engage in prospect units of behavior; they do not get the chance to say goodbye. Because the living party would have to die in order for a retrospective unit to occur, it would be impossible to examine these units with regard to the topic at hand. Sigman (1991) noted two aspects, or characteristics, of introspective constructional units. First, mediated contact is often used to maintain a sense of connection with the other party. People in Facebook memorial groups utilize the Internet as the medium by which they maintain their connection with the deceased. The second aspect is that people often remind themselves of the relationship by cognitively and behaviorally orienting themselves to their relationship with the deceased. In this vein, people act or think in ways that reify the relationship that they have with their deceased loved one.

Sigman (1991) proposed that relationships could be continuous despite one party’s absence. Relationships still exist regardless of physical absence. Interactional physical co-presence is not necessarily an essential component of a relationship. People talk via telephones or online and behave in ways that orient themselves to the established relationship even while not in a physical co-presence with them. The relationship ceases
to exist only when two people stop communicating with each other by some means without the expectation of a future interaction. Sigman found that people must maintain communication to continue their relationship. Essentially, he said that the relationship ceases when people stop communicating.

In the same line of thinking, the living often attempt to continue their relationship with the deceased by maintaining some sort of communication with them. Through death, people lose their typical means of connecting with friends, but this does not stop them from maintaining a relationship or continuing to communicate with them (Attig, 1996). Giddens (1984) argued that relationships with those who are physically absent simply require social mechanisms that differ from what would be utilized in a relationship where all parties were present. People attempt to connect with the deceased in various ways, utilizing some social mechanisms and ignoring other social mechanisms that might have been employed when the deceased was alive. People might choose to speak aloud to the deceased, write letters to the deceased, or write to the deceased on Facebook memorial group walls. Additionally, some people tend to focus on having a future interaction with the deceased. When people expect to eventually reconvene with their deceased friends, they orient themselves toward the future (Werner & Haggard, 1985), again echoing Sigman’s claims regarding relational continuity requiring anticipation of a future meeting.

People communicate to the deceased for various reasons. Often, in order to live without the physical presence of their deceased friend or family member, people try to continue with their lives as normally as possible (Attig, 2001). Part of maintaining one’s normal routine can include talking with the deceased as he or she did before the death,
exhibiting relational continuity. People essentially struggle to develop an identity where the deceased is now part of the past self and not the present self (Davis et al., 1998; Weiss, 1993), and communicating with the deceased appears to ease this transition.

Vickio (1999) offered several strategies for connecting with the deceased. He said that people can “cherish the symbolic representations of the deceased that remain following their death,” as these representations can help the bereaved feel a sense of connection with the deceased (p. 167). Vickio also suggested that people recognize how the deceased has affected their lives, incorporate purposes from the deceased’s life into their own lives, identify opportunities to include the deceased in ceremonial events, and share the deceased’s life story. By participating in Facebook memorial groups, people employ many of the strategies suggested by Vickio (1999).

While Bowlby (1980) and other researchers contended that continuing bonds with the deceased can be beneficial to grief work (Field & Friedrichs, 2004; Silverman & Klass, 1996), other researchers disagreed, arguing that maintaining a relationship with the deceased can be indicative of a refusal to acknowledge the death of a loved one (Field, Nichols, Holen, & Horowitz, 1999). Maintaining bonds with the deceased can be a sign of unhealthy grieving and the inability to cope with the loss (Field et al., 1999), and some researchers argued that the living should move forward to a future that does not include the deceased as an active participant in reality (Rando, 1992; Raphael, 1983).

Vickio (1999) and Attig (1996) cautioned against becoming too involved in finishing the deceased’s projects, thinking too much about the deceased, or completely immersing oneself into the deceased’s life story. The researchers believed that if people become too involved in another’s life, they fail to write their own life narrative. One
study’s results indicated that the people who continue to maintain a very close relationship with the deceased are unable to blend the experience of the loss with prior assumptions of the world. These people were found to be at a great risk for bereavement complications (Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006). For example, grieving individuals who continue to act as though nothing had changed following the loss of a friend fail to interpret their perspectives of the world without the deceased loved one. They then begin to live in their own world where the deceased still actually exists, and they fail to acknowledge others around them in their social network (Neimeyer et al., 2006).

Still, other researchers argued that it is not possible to indisputably conclude that it is more helpful to continue a bond or end a bond with a deceased individual (Stroebe & Schut, 2005). Essentially, certain types of continuing bonds can be helpful or harmful and certain types of relinquishing bonds can be helpful or harmful (Stroebe & Schut, 2005). Often, people believe that dwelling in the grief is the only way to maintain their love for the deceased. Freud (1955) and others argued that we should relinquish all ties to the deceased in order to avoid becoming preoccupied with them. Attig (1996) agreed that people should avoid static or obsessive connections with the deceased, but he believes that we simply must redefine the nature of our bonds with the deceased; we do not need to sever those bonds altogether. To sever the bonds or end a relationship with the deceased would be to eradicate a part of one’s self (Howarth, 2000). Klass et al. (1996) agreed and contended that completely severing bonds with the deceased could be detrimental. Instead, individuals should establish a now modified bond with the deceased. Attig (1996) suggested that grieving individuals strive to balance their own lives with attending to the deceased’s life.
Regardless of the potential to help or harm the grieving individual’s emotional status, the deceased continue to play a role in the lives of the living. People appeal to the dead for guidance in specific situations (Klass & Walter, 2001; Marwit & Klass, 1995) and talk to them as a means to sustain relational continuity and maintain a sense of normalcy. By writing to the deceased on the Facebook walls, people retain a relationship with the deceased. Talking to the deceased helps people feel “normal” again; it helps to re-complete their identities (Charmaz, 1980). People then use the communication with the deceased to continue and maintain the relationship with the deceased until accepting the loss is more bearable. Exploring how people grieve can help to determine whether or not continuing bonds with the deceased by talking to them (via Facebook or otherwise) is beneficial to those who are grieving.

Computer-Mediated Grieving

Facebook and other social networking sites provide a place for people to grieve without having to discuss their sadness with others face-to-face. Certain aspects of mediated communication most likely have a positive influence on grief-related discourse. Users take advantage of CMC’s characteristics to improve the messages they post online as well as manage self-presentation (Walther, 2007). For example, when communicating online, people are less self-conscious and less likely to be inhibited by standard social constraints. Mediated communication provides some degree of anonymity (Scott, 2004), and the mediated nature of communicating online results in lower interpersonal risks that often accompany FtF communication (Finn & Lavitt, 1994). Currently, people have a variety of options from which to choose if they wish to grieve online. They can visit and join online support groups or visit virtual memorials.
Virtual Memorials

Much like the cemetery offers people a physical place to locate their deceased loved ones (Francis, Kellaher, & Neophytou 2005), online memorials offer people a virtual place to locate their deceased loved ones. Due to the electronic culture we have today, virtual memorials are quickly becoming part of our culture’s death and dying rituals (Jones, 2004). With the popularity of the Internet, it seems expected that memorial-related matters would move from print media and physical monuments to an electronic medium. Virtual memorials can include memorial webpages, funeral home guestbooks, and memorial groups on social networking sites, such as Facebook. Foot et al. (2006) described the virtual memorials:

In contrast with gravesites, obituaries, and memorial services, Web memorials may provide more opportunities for change and development over time. Immediately after the event, they may serve as organizing surfaces for making arrangements, notifying those interested about offline memorials, and channeling assistance. As time passes, memorial Web sites may also become enduring records of a person’s life, actions, and contributions. Because of its potential for easy storage and reproduction of design, images, and texts, the Web also enhances opportunities for expressing subjective thoughts and emotions that can then be communicated in ways not possible in mass media environments. (p. 78)

The virtual memorials are similar to those memorials created in print cultures (Foot et al., 2006), but the virtual memorials are not as restricted by cost, length, or room for graphics in the same way that print memorials tend to be restricted (Jones, 2004). Web memorials also allow people to update information at any time (Roberts, 2004a).
Hess (2007) identified the ease of collection and distribution of information for the participants as another advantage of virtual groups. Additionally, virtual memorials do not necessarily have to follow specific formats or include particular sections (Jones, 2004; Roberts, 2004a). Some web memorials are very elaborate and include pictures, videos, and music. Other memorials are simple and only contain the name of the deceased and the date he or she died. Although Facebook groups have particular formatting components that cannot be modified, freedom within the minimal constraints exists. People can upload pictures and videos as well as create discussion boards.

Roberts (2004b) described her own involvement with the creation of a virtual memorial group for her friend. She cited the creation of the webpage as something that the deceased’s friends could control, as their thoughts and opinions were not taken into account when the family planned the memorial service. The group of friends had the ability to create a memorial of the deceased in a manner that they deemed appropriate. Roberts also noted that a friend who had missed the official funeral and memorial ceremonies could share in the website creation, bringing a sense of closure for him instead of leaving him with disenfranchised grief.

Recently, Facebook memorial groups have become a way to pay tribute to the deceased. Facebook users establish memorial groups to memorialize their deceased friends and create a space for the deceased’s friends to gather and share information. The online-based groups have become virtual memorials for grieving, young adults in a manner that a static, formal monument could become. People can now contribute to their friend’s memorial as opposed to visiting an unchanging tribute for a loved one. Within virtual memorials, people leave messages for the deceased, akin to physical letters left at
the public shrines examined by Jorgenson-Earp and Lanzilotti (1998). In one survey, over a quarter of the respondents indicated that they visit virtual memorials to communicate with the deceased (Roberts, 2004b). In his study of 9/11 web memorials, Hess (2007) described the Internet’s unique way of commemorating people’s perspectives of the death event. He explained,

Much like the blogging phenomenon, websites offer perspectives of the events from individuals as they experienced the event. Many web authors take pride in the preservation of time within their response as highlighting their authenticity as authors and the authenticity of the vernacular response. (p. 827)

It appears that the messages posted in virtual memories also indicate a continued relationship with the deceased, as argued by Jorgenson-Earp and Lanzilotti (1998) regarding physical memorials.

Additionally, with Internet access, web memorials can be visited quickly at any time of the day from any location (Roberts, 2004a; Schwab, 2004). In a survey, Roberts (2004b) found that people visited virtual memorials much more frequently than physical memorial monuments. The memorials allow people to visit a place where they can be close to the deceased as well as talk with others who have experienced the loss (Roberts, 2004b; Schwab, 2004). In that respect, the Facebook memorial groups also function as a type of support group. In a survey, 91 percent of people indicated that Web memorialization had been beneficial to them in their grief work (Roberts, 2006).

As evident on the Facebook groups, formal memorialization rituals, such as creating and visiting physical memorials, are being replaced by discourse (Walter, 1994). This discourse generally occurs by people discussing the deceased in support groups or
by writing or talking about the deceased. Howarth (2000) argued that technology facilitates the collective sharing of grief in new forms. She explained further: “These new forms of public ritual bring death out of the cemetery, out of the hospital and the private home and into the public eye, even onto the streets, where it becomes visible” (p. 132). Virtual memorials have become so popular that some people have even created websites where people can create online memorials for their deceased pets (“Immortal pets,” 2009).

Although many Facebook users and journalists deem Facebook memorial groups as a positive outlet for grief, not everyone regards Facebook memorials as an acceptable mode of grieving. Some Facebook members do not find these groups to be appropriate for the situation. In a newspaper article that was focused on the accidental death of a college student, the student’s girlfriend was offended by the wall comments from people who did not know the deceased (Abraham, 2007). One blogger questioned the motives of people who join memorial groups. She accused some people of joining so they can write “drama-and-angst-pumped comments” on the wall to be dramatic (“Nobody,” 2007). The father of a murdered young woman found that although the groups maintain a connection with her friends, it is public. The deceased’s former life and her family’s life were opened up for everyone to scrutinize (St. John, 2006).

Additionally, because these groups are relatively new, etiquette for conversing in these particular forums has not yet been established. The Internet increases anonymity and reduces inhibition (Urbina, 2005). This can be beneficial to people who emotionally cope with death by writing on online memorials; however, in their grief, individuals sometimes write impulsively, which can lead to inappropriate messages (McKanna &
Poe, 2006). One popular obituary website has to utilize over half of its staff of 75 employees to find these offensive messages and delete them before they are posted online (Urbina, 2005).

Many people consider Facebook and other online memorials to be mere supplements or tools in the grieving process (Barnhill & Owen, 2007). In a news article, friends of deceased individuals said that they still thought about their friend every day and would continue do so – with or without the online groups (Abraham, 2007). In addition to creating or visiting virtual memorials, another means of grieving online includes joining and participating in online support groups.

Summary

While web memorials contain many characteristics of traditional, physical memorials, many differences between the two exist. Online memorials allow people to visit the website at any time of day from any location with Internet access. Most online memorials also allow anybody to contribute to the memorial by adding pictures or comments. In addition to utilizing virtual memorials as a way to grieve, online support groups serve as another way to grieve the loss of a loved one.

Online Support Groups

In addition to being a kind of virtual memorial, Facebook memorial walls also share some features with online support groups. People grieve individually and collectively through interactions with others in their social networks (Attig, 1996, 2001). LaCoursiere (2001) defined online social support as the “cognitive, perceptual, and transactional process of initiating, participating in, and developing electronic interactions or means of electronic interactions to seek beneficial outcomes in health care status,
perceived health, or psychosocial processing ability” (p. 66). Online social support includes factors of CMC as well as elements of traditional social support.

Some online social support groups have a specific focus or membership. For example, some groups are age-specific or focus on specific characteristics of the death itself (Koocher, 1996). In one online support community, Grief Recovery Online (founded by) Widows & Widowers, or GROWW, the various message boards ranged from those where widows talked about their deceased husbands to boards where children discussed the deaths of their friends or family (GROWW, 2009). On another social support website, discussion boards were organized according to how the deceased died (e.g., car accident, suicide; Griefnet.org, 2009).

Colvin, Chenoweth, Bold, and Harding (2004) surveyed people who engaged in online social support networks with the specific goal to reveal users’ perceived advantages and disadvantages of utilizing the online support groups. Participants identified anonymity, asynchrony, and ability to personalize uses of CMC as advantages of online social support as compared with face-to-face social networks. Participants felt freer to disclose information because of the anonymity, and they also found that the online groups were convenient to write in because they could post at any time and did not have to worry about their appearance or getting to a physical location. The online support groups also increase access to others who can help the bereaved (Weinberg, Schmale, Uken, & Wessel, 1996).

Online support groups are not without problems. The limitations of online support groups revealed by the Colvin et al. (2004) survey included the absence of physical contact or context clues. Additionally, because people can join and leave online groups at
any time, group cohesion can be weak and members in the group will likely have varying support needs. In some cases, people with deceitful motives might choose to enter an online forum to cause disorder for emotionally distraught people (Gary & Remolino, 2000).

**Summary**

Online support groups allow people to congregate in a common area (online) from any location to discuss a loss. Characteristics of online communication, such as anonymity or asynchrony, often create an environment in which people are more likely to discuss emotionally sensitive information than in FtF environments.

Facebook memorial groups display characteristics that make them both a virtual memorial and a site for online social support. First, the groups serve to memorialize the deceased. People can post pictures and write messages in a way to honor the deceased. The same group members can also talk with one another about their grief and share memories of the deceased, in a social support function. The next section provides a detailed explanation of Facebook memorial groups. It is important to understand how Facebook memorial groups function because aspects of the groups can affect how people communicate and grieve in them.

*Facebook Memorial Groups*

As discussed in Chapter One, Facebook allows millions of users to post personal profiles, communicate with others, and create groups for others to join. The groups serve as the site for this dissertation’s analysis. Because Facebook groups serve such a vital component in this study, it is important to explore the groups’ functions, capabilities, and characteristics more thoroughly. Specifically, I look at the groups as public performance.
and how people use the groups to maintain a connection with the deceased. I also
examine how aspects of CMC affect communication within the groups.

Memorial Groups as Public Performance

Many of the Facebook groups, including many of the memorial groups, would be
considered public places because the “open” groups are freely accessible to any member
of the general Facebook community. Goffman (1963) considered public places to be “any
regions in a community freely accessible to members of that community” (p. 9). Because
the Facebook groups are public, people’s behavior within them can be associated with
and analyzed using Goffman’s ideas about people’s behavior in public places. Goffman
(1959) maintained that people give others signs, or symbols, that help “give” information
about themselves. He said, “While in the presence of others, the individual typically
infuses his activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory
facts that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure” (p. 30).

By joining the Facebook groups, people add to their performance of grieving the
loss of a friend. To write on the walls, people must first join the group. Upon joining any
group, the group’s name appears on the members’ individuals profiles. Other people who
are “friends” with this person on Facebook can see the person’s individual profile and
view the groups that the person has joined. In this sense, the group name is a sign and
contributes to the individual’s performance as a person grieving the loss of a friend or
acquaintance. This grief might not be known to others without the group name, or sign,
indicating that the individual knows someone who died.

The Facebook memorial groups function as sites of differing social occasions
because people write both to the deceased and to other group members. Goffman (1963)
pointed out that since different participants perform varying roles while in the same setting, it is possible that the same space can be used as a setting for more than one social occasion. For example, the Facebook memorial groups simultaneously serve as a social support group and a virtual memorial.

For many people, Facebook memorial groups serve as the social context in which they grieve, and grieving with others can reassure us that we are not grieving in isolation. Like the widows in Morgan et al.’s (1997) study, individuals join Facebook memorial groups in a similar manner; people who become members of a particular memorial group have lost the same loved one and share a similar loss. Effectively, the Facebook groups create communities of mourners (McKanna & Poe, 2006). In one news article, grieving young adults said that they found Facebook to be especially beneficial in their grief work (Kolowich, 2006). The group gives people a place to grieve, and knowing that there was a community of mourners was described by a mourner as “comforting” (Abraham, 2007). Often, beginning to cope takes encouragement and support from others. In this sense, members of Facebook memorial groups serve to motivate each other to move toward constructive grieving (Bowlby, 1980).

Goffman (1959) posited that when people find themselves in a tragic situation, they lower their guard and engage in behavior that they might not under conventional circumstances. Goffman explained, “at times of crisis lines [between teams, or groups of people] may momentarily forget their appropriate places with respect to one another” (Goffman, 1959, p. 204). It follows that after the death of a loved one (i.e., the “crisis”), people forget to perform their expected actions, which typically would not include talking to or about the deceased in a public forum. When people talk about things that are
generally not possible or acceptable in “ordinary interaction,” in-group solidarity can result. Goffman (1959) explained that this “social support” presumably has therapeutic value.

*Maintaining a Connection with the Deceased*

In addition to providing a social context for grieving, Facebook groups also function to help people maintain ties with the dead. The groups provide a place where people often post messages to the deceased. Many choose to write messages directly to their dead friends. On the message boards within Facebook memorial groups, many group members write sentiments of hope, fear, or frustration for public viewing, nearly all of which are directed toward the deceased individual; people essentially have one-sided conversations with the deceased. Writing directly to the deceased is not a surprising act, as people often suffer from separation anxiety when a close member of one’s social circle leaves (Bowlby, 1960, 1969, 1973, 1980). As a result, people seek to maintain a sense of normalcy (Field et al., 2003).

Speaking with others is a ritualistic action; by putting forth a message, we know that another person is generally obliged to acknowledge that the message was received – if for nothing more than to save the face of the speaker (Goffman, 1967). Goffman (1967) described *face* as depending on the audience and the social interaction. Face is maintained by the audience rather than the speaker. Often in social situations, we try to preserve the face we have created. Because people recognize that another person will generally respond to their messages to help save the sender’s face, people likely become accustomed to the ritual of speaking and believe that the deceased (as the intended recipient) might somehow respond. One way that people cope with the loss of a close
friend or family member is through a continued dialogue, which helps to sustain the reality of the relationship (Duck, 1999; Duck & Pond, 1989).

Features of CMC and Grieving

Aspects of CMC have the potential to affect communication on the Facebook memorial group walls by facilitating or inhibiting various aspects of it. Giddens (1984) argued that structures constrain and enable human behaviors, and Facebook is no different. As with any medium or structure, Facebook possesses features that can constrain or enable actions performed when interacting with the website.

The photos uploaded to the group pages create a virtual representation of the deceased. The pictures can shape (thus constrain) how group members envision the deceased in his or her absence. Affecting one’s internal vision of the deceased can consequently affect the communication that occurs between the living and the deceased, as I mention in my discussion of TcC in Chapter Seven.

Facebook also contains an internal search engine, which can be used by any Facebook member to search for specific people’s memorial groups, a method I used to find memorial groups in my pilot study. Users can also broadly search out memorial groups using general search terms, such as “RIP” or “In memory of,” which is what I did to find memorial groups in my second wall analysis.

Additionally, CMC characteristics might facilitate more constructive relational communication because it has the ability to foster better social skills. Asynchronous interactions permit individuals to utilize a “cognitive/interactive ‘time out’” (McQuillen, 2003). CMC is also editable and allows people to modify their messages before posting them online (Walther, 2007). Put simply, the delay allows people to formulate their
thoughts in a socially desirable manner (Barnes, 2003; McQuillen, 2003; Walther, 1992; Walther, 1996; Walther & Burgoon, 1992). Users have more time for message construction and less stress from ongoing FtF interactions, which provides for self-awareness, reflection, selection, and transmission of preferable interaction.

As an added benefit of grieving online, people now have the capability to express their emotions with others at any time of day while sitting in their own homes or other familiar environments. CMC allows people to write and transmit messages in physical isolation from others (Walther, 2007). This is beneficial because people can then mask crying or displays of extreme emotions that often accompany grief and mourning. Because they are physically separated from others, people feel more uninhibited and do things that are ordinarily thought to be inappropriate, such as displaying emotions in public. Goffman (1963) might consider typing from a home computer to be a type of an involvement shield, a barrier to perception “behind which individuals can safely do the kind of things that ordinarily result in negative sanctions” (p. 39). People can cry or sob as they “talk” in a public place without having others in the group observe this display of emotions.

Additionally, because the groups are online, people with Internet access can visit the groups and write on the walls at anytime from anywhere. The online aspect of the memorial groups enables people who did not know the deceased to visit the groups as well. These people comprise a group that I label, “Emotional Rubberneckers.”

The asynchronous aspect of posting on Facebook might also affect how the living perceive their postings. Journalists have described people writing on the message boards as if the Internet could somehow “reach across the chasm between life and death” (Stingl,
Due to the asynchronous nature of Facebook, it might seem that the deceased individuals receive messages and just do not respond to them (Mendoza, 2007).

Additionally, the reduced social context clues allowed by CMC causes more uninhibited behavior than FtF communication does (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire (1984) hypothesized that the uninhibited actions could be due to a variety of causes, one being the depersonalization from lack of nonverbal cues and the lack of established norms. This means that issues discussed online could possibly be different from topics discussed FtF. CMC also allows us to minimize or maximize our interpersonal effects; we can make communication as impersonal or as personal as we desire (Walther, 1996).

Finally, the persistence of the messages left on the Facebook group walls affects the communication within the group (Erickson, 1999). The messages can be searched, re-read, browsed, or reused. Being able to access messages at a later time can help users better understand their dialogue with the deceased. Sending messages to the deceased, online or otherwise, appears to be an activity that people utilize in an attempt to maintain relationships with the deceased.

In many ways, the Facebook memorial groups aid in Vickio’s (1999) previously discussed suggestions for maintaining a relationship with the deceased. The memorial aspect of the group helps people connect with a symbolic representation of the deceased. The group can also serve as a virtual support group where members can talk to each other about the deceased’s life story and share how they can include the deceased in special occasions. Additionally, the group allows people to post messages to the deceased, in which they begin to recognize the effect that the deceased had on their life. By posting
messages, people keep their relationship with the deceased alive, which demonstrates how meaningful the friendship was and still is to the living. Bereaved individuals engage in many activities to attempt to remain connected to the deceased.

As evident, individuals use any number of a variety of methods to cope with their grief following the death of a loved one. Often, coping involves seeking to maintain a relationship with the deceased. An important component of relational maintenance now includes aspects of the Internet and computer-mediated communication. The relationship between the elements of grief, coping, relational maintenance, and CMC results in an opportunity for individuals to post online messages directed to the deceased as a way to continue a relationship with him or her. In this study, I focus on how people write on Facebook memorial group walls to maintain relationships with the deceased and talk with others about the deceased.

Research Questions

In order to further study the concept of retaining a relationship with the deceased through communication, this dissertation examines the types of issues posted on Facebook memorial group walls, as well as the communicative functions served by the posts. To begin, I am particularly interested in analyzing the topics discussed on the Facebook group walls to determine which issues are mentioned. Examining how relational continuity appears online provides insight as to how people begin to recreate relationships with the deceased and reorganize their identities to include their friend as a deceased member of their reality (as advised by Attig, 2001).

I explore how people attempt to maintain relational continuity with the deceased by examining the topics discussed on Facebook memorial group message boards and the
messages’ communicative functions. Foot et al. (2006) analyzed several websites memorializing victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States to develop a conceptual framework of Web-based memorializing. While the researchers noted that people posted messages on some of the memorial websites, they did not investigate this communication further. This dissertation aims to fill this gap in the research. Based on concepts of relational continuity and attachment (Sigman, 1991; Bowlby, 1969, 1972), I expect that the topics posted to the deceased would be similar to the types of postings we would make to living friends. By inductively analyzing the message topics and apparent message functions in the pilot study, I can gain a better understanding of the communication that occurs on the memorial group walls.

The first question aims to describe the general characteristics of the messages posted on Facebook memorial walls. The goal of asking this descriptive question is to get a sense for who is posting to the wall, what they are writing about, and how these messages seem to function discursively. Research Question 1 has four parts:

RQ₁a: What is the relationship between the authors of the messages and the intended message recipients?

RQ₁b: Who are the messages’ intended recipients?

RQ₁c: What topics are discussed on the walls?

RQ₁d: What functions do the messages appear to serve?

I investigate the wall messages to explore who wrote the messages, to whom the messages are addressed, the message content, and the function that these messages serve. Because this is an inductive analysis, a solid understanding of the messages on Facebook memorial group walls is necessary before moving forward with additional investigation. I
address these questions in the pilot study and revisit them in the second analysis of an additional set of Facebook memorial group walls.

The second research question aims to identify what people accomplish, cognitively or emotionally, in writing posts to the deceased on the memorial group walls. The goal of this investigation is to discover how people regard their own participation in the groups. In order to explore this inquiry further, I posed the second research question:

RQ2: How do people describe their own participation in the Facebook memorial groups? That is, what meanings do people attribute to their participation in the Facebook memorial group?

Uncovering the meanings that participants give to their communication on the Facebook memorial walls can help us understand their perceptions of why they participate, what they get out of the participation, and whether or not they feel that participation benefits them in some way. Interviews with people who write on the memorial group walls also provide a first-hand account of participation in the memorial groups. Using the interviews, I explore the interviewee’s perception of the grieving process and identify the coping behaviors they utilized. I can also investigate aspects of how the interviewees maintained a relationship with the deceased, if at all.

The Facebook memorial group walls also contain evidence of transcorporeal communication (TcC), as discovered in my pilot study (provided in Chapter Three). I deemed it important to investigate and describe this type of communication in order to distinguish it from other forms of communication that the communication studies field has extensively investigated. Therefore, I pose the final research question:

RQ3: What characterizes transcorporeal communication?
Communication scholars often consider interpersonal communication as being a transactional event where meanings are shared between two or more individuals (Buber, 1956; Duck, 1994b; Goffman, 1967; Weiner, 1967). What these scholars often do not address is the idea of communicating with a receiver who cannot, in this physical world as it currently exists, offer feedback. On the Facebook walls, people communicate with their deceased loved ones in as if they are involved in a standard interpersonal exchange and the dead could respond. This type of communication, transcorporeal communication, demands further exploration. The results of the investigation of the previous research questions and inquiries also aided in my exploration of RQ2. By identifying the topics discussed between the living and the dead and investigating why people communicate with the deceased in the manner evident on the walls, I sought to advance the concept of transcorporeal communication.

As I seek to answer the research questions, I also aim to identify and describe the grief performance demonstrated in the Facebook memorial groups. Throughout my analysis of the communication on the group walls, I weave in a description of people’s behavior in the groups, using Goffman’s notions of politeness and self-presentation in a public place.

The following chapters describe the methods and results of my investigation of these research questions. Chapter Three provides the results of the pilot study done to respond to the first research question. I present these results prior to the methods section because findings from the pilot study drive the subsequent methods and studies presented in this dissertation. Chapter Four describes the methods used in the dissertation. Chapter Five presents the second analysis of an additional set of Facebook memorial group walls,
where I revisit the first research question. Chapter Six discusses the interviews conducted
with people who write on Facebook memorial group walls and responds to the second
research question. Chapter Seven offers a discussion of the multiple audiences present as
one writes on the group walls, as well as a discussion of TeC. The discussion of TeC
serves as a careful response to the third research question. Finally, Chapter Eight
summarizes this study’s findings by returning to the research questions and provides
implications, limitations, and areas of future research.
CHAPTER 3: PILOT STUDY

In the pilot study, I examined 10 Facebook memorial group walls and investigated the grieving-related communication on them. I first sought to explore and describe the discourse that took place on the memorial group. Secondly, I investigated communicative functions served by the different postings. I expected that some of the functions would be related to the grieving process as outlined by Parkes and Bowlby. I also anticipated the presence of other functions as well. Answers to these questions should give us insight into the bereavement process of young people following the loss of a friend as well as highlight the type of communication present on the Facebook group walls.

Method

For the pilot study, I identified 10 public Facebook memorial groups from newspaper articles discussing a young individual’s death. The deceased’s ages ranged from 13 to 20 years old. Six of these dead individuals were male and four were female. Five deaths were the result of accidents, four were homicides, and one was a suicide. I ran a search for the groups on Facebook by searching for the deceased’s name under the “group” tab. When I found the correct group, I archived the wall postings by copying all of the wall posts to a word processing document. I archived the postings because new posts were added every day in some groups and failing to archive the walls would have resulted in an ever-growing discourse to analyze.

I then examined the discourse that appeared on the group’s public walls, or message boards. The number of wall postings ranged from 48 postings to 360 postings at the time of archival. The number of postings did not appear to affect the topics of the comments; the most prevalent themes were present in all groups regardless of the
quantity of remarks. Likewise, the gender and age of deceased and cause of death also
did not appear to affect the messages’ content.

I used techniques of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin,
1990) in order to investigate the discourse on the memorial group walls as well as
identify communicative functions of that discourse. Grounded theory is essentially “the
discovery of theory from data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). Strauss and Corbin
described grounded theory as using a “systematic set of procedures to develop an
inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon” (p. 24). The set of procedures
includes isolating themes of topics, open-coding, focused coding, and axial coding.

To first isolate themes of topics discussed on the memorial group walls, I utilized
inductive analysis as explained by Lofland and Lofland (1995). Using the process of open
coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I examined and categorized data, or the individual units
of dialogue present on the walls. “Open coding” refers to naming and classifying the
units of meaning (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As I combed through the data looking for
patterns, I remained open to what struck me as being meaningful. I developed the codes
and categories from the data itself, rather than from logically deduced hypothesis,
(suggested by Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Throughout the process of coding the walls,
theoretical sensitivity remained an importance consideration. Strauss and Corbin (1990)
defined theoretical sensitivity as “the ability to recognize what is important in data and to
give it meaning” (p. 46). They argued that the researcher must remain true to the data
without being influenced by preconceived theories or ideas.

Through close examination of the discourse, I identified statements within the
wall postings that appeared to be discussing discrete topics. Then, I conceptually labeled
each unit of meaning within the posts that represented one coherent thought (as utilized in Stromer-Galley, 2007). A change in topic indicated a new thought. Each post had the potential to contain multiple thoughts. Properties of individual thoughts within the postings led me to code them as appropriate. For example, I coded, “well im back at school, and boy is it fun!! NOT!! But im trying to make it fun,”\textsuperscript{1} as “providing updates on typical events.” The second part of the same posting said, “love ya and miss ya Emily!!” I coded the second part as “customary expressions.” Studying and comparing data aid in determining the “best fit” for the data in terms of categorizing them into suitable categories (Charmaz, 2006).

I employed the method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze the meaning and relevance of the categories that emerged. In line with the constant comparative method, I compared each unit of analysis to the previously analyzed units. Similar units are groups, and dissimilar units are placed in their own category. The constant comparative method requires researchers to “take control of their data collection and analysis, and in turn these methods give researchers more analytic control over their material” (Charmaz, 2002, p. 676). This process minimizes researcher bias.

Following open coding, I engaged in the practice of focused coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During this process, I collapsed and combined categories to establish the most purposeful codes. The underlying question driving my focused coding was: “What topic(s) are present in the group members’ wall postings?” With this inquiry in mind, I labeled and grouped similar topics together to create categories of topics. For example,

\textsuperscript{1} All spelling, ellipses, capitalization, and additional syntax of wall postings are presented in original form.
the previously discussed post that was coded as “providing updates on typical events” then became a member of the “updates” category.

Focused coding brought about 10 themes of messages on Facebook memorial group walls: Shock, Technology-Related References, Original and Non-Original Prose, Spiritual References, Lamentations and Questions, Phatic Communication, Memories, Continued Presence and Reminders of Past Presence, Updates, and Emotional Rubbernecking. I named the categories based on a logical understanding of the messages within the groups. The themes are not necessarily exclusive categories, as some comments fit into more than one distinct theme. For example, in a post, someone might mention something that contains both phatic communication and references to technology. Determining the 10 themes answered the first part of my research inquiry, which aimed to explore and describe the discourse that took place on the memorial group walls.

To determine the communicative function of the messages on the walls, the second part of my investigation, I utilized axial coding. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), axial coding is a procedure where the researcher makes connections between the categories that were previously determined through open coding. The process essentially puts the data together in new ways.

I began the axial coding stage of my method by examining the 10 themes that I uncovered earlier. I made connections between the themes in terms of the apparent function of the messages within the themes and how they correlated with the theoretical framework of grieving. To uphold a fair theoretical sensitivity, I did not try to force the themes into Parkes and Bowlby’s model of the phases of grieving. Instead, I periodically
stepped back from the data and maintained critical judgment, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990). I considered the themes’ similarities or parallels and made connections accordingly. I also looked for themes that did not necessarily fit into any of the phases put forth by Parkes and Bowlby. As I searched for cases that did not necessarily match the phases of grieving, I discovered the presence of Emotional Rubbernecker, which I further discuss in the findings section of this chapter. When conducting grounded theory, the negative cases are important to find and note because they indicate a possible variation in the theory that should be further pursued (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This practice resulted in the creation of categories that reflect the three main functions of communication on Facebook memorial walls: sensemaking, maintaining bonds with the deceased, and Emotional Rubbernecking.

Findings

The 10 themes identified through systematic inductive analysis were: Shock, Technology-Related References, Original and Non-Original Prose, Spiritual/Afterlife References, Lamentations and Questions, Phatic Communication, Memories, Continued Presence and Reminders of Past Presence, Updates, and what I am calling “Emotional Rubbernecking.” The 10 themes were then grouped based on the communicative function of the messages and how they related to the grieving process. These functions included sensemaking, maintaining bonds with the deceased, and “rubbernecking,” or gawking at others’ grief. I examine each function in terms of its relevant themes. Table 1 illustrates the themes and respective communicative functions.
Table 1

*Facebook memorial group message communicative functions and themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communicative Function</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensemaking</td>
<td>Shock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology-related references</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Original and non-original prose</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Spiritual references</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lamentations and questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining bonds</td>
<td>Phatic communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Memories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continued presence and reminders of past presence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Updates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional rubbernecking</td>
<td>Emotional rubbernecking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sensemaking*

Those who are grieving actively seek to understand why the death happened, and survivors often try to cognitively make sense of a loved one’s death (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker et al., 2001). As described in the previous chapter, “sensemaking,” or making sense of a friend’s death, includes the grieving phases of shock and numbness, yearning and searching, as well as having feelings of disorganization and despair. Messages related to these three phases indicate that the bereaved person posting the comments has not yet emotionally and cognitively accepted that his or her friend is now deceased. As evident on the Facebook memorial group walls, posters engaged in sensemaking by experiencing
shock, envisioning the deceased checking his or her Facebook from heaven, posting original and non-original prose, referring to spirituality, and asking questions.

Shock

As stated previously, shock is the first phase in grieving. This phase is characterized by feelings of disbelief and numbness, as survivors cannot believe that a death has occurred (Bowlby, 1980a). Often when someone dies unexpectedly, people wish they could talk with the deceased – even if it is just one more time – in order to get over their sense of shock and disbelief. One friend posted, “Man I really can’t believe the guy I used to sit next to in history class and joke around with is gone.” Posts in the shock category mentioned that the person’s death was surreal, hard to believe, and unreal. The deceased’s young age was regularly mentioned in wall postings. This supports the assertion made by grief scholars, such as Charmaz (1980), that we have an ideal age at which it is acceptable for a person to die. In our society, death at a young age is more tragic than the death of an elderly person (Charmaz, 1980).

While displays of shock were more evident during the time period closest to when the death occurred, shock was also evident later on as well. The delayed feelings of shock were usually associated with an anniversary or milestone of some sort. For example, “It’s hard to believe it’s been 7 months I still can’t believe what happened but I drive past your house everyday.” This phenomenon is consistent with what has been found by prior research. For example, Parkes (1970a, 1970b) found that these feelings of shock can last anywhere from a few hours to a week, and they might recur at other times in the grieving process.
In several instances, group members referred to their deceased friend checking his or her Facebook from heaven. Checking one’s Facebook is a habitual behavior of many young individuals, so it might be normal for others to assume that the deceased continues with this behavior in the afterlife. Using Facebook is a way for people to make sense of and visualize what the deceased is currently doing. Examples include:

- okay lets all be real .. [he] is up there right now looking at this facebook group.
- I just hope there’s facebook up in heaven so she can see all of this…
- for some reason I still keep expecting my next facebook message to be from you.…

Due to the text-based nature of the Facebook walls, many people opted to use emoticons and other symbols in their messages to the deceased. A sideways heart <3, an upright heart ♥, sideways frown faces :( , and xoxo, indicating hugs and kisses, were prominent fixtures in several wall postings. Some users also posted links to newspaper articles, obituaries, and YouTube videos of memorial services as well. This indicates that people utilized a wide range of technological features for communicating when remembering their friends.

People also mentioned to other group members that the Facebook group itself was helpful in the grieving process because it demonstrates how much people miss the deceased individual. One person noted, “You can tell everyone loved her. I mean over
200 people are in this group.” Another said, “Courtney left a hell of a lot of good on this earth, it takes a couple clicks of the mouse to realize that.”

*Original and Non-Original Prose*

Many group members posted famous quotations and poems, which seems to be a way for the living to link something new (death of a loved one) to something they might feel comfortable with (favorite poems or lyrics) in order to comprehend what has occurred. Essentially, the poems and quotes served as reference points. Bible verses such as, “Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted,” or, “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away,” are two examples. Irish blessings and well-known song lyrics were also posted.

Many opted to use original writings to express their feelings instead. Some wrote poems about their deceased friend, while others chose to write song lyrics. A few posted links to a recorded version of songs available on YouTube.com.

*Spirituality*

References to a higher being were present in many of the posts. A person’s spirituality helps provide him or her with another level of understanding when it comes to cognitively and emotionally comprehending the death of a loved one. People posted inspiring Bible verses or talked about God. Many people also posed questions to a deity, asking why their friend had to be the one to die. References to heaven and angels were also present. Many people told the deceased that he or she was now in a better place, or

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2 To maintain the privacy of the deceased and the people writing on the Facebook walls, pseudonyms were utilized, and all identifiable information was removed from any included examples.
“in the Lord’s arms.” This demonstrates that people acknowledge the death, and in order to accept the loss, they relied on their spirituality.

Others mentioned that they will one day be reunited with their friend. These comments were reflective of Sigman’s (1991) concept of relational continuity. They are trying to maintain their relationship with their now deceased loved one. The phrases, “see you soon,” or, “I’ll see you when it’s my turn,” imply that the living believe in an afterlife and that the dead are “somewhere.” When the living die, they believe that they will go to the same place where they can meet with the deceased acquaintance again. These statements serve as a sign of interest in the future, and attempts to plan for it are part of the recovery process (Parkes, 1972). Group members also asked the deceased if he or she would take care of another deceased individual or pet. “hey emily. as you know my grandpa passed away today. i know he is up there in heaven with you. take good care of him,” is one example of such a request.

Many posts referred to God “taking” their friend. For example, “God took you for some reason.” Others made statements such as, “God needed another angel in his Kingdom,” or, “God needed a strong angel to light up the sky.” This indicates that people are trying to rationalize why their friend had to leave this physical world.

Lamentations and Questions

As part of the grieving process, people try to make sense as to why their friend died through lamenting the death and asking questions. Through these lamentations and questions, they seem to be trying to analyze why the person died as well as understand their own actions before the person died. The living ultimately recognize that their loved one is dead and many feel guilty that they did not spend more time with their friend.
before the friend passed away. One person said, “I’m sorry I didn’t come to see you that weekend for your birthday like you asked; and I’m sorry for every fight we ever had.” Another stated, “I wish I could have said my last goodbyes.”

They also have many questions as to why their friend died – and at such a young age. One person asked, “fuck dude why’d you hafta go so soon?” Users directed a majority of these questions directed toward God or a higher being. These statements give evidence to the claim that the living must reconcile these questions before moving on to the next phase of grieving: acknowledging the death and maintaining bonds (Pennebaker, 1997).

In some cases, people posted a modified version of “I miss you.” They wrote, “I really miss you today [emphasis added],” implying that on this particular day, the person’s death was harder to cope with than on other days. The living also noted times when they wanted to talk specifically with the deceased because he or she was the only person who could understand or help. Because some of the posters were very close to the deceased, they no longer have a relationship with someone who they can talk to about certain topics. One person said, “I need to have a chat with someone, you’d understand.” In these situations, the living must learn to navigate their lives without their confidant (Pennebaker et al., 2001). Some messages in this theme demonstrate that individuals are beginning to engage in making sense of one’s life without their friends by continuing a relationship with them.

After people lose a loved one, they struggle to make sense of the situation. Some wall post themes indicated that the posts’ authors were engaged in the sensemaking
function. Messages of shock, technology-related references, spirituality, and lamentations and questions comprised the group of posts dedicated to making sense of the death.

Maintaining Bonds

Maintaining bonds with the deceased is the second function of communication on Facebook memorial walls. Maintaining bonds is, in some aspects, “sensemaking” as well; however, this communicative function is more relational in nature and focuses on individuals making sense of their identity as it exists without the deceased. The living often attempt to renegotiate their identities by maintaining bonds with the deceased, as people generally do not forget their dead friends. Survivors must determine who they are now that an important person in their lives is gone (Attig, 2001). The living maintained bonds through their use of phatic communication, posting memories of the deceased, noting the presence of the deceased’s spirit, and writing directly to the deceased.

Phatic Communication

Many phrases and words that I classify as “phatic communication” were repeated throughout the postings of all groups. Malinowski (1923) defined phatic communication as communication with the exclusive function to perform a social task; it does not distribute information. Phatic communication is important to relationships, as it establishes and maintains social bonds (Malinowski, 1923). In practically every posting, fundamental phrases such as “I miss you,” “I love you,” or “I’m thinking of you” were included. These phrases were the most common themes evident in the postings and were often accompanied by further comments. These phrases are synonymous with how the living include “hello” or “how are you?” in nearly every conversation, including conversations that take place between friends on Facebook.
Clichés and commonly used expressions frequently appeared on the walls. Phrases such as, “only the good die young,” “[he/she] is in a better place,” “everything happens for a reason,” or, “rest in peace,” comprised this theme. Additionally, particular words were frequently used in postings. Group members tended to use “angel,” “tragedy,” and “God bless” when writing to their deceased loved ones. It might be the case that people wrote these phrases because they did not know what else to say. They are still getting accustomed to the idea that their friend is dead. When this fact is acknowledged cognitively and emotionally, they begin to write to their friend much like they would if the friend was still alive.

Memories

Group members also posted their favorite memories of the deceased which were all upbeat in nature. One member posted, “the one memory that I will always remember was from this past summer when we were at Tim’s house…getting ready to go in the pool…you and Kevin stripped down and were the first ones in…NAKED.” Another said, “I’ll always remember the good times we had in Cross Country, math class, fuckin around at the lunch table.”

The memories varied from the somber to the humorous; however, none highlighted negative relationships they might have had with the deceased. All memories were positive. In this way, the living seem to be romanticizing the life of the deceased. In one posting, the concept is explicitly demonstrated:

When I think of you, David, I won’t think about all the times I was mean to you, or how your life ended so shortly. I’ll think about how silly you were, and how you would paint your nails hot pink because you said someone dared you.
The posters appear to only reflect on the happy experiences they had with the deceased individual while overlooking any negative incidents.

*Continued Presence and Reminders of Past Presence*

Many noted the presence of the deceased’s spirit around them or having some effect on them. This relates to the searching and yearning phase of grieving. In some instances, people reported “feeling” the presence of the deceased. For example, “u noe wat to me you will never b gone…the present of your soul will remain here where it belongs.” In numerous posts, people told the deceased to “watch over us” or “help us out” during challenging times in their lives. This implies that the people considered the deceased to be somewhere (most likely heaven) looking down on the world with the power to keep his or her friends safe. Posts such as “Thanks for keeping us safe this year” and “keep watching over us and keep us all strong!!” illustrate this claim. Group members also mentioned that they knew their deceased friend was watching a particular event: “i’m sure you were belting out a good emily laugh when i fell on my face and skinned my knees…haha, you probably tripped me.” In some instances, the members spoke of the deceased visiting their dreams: “you were in my dreams last night!! thanks for visiting me there!!” These examples indicate that people are sometimes still preoccupied with thoughts of their dead friends (Bowlby, 1980a; Parkes, 1970b, 1972).

Sometimes, the deceased’s presence was noted by reminders. Many things in everyday life can remind the living of deceased individuals. A group member said, “So yesterday i was workin and this girl came in with a huge peace sign necklace and I thought of you.” Some even came across old notes written by the deceased: “Courtney, i found a note you wrote for me way back. I love getting little reminders of you all the
time.” Another stated, “sometimes I’ll see somebody that looks a little like you and I’ll wish it was actually you and I could wave back.”

The living noted how they were coming to terms with places and things that meant something to their relationship with the deceased. One person who met Courtney while she was a counselor at a summer camp stated, “Not sure why but I have been thinking about you heaps lately….mybe because camp is in progress.” Someone else wrote, “There are so many little things that remind me of you… purple, sweating, english bulldogs, sayings, songs, pictures.”

Many people took note of dates that are important to them and the deceased. For example someone said, “So today’s day 100,” to indicate it had been 100 days since the death of her friend. Many times, the poster would mention an anniversary along with stating that he or she missed the deceased: “It’s been a whole month, and there still isn’t a day that I don’t think about you.” They also wrote notes to their friends on holidays, wishing a merry Christmas or a happy Valentine’s Day, which is akin to the memorials posted by family and friends in the classified or obituary sections of newspapers on birthdays and anniversaries. Again, those who are living must determine what these things, places, and events now mean in the absence of their loved ones, which is how people begin to reconstruct their identity (Attig, 2001).

*Updates*

Numerous people wrote to the deceased and provided updates on events happening in their lives. Many people posted updates or announcements to the deceased on the wall as if to involve him or her in their daily lives. Many times, people kept their deceased friend up to date on the latest, mundane happenings in their everyday lives.
They told stories of who was dating whom, how the school year was going, or how the parties were. For example, “i’m going up to the hollow tonight and i plan on having a white Russian just for you.” Other examples include: “i am having an INCREDIBLE summer in South Africa on a missions trip. you would love it here!” and, “Being in your apartment was weird though. Taking down your things….emptying your drawers, throwing out your broken chair.”

It also appeared that the living were often trying to reassure their deceased friend that they have not been forgotten when perhaps, the living might be reassuring themselves that they have not forgotten their friend. They said things such as, “we talk about you all of the time,” or “I just wanted to let you know that you’re on my mind constantly!” One member wrote, “Havent written in awhile…but dont think I forgot about you!”

This theme represents the most obvious evidence of attempts at relational continuity. The living often seek to continue their relationships with their departed loved one and, in this case, use Facebook wall postings to do so. Conceivably, they provide evidence that supports the claim that Sigman (1991) argued: people must continue communication to maintain a relationship, and the relationship ends when people cease to communicate. As part of the reconstruction phase of grieving, people are also learning to live without the physical presence of their loved one (Attig, 2001). They try to continue with their lives as normally as possible. Part of maintaining normalcy is including the deceased in recent events.
Emotional Rubbernecking

The first two major functions of communication found on these Facebook memorial group walls align with the grieving process. By posting to Facebook walls, survivors were able to make sense of the death and continue their connection or relationship with their deceased friend. In contrast, this final function of communication encompasses a communication dynamic that features Facebook users who did not have a close relationship (or any relationship) with the deceased. The presence of strangers writing on virtual memorials has been briefly noted in previous research where the strangers were termed, “hooligans” (Roberts, 2006, p. 4).

Because most Facebook group walls are easily accessible to all Facebook users, the Facebook walls afford an opportunity for strangers to join or view a community that honors a deceased person as well as observe others’ reactions to losing a loved one. These Emotional Rubberneckers, as I have labeled them, often posted on the walls and noted that they either had also lost a friend, or they did not know the deceased but were also saddened by the loss.

Some people who posted on the memorial group walls stated that they never knew the deceased, but they did know someone who died in a similar manner or at the same young age. These posters invoked these people’s names on the walls. In some cases, they also asked the newly deceased person to take care of their deceased friends or family. Sometimes, this seemed as though the strangers simply wanted attention, or they wanted to remind people that their loved one was still dead as well. One example demonstrates these aspects: “Hey people this is a cool page, my friend died in a car accident and we have a page up for her too, we even had bracelets made also.” Morgan et al. (1997)
remind us that people want to be in the company of others who have also suffered a loss because it serves as a type of social support. It is possible that this dynamic is what was motivating the people in this category of emotional rubbernecker.

In some instances, those close to the deceased raised the issue that they did not appreciate strangers writing on their dead friend’s group wall. They were also angry that people said they missed the deceased when they did not get along when both were alive. For example, the sister of one deceased person posted, “sometimes i get angry when people pretend to know you and don't....i feel that some people have no right to say things about you....” Another person wrote,

the fact that grants gone doesn't change anything... he still feels the EXACT same way about all you WEAK ASS people who before would hate and talk all this shit about him and now are ‘in love with him” and “can’t live without him”...

These two individuals were not upset that people are posting comments to their deceased loved ones; they were offended that people who were not friends with the deceased now act as though they were close friends. The Rubbernecker might be posting out of regret for not being friends with the deceased when he or she was alive, or they might simply want to be associated with this dramatic affair.

Because the deceased people in these groups were so young and died suddenly or tragically, news stories about them were abundant. This could have resulted in people using Facebook to seek out the deceased and learn more about them. One posting supports this reasoning: “Hey I don't know who Heidi is personally but i heard her story on Fox News and was deeply touched. It made me very sad and i really wished there was something i could do.”
Currently, grief literature fails to mention the presence of Emotional Rubberneackers. This phenomenon requires further research to explore reasons why people gawk at others’ grief.

Discussion

Facebook and similar online web pages present a unique means for people to communicate with and about their deceased friends. The mediated and asynchronous nature of Facebook create a unique set of circumstances that have an effect on the grieving process. By creating memorial groups, people now have a new way to cope with the death of a loved one, and individuals have the opportunity to express their grief in an acceptable way in a society that does not openly talk about death. Because grieving can occur online, it is “safer” interpersonally, and people might be less inhibited to discuss various topics – or to communicate at all (Kiesler et al., 1984; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). This becomes important to those who are grieving because it offers a link to the deceased.

Initially, my objective was to explore the types of postings displayed on Facebook memorial group walls. Group members’ posts included evidence of phatic communication, technology-related references, non-original and original prose, memories, spiritual or afterlife references, shock, lamentations and questions, continued presence and reminders of past presence, updates, and the presence of “emotional rubberneackers.” Secondly, I sought to examine the communicative functions of wall postings which included sensemaking, maintaining bonds, and rubbernecking.

Potentially, the most intriguing finding of this study is that people usually aimed their comments directly to the deceased. People customarily wrote comments directly to the deceased, as if he or she could see it and write back. Rarely did it seem that people
intended their comments for the rest of the group members. It appears that writing to the deceased is one means for continuing a bond with the deceased. The bereaved try to maintain a normal life, and part of this includes acting as if the deceased could check his or her Facebook. Group members also continued to use nicknames and refer to inside jokes in their posts. They wrote with abbreviations, emoticons, and incorrect grammar or spelling. The communication remained very informal, as it would be in face-to-face conversations with a close friend.

Additionally, I argue that the communication between the living and the deceased is not exclusively intrapersonal or interpersonal communication. The communication is not intrapersonal because the speaker is not talking to him or herself. The communication also does not fit the model of interpersonal communication because there is no way for the deceased to be a responsive party in the interaction. Yet, the person appears to communicate with the deceased as if the dead person could respond. I argue that the communication is, in effect, one-way interpersonal communication. By talking to the deceased about topics that people talk to other living people about, people treat the dead as if they or their spirits are still alive and physically present.

Writing to the deceased in this manner reconnects the living with the dead and helps them make sense of life without their loved one, which is the final phase of grieving (Attig, 2001; Bowlby, 1960, 1979; Pennebaker et al., 2001). The concept of people writing directly to the deceased, with the deceased as the intended recipient, opens up a unique area of communication to investigate, which I have termed, “transcorporeal communication.” “Trans” indicates that the communication occurs in a different state, and “corporeal” indicates a relationship to a physical material body. Deceased people no
longer maintain a physical presence, thus, the messages are directed at someone who is in a different state of being physically present. Further examination of this phenomenon is needed.

As Shuchter and Zisook (1993) found, widows and widowers reported that they talked with their deceased spouses daily. This analysis of Facebook memorial group walls illustrates that many people, not just widows or widowers, communicate with the deceased. In the groups examined here, nearly every post was directed at the deceased person, which indicates that communicating directly with the deceased is likely an important part of the grieving process. Friends were, in a sense, communicating interpersonally with the dead person, but they were getting no physical feedback from the deceased. Some of these people would write weekly, or even daily, to tell the deceased person about their day or just to say hello, which is characteristic of two living people who send online messages to each other on Facebook. This study also gives us insight as to what other people talk about with their deceased friends.

It appeared that individuals posted messages to the deceased on Facebook memorial groups as an attempt to maintain relational continuity. Sigman (1991) argued that relationships can be continuous despite absences of physical and interactional co-presence. It is only when two people stop communicating (without anticipation of future interaction) that the relationship is over. When the living continue to communicate their feelings to their deceased loved ones, they are attempting to maintain the relationship between them. The results of this research offer a different view of relational continuity as well as empirically illustrate a type of communication that has not yet been closely examined by communication scholars. Communication scholars have focused so much on
the transactional model of communication and disregarded the possible model of communication in which there is absolutely no opportunity for feedback. We need to focus our efforts on re-examining this type of communication and discovering its benefits – or harms – for those who are grieving.

To understand the phenomenon of transcorporeal communication more fully, further examination was warranted. I examined an additional set of Facebook memorial groups and compared the discourse on the walls to the previously identified themes and communicative functions to test my originally identified themes. I also explored the meanings that people attribute to their participation in these memorial groups by conducting in-depth online interviews. I discuss these methods in depth in Chapter Four.

When testing the pilot study’s themes in Chapter Five, I revisit the first research question, which aims to gain an understanding of the communication on the Facebook memorial group walls. Chapter Six is a response to the second research question, which also derived from the pilot study. The pilot study revealed that people post messages on the memorial group walls seemingly in an attempt to make sense of the death and maintain bonds with the deceased. Interviews with people who write on the walls can provide the first-hand perspective from people who actively engage in these functions. Finally, the pilot study exposed a unique form of communication that demands further study. As a result, I posed RQ3: What characterizes transcorporeal communication? Results and analysis of the wall postings and interviews provide a response to this research question, which is thoroughly discussed in Chapter Seven.
CHAPTER 4: METHOD

The Facebook memorial groups present an excellent opportunity to study grief, as the online records of individuals posting messages directly to the deceased person allow people to clearly observe transcorporeal communication in its natural form. Additionally, the nature of the Internet allows researchers to collect information by observing discourse and conducting online interviews. By utilizing in-depth online asynchronous interviews and additional discourse analysis, I took advantage of the benefits provided by online data gathering.

In the previously conducted pilot study, I exclusively utilized grounded theory methods. This included systematic inductive analysis, as explained by Lofland and Lofland (1995), to isolate themes of the topics discussed on the group walls. Next, through the process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I looked for recurrent topics within the message board dialogue. Then, using focused coding as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), I collapsed and combined categories. The process of focused coding resulted in the 10 themes presented in this study. In the second stage, to determine the communicative function of the messages on the walls, I used axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), making connections between themes, to combine the categories. Axial coding resulted in three categories of communicative functions that appear on Facebook memorial group walls.

Further examination of the communication on Facebook memorial walls was needed to corroborate or refute the initial categories and functions. The research presented in this dissertation includes an examination of an additional set of Facebook memorial group walls and in-depth online interviews with people who regularly wrote on
the memorial group walls. These interviews provide a first-person perspective on the experience of posting messages on Facebook memorial walls and allows me to respond to my second research question.

Validating Themes and Communicative Functions

The previously identified themes and functions discerned in the pilot study served as “tentative analytic categories” as described by Charmaz (2006, p. 3). My next step included looking to more data to fill the gaps in my initial findings. Strauss and Corbin (1990) described this process as “validating one’s theory against the data” (p. 133). I utilized “validation” techniques to test and challenge establish trustworthiness in my initial analysis and adjust the analysis and grounded theory as necessary to generate a theory that best fits the data, a process advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

To validate the original 10 themes and 3 communicative functions established in my pilot study, I identified 10 additional Facebook groups on the Facebook website. I then compared the posts in these groups to the previously determined themes and functions, continuing to use principles of grounded theory as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

In order to identify the 10 Facebook groups to examine, I started by conducting a Facebook group search using “in memory of” as the search terms. I then applied a filter so the search would only return groups that fell into the Common Interest – Friends category. This search resulted in over 500 groups (Five hundred is the maximum amount of results returned by a Facebook search). Groups chosen for the study needed to meet several criteria. First, the groups had to memorialize an individual person who was not of celebrity status. It appeared that celebrity memorials resulted in the memorial group
becoming a fan-based group, consisting primarily of people who did not know the deceased. These groups were not purely “memorial” in nature and thus were inappropriate for the present investigation. Secondly, the groups needed to have 30 or more wall postings. Although results of the pilot study indicated that the number of postings had no clear effect on the themes or functions observed, I sought to examine a large number of posts to confirm or refute my previously determined themes. The groups also needed to be active. That is, a message must have been posted within the last 30 days in order to be considered “active.” Finally, the group had to be “open,” or available for public viewing.

I selected groups with varying numbers of members. At the time of posting archival, the group populations were 4185, 2350, 2007, 1018, 975, 871, 768, 630, 530, and 434 members. In choosing the groups, I also ensured that I would be analyzing an equal number of groups memorializing women and men. Because I sought to utilize Facebook groups memorializing young adults, I also looked at the deceased’s pictures and online obituaries in an attempt to identify young, college-aged adults. I chose to focus on young people’s memorials because, as noted above, the death expectations are violated the most when a young person dies (Charmaz, 1980). The violated death expectation can arguably result in survivors writing more compelling grief-related messages than if an older person died. Upon identification of the 10 Facebook groups, I archived the messages posted on the walls. This ensured a fixed corpus of materials to analyze.

To answer RQ1: *What characterizes the messages posted on the Facebook memorial group walls?*, I followed grounded theory methods similar to what was utilized
in the pilot study when examining another grouping of Facebook memorial groups. Instead of comparing the discourse against itself, as I had in the pilot study, I compared the discourse on the second set of walls to the 10 themes and 3 communicative functions previously established by the pilot study. I did this to determine the extent to which the pilot study’s findings applied to additional instances of intended communication with the dead. Essentially, I attempted to confirm my theory with additional data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested that researchers use the data collected from “comparative groups” (such as the second set of Facebook walls) to test if the initial conceptualization of themes was correct (p. 23). Additional information found on the second set of Facebook group walls was also used to fill in any gaps in my initial categories of message themes. Strauss and Corbin (1990) identified this validation as a crucial step in grounding one’s theory. Specific examples of my comparison and coding process are presented in Chapter Five.

I utilized grounded theory because the method allows for creativity while remaining rigorous and precise (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The creativity allowed by grounded theory permitted me to ask questions particularly relevant to the data being explored. In addition, I was able to “make the free associations that are necessary for generating stimulating questions, and for coming up with the comparisons that led to discovery” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 27). In this vein, the aspect of creativity made available through grounded theory methods enabled me to recognize patterns and categories of discourse present on the Facebook memorial group walls, as well as the categories’ communicative functions. I also utilize grounded theory because
my objective was to advance a theory of TeC, and analysis of the messages on the walls can generate concepts that are key tenets in a newly advanced theory (Charmaz, 2006).

In-Depth Online Asynchronous Interviews

The second stage in my method utilized in-depth online asynchronous interviews to explore RQ2: *How do people describe their own participation in the Facebook memorial groups? That is, what meanings do people attribute to their participation in the Facebook memorial groups?* Moreover, these interviews allowed me to investigate RQ3: *What characterizes transcorporeal communication?*

I decided to interview people in order to gain a first-person perspective on their participation in the Facebook memorial groups. Analysis of the group walls alone only provides one view of the communication on the walls. Additional investigation is likely necessary in order to support or refute some of the conclusions drawn in the wall analysis. I also chose to utilize online interviews because the people who are participating in the memorial walls are geographically dispersed (and accustomed to engaging in CMC), so it seemed practical to interview them online.

To execute the online interviews I turned to Fontana and Frey (2005), who argued that it is now possible for researchers to engage in “virtual interviewing” (p. 721). Through virtual interviewing, researchers utilize the Internet to synchronously or asynchronously acquire information from participants. In a review of findings from studies that utilized e-mail for in-depth interviewing, Meho (2006) discovered that online asynchronous interviews are beneficial for a variety of reasons. Due it its asynchronous nature, e-mail allows the researcher to interview more than one participant simultaneously as interview questions can be sent to several participants at one time.
Additionally, e-mail interviews tend to cost less to administer because there is no need for long-distance phone calls or traveling to the location of participants. Time is also saved because data from the e-mail interviews require little editing, in terms of transcription, before being analyzed. I wanted to capitalize on the asynchronous aspect of computer-mediated communication, as e-mailed questions provide the participant with time to reflect on and edit their answers to the interview questions (Kennedy, 2000; Kivits, 2005; Levinson, 1990). Participants also had the opportunity to consider the questions while in a familiar environment.

While online interviews might offer a lesser degree of media richness than FtF interviews, e-mail interviews can reduce problems associated with telephone or face-to-face interviews (Meho, 2006). Meho (2006) found that e-mail interviewing can be a viable alternative to face-to-face or telephone interviewing. In fact, in a study that compared interview questions answered face-to-face and questions answered via e-mail, Meho and Tibbo (2003) found that the participants who answered via e-mail provided more “reflectively dense” descriptions than did the participants who were interviewed in a face-to-face setting. Due to the asynchronicity of e-mail, people have time to reflect on the interview questions and construct thoughtful answers (McQuillen, 2003; Walther, 1992; Walther, 1996; Walther & Burgoon, 1992).

People are often more willing to discuss their relationship and communication with the deceased more candidly in an online environment, as mediated settings provide a sense of anonymity (Finn & Lavitt, 1994). This anonymity can lead to participants providing information that is more genuine than information gleaned from a face-to-face interview. Several studies have indicated that people disclose more online than they do
face-to-face (Herring, 1996; Ho & McLeod, 2008; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Kim, Brenner, Liang, and Asay (2003) explained that the medium of e-mail can protect against the loss of face, especially when the participant is discussing a sensitive event such as the death of his or her friend. E-mail can also aid those who express themselves better in writing than while talking, as well as those who might be apprehensive about discussing their thoughts face-to-face with a researcher (Meho, 2006).

For this part of my study, I interviewed five people who identified themselves as active members of a Facebook memorial group, writing on the group walls approximately once per month. I chose to conduct interviews with a small number of individuals so I could question them at length and gain a thorough insight of their grief and attempts at relational continuity. I was not trying to get a representative sample of all people who write on these walls; rather, I sought to refine, extend, and enrich my claims as well as to get a sense for what motivates some people to participate in this online grieving.

I gathered information by e-mailing a list of interview questions to the participants, who, in turn, e-mailed their answers back to me. I also utilized follow-up questions as necessary. I embedded the interview questions in the body of the e-mail and attached the questions as a separate document so the participant could choose either means to respond to the questions. Dommeyer and Moriarty (2000) found that embedding the questions in the body of an e-mail result in higher response rates than if the questions are attached in a separate document. Due to the emotional nature of the topic, and in accordance with IRB protocol (available in Appendix A), I provided participants with contact information for counselors, should they need the service.
In order to recruit participants for the in-depth online interviews, I utilized the snowball method of recruitment. The snowball method “yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141). The chain of referrals generated a pool of interview participants. Snowball sampling is often used to reach a generally inaccessible population or engage people in a discussion about a sensitive subject (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Because discussing the death of a friend is a sensitive topic that requires a degree of trust between the participants and researcher, the snowball method appeared to be most useful. Additionally, the trust between the participants and the researcher, necessary for a successful interview, can be developed as the result of referrals (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Generally, the snowball method has been identified as an appropriate and effective means of recruiting participants for online asynchronous interviews (Meho, 2006).

One potential problem with snowball sampling lies in the selection bias present when one person selects people to refer to the researcher. This bias can influence the sample of participants in the study, affecting generalizability (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). I did not believe the potential bias to be a problem in my study, as the grieving communication on the Facebook memorial walls in the pilot study held constant across all of the walls, seemingly regardless of the group’s demographic composition. Additionally, I did not interview members of the same Facebook group, eliminating the problem of over-representing one specific group of people.

To engage in the snowball recruitment method, I located acquaintances of mine who are members of Facebook and asked them to refer me to an active member of a
Facebook memorial group. I wanted to refrain from announcing a request for participants on the group walls because I did not wish to affect or disrupt the members’ performance of grieving. When I was alerted to a potential interviewee, I sent the person an e-mail describing my study and participant criteria (provided in Appendix B).

After locating participants, I e-mailed them an invitation to participate in the study as well as an electronic copy of a consent form, found in Appendices C and D. To obtain consent, I had the participants respond to this electronic invitation by stating that the consent form was read and agreed to (a method discussed in Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004). I also assured the participants that I would take measures to maximize their confidentiality which included utilizing pseudonyms and removing personal identifiers before including information in the write-up.

Using the interviews, I aimed to gain a thorough understanding of the friendship as it existed prior to and after the death of one party in the relationship. Additionally, I examined how the relationship and the communication within it have changed following the death. I explored this further by asking the participants to describe their friendship with the deceased before he or she died, as well as describe the relationship as it exists currently.

To identify what people accomplish, cognitively or emotionally, in writing posts to the deceased I asked participants open-ended, descriptive questions. These questions included the following: Do you write to the deceased? What do you say in the messages? The complete interview protocol can be found in Appendix E. E-mailed follow-up questions were then utilized as necessary. Further, I wanted to determine if talking to the deceased or maintaining a relationship with them facilitated their coping. To investigate
this particular issue, I asked participants what their participation in the Facebook
memorial groups means to them.

To address issues of engaging in relational continuity with the deceased, I invited
participants to describe their communication with the deceased. I also posed a series of
related questions: How has the communication with your friend changed now that he or
she is deceased? Who is the intended recipient of your messages on the Facebook
memorial wall? Why do you think you write on the group walls? Responses to these
questions aided in responding to my research questions and general assessment of
transcorporeal communication.

After the five interviewees responded to the initial set of interview questions, I
then examined their answers and conducted a preliminary analysis of them. Based on the
initial answers, I developed follow-up questions that I sent to the interviewees in a
manner similar to how the initial questions were sent. I embedded the interview questions
in the e-mail as well as attached the questions in a separate document. The follow-up
questions are also provided in Appendix E.

Exploring Transcorporeal Communication

As discussed earlier, the nature of communication between the living and the
deceased is an often unnoticed form of communication. Using my proposed methods, I
sought to respond to my research questions and bring light to this overlooked area of
communication studies. The results of my investigation as a whole aided in my
exploration of RQ3: What is transcorporeal communication? Identifying various
characteristics of wall postings on Facebook memorial group walls and discovering how
people characterize their own relationships and communication with the deceased
assisted in understanding and explaining the phenomenon of transcorporeal communication.
CHAPTER 5: FACEBOOK WALL RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In addition to the walls analyzed in the pilot study, I examined 10 more Facebook memorial group walls in order to validate that my initial categories were accurate and inclusive of all posts. I located 10 additional Facebook memorial groups on the website using the methods described in the previous chapter. I then compared the postings in these groups to the themes previously established in the pilot study. If a message did not fit in to or correspond with an original theme, I made of a note of it and modified the themes accordingly. This meant recognizing additional theme elements or moving theme elements to another theme. In other instances, some of the messages that were inconsistent with previous themes were combined to create an entirely new theme. Distinguishing additional themes and refining categories generates a more specific and accurate analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A complete table listing the themes and theme elements can be found in Table 2.

The verification process indicated support for the themes and their elements in addition to revealing new elements and new themes. Upon review of the 10 additional walls, it also became apparent that the few instances of people writing to the Facebook group members, as opposed to writing to the deceased, was an important aspect of communication on the walls. Consequently, I analyzed and discussed the messages based on the message’s sender and intended receiver. The senders varied from people who were best friends with the deceased to people who had never heard of the deceased when the deceased was still alive. The intended receivers included the deceased as well as the other group members.
Table 2

*Revised Message Themes and Theme Elements*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function/Theme</th>
<th>Theme Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensemaking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shock</td>
<td>“Surreal” or “hard to believe”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Loss for words”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anniversary of death observances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age references</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology-related references</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original and non-original prose</td>
<td>Quotes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Song lyrics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>Bible verses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentions of God, angels, heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prayers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamentations and questions</td>
<td>Yearnings to talk to deceased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Issues of desiring closure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desires to mend bad relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function/Theme</td>
<td>Theme Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining Bonds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phatic communication</td>
<td>“Miss you,” “Love you,” “Thinking of you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clichés</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emoticons&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memories</td>
<td>Humorous recollections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somber stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Romanticized characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Blessed to know you”&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continued presence/past presence</td>
<td>Noting reminders of the deceased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentions of important locations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Birthday and holiday commemorations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Signs sent by the deceased&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Descriptions of dreams of the deceased&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Updates</td>
<td>Mundane occurrences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Important life events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Haven’t forgotten you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dedications&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sports teams’ results&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Appreciation of positive character traits&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gratitude for friendship&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function/Theme</th>
<th>Theme Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining Bonds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promises and requests*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Requests for help*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Requests to be in dreams*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appeals to watch over the living*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assurance that family would be taken care of*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pledges to continue with deceased’s projects*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eventual reunion*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Messages noting future interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“See you soon”*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Newly identified theme
*Newly identified theme element
*The theme element originally part of Technology-Related References theme
*The theme element originally part of Continued Presence theme
*The theme element originally part of Spirituality theme

In the first section of the analysis that follows, I present my re-examination of the findings from my initial study of memorial groups to explore the posts written to the deceased. Secondly, I studied the messages posted to the entire group from people who knew the deceased. Finally, I analyzed the messages posted by those who did not know the deceased.

As I was conducting my thematic analysis, trying to test and challenge my themes from the pilot study, I was struck with how people presented themselves to others on the Facebook memorial group walls, a public forum. This presentation was interesting because the observed conduct could not be fully recognized by forcing it to fit into a
message theme. Rather, the conduct was apparent throughout the postings and needed to be addressed properly. To make sense of people’s conduct in the Facebook memorial groups, I turned to Goffman and his description of the presentation of self. As indicated in Chapter One, I identified and applied aspects of Goffman’s various concepts throughout my analysis of Facebook memorial group walls. I offer these descriptions in order to provide a more thorough explanation of my observations and claims.

Re-Examination of Initial Grounded Theory

As indicated by Strauss and Corbin (1990), a key process when engaging in grounded theory includes “validating” the theory (p. 118). In order to challenge my initial findings and establish trustworthiness in my originally discerned themes and communicative processes, I compared the discourse on an additional set of Facebook memorial group walls to the original themes from the pilot study. I compared the wall findings in an effort to refine my coding scheme to best account for the patterns that I saw in the data. Changes in themes and theme elements are also revealed in Table 2. When challenging the initial themes, I also examined the communicative functions of the messages written to the deceased.

As in the pilot study, I again labeled each unit of meaning within the posts that represented one coherent thought (as utilized in Stromer-Galley, 2007). A topic change indicated a change in thought, and a change in the message addressee signaled a topic change as well. The two addressees included the deceased and the other group members.

To demonstrate my validation process, I provide the following example. I examined a post that read,
RIP Nicole…you will always be remembered with great fondness, love and respect..you were an amazing person and I only wish I could have known you longer and better ♥ may your soul rest peaceful in the heavens with those who you have loved who have passed before you ♥ Love you always ♥ .xox.

I coded the first thought, “RIP Nicole” as *Phatic Communication* because the message’s purpose was purely social in nature. The second thought, “you will always be remembered with great fondness, love and respect.. you were an amazing person” is a *Memory* because the poster discussed the deceased’s positive characteristics – without expressing gratitude for the deceased (in which case, the thought unit would be coded as *Appreciation*). The third thought, “I only wish I could have known you longer and better,” was coded as *Lamentations and Questions*, as it indicated a longing for something. “may your soul rest peaceful in the heavens with those who you have loved who have passed before you,” the fourth thought, was coded as *Spirituality* because the message referenced a higher power. Finally, I coded the fifth thought, “Love you always .xox.” as *Phatic Communication*. The hearts (♥) peppered throughout the posting were originally coded as *Technology-Related References* because they are an emoticon. Upon further analysis, I determined that emoticons were a better fit for the Phatic Communication category and labeled them as such. I moved emoticons to the Phatic Communication theme because they more closely resemble expressions of emotions rather than referencing technology. A discussion of this shift is included in the section on Phatic Communication in this chapter.

I continuously compared the thought units to each other and the previously determined themes to determine the best fit for the thought units. When I came across a
thought unit that did not fit into one of the previously defined categories, such as, “thank u so much for being a good friend,” I set that thought unit aside. When I finished analyzing the wall posts on all 10 group walls, I revisited the units that I reserved to determine if any relationship existed between them. It was at this point that I combined some of the thought units to create entirely new themes. This process resulted in the establishment of three additional themes: Appreciation, Promises and Requests, and Eventual Reunion. In some instances, I also shifted examples from other themes to the new themes because the relationship was a better fit. For example, people regularly asked the deceased to watch over them during certain life events. This thought unit was previously categorized as Continued Presence because it indicated that the deceased continued to have a presence and could watch over the living. I shifted these kinds of messages to the new Promises and Requests theme because many people asked the deceased for things as well as promising to look after the deceased’s family or projects. The new Promises and Requests theme serves as a “better fit,” or more accurate representation of the data because the actions embodied the reciprocal nature of relationships, which emerged as an important concept to highlight. The process of validating relationships against data, filling in categories, and relating categories concurrently is a process endorsed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Lofland and Lofland (1995).

During the comparison process, the presence of the initial themes was generally supported. The process also revealed further elements or characteristics of particular previously defined themes. In some instances, theme elements were shifted to one of the three new themes, which are also described in this chapter.
Support for Initial Themes and Functions

Examination of the 10 additional Facebook memorial group walls generally revealed support for the previously defined themes. The second analysis of Facebook memorial groups provided support for the initial themes of Shock, Technology-Related References, Original and Non-Original Prose, Spirituality, Lamentations and Questions, Phatic Communication, Memories, Continued Presence and Reminders of Past Presence, and Updates. The exploration also uncovered elements of themes that were previously not identified. In this analysis, I provide examples of the previously-defined themes, identify new theme elements and elements that have been reorganized to comprise new themes, and discuss newly-defined themes. I found that defining theme elements, or distinct groups of messages that fell under the umbrella term of the theme, more explicitly proved to be useful in comparing the thought units to previous themes.

The examination also provided evidence that supported the communicative functions of Sensemaking and Maintaining Bonds. The Emotional Rubbernecking theme posited in the pilot study has been removed as a function for this set of themes. I removed the Emotional Rubbernecking communicative function from this section of the analysis, as the messages were written by people who did not know the deceased and addressed to the other group members. The category has been, instead, separated to identify the Rubberneackers as a distinct group of people writing a discrete type of message. I discuss the Emotional Rubberneackers later in the chapter.

Shock

Most messages in this category indicated that the group members did not know what to say or how to react. Examples include, “I still can’t believe I won’t get to hang
out with you when I’m home. I don’t know what I’m going to do without movie nights...”
and, “What the HELL omg :( i didn’t even know what happend ..omg im so in shock.”

While many of the messages in the Shock category occurred very close to the
time the deceased died, messages signifying shock were posted throughout the walls. For
example, “Can’t believe in 2 days will be a year since you’ve left us. A year already?”
and, “wow michael.....it’s been 41 days now....and i’m still hurting as much even more
than the day you left.” The previous examples also demonstrate people mentioning
anniversaries that are important to the deceased. As was the case in the pilot study, the
deceased’s young age continued to be a prominent element in shock-related messages.

Some messages that fell into the Shock category included evidence that the group
members did not know what to write on the walls, which is a previously uncategorized
characteristic of the Shock theme. For example, one person wrote, “Sherry, I really don’t
know what to say,” and another posted, “It’s really difficult to find the proper words to
say right now. Wow.” This type of reaction indicates that the group members are unsure
as to how they should respond in this situation, which might be attributed to their distress
over losing a loved one (Yates et al., 1993). The reaction can also be attributed to the
suddenness of the death and the fact that Americans do not discuss death and are not
often taught how to grieve (Charmaz, 1980).

Technology-Related References

Posts falling into the Technology-Related References category continued to
contain “textspeak.” Textspeak is an abbreviated form of English where full words are
shortened to the shortest number of letters needed to express a message. For example,
“you” becomes “u,” and “your” or “you’re” becomes “ur.” In this type of language,
grammar and punctuation are often disregarded (Crystal, 2008). In the online groups, people continued to use the type of communication (textspeak) that they used when talking to living people. It appeared that people used this kind of communication when making sense of their friend’s death as a way to maintain some sense of normalcy as they talked with their deceased friend.

People also continued to mention Facebook and other forms of technology. One person said that writing on the wall made him feel as though the deceased could see it: “Just makes me feel like I can keep talking to you writing on here. I know you can see it.” Another person wrote, “i am missing you big time today. i just wanna pop in your room and see you guys facebooking and laughing.” Others posted links to newspaper articles related to the deceased or to the deceased’s obituary.

Original and Non-Original Prose

In the second set of group walls, the original and non-original prose were comparable to the prose in the first set of group walls. People posted poetry, Bible verses, and song lyrics in both sets of messages. The same forms of prose evident on the first set of walls were evident on the second set of walls. People continued to write their own poetry, provide famous quotations, and post relevant song lyrics.

Spirituality

As with the previous set of memorial group walls, members continued to post spiritually-related messages alluding to God, angels, prayers, heaven, and Bible verses. Some of these posts were even humorous. For example, one person posted, “what can i say man you were a pimp, keep pimpin those angels for eternity ;).” Another person was more serious and said, “My the lord hold her close and give her shiny wings.”
revealing prayer are a new addition to this theme. Some messages simply stated that the person was praying for the deceased, which had previously not been identified as a distinct theme element.

Upon closer exploration of the original elements of this theme, I shifted the “see you soon” type of messages to a newly created theme, Eventual Reunion, discussed later in this chapter. I also moved messages requesting something from the deceased, such as appeals for the deceased to “keep watching over us,” to another new theme, Promises and Requests. As I previously explained, asking favors of the deceased correlated with messages promising to help out the deceased, so I combined those two types of messages into one theme. I discuss the theme of Promises and Requests in detail later in the chapter.

Lamentations and Questions

Messages related to the Lamentations and Questions theme included statements of being sorry for past actions, wanting to talk to the deceased, and asking why the deceased had to be the one to die. In this theme, messages indicated that people were sad about the loss of one’s life, and they questioned this loss. For instance, many people told the deceased that they wished he or she was still alive: “i wish you were still here, i wish you never had to leave your mom dad and [sister], i wish you never had to leave me and [cousin]. People often indicated that they still needed the deceased in their lives. In one such example, a group member wrote, “I can’t help but be selfish and tell you I need you still, I wasn’t finished with our amazing talks and our dance to J.Lo and Ja Rule from way back in Grade 10 and 11!”
Two newly identified elements in the Lamentations and Questions theme include issues of closure and desires to mend the relationship with the deceased. People appeared to feel strongly about wanting to have been able to say goodbye to the deceased. One person wrote, “like everyone else, i just wish i could’ve said goodbye. Miss you pal :(.” Another person posted, “I just wish I would’ve gotten to see you just one last time.” Other group members mentioned that they would have liked to have patched up their troubled relationship with the deceased. As Attig (2000) notes, feeling that one has unfinished business can lead to lamentation and questioning. This is evident in the following post from one of the memorial walls:

Im sorry we were fighting when all this happened, so sorry you wouldn’t even believe. And if you remember what the last thing you said to me was I think your right. I know I should of listened to you cause you’re my bodyguard and all but my heart is screwed sometimes as you probably know by now haha.

Another young man wrote,

Kyle, I guess I need to start and say that I am sorry that we ended our friendship in an argument. It bothered me for a while thinking that you were in heaven still mad at me. Then I started thinking we never were really mad at eachother and no matter what nothing can take away the friendship we had for so many years.

Both new elements, issues of closure and desires to mend the relationship with the deceased, indicate a yearning to end the relationship, as it existed in the physical world, in a positive way. People wanted to be able to say goodbye and be on good terms with their friend when he or she ceased having a physical presence.
Evidence of Phatic Communication as it was described in the pilot study, was also evident throughout the second set of walls. People continued to write “I miss you,” “I’m thinking of you,” or “I love you.” They also wrote phrases such as, “everything happens for a reason,” and “only the good die young.” In some cases, it appeared that people wrote Phatic messages when they did not know what else to say. In other instances, people would write a Phatic message followed by a Memory or Update. Upon further examination of emoticons (originally considered a Technology-Related Reference), it appeared that the emoticons served to perform a social task that does not distribute information, making them a type of Phatic Communication. As a result, I shifted the emoticons element from the Technology-Related References to the Phatic Communication theme.

Memories

Group members posted memories throughout the second group of memorial wall postings much like they did in the first collection of groups. Overall, the memories posted on the walls were very positive in nature, as it appeared that the group members wanted to present the deceased positively. People discussed memories of special occasions, as well as memories of seemingly trivial events. One woman shared a memory about her deceased boyfriend,

Happy Valentines day baby ❤️ I will never forget last vday when u surprised me at the airport to pick me up with the best surprise, my slide show of us :) I still remember all the words you used to describe how much you loved me.
Another person wrote, “Sherry, I can’t stop thinking of you filling my candy bag to the brim, although I only had a dollar.”

Sharing phrases said by the deceased represents another formerly unidentified constituent of the Memory theme. People sometimes wrote phrases, surrounded by quotation marks, and attributed the quote to the deceased. “‘Just give me 3 minutes. Come on. That’s all it’ll take. I promise...’ – Kyle” serves as one example of this added element. By quoting the deceased, the group members, in a sense, give the deceased back his or her voice so that the deceased can be a participant in the conversation on the Facebook walls as well.

One previously unidentified element in the Memory theme includes people detailing the deceased’s positive characteristics. “Kathy and myself were never more impressed with your respect, manners, and of course appreciation for even the small stuff. You left a lasting impression on our family that will not be forgotten,” “Ryan, you meant the world to me... you were kind, caring and a joy to be around. You’ve touched so many people’s lives and that in itself shows how great you were. You always knew how to make me laugh,” and, “Every moment with you was unforgettable. You just had that certain knack, to make anyone smile at anytime, no matter how or what the felt,” are some examples of people describing the deceased in a positive manner.

Continued Presence and Reminders of Past Presence

Group members continued to post messages mentioning the deceased’s presence. They discussed particular locations, birthdays, holidays, and anniversaries that were important to the deceased when he or she was alive. The group members also mentioned when something, such as a song, reminded them of the deceased. Previously in this
theme, I included posts that asked the deceased to “watch over” everyone. Upon examination of the second set of walls, I have shifted these messages to an entirely new theme, Promises and Requests.

An additional element to the Continued Presence theme is the notion of the deceased sending “signs” to the living. People noted that the deceased sent signs to them as a reminder that the deceased still has a presence. The messages refer to the living observing certain numbers or events that were important to the deceased within particular contexts. The combination of the items in a certain context appears to serve as a sign, rather than a mere coincidence. One example posting said,

Mom and I went out last night, and I know you were there with us, as I looked up at the TV it was on the sports channels, and there it was the number 21 chalked and outlined on grass turf somewhere. Then I looked at the TV beside it and unbelievable, there you were again, it was a Washington Redskin player on the tube, and yes his number was 21. Wow.

These types of messages indicate that the group member is in the yearning and searching phase of grieving (Bowlby, 1980; Parkes, 1970b, 1972). They notice normal events and are reminded of the deceased. In essence, the living are searching out the deceased through inanimate objects.

Statements regarding dreams were also evident and included as an additional element of the Presence theme. People often mentioned that the deceased visited them in their dreams. One young woman wrote, “hey lovey! I’ve been missing you like crazy lately! You visited me in my dreams the other night though :).” Several others requested
that the deceased visit them in their dreams. I grouped the latter type of messages into the
newly created theme, Promises and Requests.

Many people pointed out that the deceased will live on and maintain a presence in
their lives. Although this concept operates as the underlying premise of the theme, I
include blatant recognition of the deceased’s presence as a separate element. One person
wrote, “You have left us in the physical sense but spiritually you are with all of us.”
Another example of this theme element said,

The other day I was driving in my car and I all of a sudden got this huge rush
through my body, I was so cold and I just kept getting colder, it was the strangest
thing. It felt like you were right there beside me when this happened. I couldn’t
even begin to tell you what that feeling was like, but it was good to know that you
were nearby. I don’t know if it’s just because of the time of year or not, but I
cannot believe how much I think about you and miss you.

In the former example, the person indicated that the deceased maintained a social
presence. In the latter example, the poster revealed that they felt the deceased’s physical
presence. More information regarding issues of the deceased’s presence can be found in
the review of literature in Chapter Two and in the discussion on transcorporeal
communication in Chapter Seven.

Updates

Group members continued to update their deceased loved ones on the happenings
in their lives. These Updates ranged from telling the deceased about important events,
such as engagements and graduations, to describing mundane events, such as the party
that took place the weekend before or the fact that a huge blizzard hit the area and the mall was closed.

One addition to this theme is the inclusion of updates on the deceased’s favorite sports team. For example, one deceased individual was a University of Alabama football fan, and a group member wrote, “Your team is doing WONDERFULLY this year!!!! I MISS YOU A LOT!! ROLL TIDE!!!!” on the deceased’s memorial group wall.

Another addition to the Updates theme is the mention of someone dedicating something to the deceased. For example, one person dedicated his boxing match to the deceased: “I wanted you to know that I dedicated my last fight to you on Nov. 3rd I won by second round TKO.” Another person wrote that they dedicated their sports season to the deceased.

*Additional Themes*

When examining the second set of memorial group walls, I added elements to some established themes and removed elements from others. Through the process of modifying themes, I discovered additional themes, which is a typical outcome when verifying themes. Strauss and Corbin (1990) noted that additional themes might emerge to fill the gaps in the initial grounded theory. Finding new themes indicates a continued refinement of the relationships in the findings as well as a thorough re-examination of the data without a predetermined notion of what will emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As a result of my careful second analysis of Facebook memorial group walls, I discerned three additional themes: (1) Appreciation; (2) Promises and Requests; and, (3) Eventual Reunion. I describe each theme and give examples from the Facebook memorial walls to illustrate the themes.
Appreciation

Commonly, group members posted thank yous in their messages to the deceased. Theme elements in the Appreciation theme had previously not been explicitly identified as an element in any theme. The messages had previously been lumped together with Memories or Continued Presence messages because they either focused on thanking the deceased for something that happened in the past (a Memory) or something that happened presently (indicating Continue Presence). The new theme of Appreciation provides a more accurate designation for these messages.

Generally in this theme, posters wanted to thank the deceased for being a good person or tell the deceased how blessed they are for knowing them. “thank you for becoming my friend and sharing your friendship,” “Your family was blessed to have you, and we are blessed to have you in our hearts,” and, “Thanks for making us smile,” serve as examples of this theme. Many of the Appreciation messages appeared to be written to provide closure for the living. Although closure is not necessarily something that can be achieved, many people seek it because they might feel guilty for fighting with the deceased or are “haunted” because they never got the opportunity to say goodbye (Attig, 2000, p. 130). For example one group member wrote, “i will always remember everything you have taught me.. because of you and everything that you have done with your life i want to take every chance i have.” Another posted,

I would like to say thank you. Thank you for touching my life. It takes a special and remarkable person to touch the lives of so many people in such a short span of time. Thank you for letting me be one of those people. Your time was short but
profound. There are so many people who love you and can feel you loving them right back. So again, forever, and always thank you.

People also posted their appreciation for the memories they shared with the deceased as well as their gratitude for the deceased’s positive attitude and inspiring actions. These posts are likely messages that they never got to tell the deceased directly, as some posts indicate that they wish they could have told the deceased how much they meant to them. Attig (2000) maintained that memorials aid in providing a sense of closure because they help people acknowledge the death of a loved one and move toward learning to love the deceased in their absence. The Facebook group provided a virtual space for the living to declare their thoughts, show their appreciation, and move toward a sense of closure.

Messages in theme of Appreciation operate under the Maintaining Bonds function. It is considered polite, and often a part of a relationship, to thank someone or show appreciation for them. As a result, the living continue to maintain respectful bonds with the deceased.

Promises and Requests

The new theme of Promises and Requests is a composite of small elements taken from other previously defined themes. During the second analysis, I was able to identify elements that had previously gone uncategorized into a theme. I combined four of these newly identified elements (requests for help, requests for the deceased to visit the living in their dreams, assuring the deceased that his or her family would be taken care of, and pledges to continue with a project that the deceased was working on at the time of his or her death) with an element shifted from the Continued Presence theme (appeals to the
deceased to watch over the living) to create the Promises and Requests theme. This category is a better fit for the new and shifted elements because this theme more clearly demonstrates the give-and-take, seemingly reciprocal relationship between the two parties in the relationship.

Because the deceased is no longer a part of the physical world, those who remain members of the physical world often reassured their deceased friend that they will care for the important people and projects in the deceased’s life as necessary. In many examples, the person posting the message promised to take care of a member of the deceased’s family. One person wrote, “I can promise you that I will do everything I can to take care of your cousin.” Another post said, “we are always here for [your family].” A final example read:

me and [deceased’s sister] are going shoppin and out for lunch soon too, i love her so much and im going to take care of her for you me and tj just gained an extra sister! Imma keep an eye on [your family] from now on.

While the living provided a service to the deceased by handling concerns in the physical world, they also asked the deceased to assist them in a variety of ways. Many people asked that the deceased to visit them in their dreams, watch over them, or take care of other deceased loved ones. One group member wrote:

Michael I miss you more and more each and every day that you have been gone. Please come visit me in my dreams, I really need you to be there. Mom has been having a rough time lately, and I know its cause you are not physically here with us. My entire body aches since you left, so tense, so upset. Please come and talk to me, pleeeaaasssse.
Numerous people also asked the deceased to help them get through this rough time of grieving the actual death or handling special events without the deceased. For example, one young woman wrote, “Our Anniversary is coming up soon...i hope im ready for it, please stay by my side to help me through it, because I am going to need you there, always will.”

In addition to the previously described requests, some posters asked for assistance in school, sports, or the weather. As one group member told his deceased friend about a golfing fundraiser to raise money for a scholarship in the deceased’s name, he said, “The Date is Monday August 25th and is being held at [the golf course]. Please do me a favour and make sure the weather is spectacular.”

As these examples demonstrate, people posting on the Facebook memorial walls often asked favors of their deceased friends, while others promised to carry out a favor for their deceased loved ones. These acts indicate the continued reciprocal nature of friendship, signifying a maintained bond. As a result, messages in this theme operate in the communicative function category of Maintaining Bonds.

*Eventual Reunion*

Often times, people wrote messages indicating that they would one day be reunited with the deceased. The postings that indicated an eventual reunion with the deceased were fairly straightforward and obvious. They included phrases such as, “see you soon,” and, “can’t wait to see you again.” In one instance, the deceased’s father wrote, “You were a one and only and I cannot wait till we are together again.” The people posting Eventual Reunion messages clearly anticipate meeting up with their deceased loved ones again in some setting. This is an important concept to note, as
Sigman (1991) argued that a relationship dissolves when people stop communicating \textit{without expecting a future interaction}. Because people recognize that a future interaction will take place, they maintain a notion of relational continuity as Sigman described.

Due to the significance of the recognition of an eventual reunion with the deceased, I established a separate theme to encompass the messages. Messages now in this theme were previously associated with the Spirituality theme. I also shifted messages of “see you soon” to the Eventual Reunion theme because it was more descriptive, and thus more accurate, than the theme in which it previously was an element. The Eventual Reunion theme is a better fit for the data. The Eventual Reunion theme operates under the Maintaining Bonds communicative function.

\textit{Support for Initial Communicative Functions}

When testing the initial themes, I also challenged the communicative functions. The communicative functions changed slightly, but they overall remained similar to how they were described previously. Messages of Shock, Technology, Prose, Spirituality, and Lamentations functioned as sensemaking mechanisms for those who were grieving. Phatic Communication, Memories, Presence, and Updates continued to function to maintain bonds with the deceased. As was the case with the Emotional Rubbernecking theme, I also removed Emotional Rubbernecking as a communicative function of posts directed at the deceased. While Rubbernecking is a function of some of the wall posts, it is not a function utilized when people wrote directly to the deceased. Rubbernecking was instead utilized when people who did not know the deceased wrote on the walls. I further discuss Emotional Rubbernecking later in this chapter. I now turn to examining messages directed to the entire group that were written by those who knew the deceased.
Group Dynamics

Although members of the groups typically wrote to the deceased, people also wrote to other group members. In some instances, people wrote to the deceased and the whole group in the same posting. For example,

lisa i miss you sister. lisa was the Sister i never had and i was the brother she never had. i have known her and the family for fifteen years and there are all wonderful people. three weeks prior to the Accident i would be with lisa washing the truck and keeping her company. She was the best friend i ever had. i digg you so much i will see you when i get there dont wait up for me.

In this posting, the poster wrote to the deceased (Lisa), then to the group, and finally returned to addressing the deceased again.

In my observations, people rarely wrote messages about others’ messages to the deceased. In a way, the group members fulfilled Goffman’s (1959) idea of “teammates.” Together, the group members stage the performance of grieving and memorializing a common loved one. While staging this performance, group members also help maintain the other members’ faces. In the Facebook groups, it appeared that people maintained others’ faces by generally not commenting on one’s conversations with the deceased. Goffman (1967) would likely term this action, “tactful blindness” because group members do not point out that others are displaying their intense, grief-related emotions (p. 18). In nearly all instances of group members mentioning that another person was having an especially difficult time with the death, the group member offered support to the mourning individual. Although it might appear that the group members were overlooking the fact that people write to the deceased, the group members might also be
demonstrating courtesy by not interrupting what seems to be someone’s perfectly legitimate conversation with the deceased. The respect for others indicates an awareness of the rules and etiquette that guide ordinary conversations (Goffman, 1967).

In addition to exhibiting behaviors discussed by Goffman, the Facebook memorial groups possessed additional characteristics that merit discussion. First, the groups are best understood as bona fide groups because of their fluid membership and connection with context, as explained below (Frey, 2003). Additionally, members of the Facebook memorial groups exhibited both task-related and relational communication in their wall postings. The members exchanged information about the deceased as well as maintaining the group’s purpose through communication. Finally, the group members often provided identity statements as they explained their relationship with the deceased to the group.

*Bona Fide Group Perspective*

The Facebook memorial groups examined in this study are considered to be bona fide groups, as defined by Putnam and Stohl (1990). The groups demonstrate the two characteristics of bona fide groups: stable but permeable boundaries and interdependence with the group’s immediate context (Putnam & Stohl, 1990). People can join and leave the groups at any time, demonstrative of the groups’ permeable boundaries.

This fluidity in membership can be seen in some of the comments written on the memorial group walls. While most members often join the Facebook groups permanently, others sometimes leave the groups or go for a long time without writing on the group wall. Their departure does not go unnoticed by the other group members. In one group, a post read, “its amazing how as soon as the hype behind Nicole has gone away they leave the group.. Shes still gone some people make me sick.” Other groups
had similar negative perspectives of people leaving the groups, evident by their messages on the walls. On the other hand, people might choose to leave the group because they have accepted the death and moved on. It is difficult to discern whether people leave the group because there is no more “hype” surrounding the death. For example, one posting read, “I’m leaving this Group but I wanted to say God Bless you all who have been affected by Ryan’s early passing!!” This poster might have felt the need to move on and chose to leave the group, or the writer might have become uninterested in the death and wished to leave. Because he warned the group that he was leaving before the encounter (the discussion on the wall) terminated, the person engaged in a “protective maneuver” that helps save the faces of the other group members by allowing them to prepare for his early departure (Goffman, 1967, p. 16).

Additionally, some people also choose to read the comments on the group walls and “lurk” without leaving any comments or other indication that they visited the group. This type of participation further illustrates the permeable group boundaries. In fact, Nonnecke and Preece (2000) found that very few people who visit online forums actually contribute to the ongoing conversations. These people “lurk,” or read others’ comments without publicly participating in the discussions. Although it is impossible to observe lurkers on the Facebook memorial groups, it is likely that the groups included at least a few people who read comments but never posted on the wall.

The Facebook groups also depend on the environment in which it exists, as “external environments and internal group processes are intrinsically and intricately related” (Frey, 2003, p. 7). Examining how group members exploit certain aspects of the external environment can help us understand the groups as they exist in their natural
environment (Putnam & Stohl, 1990). Putnam and Stohl (1990) argued, “the internal dynamics of group process shapes and is shaped by fluid group boundaries and links to a larger social system” (p. 261).

In line with the bona fide group perspective, particular aspects of CMC influence the group’s processes and how people communicate within it. As such, it is important to recognize the environment in which the Facebook groups are embedded. As discussed in Chapter Two, Facebook’s mediated and asynchronous qualities can influence the group’s communication. For example, because posting on Facebook group walls is asynchronous communication, the authors of the messages have the capability to edit the content (Barnes, 2003; McQuillen, 2003; Walther, 1992b; Walther, 1996; Walther & Burgoon, 1992). The sense of anonymity afforded by online communication can also affect the group’s communication, as people are often less reserved and disclose more when communicating in mediated settings than in face-to-face settings (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). As evident, it is important to examine the Facebook groups as they function within a context in which they are deeply rooted (Frey, 2003; Putnam & Stohl, 1990).

Because the Facebook groups studied were naturally occurring and had fluid boundaries, the communication within the groups was genuine and the group members were voluntary. This created an authentic discourse created by legitimate Facebook group members for me, as the researcher, to analyze. In my analysis of the groups, I identified task-related and relational communication, as well as the presence of identity statements.
Task-Related Communication

The groups wrote task-related messages that dealt with information-sharing and information seeking. Task-related communication refers to messages that focus on accomplishing a goal (Bales, 1950). The members’ task-related communication focused on making decisions about memorials as well as gaining information about the events surrounding the deceased’s death.

Information Sharing

When group members shared information with other group members, the information was often related to the deceased’s death, funeral, and memorials. Sometimes, the people offered information about the actual death itself. For example, someone posted, “they ruled it accidental (drowning),” in response to a question about how the person died. A person who was with the deceased when she died posted a series of messages detailing exactly what happened leading up to the death. Another member told the group that the deceased was an organ donor and, because of the deceased, two men received corneal implants. Some people provided links to obituaries and news articles as a way to provide information.

When applicable, other people posted information about the person who caused their loved one’s death. One of the deceased individuals died as the result of a drunk driving accident, and a group member updated the group on the court case:

Just a small recap of the last three, very hard and emotional days. [The defendant] appeared all three days, sat through witness testimony, first responders, experts and finally yesterday at around noon the judge decided that he will face all four charges and will proceed to trial. Impaired driving causing death Impaired driving
causing bodily harm Driving over .08 The fourth one was criminal negligence causing death – which subsequently was changed to dangerous driving causing death.

People also posted links to news articles that discussed the criminal proceedings related to the deceased’s death, much like they posted links to obituaries or news articles about the death itself.

Some postings dealt with technical information about the funeral as well as descriptions of the funeral or explanations as to why the member could not attend the funeral. People provided dates, times, and addresses of the viewings and funerals. One individual wrote, “The service was very nice today, she looked as beautifull as ever laying there peacefully... Great speach put out by her sister and friends.” Another person explained why she was not at the funeral: “I was unable to attend lisa’s service today, as myself and my son are sick.”

Additional information-sharing messages were related to memorials for the deceased. One woman was organizing t-shirt orders for those who wanted to buy a t-shirt that memorialized the deceased. She wrote, “if anyone want’s a t-shirt in kyle’s memory, call me. his sister called and is making them, so i’m taking names, numbers and sizes and making a list. let me know.” Another person notified the other members of a celebration of a deceased’s birthday: “As per the family’s request, the balloon release and celebration of Lisa’s birthday will be taking place at [the park] between 8:15-8:30pm this evening.”

In some instances, the deceased was working on a project at the time of his or her death. In these occasions, the group members shared information about the project and
how to proceed with it. In this respect, some of the members used the Facebook group wall as a place to explain how the project was continuing.

On some group walls, people posted links for other Facebook memorial groups that honored the same person. A few members provided links to online funeral home guestbooks. They often asked everyone to sign the guestbook so the family could print it out and save as a keepsake. For example, a young woman wrote, “Could everyone please go to the link above and sign Kyle’s guest book?? My mother-on-law, who is Kyle’s aunt would really like to print it out for his mom... Thanks so much.” Depending on how the person died, some people would provide links to Facebook groups related to the cause of death. For example, members posted links to suicide and drunk driving related groups.

**Information-Seeking**

The group members also asked questions about the deceased’s death or funeral arrangements. They appeared to ask questions as a way to reduce the ambiguity surrounding the death and related events. One person simply asked, “what happened?” in reference to the death. People asked about funeral arrangements, circumstances surrounding the death, and legal proceedings of the people who caused the deaths (if applicable). In asking questions, the group members effectively engaged in sensemaking, much like the members attempted to accomplish when posting messages to the deceased. In this respect, the members were trying to achieve the task or goal of making sense of the death.

In one particular instance, an individual had disappeared for several days before being found dead. Initially it was unclear as to whether or not the death was suicidal or accidental in nature. Questions flooded her memorial group wall as members sought to
understand what happened and make sense of any rumors they heard or newspaper articles they read. A young man tried to understand the series of events surrounding the woman’s death:

What I’m wondering is how Nicole’s body had her cell phone and ID card on her, if everything had been left in her room. I thought she left everything, ID, phone, purse and all, in her room when she disappeared. And then the ID and phone are with the body?

The most immediate concern people had was with the funeral arrangements. Because funerals often take place within a few days of the death, people wanted to find out about it as soon as possible.

One person wanted to know more information about the person who caused his friend’s death: “maybe i’m outta the Loop, but has anyone heard anymore about the Guy that hit Lisa?” This message was followed by several comments from other group members who explained what was going on with respect to the drunk driver who killed Lisa.

Members often responded to the questions with any information that they had. They appeared to be very patient with the information-seekers, answering questions that could have been easily answered by reading through the previously posted messages. By supplying answers, the members provided information as well as a sense of hospitality to those asking the questions. The kindness put forth by the group members demonstrates a sense of relationship building and relational communication within the group.

Analysis of the messages intended for other group members revealed that people engage in task-related communication in order to find out information about the deceased
or to answer inquiries about the deceased. This indicated the people still cared about the deceased loved one enough to ask questions about him or her. The presence of task-related communication also implies that group members provided a response when asked for one. When people pose a question, they expect a response (Bakhtin, 1986), and people often feel obliged to provide a response to save the face of the person who asked the question (Goffman, 1967).

**Relational Communication**

The messages posted on Facebook that create the “social fabric of a group by promoting relationships between and among group members” are indicative of relational communication (Keyton, 1999, p. 192). Bales (1950) described relational, or socio-emotional, communication as communication that concerns the relationships that exist in the group; these messages are not focused on the task-related goals. The group members demonstrated relational communication by posting messages related to group maintenance, emotional support for other members, and reminiscing about the deceased.

**Support**

Many of the comments posted to the group were support-centered. The members either needed support or were supportive to others. One woman told the group, “kay, well get through this all together :) always here for each other looooove you!” Another person wrote, “My heart goes out to michaels family during this hard time. Just know that he will always be with you. It may be hard now, but one day you will meet again, and he is right beside you.” In one instance, a member wrote a support-related message to a specific member, the deceased’s girlfriend: “to Michael’s gf [girlfriend], keep your chin up. You were so lucky :).” Some people posted messages offering to chat with those who
were having a particularly difficult time with the death. The mother of one deceased young woman gave out the deceased’s cell phone number and told the group that the phone will be in service for a very long time. The mention of the deceased’s cell phone and being able to listen to the deceased’s voice in the voicemail message was a common fixture in the memorial groups.

A few of the group members encouraged others to continue writing on the group walls as a means to grieve. For example, one young woman appeared to have an intense emotional response to the death. Another member responded to her tremendously expressive messages,

We are all here for you to chat if you feel like you need to. Letting your feelings out as you hae done on the Wall, is so important for you……….and others feel the warmth and friendship you have for Nicole. Take care dear.

Based on Lieberman’s (1993) definition of self-help groups, the Facebook memorial groups could be considered to be self-help groups. The Facebook groups are composed of people who share a common situation or experience (the death of a loved one). They are also self-regulating (through group maintenance), and the groups utilize values and self-reliance. Social support protects people from the devastating effects of stress, and the company of other group members helps one avert loneliness (Rook, 1987).

The group members also thanked each other for the support provided both online and offline. Examples of this support include, “i just wanted to say how awesome it was to see all of you from AL that came all the way here for Kyle’s funeral. He had amazing friends in all of you,” and, “Glad to see everyone is holding up! It’s what you need to do, for yourself, and for her. Its also nice to see everyone giving her nice little messages.”
Another person wrote a note of support on the group wall of someone who died under circumstances that might have involved the use of illegal drugs:

> We are all saddened by the loss of Ryan. I would encourage you all to remember the spirit in which he lived and not the manner in which he died. He lived his life the way he placed his soccer, full speed ahead with passion and with power. He lived his life like he played his soccer, with respect and support for his teammates. He lived his life like he played his soccer, with a smile and a laugh. I encourage you all to remember the spirit in which he lived and not the manner in which he died.

In addition to blatant messages of support, the group members asked for and provided photographs, addresses, and phone numbers to one another. These items served to provide support for the group members.

*Group Maintenance*

The group often sought to maintain the integrity of the group, reminding people of the group’s purpose. On one of the group walls, the first poster described why they created the group and how they wanted others to interact within it: “kyle in some way affected us all….in it being laughin or partyin, playin sports, or just chillin so this page is just a little reminder so we can share stories and things about our boy kyle.” Similarly, Facebook provides a place for the group’s description and recent news. In these sections of the group’s profile, people often wrote an explanation of the group’s identity.

When people’s messages were not in line with the group’s purpose, other members brought it to everyone’s attention. One example of this can be seen in the following messages, which were posted on one woman’s memorial group after some
members got into an argument about the deceased’s killer and what legal punishment he should receive:

I kinda missed the part where this page turned from a shrine of lisa’s memory to send our condolences and prayers into a discussion of whos a sick fuck and who isn’t stop your guys’s dwelling on the past mourn for lisa forget the guy that’s beyond us now. It seems you guys have forgotten about lisa and the fact that she was a happy person and that she wouldn’t want you guys to live the rest of your life pissed off so relax take a chill pill and take it off your mind and stop using lisas page as your bickering station.

Another person wrote:

Jordan is right, I created this page to **REMEMBER** Lisa. Not to bicker and call names. Lisa would be pretty disappointed with everyone if she saw people fighting. **From NOW ON, keep your name calling to either a pm [private message] or to yourself. Anymore name calling and I’ll delete the post or discussion.**

By posting messages such as these, the members attempted to monitor what others wrote on the group’s wall, protecting the group’s function and maintaining norms within the group. Additionally, by monitoring others’ behaviors, people instituted a system of etiquette, or appropriate conduct in a particular situation. Goffman (1967) described society’s practice of conduct:

In our society a system of etiquette obtains that enjoins the individual to handle these expressive events fittingly, projecting through them a proper image of himself, an appropriate respect for the others present, and a suitable regard for the
setting. When the individual intentionally or unintentionally breaks a rule of
etiquette, others present may mobilize themselves to restore the ceremonial order,
somewhat as they do when other types of social order are transgressed. (p. 114)
As indicated in the wall examples, people sought to restore order when another
poster violated the understood code of conduct.

Apart from the posts that triggered the explicit maintenance messages, people
tended to show respect for others in the group. It appeared that the group members
instinctively followed Goffman’s (1967) rules of conduct that included obligations and
expectations. An obligation refers to how a person “is morally constrained to conduct
[oneself],” and an expectation establishes “how others are morally bound to act in regard
to [others]” (p. 49). In the Facebook memorial groups, people generally allow others to
express themselves, and they appeared to expect others to allow them to express
themselves as necessary in return. Following these unspoken rules indicated that the
members were maintaining the group’s purpose. Although no formal rules of online
etiquette were established, people generally remained respectful of others in their group,
including the deceased.

Reminiscing

The sharing of memories between group members was evident on the memorial
walls as well. This was similar to how the members shared memories with the deceased,
described earlier. The main difference was that reminiscing messages were directed only
at the other group members, not at the deceased. The group interaction creates an area in
which members share stories and create a shared reality (Fisher, 1984; Keyton, 1999). On
Facebook memorial groups, the group members share memories of the deceased
individual, which creates the shared reality of that individual. When the group members discuss the deceased, they are, in a sense, helping create public memory. The group members bring their own memories and descriptions of the deceased to the group. Schwab (2004) argued that the memories can offer comfort and courage to move past the traumatic loss. Many times, the discussion revolved around only mentioning the deceased’s positive attributes. Related comments include:

She was always such a happy person, and this world needs more people with the compasion that she had.

Lisa was Fun Loving, and Dedicated to her Job doing the best she possibly could…she left smiles on everyones faces everytime she walked by or even pulled up, we will remember the smiles and the jokes she told, and the ways she always got us to smile.

He was one of those rare “good guys”, had tons of personality and could make you feel comfortable about any situation. In the brief time I knew him, he seemed very genuine and had great ambition for life.

The positive comments offered by the group members create a shared reality in which the deceased was a great person. As discussed in the pilot study, people tend to romanticize the deceased and death itself by posting only positive remarks. Perhaps this is the result of people adhering to the adage, “Never speak ill of the dead.” Additionally, Goffman (1967) argued that members of groups are expected to save the face of others in the group. In this sense, it appeared that the group members were attempting to save face for the deceased because the deceased are virtual members of the group yet they can no longer engage in face-saving for themselves. Goffman (1967) further argued that people
might desire to save another person’s face because he or she has an emotional attachment to that person. Because people openly grieve on the Facebook memorial walls, it can be assumed that they had an emotional attachment to the deceased and wanted to protect the deceased’s face.

Other group members shared specific memories of them and the deceased. They told stories to the other members about being with the deceased. Memory topics ranged from attending parties with the deceased to being in the band or playing sports with the deceased. A group member wrote, “Ryan was a great dude, last time I saw him we were battling to see who would end up second last at bowling.” Another posted direct chat transcripts from a conversation she had with the deceased. The memories shared on the walls, as well as other message posted to the group, often included a statement about their identity and relation to the deceased.

In addition to writing task-related messages, group members also wrote messages of relational communication. Because group members provided support to one another, shared stories about the deceased, and maintained the group themselves, the Facebook memorial groups do, in fact, function as a social support group

**Identity Statements**

In nearly everyone’s first post directed to the group, they included a statement that described how they knew the deceased. I labeled these phrases as identity statements. Some examples include: “I met ryan when i was 12 or 13. He was a very nice guy so i decided to ask him to come to my eighth grade mini prom,” and, “We were friends since grade 8!!.. Long time..” Some people explained their relationship to the deceased in a way that they seemed to be making the argument that their pain is greater than others’
pain because they knew the deceased better. For example, one of the deceased’s coworkers wrote,

> A few years ago Lisa and I were the only girls driving for [towing company] with the exception of Laura coming and going once in a blue moon. We had a connection that no one else at that job did.

Another person clearly pointed out to others that her grief was more distressing than other people’s grief: “well this is lil harder for me too type then alot of ppl, for that this is still really hard for me too take in....i worked on the midnights with Lisa for quite a while with [towing company].”

Others appeared to be rationalizing that they could write on the walls because they knew the deceased in some capacity, no matter how detached the relationship was in reality. In one particular posting, the relationship between the poster and the deceased appeared to be very weak: “Ive seen him at [local bar]. He wouldnt let one of my friends in. we just laughed. my heart goes out to friends and family.” Other posts mentioned that they were friends with the deceased’s close friends, so they were friends by association and wrote on the wall to support their mutual friends. One person wrote, “i have friends who were friends of ryan’s and i only heard good things about him.”

While it is difficult to discern why people seek out memorial groups, some of the members offered insight as to why they joined the group. Many times members noted that they heard about the death from a news source and sought out the group to offer condolences. One of the Rubbernecker wrote, “sympthy to the family, I never knew Lisa, but 15 min ago I just got my [magazine] and read her story. How surprized to see it on facebook. My heart goes out to her family.” In the same group, someone posted, “I did
not know Lisa, I just read of the tragedy in this morning's newspaper, I want to send out my condolences to her family and friends, I am so sorry for your loss...sometimes life just isn't fair..” By stating how they found the groups, the posters included their identity statement.

In summary, the Facebook groups appeared to have characteristics of bona fide groups. Because the memorial groups are bona fide groups, I was able to observe how the groups shape and are shaped by the permeable boundaries and link to a larger social system. These two characteristics of bona fide groups proved to be important factors that affected the communication within the groups. The memorial groups also contained both task-related and relational messages, and provided identity statements when necessary.

People who did not know the deceased wrote messages of sympathy to the group as well. The Emotional Rubberneckers also provided an identity statement by identifying themselves as someone who did not know the deceased or that they knew the deceased in a limited capacity. I explore the Emotional Rubbernecking posts in detail in the next section.

Emotional Rubbernecking

The first two groups of posters were comprised of those who knew the deceased in a personal manner. That is, they were friends or close acquaintances with the deceased. This third group, the Emotional Rubberneckers, consists of people who did not know the deceased in an intimate capacity. Grieving over the deaths of strangers is not necessarily an uncommon act. People often grieve over the loss of someone with whom they identified, even if they did not personally know the deceased (Davis, 2001). The outpourings of grief following the deaths of John F. Kennedy and Princess Diana serve as
examples of people grieving the loss of someone they did not personally know. Davis (2001) argued that the deceased’s perceived importance determines whether or not people identify with the deceased. In this study, the deceased’s young age might contribute to their importance and lead to Rubbernecking, as Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth (1999) explained that young, healthy bodies have a strong social presence, while people with “less than perfect” bodies have a lesser social presence.

Although the term, “rubbernecking,” brings with it a negative connotation, Rubbernecker are not necessarily negative elements in the Facebook groups. When I first began my analysis of the Rubbernecking messages, it appeared as if the Rubbernecker simply wanted to be involved in the emotional drama and get attention from it without having to actually feel the emotions that accompany the death of a loved one. Some who did know the deceased noted that they have also lost other friends as well. Perhaps they did this to point out that their lives are more dramatic because they have suffered from more losses than others have. As I continued to examine the Rubbernecking messages, it appeared that people who were Rubbernecking posted messages because the person’s death affected them in some way.

In the next two sections, I discuss the various levels of Rubbernecker and possible motives for choosing to Rubberneck. Many Rubbernecker appeared to post messages because they felt some connection to the deceased. In a sense, the deceased person’s death was a loss to the larger society. As such, the Rubbernecker were engaged in communal grieving. The loss of a stranger was experienced as the loss of a close friend. Jorgenson-Earp and Lanzilotti (1998) argued that, in the midst of the numerous television reports of death, some tragedies will “break through the feeling of mediated
unreality,” and “under such conditions, the deaths of strangers can seem more real than
deaths in the local community” (pp. 156-157).

On the Facebook walls, the Rubbernecks often offered their condolences and
prayers to the deceased’s friends and family, indicating that they were writing on the
walls for positive reasons. Jorgenson-Earp and Lanzilotti (1998) continued their
argument and said that in the wake of some tragedies, a sense of community is formed. In
this case, the Rubbernecks often feel grief and need to actively respond to it. This can
result in the postings on Facebook memorial group walls. The Rubbernecks and their
supportive messages appeared to be welcome in most of the Facebook memorial groups.
Perhaps the deceased’s close friends recognized that the Rubbernecks also needed to
grieve the loss of someone whose death affected them in some way.

*Types of Rubbernecks*

The Rubbernecks are not easily defined, as many are not clear-cut “outsiders.”
The line between those who knew the deceased semi-personally and those who did not is
virtually indistinguishable, essentially making the Rubbernecks’ identities fluid. Some
Rubbernecks were friends with people who knew the deceased while other
Rubbernecks had heard about the deceased’s death on the news and sought out the
memorial group on Facebook. The Rubbernecks who had the weaker relationships with
the deceased tended to provide identity statements and described themselves as people
who did not personally know the deceased.

One person described why she was posting on the wall by writing, “Ryan was a
best friend to my niece Krista, who created this group in his memory.” Another poster
said, “Heart goes out to he’s family and Margaret my grade 3 teacher.” It was as if the
members with very weak ties to the deceased felt the need to rationalize their presence in the groups. It can be assumed that many other people with very weak ties to the deceased merely lurked instead of writing messages on the walls. In one particular posting, the relationship between the poster and the deceased appeared to be very weak:

Ryan’s father Neil, taught me years and years ago as a substitute……What a great man and teacher he is! anyways, my heart goes out to you and your family. I have never forgotten you. The last time I’ve seen you was in a chinese restaurant when I waited on your table…..about 20 years ago.

Some Rubberneckers were people who were friends with the deceased long ago and lost touch with them. A young man described his relationship with the deceased: “i have not talked to him i ages but back in the day wen he played soccer with me i remember him being such a nice guy you’ll be missed deeply.”

Another group of Rubberneckers were those who knew of the deceased, but did not have a close relationship with the deceased. One woman wrote, “i never knew him personally but i always saw him out having a good time. He was at one of the partys i went to a while.” Other people mentioned that they saw the deceased at work, especially if the deceased worked at a restaurant or bar where a face-to-face connection was made but was superficial in nature.

Although the Rubberneckers did not have a close relationship with the deceased, some still mentioned that they had an emotional reaction to the death and the wall postings. A young woman described her emotions,

As I sit here reading all the posts, I can’t help but cry. It’s kind of funny tho becasue I never really knew Ryan well, just enough to say hi when I saw
him…but he has touched so many people over his short time here that I can’t help but weep for the loss of someone so wonderful at such a young age.

Another person wrote,

I did not know Lisa personally, I just knew her by acquaintance when I lived in [town]. When I heard the story today it made me sick to my stomach for a tragic accident at all because someone was not being smart on the road. My Condolences go out to the family, I will be praying for the family as well for Lisa.

The final group of Rubbernecks were those who knew the deceased only through witnessing or being involved in the actual death. For example, a firefighter who was called to the scene of one woman’s death wrote, “I would like to extend my sincere condolences to the families and friends of Hannah and David. I was one of the firefighters on the scene at the time of the accident.” Another woman posted, “Well, I’ve been looking for this site for the past two days and I finally found it. It was a real tragedy when I saw this happen right in front me while I was standing on my balcony.” It appeared as if these kinds of Rubbernecks felt a connection with the deceased because they were present for a huge part of the deceased’s life: the end of it.

A subset of Rubbernecks includes lurkers, the people who choose to view the memorial groups and discourse on the walls without joining the groups or leaving messages. I discuss lurkers and their role as an audience at length in Chapter Seven.

Characteristics of Rubbernecks

Analysis of the messages posted by Rubbernecks indicated that the Rubbernecks found the group and joined it due to a variety of reasons. Some people
experienced the loss of a loved one in a situation similar to the deceased memorialized in
the group. One person explained that she empathized with those dealing with a sudden
loss, “My father died this New Years Eve of a heart attack, so I understand what it is like
to suddenly lose someone you love.”

Another woman described that she identified with the parents of the deceased, as
she also lost a daughter:

I am sitting here reading all the beautiful words to Sherry and her family and
unfortunately I know exactly what they are going through. My precious Laura has
been gone physically from us for 3 years and 2 months. I do not know why any of
us have to travel this heart wrenching nightmare but, I know I would not be
getting through this awful journey without the support of my family, friends,
Laura’s beautiful friends, the people I have met through the various bereaved
parents groups I have joined in our area & on facebook.

The woman also recommended particular books on grieving and provided her e-mail
address so the parents of the deceased could contact her to talk if they wanted to do so.

Other people commented that they lost someone in a manner similar to how the
memorialized deceased died. For example, a young woman posted, “I feel your pain
through this sad time i lost my Dad in August from a car accident as well, I didn’t know
Sherry very well but I feel deeply sorry for her loss.” Likewise, someone wrote, “I didn’t
know Trent but I know what it’s like to lose someone you are about in a car accident.
That is something you never forget.” By citing their own instance of a death they grieved,
as in the previous examples, the Rubberneckers also brought attention to the fact that they
also experienced a tragic loss at some point. Perhaps this was their attempt to keep their deceased loved ones’ memories alive as well.

*Message Content*

The Rubberneckers typically offered condolences to the grieving friends. Some indicated that, based on the other wall postings, the deceased must have been a fantastic person. Examples of their expressed sympathies include the following posts: “I have not met Lisa but I just want to give condolences to the family and friends of hers. It’s a terrible tragedy this happened but be strong and my best wishes go out to all her family and friends,” and, “We didn’t know Quentin personally but his Uncle married our Aunt. Our thoughts are with his family & friends.” In another instance, a man wrote,

I did not know Sherry personally but from looking at the pics, videos, and messages from those who did count her as a dear friend and family member, it is very apparent that the community (and world for that matter) is all the less brighter for her loss.

One woman appeared to offer support by providing a link to an actual online support group. Her message read,

everyone i didnt know Sherry but i wanted to let you know that you are not alone and there always people to talk to. [website url] has a 24 hour chat with people who understand what you are going through and are very helpful. If you need to talk please use it.

Other messages revealed that the posters could not comprehend the grief that those who knew the deceased must be feeling. One woman wrote, “I cant even imagine what the family and friends of this girl is going through and I'm sending all my
condolences to everyone that knew her especially her family.” Another person wrote, “My condolences to those who knew her….I can’t imagine what pain her family and friends are going through.”

Identification vs. Emotional-Distancing

For the most part, the Rubberneckers who had a very distant relationship with the deceased, appeared to want to identify with the deceased and the bereaved members’ distressing situation without being emotionally involved in the death. Initially, these people showed identification with the deceased simply by joining the group. When people join a Facebook group, the names of the groups are listed on the person’s Facebook profile for others to see. Displaying their membership in any group serves as an important identity signal (Donath & boyd, 2004). Membership displays also demonstrate an individual’s association with grief – and the drama that accompanies it – when they are a part of a Facebook memorial group. In this respect, people might choose to join groups to indicate that they are touched by the tragedy of loss. boyd and Heer (2006) have argued that online profiles have become a means of presenting one’s identity. Tufekci (2008) described the possible motivation behind joining online memorial groups: “In technologically mediated sociality, being seen by those we wish to be seen by, in ways we wish to be seen, and thereby engaging in identity expression, communication and impression management are central motivations” (p. 21). Tufekci would argue that by joining the groups, people want to be seen and they want others to know that they are members of the memorial group.

Although the Rubberneckers did not have a close, personal relationship with the deceased, they do have some a relationship of some sort, weak as it might seem. In some
cases, these weak relationships were hinged on only knowing of the deceased due to a news article or having lost a loved one in a manner similar to the deceased memorialized in the group. Because the Rubberneckers often provided some identity statement in their posts, their messages made it seem as though they wanted to relate to the group members’ grief. At the same time, through their messages saying, “I can’t imagine…” they also indicated their relief that they were not emotionally close with the deceased. One Rubbernecker wrote a poem that clearly displayed her contentment with not knowing the deceased. A portion of the poem read:

   Selfishly, I’m glad I never got to meet you.
   From what I’ve heard, you were a wonderful person,
   Always striving to follow God and walk in His ways.
   I don’t have to mourn your loss like so many others are.
   I never had the privilege of knowing you.
   I know I will meet you one day though.
   In heaven.
   God wanted you to be there before I am.

   In the latter section of the poem, the author indicated that she will meet the deceased one day, signifying that a relationship with the deceased will exist. At the same time, as mentioned in the poem, the author is grateful that she did not know the deceased, as she would probably suffer from emotional distress if she did know the deceased and had to suffer through the deceased’s loss. Other people in the group did not have any written reaction to this poem, or many other Rubbernecking messages. In a few instances, group members did react to the presence of the Rubberneckers.
Rubbernecks’ Noted Presence

In some groups, the members invited the Rubbernecks to write on the walls because they enjoy receiving support from everyone. For example, one young woman wrote,

for every person that thought their post or words of sympathy didn’t mean anything, you are wrong, i don’t care who it comes from the community we have been surrounded by the last couple of days has been incredible and i cannot even believe it!

On the other end of the spectrum, and a rare occurrence, it appeared that some people wanted to restrict who wrote on the wall. In these instances, the people closest to the deceased got angry that strangers and people who did not get along with the deceased were writing condolence-laced messages on the walls. One group in particular did not appreciate outsiders’ posts: “Craig and I are sitting at the computer right now together and we know EXACTLY what you feel...I'm tired of all the "I Love you's" cuz not many people truly did....” Messages like these were also noted on one of the walls examined in the pilot study.

One rule common to all situations is that people must “fit in” to the situation and behave in a way that is expected of them (Goffman, 1963). When one does not know the deceased but posts on the memorial wall anyway, that person does not “fit in” and can cause disharmony. Although the groups are public, the Rubbernecks are not necessarily sanctioned to be present in the groups because they did not know the deceased enough to memorialize them properly. The notion of fitting in also relates to behaving in a manner that is appropriate for the situation. Goffman (1963) refers to this concept as giving way
to the requirements of the situation. What is appropriate in one situation might not be suitable in another situation. For example, it is generally not suitable for people to visit a traditional, physical memorial for an individual and talk to the deceased or other people at the memorial. One might think that this code of conduct should be applied to virtual memorials as well. When the Rubberneckers write on the walls, others might see them as imposing on the grieving group members’ territory.

The fact that people seemed angry about strangers writing on the walls was an interesting phenomenon, as Facebook groups can be “closed” to outsiders. The only people who can view the wall, discussion board, and photos in a closed group are people who have joined the group (“Facebook|Help Center,” 2009). When groups are “closed,” an option that group administrators can choose, people cannot join or, consequently, write on the walls without permission from the group administrators. To prevent strangers from writing on the walls, the group administrators would simply need to make the group a “closed” group and not accept strangers’ requests to join the group.

Essentially, the Rubberneckers varied from people who were one-degree removed from the deceased to complete strangers who had never heard of the deceased before the death occurred. The Rubberneckers often offered condolences and sympathy for those who are grieving and appeared to identify with the loss while trying to remain emotionally distant from it.

Summary

In the second analysis of Facebook memorial walls, I realized that modifications to the original themes were necessary. Using grounded theory methods, I reorganized the original themes and discovered additional themes. In addition to solely examining the
messages written to the deceased, I analyzed the posts directed to group members to explore task-related and relational messages posted. Finally, I eliminated the Emotional Rubberneeking theme and communicative function from the original series of posting themes and identified the Rubberneeking posts as being in their own category of group members and message posters.

In the next stage of this project, I conducted asynchronous, online interviews with five people who wrote on Facebook memorial group walls. I sought to explore the members’ perceptions of their participation in the group as it relates to maintaining a relationship with the deceased. I also asked about the participants’ messages posted to the deceased, including concepts of the intended audience and message content. I conducted the interviews as a type of member check (as described by Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I sought to substantiate my reading and analysis of the Facebook walls. As such, findings from the wall analysis and interviews are not mutually exclusive; the wall analysis and interviews informed each other. The wall analysis aided in creating the interview protocol and analyzing the interviews. Likewise, the interviews provided additional insight and support for the wall analysis.
CHAPTER 6: INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

After analyzing the second set of walls, I conducted asynchronous, online interviews with five people who reported that they wrote on Facebook memorial groups regularly (approximately once per month). I sought to explore the participants’ relationships and communication with the deceased prior to the death as well as their relationships and communication with the deceased after the death.

To find participants, I utilized the snowball method of recruitment, primarily because I wanted to engage people in a discussion about an emotionally sensitive topic and snowball sampling is often useful for this purpose (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Because people were referred to me by mutual acquaintances, a small bit of trust between the participant and me already exists, allowing for more genuine discussion in the interview (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

To begin the snowball method, I asked acquaintances of mine to put me in contact with their acquaintances who wrote on Facebook memorial group walls. Upon locating the individuals, I e-mailed them an electronic copy of the consent form. In accordance with IRB protocol, the participants were notified of this study's purpose, potential risks, benefits, and confidentiality issues. Participants were also informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary, they could choose not to answer any of the questions, and they could withdraw from the study at any time. After reading and agreeing to the conditions of the consent form, participants e-mailed me and indicated their agreement to the conditions by typing, “I have read and agreed to the information presented in the consent form regarding my participation in ‘Reconnecting with the Dead Via Facebook: Examining Transcorporeal Communication as a Way to Maintain
Relationships,” into the body of the e-mail. Upon receipt of each participant’s consent, I e-mailed the interview questions to him or her both as an attachment and included in the body of the e-mail. I did this so the interviewees had the option to respond to the questions in a word processing document or in the body of the e-mail. I asked follow-up questions as necessary by sending a separate e-mail message to the individuals after they sent me their initial interview answers. The interview protocol is presented in Appendix E.

After receiving all of the e-mailed answers, I read through them as a group to identify and analyze any patterns that existed in the participants’ responses. Again, I utilized methods of grounded theory, specifically the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as described in Chapter Four. To isolate themes in the five interviews, I began by utilizing systematic inductive analysis (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). I was especially interested in how the interviewees described their communication with the deceased before the death as compared to after the death. Similarly, I was concerned with the interviewees’ descriptions of their relationship with the deceased before and after the death. As such, I compared the interviewees’ responses to the questions about communication to each other. Likewise, I compared the responses to questions about the relationship with the deceased.

The following are brief descriptions of the interviewees and their deceased friends. All names have been changed, and identifiable information has been removed. Annie’s brother, Adam, committed suicide one year prior to the interview. At the time of his death, Adam was 27 and Annie was 26. Beth’s friend Brad also committed suicide approximately a year before the interview. Beth was 25 and Brad was 26. Carli’s close
friend Cole died in an accidental drowning just over two years before the interview. Carli and Cole were both 17 at the time of Cole’s death. Deidre lost her good friend and former teammate, Danielle, two years prior to the interview. Danielle died as the result of an accidental fall from a hotel balcony. Deidre was 22 and Danielle was 20. Elizabeth’s friend, Elly, was murdered three years before the interview. Elizabeth was 17 and Elly was 20. As evident, all of the interviewees and the deceased were and are young adults. The types of deaths did not appear to have a large effect on the participant’s communication or relationship with the deceased after the death.

The interviews revealed characteristics of the interviewees’ relationships and communication with the deceased before and after the death. Participants also disclosed more specific information related to their communication with the deceased; they discussed the content of their messages posted on Facebook memorial group walls as well as purposes for writing on the walls. In addition, participants recognized that others likely read messages intended for the deceased, which implicated issues of the intended audiences as an important part of the interview analysis. As presented in Chapter Five, I again draw on Goffman to address aspects of the conduct perceived in the interviews with active memorial group members.

Relationship with the Deceased

Four of the five interviewees had a very close relationship with the deceased on whose wall they wrote. These participants stated that they wrote on the group walls about once per month. The participant who was not particularly close with the deceased admitted to writing “infrequently.” The first four participants also disclosed that when the deceased was still alive, they spoke at least once per day. These participants described the
deceased individuals as “brother-like,” “a confidant,” and a “very close.” To Deidre, Danielle was a former teammate, roommate, and “best friend.” Annie often wrote on her deceased brother’s memorial group wall. She described that their relationship went beyond being blood relatives; they were close friends as well:

Adam is my older brother so I have known him all my life. As young children we fought just as other siblings fought. Moving into our elementary/high school years I loathed him. He was self-centered, egotistical, and a complete pessimist. I constantly wished he wasn’t my brother. As we both grew up and matured, I came to accept those qualities about him because they weren’t going to change. Our relationship was much better when he left for college. A few years later we ended up living in the same city for a few years. We used to go out to the bars together with friends and there were a few occasions when we used each other as sober cabs. I moved away about 2 ½ years before he died. This was probably the period when I came to “understand” more about him. He had quite a few problems with his relationships with women and his views on himself. I think that at some points I was his confidant. He would tell me things that he wouldn’t tell our parents. He would do something wrong, whether it was at work or relationship wise, mostly it was using too much force in his job and he would get in a bit of trouble with his supervisors. Afterwards he would have panic attacks about the situation and he would usually end up in the emergency room because he would get to the point of passing out. Most of the time he wouldn’t call my parents, but he usually would tell me.
As evident, the interviewee had a connection with her brother that went beyond a simple blood relation; they were friends as well. Because the participants were so close to their loved one when the loved one died, they lost a confidant (Pennebaker et al., 2001). The deceased was probably one of the few people with whom the interviewees would talk with about emotional issues, such as the death of a close friend (Attig, 1996). The living might routinely turn to their now deceased friends in this time of emotional crisis because it is a habit. Likewise, it makes sense that Elizabeth, who was not especially close to Elly, never developed a habit of talking to Elly about disturbing matters. As a result, Elizabeth does not frequently write on Elly’s memorial group wall.

Regardless of the type of relationship they had with the deceased prior to the death, all of the participants talked about their continued relationship with the deceased. No mention was made about the severing of bonds or something “coming to an end.” Deidre said that Danielle “is and always will be my best friend. [She] has made an impact on my life and I know that she will continue to do so.” Deidre’s statement indicates that she has a continued relationship with her deceased friend. Continuing a relationship is a normal behavior after a loved one has died (Attig, 1996, 2001; Mitchell, 2007), as discussed at length in Chapter Two. Beth also indicated that the love she has for the deceased has not diminished just because Brad has died. Another interviewee described her relationship with her deceased friend:

I still think about Cole all the time. Any time something funny happens, or if somebody does something silly that he probably would have done I automatically think of him. My friends and I discuss him often. He’s still one of the funniest, most loving and selfless people I’ve ever known.
Carli said that she continued to care about Cole as much as she cared about him when he was alive. Because she continues to orient herself to the deceased, Carli reifies the relationship that she previously had with Cole.

The participants explained that the deceased is still basically the same person to them. Annie revealed that she views her brother in the same manner that she viewed him when he was alive. She said, “I still see him as a self-centered, egotistical pessimist. His death doesn’t change that.” Deidre also echoed this sentiment and said that looking at the pictures posted in the Facebook group is important to her. She said, “I enjoy seeing funny pictures of her, pictures with me in them, pictures that show the true person that she is. She is always going to be that person to me.” Elizabeth, the participant who was not especially close to Elly described how her relationship with the deceased has remained the same. She said, “I will be honest, I don’t think about her every day.” The participants continued to exist in the same relationship, and in the same standing, with the deceased after the deceased has died. This is analogous to Goffman’s (1967) view that relationships continue to exist with the constant characteristics after the encounter ends. If two people were best friends at their last encounter, they will continue to exist in that same standing after that encounter concludes. The continued relationship standing also demonstrates Hallam et al.’s (1999) argument that the deceased is a part of the living individual’s history and continues to influence the survivor’s sense of self.

Most participants indicated that although their thoughts of the deceased’s characteristics have changed very little, they actually felt closer to the deceased now that he or she is dead. Although Elizabeth was not particularly close to Elly, she explained that she felt closer to Elly after Elly died: “She and I weren’t really close, but I do think
about her and her family from time to time. I feel closer to her now that she’s gone.”

Elizabeth continued,

In the few years before she had passed, I hadn’t seen her. I didn’t have that strong
of a relationship with her, but now that she’s gone, I feel like I am a lot closer
with her because I think about her more often.

Annie also mentioned that her relationship with her brother has deepened. She wrote,

Knowing about the hour before his death and what was going through his mind
and all of the sadness that he must have felt I think has changed my outlook on
our relationship. It’s more of a deeper love that I feel towards him and also sense
of understanding.

Overall, the participants continue to have a relationship with the deceased that
resembles the relationship they had when the deceased was still alive. In some respects,
the relationship has stayed the same with a few differences, namely the intimacy level of
the relationship, which intensified. A large part of maintaining or increasing relational
closeness with the deceased might be attributed to the communication that now occurs in
the relationship.

Communication with the Deceased

The interviews also focused on the communication between the interviewee and
his or her deceased friend. The participants generally described their communication with
the deceased before the death as “normal.” They said that they talked with the deceased
daily or even multiple times per day when the deceased was still alive. Carli, explained
that she talked with her friend every day in school. She said, “Cole and I spoke every day
before he passed away. Our lockers were right next to each other and every day he would
give me a hug and a kiss on the cheek and tell me good morning.” Annie also described her communication with her brother before he died:

We spoke on the phone probably once every 2 to 3 weeks and saw each other maybe once every month/every other month. This was/is probably my biggest problem with his death. Since it was a suicide, there is a lot of guilt on this subject on my part. I honestly wish I would have tried harder under the communication aspect. At the time of his death I was just starting out as a single mother and my best friend had passed away the previous year, so I was also trying to cope with that. Numerous times my parents would call and say, you need to call Adam because so and so happened and he won’t tell us how he’s feeling. I would try, but I still don’t feel as though I tried hard enough. There were a lot of times that I just said I have too much right now and I can’t worry about someone else’s stuff, he has my phone number, he can call too. I knew what was going on in his head and I thought it was something he needed to figure out for himself.

This participant had a lot of regret regarding her communication with her brother when he was alive. While she talked quite regularly with him when he was alive, Annie still wished that she would have communicated with him even more. The frequent communication appears to be indicative of the close relationship between the interviewee and the deceased. The participant who did not write on the walls as often as the other participants described her communication with the deceased prior to the death as infrequent. She said, “Before she was murdered, I hadn’t talked to her in a few years besides an occasional “Hey” at high school.”
After the death of their friends, the participants said they continued to communicate with the deceased. Communication with the deceased after the death takes many forms. Deidre said that she communicates with the deceased by visiting Danielle’s gravesite when she is in town, remaining close with Danielle’s family, constantly thinking about the deceased, and writing on the Facebook memorial wall about once every other week. Carli described how she continued to communicate with the deceased: “Sometimes I find myself talking to him; I tell him that I miss him. I also post messages on his Facebook. In some weird way I feel like he sees it.” Writing on the group walls and praying were the two main methods that people identified as ways that they used to talk to the deceased.

Again, the amount of post-death communication mimicked the communication between the participants and the deceased before the death. Annie said that she writes on the group wall “whenever she feels like it,” which was approximately once or twice per month. Beth explained that she writes on the walls, “Whenever I feel like I have something to say to him. His Birthday, Christmas, the day he died, Days that remind me of him. Or random times.” Carli writes on the walls “at least once a month, usually when something big happens in my life. Or silly things that I know he would appreciate.”

Although the communication with the deceased continued post-death, some changes were evident. Beth explained that she “can’t just call or go visit. It has to be a more spiritual thing now.” Because it has to be more spiritual, Beth said that she talks to the deceased more frequently than when the deceased was alive. She continued, “I have always told him everything. Now it’s just more often.” Elizabeth felt as though the deceased became omnipotent after death and could also hear her prayers. She explained,
I feel like now when I say a prayer, she can really hear how much she affected me as a little kid. I looked up to her, and I don’t think she knew that I think she now knows how much she put an impact on my life...and now when I do talk to her during a prayer, I feel like I can say more.

The interviewees generally indicated that their communication with the deceased after he or she died remained somewhat similar to the communication with the deceased before he or she died. The main difference in communication related to the fact that the deceased no longer gives physical feedback. Beth described her communication as talking “just like we always did; I just get no response now.” Carli also mentioned the lack of response as one of the few changes in her communication with Cole after his death. Although Cole no longer had a physical, observable presence, Carli said that she felt his presence and knew he was there to help her through difficult times in her life. She explained,

Well obviously he’s not there for the hugs anymore, and he can’t answer back when I speak to him, but I do feel like he’s there. It’s hard to explain but you just know. Even though he cannot communicate back with me, I feel his presence. And I know that when I’m going through a tough time he’s there with me.

Annie revealed that she had, and is still having, difficulty accepting her brother’s death. Because of this struggle, she indicated that her communication with her brother probably decreased following his death. Annie explained,

I still don’t feel as though I communicate with him as much (talk to him as if he were still alive) but it’s no longer because I’m too busy, but more along the lines of if I don’t think about him or try and talk to him I can pretend he isn’t dead.
Regardless of the amount of communication that occurred between the participants and their deceased loved ones, the interviewees admitted to posting on Facebook memorial group walls as a way to communicate with the deceased. As a result, the content of their postings was important to investigate further.

**Wall Posting Content**

The interviewees said that they wrote posts consisting of various topics on the memorial group walls. Beth indicated that she wrote a variety of messages on the wall: “Everything from; Why to Happy Birthday, I miss you, just thinking of you. Anything that strikes me at the time.” Carli writes to Cole to tell him how much she misses him and to update him on her life events. She explained, “I never want him to think he’s missing out, so we fill him in.” Deidre wrote on the walls to let Danielle know that she is thinking of her. Deidre also said, “If something happens that reminds me of her, I always let her know. If I do something she would laugh at, I tell her.” Carli also said that she tells Cole about “silly things” because she had always done so when he was alive.

The interviews also revealed the same message themes and communicative functions that the wall analyses revealed. For example, Annie said that she often posts messages on Adam’s group wall, indicating that she misses him and wishes his death had never happened. In this respect, Annie’s posts would fall into the Phatic Communication theme and the Lamentations and Questions theme. Elizabeth stated that she posted messages describing memories of the deceased. These posts would likely be categorized in the Memories theme. Other interviewees mentioned that they post messages on important days or holidays, which would be a message of Continued Presence.
participants report that they posted these messages for various reasons, which are described in the next section.

_Purposes for Writing on the Wall_

I asked the participants why they choose to write on the Facebook memorial group walls; I wanted to find out what their participation in these groups meant to them. When discussing their wall postings, the participants indicated that the act of posting the messages was important to them for a variety of reasons. Beth identified two benefits of writing on the Facebook group wall: “It helps me heal; it keeps his memory alive.” Annie revealed that her biggest fear is that people (including her) will one day forget her brother. She cited that reason as a cause for her to write on the walls and check the memorial page anytime she is on Facebook to see if anyone has written anything. Annie also said that she writes on the walls to show others that she continues to struggle with Adam’s death. In this manner, she addresses two audiences, her brother and the group, when posting messages, which is consistent with what I observed in my previous study. Elizabeth discussed why she wrote on Elly’s wall:

I want her to know how important she was to me and to everyone around her.

Writing on the wall gave me some peace of mind, and it means a lot to me. I felt guilty for not seeing her one last time before she was gone, but writing about it made me feel better. I write on the wall because it helps get my feelings out. I wasn’t very close with her, so my post wasn’t as personal as others. Mine may have seemed insignificant compared to the others, but I know my post was important to me.
It appeared that Elizabeth wrote on Elly’s wall in order to gain some sense of closure. For some interviewees, the Facebook memorial group served as an especially important site for talking to the deceased because it offers a place to grieve without having to visit a cemetery or other physical location. Annie explained:

I think about him every hour of every day. The only real “communication” (meaning directly speaking to him) is on his Facebook memorial page. I purposely avoid his gravestone because his actual human body is there and that makes it too real for me and sometimes I can believe in my head that it isn’t real.

Annie has a hard time visiting Adam’s physical, deceased body, so she prefers to visit and communicate with his online presence. Deidre identified the Facebook memorial groups as a way to remain connected to the deceased from any location. She said that writing on Danielle’s wall was a way to tell her that she continues to be an important part of her life and writing on the wall is “a way to visit with her even though I can’t see her every day.”

Carli said she writes on the walls “because sometimes just talking isn’t enough. Words evaporate but if you put your messages in a place where it will never disappear then you know someday he’ll find it.” The CMC aspect of permanence allows the messages to remain on the walls for an indefinite amount of time. Additionally, because the messages remain public for a long period of time, the message author (and other members) can return to re-read the messages. Erikson (1999) described the benefits of posting online: “Persistence expands conversation beyond those within earshot, rendering it accessible to those in other places and at later times” (para 4). Carli continued to say that writing on the wall means a lot, and “it’s another channel for me to speak to him. It
makes me feel closer to him.” In this sense, Carli identified that writing messages to the
deceased served as a way to maintain, and even intensify, a relationship with the
deceased.

Just as communicating with the deceased helps the individuals, communicating in
a public forum allows groups members to view the messages as well. Viewing others’
communication and writing posts knowing that others will see the messages help the
bereaved as well.

Communication and Other Group Members

In their discussion as to why they post messages on the walls, many of the
interviewees mentioned that other group members would probably read the messages. In
that respect, the group members were secondary receivers of the message. The
interviewees recognized that others could read messages that were directed to the
deceased, which means they were, in a sense, writing messages for both the deceased and
the group members. When asked why she writes on the group wall, Beth replied, “I’m
unsure really! I hope some how he can read it, maybe friends and family will read it and
feel some comfort in the fact that I think about him all the time too.” While Deidre uses
wall postings to “talk” with her deceased friend, she also uses it to communicate with
other group members. She said, “It is a way to stay in touch with her and others that care
about her just as much as I do.

As I indicated earlier, Annie mentioned that she writes messages mostly to her
brother, but the messages are also a way for her to show others that she has not forgotten
him. Annie disclosed that she writes on Adam’s wall knowing that other people will read
it. She continued, “I think they expect it from me. I was his sister, not just a friend.” In
this sense, Annie is knowingly playing the role of the sister whose brother killed himself. Goffman (1959) would identify Annie as playing a social role, which is “the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status” (p. 16). Annie now has the given status of being the sister of someone who died. As a result, she is consciously performing the duties assigned to that particular role.

In her interview, Carli said that she does not think about other people seeing her posts on the group wall, yet she acknowledges that other people probably read the messages. Carli expanded on this notion:

I don’t ever really think about [other people reading my messages]. Even though Facebook is a public place, I know that the people that go back and look at his wall are people that care for Kyle like I do. It’s not about what other people see, it’s about talking to him, and I think everyone respects that.

As discussed in the wall analysis (Chapter Five), group members were generally courteous to one another, following Goffman’s (1967) argument that members in the social group avoid destroying each other’s faces in order to prevent a disruption in the relationships between group members. People also follow the system of etiquette that exists within the context (Goffman, 1967), which, in Facebook memorial groups, appears to include respecting others as they grieve.

Deidre echoed Carli’s sentiment and said that it does not bother her to know that other people read messages that she primarily meant for the deceased. Deidre identified that the intended recipient of her messages was Danielle, but knows that others will see it as well. She continued, “I knew lots of people were close to her, so I am ok if they see it too.” Elizabeth also mentioned that her posts were probably read by other people, and she
hoped that her messages helped them in some way. She said, “I also wrote on the wall for others to see how great of a person she is. When others see posts, it might encourage them to post their feelings as well.”

Seeing others’ posts to the deceased also appeared to comfort the grieving individuals. Beth explained the importance of seeing that others write on the group wall: “It means a lot to me when other people post as well, it makes me feel comfortable in the fact that I’m not alone. I know I’m not. It just helps!”

Other participants also mentioned the presence of other group members and the importance of the Facebook groups as a site to congregate for the same reason: to memorialize a friend. Beth said that although her messages are intended for the deceased, she does not mind that others can see her wall posts. She explained, “I think most people that see my post feel the same way that I do. We all lost a great friend and need to share our sorrow together.” Elizabeth also described why she visits the memorial group regularly:

I go back to the page because I want to see if anyone else posts on the wall and see what they have to say. I know a lot of people in the group, and I just like to see how she impacted their lives. I don’t write anything else because I’m not as close to her as she was with other people. I feel like anything else I would want to say, I would pray and say to her directly.

Carli summed up why writing on the Facebook group walls was very important to her. She said, “I think it helps you get through the grieving processes. It’s a way for you to express how much you miss the person, and see others that feel the same way.”
Interviews with people who write on Facebook memorial group walls revealed that people maintained a relationship with their friends after the friends have died. The interviewees repeatedly described their relationship with the deceased before the death as being very similar to their relationship with the deceased after the death. If they were close with the deceased before the death, they continued to remain close with the deceased after the death. Part of the relational continuity involved maintaining communication with the deceased. As was the case with the relationship itself, the communication after the death also continued with comparable frequency to communication with the deceased prior to the death. They way that the interviewees described what they posted on the Facebook memorial group walls was akin to the themes and communicative functions that I found previously. The interview participants also described why they wrote on the group walls and what writing on the walls meant to them. In addition, Goffman’s (1959, 1963, 1967) concepts related to human behavior in social situations aided in the analysis of the interviews and examination of participants’ behaviors in the groups.

Finally, the interviewees indicated that they realized that others could, and probably would, read the messages posted to the deceased on the group walls. They often wrote messages with the deceased and the other group members in mind as their audiences. This concept of writing to a dual audience is further discussed in Chapter Seven. Additionally in Chapter Seven, I continue to explore TcC as it functions on the Facebook memorial group walls.
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

Analysis of the wall postings and online interviews revealed major underlying phenomena that greatly affected the communication on the Facebook memorial group walls. In this chapter, I first discuss Goffman’s ideas as they relate to findings from the wall analysis and interviews. Then, I discuss the notion of Facebook wall posts having multiple audiences, as people post seemingly private messages in a very public forum. I then focus on the type of communication present in the messages directed at the deceased individuals, and I discuss transcorporeal communication as it functioned in Facebook memorial groups. Finally, I posit my conceptualization of TcC communication in its basic form and identify potential occasions in which it would be utilized.

Discussion of Goffman

Because Facebook is a public space that anyone can enter by joining Facebook, numerous issues related to behavior in public places were evident on the Facebook memorial group walls. As noted in Chapter One, Goffman (1963, 1967) focused on people’s behaviors while in public settings, communicating face-to-face with others. I did not begin this research project with a goal to test or apply Goffman’s work, yet, as I conducted my analysis, I found it increasingly important to draw from Goffman’s theoretical standpoint.

Using Goffman’s views of behavior as a framework from which to operate, I analyzed people’s behaviors and communication as they transpired in a public, yet mediated, setting. I found that Goffman’s ideas also pertained to and helped explain people’s behaviors in a mediated public setting. Throughout my analysis of the Facebook memorial group walls and interviews with memorial group participants, I observed
people exhibiting several of Goffman’s ideas regarding human behavior, including face-saving and adherence to social rules.

Throughout the group postings, people exhibited face-work and face-saving related behaviors. Goffman (1967) described face-work as taking action to counteract any incidents that threaten a person’s face, or “image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (p. 5). People saved the deceased person’s face by posting only positive comments on the walls. People also saved the faces of other group members. The group members as a whole displayed evidence of following social rules and engaging in politeness, as described by Goffman (1967).

On the Facebook walls, people utilized tactful blindness to ignore the fact that people were emotional and self-disclosed their feelings of grief and sadness in a public setting. People rarely discussed someone’s grief-laden message. In the atypical occasions where an individual did mention someone’s emotional posting, he or she only wrote a brief, polite note of support for the bereaved. Generally, individuals did not discuss people’s messages to the deceased, perhaps as a way to avoid interrupting one’s personal conversation with the deceased, which again showed an awareness of the social rules that guide conversations (Goffman, 1967). Facebook group members also managed the behaviors of others in the memorial groups. The members monitored other members’ behaviors and essentially created a system of etiquette. By restoring order in the groups, the members determined and enforced appropriate conduct in particular situations (Goffman, 1967). Additionally, when people saved their face, the face of the deceased, or the face of others in the memorial groups, they indicated a willingness to follow particular rules of social interaction (Goffman, 1967).
In addition, people also acted in various roles with different intentions while writing on the group walls. Some people sought social support from fellow group members while others wrote to the deceased as a way to grieve. As the group members performed their social roles, they enacted the duties attached to that particular role (Goffman, 1959). For example, in the role as a bereaved person writing to his or her deceased friend in a Facebook group, the person demonstrated characteristics of being emotional while writing messages of friendship and relational continuity.

Finally, aspects of continuing relationships can be discussed by applying Goffman’s concepts. Goffman (1967) proposed that people continue to maintain a particular position in a relationship even after the encounter with the other party ends. This claim held true for those who lost a loved one. The survivors continued to exist as friends of the deceased in a manner similar to how the relationships existed when the deceased was still alive. If an individual was very close to the deceased before the death, it appeared that these individuals continued to remain close to the deceased following the death. If a person was not as intimate with the deceased before the death, the person continued to be more distant. Similarly, the living also thought of the deceased in a manner similar to how they thought of the deceased when he or she was alive. For example, if people think their friend was arrogant before he or she died, people will continue to consider the deceased to be an arrogant person.

As evident, many of Goffman’s ideas of behavior in public places were relevant to consider when examining the behaviors displayed in Facebook memorial groups. People’s wall posts and interview answers revealed conduct that included face-work, roles, social rules, and relational continuity.
Multiple-Audiences

When people post messages to the deceased in the Facebook memorial groups, they do so in a public forum. As anyone can join Facebook (“Welcome to Facebook!,” Facebook,” 2009), anybody can post or access content on “open,” or public, pages, such as open memorial groups. In the open groups, anyone can look at the postings, including those who are not even members of the group. Because of this allowance, the online audience is often comprised of diverse people and multiple audiences (Schlosser, 2005). Tufekci (2008) argued, “Questions of privacy arising from social representations and interactions…should be analyzed in a framework that takes into account the dynamic boundary between the public and the private in social interactions…” (p. 21). As such, it is imperative to examine the various audiences that can publicly witness a grieving person’s private emotions through that person’s postings on Facebook group walls.

Most of the posts analyzed in Chapter Five and the interviews discussed in Chapter Six indicated that the messages on the Facebook group walls were directed to the deceased. At the same time, the interviewees revealed that they knew others would probably read the messages as well. In this respect, the people posting on the walls are writing with two audiences in mind: the deceased individual and the other Facebook members who can access the public group. In the example provided in Chapter Six, one of the interviewees, Beth, explained why she writes on the memorial group wall: “I hope some how he can read it, maybe friends and family will read it and feel some comfort in the fact that I think about him all the time too.”
The fact that more than one distinct audience is present could be attributed to Facebook memorial groups’ multiple purposes. As discussed in Chapter Two, the groups serve various functions. Foot et al. (2006) identified three functions that memorializing fulfills: mourning the deceased, easing the living’s grief and guilt, and communicating with others who are also mourning. Each of the group’s functions carries its own objective with it its associated audience. Because people must go to the same place (the Facebook group) to achieve their purpose, it appears inevitable that multiple audiences converge in the same place. As a result, people knowingly write messages for one purpose, yet they have the audience of the other purposes in mind as well. When people wrote on Facebook memorial group walls, they posted messages with more than one audience in mind, including the self, the deceased, and other Facebook members. Although the posts were often explicitly directed at the deceased, interviews with group members indicated that they were aware that others in the group would read the messages.

Identifying potential audiences is an important concept to address and discuss when exploring the communication present on Facebook memorial group walls, as the audience is a vital part of message construction. Bakhtin (1986) elaborated on the importance of audience identification when composing messages:

An essential (constitutive) marker of the utterance is its quality of being directed to someone, its *addressivity*. As distinct from the signifying units of a language – words and sentences – that are impersonal, belonging to nobody and addressed to nobody, the utterance has both an author (and, consequently, expression, which we have already discussed) and an addressee....Both the composition and,
particularly, the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker (or writer) senses and imagines his addressees, and the force of their effect on the utterance. (p. 95)

Bakhtin identified that the audience has a large effect on communication before the sender even sends the message, as the audience influences the author. Because the audience is so important in communication and message construction, it is imperative to review the various audiences of postings on Facebook memorial group walls.

People often envision their intended receiver while composing any message to be posted online, (Markham, 1998), which is similar to people envisioning the intended recipient when composing a letter. Ordinarily when a person writes a letter, or posts messages online, the intended addressee is not present. Rather, the writer often “fictionalizes” an audience in his or her imagination (Ong, 1975). Both mediums (Facebook posts and written letters) are effectively asynchronous, and the audience is not physically present. Because the audience does not have a physical presence, the message’s author must imagine the person to whom he or she is writing. Ong (1975) explained, “Although by writing a letter you are somehow pretending the reader is present while you are writing, you cannot address him as you do in oral speech. You must fictionalize him, make him into a special construct” (p. 19). In this sense, it is likely that the people posting to the deceased visualize the deceased when constructing messages to them. This visualization closely resembles the concept of the internal representation of the deceased, which I discuss in my explanation of the TcC model later in this chapter. Bakhtin also (1986) discussed the importance of message authors identifying their addressee:
But from the very beginning, the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created. As we know, the role of the others for whom the utterance is constructed is extremely great. We have already said that the role of these others, for whom my thought becomes actual thought for the first time (and thus also for my own self as well) is not that of passive listeners, but of active participants in speech communication. From the very beginning, the speaker expects a response from them, an active responsive understanding. The entire utterance is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering this response. (p. 94)

In this passage, Bakhtin identified others and the self as the audiences of a message. He also argued that the audience is incredibly important to consider when composing a message because they are expected to respond to the message in some way. When someone chooses to write on the Facebook group walls, he or she has an audience in mind and considers them when constructing messages. As evidenced in the interviews, the people who post messages on the walls do so with the deceased and other group members in mind. Although they did not explicitly say that they also compose messages for themselves, the interviewees did indicate that writing on the walls helps them manage their grief. Therefore, the potential audiences of messages posted on Facebook memorial group walls include the message author, the deceased, other group members, and lurkers. Because I have thoroughly discussed the deceased as an audience in Chapter Six and provide a model of communication with the deceased as the audience later in this chapter, I turn my focus to discussing the latter audiences of the self and the group members.
The Self as an Audience

The first audience of messages posted on the walls is comprised of the messages’ authors. I consider them an audience because they are helped by the act of posting messages in the Facebook memorial groups. In a sense, they post the messages for themselves as they struggle to manage their grief. The interviewees indicated that writing on the group walls did help them by making them feel more “normal,” thus aiding in their grief work. In her interview, Beth claimed that writing on the walls helped her heal emotionally. Carli wrote on the wall to ease her guilt over not talking to the deceased frequently when she was alive. Because they wrote with the intention of helping themselves (as advocated by Pennebaker, 1997a and Pennebaker et al., 2001), the posters are an audience for their own messages.

Active Group Members as an Audience

Sometimes people wrote messages on the wall that were directly addressed to other group members. However, even when they wrote to the deceased, those writing the messages were generally aware that others can and will read their messages. The interviews revealed that the participants posted messages knowing that other group members would see the posts. In the following post, the writer acknowledged that others have the ability to read a message intended for the deceased:

I really do miss you. I can't believe it has been a year since you left us. It has been the hardest year of my life. I have had a very hard time dealing with your death. I am writing on this to try to get some comfort or maybe just a little peace of mind. I don't care if this is read by everyone I just want you to know that I LOVE YOU so much. I really miss being able to talk to you.
In this example, it appears as though the message author wants others to know that he is struggling to manage his grief. Similarly, one of the interview participants indicated that she sometimes writes to the deceased on the group wall as a way to let others know of her emotional state. The interview participant, Annie, revealed that she posts messages to the deceased as a way to show others that she is still having a hard time with Adam’s death.

As indicated previously, one of the interviewees, Carli, initially said that she does not think about others reading the messages, yet she recognizes that people will read her posts. Perhaps the writers cast the audience as people who overhear a private conversation. The audience then reacts appropriately, in the role in which they are cast by the message’s author (Ong, 1975). Because the audience’s role is not to read the seemingly private messages written to the deceased, they rarely, if ever, discussed the posts written to the deceased. Carli also said that nobody really ever mentions or responds to her postings on the memorial group wall. She explained, “I think that when we post, it’s a very personal and private thing. Which sounds pretty funny because it’s displayed on Facebook, but it’s almost like it’s just a personal message to him, and no one else sees it.” Again, this type of behavior indicated face-saving for other group members as well as people following the proper conduct in that social situation (Goffman, 1955, 1967). Goffman (1967) further explained,

In any society, whenever the physical possibility of spoken interaction arises, it seems that a system of practices, conventions, and procedural rules comes into play which functions as a means of guiding and organizing the flow of messages.

An understanding will prevail as to when and where it will be permissible to
initiate talk among whom, and by means of what topics of conversation. (pp. 33-34)

In line with Goffman’s argument, people reading the posts in Facebook memorial groups appear to recognize an appropriate topic of conversation does not include pointing out that someone wrote to the deceased or that someone is emotionally distraught in this online public place.

While people do not openly discuss specific postings, reading the messages outwardly intended for the deceased can be beneficial for the audience grieving the same loss. Simply reading what others wrote on the walls appeared to provide some support for the bereaved. Some group members commented on how reading the walls helped them in their grieving. One young woman wrote,

I wanna thank all the people who are writing on this wall. Being Ryan’s cousin, I am really affected by his death, and this Memory wall is kind of a comfort, for me. It’s getting harder each day to live without my dearest Ryan. By this wall, we hear about him, about how he was on his every-day life.

People who write on the walls recognize that their postings help the deceased’s family and co-group members. In an interview, one woman said that she wrote on the walls because “...maybe friends and family will read it and feel some comfort in the fact that I think about him all the time too.” She later said that she liked reading others’ postings and realizing that she was not alone in her grief. Other group members noted that reading comments helped them know what they should write or how they should respond to the death. A wall posting supported this sentiment: “I honestly had no idea what to write here, but after reading through all the posts I knew I had to say something.”
Many of the interviewees also indicated that reading others’ comments helped them grieve. They said that the others’ messages made them feel as though they were not alone in their grief. They also explained that reading others’ posts helped them realize that the deceased was not forgotten.

_Lurkers as an Audience_

The public audience also contains publicly silent participants, or lurkers. Lurkers are people who visit and read messages in online forums without leaving any evidence that someone had read the posts (Nonnecke & Preece, 2000). They do not post any messages or leave any other indication that they are present. They do not need to contribute to the discussions, as they are not necessarily in the immediate presence of anyone else. When people are in each other’s immediate presence, people either give or give off expressions (Goffman, 1959, 1967). By posting messages or pictures, group members show that they have an immediate presence and can become engaged in conversations on the group wall. Because the lurkers are not in an immediate presence of others, they are not obligated to be involved in the wall conversations with others because no one is aware that people are _giving off expressions_ (as explained by Goffman, 1959, p. 2). Lurkers can consciously make the decision to post on the walls or to join the group and have their presence become known to other members.

Technically speaking, I, as a researcher, am a lurker. I observed twenty Facebook memorial group walls without any of the group members knowing that I was there. In some cases, lurkers are not as well intentioned as researchers or others who lurk to get a better understanding of something without feeling the pressure to participate in the
discussion. Burrows, Nettleton, Pleece, Loader, and Muncer (2000) contended that some lurkers visit online forums to read about other people’s misfortunes. They said,

For some of these lurkers the information, advice and support being given may well offer positive benefit. However, there is also the possibility that publically accessible systems of wired welfare, with their multitude of daily narratives and hopes and despair are being treated as a form of voyeuristic entertainment and as such are simply yet another expression of the depressing Oprahfication (or voyeurism) of popular culture. [italics in original] (p. 118)

The lurkers are not “legitimate participants” (as discussed by Goffman, 1967) because the lurkers did not formally participate in the group. Because of these individuals’ lack of participation, the people who wrote on the walls often chose to act as if the illegitimate participants could not see the messages posted. Aside from hearing from others that people often read the memorial group walls without joining the groups or posting messages (and engaging in this activity myself), I have no empirical evidence that lurkers visited the groups, which is appropriate, considering the definition of a lurker.

Essentially, posts on Facebook memorial group walls that are intended for the deceased have multiple audiences consisting of the deceased, the message author, and Facebook members. The various audiences create an interesting combination that results in messages not being exclusively private nor purely public. Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti (1998) argued that sites of public tragedy and resultant impromptu memorials indicate that the boundary between public and private grief has become blurred. I contend that the same argument can be made about virtual memorials. People write private
messages to the deceased and for themselves, yet the group members know that the Facebook public can also view these messages.

Transcorporeal Communication

In addition to presenting evidence of people writing to multiple audiences, the present study also empirically illustrates a type of communication that has not yet been closely examined by communication scholars. The communication that occurs between the living and the deceased is a unique type of communication, which has previously gone unstudied. Through a grounded theory investigation of Facebook memorial group walls and interviews with group members, I have observed that people write to the deceased as if the deceased could see the message and possibly respond. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, communication scholars have focused primarily on the models of communication that disregards situations in which there is absolutely no opportunity for receiver feedback, yet a distinct intended receiver exists. I focus my efforts on re-examining this type of communication and discovering its functions for those who are grieving.

As stated in Chapter One, the communication on the Facebook memorial walls is not represented in current conceptualizations of communication models. Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) linear model does not necessarily provide a good fit for explaining the communication present on Facebook memorial group walls. Shannon and Weaver’s model includes a receiver, a person to whom the message is delivered. This receiver’s responsibility is to receive the message sent by the sender. When the receiver is deceased, as is the case on Facebook memorial groups, we cannot be sure that the deceased, in fact,
received the message. This model also implies that only people with physical presences serve as the intended recipients.

The interactive communication model, posited by Schramm (1954) includes the component of receiver feedback. While feedback is included in TcC, it does not function in the same way as it does in the interactive model. In the interactive model, both the sender and receiver encode and decode messages simultaneously. In TcC, the receiver (the deceased) does not decode or encode messages.

The transactional communication model appears to be a better fit for describing TcC, but it does not account for all TcC components. This is not surprising, as transactional models permeate interpersonal communication scholarship. Transactional models form the basis from which communication theories such as expectancy violation theory, social penetration theory, and symbolic interactionism derive. Specifically, Mead’s (1934) symbolic interactionism can help explain aspects of TcC.

Symbolic interactionism describes communication as an interactive process oriented toward a person who is co-present in the situation (Mead, 1934). One of symbolic interactionism’s main premises is that “The meaning of such things [individual encounters in daily life] is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows” (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). As people interact with others, they gain meaning from the interaction. While symbolic interactionism does help describe TcC, it does not adequately account for communication with someone who is incapable of interacting. The deceased have no physical presence, yet they do appear to affect the meanings derived from interaction between Facebook memorial group members and the deceased’s online presence. It seems that people orient their communication and
meaning-making toward the online presence of the deceased. In this sense, TcC appears to offer an extension of symbolic interactionism, accounting for interactions between one person who has a physical presence and another person who no longer has a physical presence. Through self-determined feedback based on how they think the deceased would respond in particular situations, the living interact with the deceased’s online social presence and create meaning with that presence.

When utilizing transcorporeal communication to maintain bonds with the deceased, the individual essentially communicates with the deceased as if the dead person could respond. Since a response from the deceased is impossible, the communication is neither linear nor interactive communication. At the same time, because the individual is sending a message to an intended receiver other than him or herself, the communication is not intrapersonal communication (as described by Barker & Wiseman, 1966). The communication is similar to that described by symbolic interactionism, but it is not identical. Instead, the communication represents a type of communication that I term as transcorporeal communication (TcC). First, I present TcC as it functions on the Facebook memorial group walls. Then, I explain the fundamental model of TcC and provide examples of situations in which people would utilize TcC.

Transcorporeal Communication on Facebook Memorial Group Walls

I first posit my concept of TcC as it appeared in the posts on Facebook memorial group walls, as conduct in situations and in places are based on the occasion in which the communication occurs (Goffman, 1963). As a result, it is important to examine TcC as it functioned under the conditions of grief and computer-mediation. The communication within the social situation that existed in the Facebook memorial group walls includes the
components of the deceased’s online presence, the inner-representation of the deceased (the intended receiver), and self-established feedback. Within the social situation, people utilize TcC to maintain relational continuity with their deceased loved ones. Figure 3 serves to illustrate my conceptualization of TcC as it functioned on the Facebook memorial group walls.

Figure 3. Transcorporeal communication on Facebook memorial group walls.

The right side of the model in Figure 3 shows the receiver as the inner representation of the deceased. The receiver is who the sender visualizes when he or she generates a message and sends it. The sender sends the message using online means to the representation of the deceased. The sender then orients him or herself to the deceased and considers his or her message as he or she believes the deceased would consider it. Essentially, the sender provides feedback to him or herself based on what he or she believes that the receiver (the deceased) would have said. Again, this speaks to Sigman’s
(1991) idea that people continue to orient themselves to the other party in the relationship, even in the other party’s absence.

*The Deceased’s Presence as the Intended Receiver*

As with any message, the intended recipient is a vital component of any communication. Bakhtin (1986) considers addressivity, or turning to an audience, as “a constitutive feature of the utterance; without it the utterance does not and cannot exist” (p. 99). On Facebook memorial group walls, people intended their messages for the deceased, for other group members, or for both. When presenting components of TcC as it applies to Facebook memorial group postings, I utilize and refer to the messages including the deceased as the intended receiver. Much of this discussion involves focusing on how people conceive of the deceased’s presence, as it is this visualization that serves as the intended receiver of messages in TcC.

According to Leder (1990), death possesses the ability to sever or transform all relations. When a friend dies, one’s relationship with him or her undoubtedly changes. The living can no longer physically engage in dialogue with the deceased. Additionally, from the point of view of the deceased, the existence of self is threatened. The living then perceive the loss of another’s self through death. It is up to the living to continue the relationship with the deceased. On Facebook walls, the living talk to the deceased as if the deceased could answer back. In essence, the deceased maintain a presence online. The living sense this presence and converse with the dead as if they were physically present. In her interview, Carli indicated that she felt as though her deceased friend could somehow see the messages posted on Facebook. Beth also said that she sensed that her deceased friend could also read messages posted on the group wall.
As I discussed in Chapter Two, the deceased continue to have a presence in the lives of those who loved the deceased. Mead (1934) maintained that people require validation of the world that they perceive. This validation requires continuous interaction or dialogue with others who are a major part of the survivor’s socially constructed world (Berger & Kellner, 1964). By writing to the deceased online, people attempt to obtain that validation. Essentially, the deceased’s continued presence, even if it only exists online, makes the survivors’ worlds more “normal” once again. This human need to continue validation of self and the world around him or her leads people to engage in a distinctive form of communication with the deceased.

According to the interviews, communication with one’s friend was a “normal” part of the grieving individuals’ lives. They attempted to maintain the same level of communication with the deceased after the death as well. They communicated on Facebook memorial walls, by visiting the cemetery, and through prayer. As previously discussed, Sigman (1991) argued that “social relationships do not necessarily cease to exist when the members cease being in each other’s physical and interactional co-presence” (p. 109). Many people continue to engage in meaningful social relationships with their deceased loved one. Incorporating the dead into the social world represents a belief in life beyond embodiment, while still maintaining fairly clear boundaries between the living and the deceased (Hallam et al., 1999). Many studies have uncovered the fact that many people perceive the deceased’s presence and consider conversations with the deceased to be significant (Glick et al., 1974; Klass & Walter, 2001; Parkes, 1970b; Rees, 1971; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993).
In previous studies, people have indicated that they “feel” the deceased or “just know” that the deceased is present (Hallam et al., 1999). The presence of an individual also depends on how one aligns him or herself toward others. Merleau-Ponty (1974) maintained that the “here” of the body refers to how the body is oriented toward it tasks, not of the physical location of the body. Giddens (1984) explained further, “The social characteristics of co-presence are anchored in the spatiality of the body, in orientation to others and to the experiencing self” (p. 64). I argue that characteristics of co-presence are not necessarily linked to a physical co-presence. Rather, the presence hinges on how a person acts and behaves in relation to others. Giddens (1984) introduced the idea of human action occurring as a durée, a continuous flow of conduct. The flow of everyday life occurs as intentional action. This continuous flow of conduct persists even after a person has died. People in the deceased’s social circle continue to live their lives, often conducting themselves as if the deceased was still alive. This might explain why people might feel as though their deceased loved ones are present in an online space and can receive messages. Grieving people continue to function as if the deceased was still alive. This functioning includes continuing to think about the deceased and write to the deceased online. To these people, the deceased still maintains an online presence (Markham, 1998). The deceased continues to exist in spirit and virtually (online) (Hallam et al., 1999; Markham, 1998).

Telecommunications media (including computer-mediated communication) permit relational co-presence (Sigman, 1991). Scarry (1985) claimed, “Through tools and acts of making, human beings become implicated in each other’s sentience” (p. 176). The Internet aids in this sentience. Although one member of a TcC conversation on Facebook
memorial group walls is deceased, his or her presence still exists. It is with this presence that the grieving individuals interact and communicate. Attig (2000) explained,

[The deceased] are nevertheless present in our lives, as themselves, as long as we remember them. They remain the same persons who once lived their lives with us….Their remembered presence is as real as their presence in our hearts and lives when they were alive and merely separated from us….memory substitutes for perception as the primary medium through which we welcome their presence. (p. 154)

People write on the Facebook walls as if they are in the presence of the deceased. They communicate with the representation of other humans whose presence is manifested in the imagination of the bereaved. Steuer (1992) defined presence as “the extent to which one feels present in the mediated environment, rather than in the immediate physical environment” (p. 76). Lee (2004) introduced the idea of people having a valid connection with the actual object that the mediated object represents. In the case of Facebook walls, grieving individuals attempt to maintain a connection with the deceased individual as the deceased appears to be present on Facebook walls. Lee termed this type of virtual objects “para-authentic.” The physical experience becomes virtual “when the act of experiencing actual physical objects is mediated by technology or when the experienced physical objects are artificially created by technology” (Lee, 2004, p. 39).

One’s imagination, or visualization of the deceased friend, helps to stimulate sensory cues and create a genuine awareness of the imagined object. I argue that when people write on the walls, they feel present in a virtual space online with their deceased friends. Markham (1998) indicated in her study that people writing to the deceased often
visualized the Other’s physical self. In the present study, interviews with people who regularly write to the deceased online revealed that many of the interviewees also imagined the deceased reading and responding to the living’s messages. When posting messages on Cole’s memorial group wall, Carli mentioned that she pictures Cole in her mind. She explained, “When I’m writing, I visualize a verbal conversation with him in my mind.” Deidre described how she imagines Danielle when writing to Danielle: “I see her as she was when she passed. Her long brown curly hair is always pulled out of her face and we usually have soccer gear on.” By engaging in the behavior of imagining the deceased as one writes to him or her, the bereaved people often fail to perceive or to acknowledge the medium they are using to communicate and maintain relationships with the deceased. Instead, they envision that they are in the physical presence of their friends, conversing with them.

The virtual social experience operates in a manner similar to the virtual physical experience as described by Lee (2004). The social experience also becomes a virtual experience when people experience the presence of others through a mediated means or when technology artificially creates other people. When people visualize their deceased friends as a partner in a conversation, the imagined form of the deceased is of inferior quality as compared to the deceased friend’s physical presence; however, Scarry (1985) argued that an imagination-simulated friend is better than no friend at all. These imagination-simulated friends are often referred to as inner representations of the deceased. I argue that one’s inner representation of the deceased serves as the sender’s intended receiver. This imagined presence is closely tied to the deceased’s social presence and role as an intended receiver.
As mentioned earlier, the audience, or intended receiver, serves as an important element in the model of TcC. People often create “inner representations” of the deceased when struggling to maintain a relationship with them following the loved one’s death. As a result, the deceased’s presence often continues in a psychological sense as well as in a social sense, as the deceased continue to exercise agency within the living’s existence (Marwit & Klass, 1994-1995). Sensing a presence, considering the deceased to have a continuing influence on one’s life, or purposefully incorporating the deceased’s characteristics or morals into the self indicate interaction with one’s inner representation of a deceased loved one (Fairbairn, 1952; Marwit & Klass, 1994-1995). Bereaved individuals often incorporate the deceased into their sense of self (Howarth, 2000). Fairbairn (1952) first described the “inner representation” as aspects of the self that are identified with the deceased, memories or characteristics of the deceased, and emotional conditions that are connected with memories of the deceased.

Grieving people readily accept the idea of an inner representation of the deceased. The inner representations offer guidance, are role models, help clarify values, and exist in memories (Klass, 1993; Marwit & Klass, 1994-1995). The concept of inner representations of the deceased comprises a key component of my model of transcorporeal communication, as the inner representations are the intended recipients of the message. As previously discussed, the living often integrate the deceased into their life’s narrative to regain an understanding of their identities as they exist without the physical presence of the deceased (Marwit & Klass, 1994-1995). The living accomplish this by creating an inner representation of the deceased and continuing communication with the deceased as a way to cope with the death of their friends and family members.
Because no physical body exists, the sender must send the message to the imagined presence of the deceased.

Ong (1975) argued that when writing messages, people fictionalize or envision the person to whom they initially intend to read the message. Schwab (2004) stated, “As we visualize [the deceased], we may converse with, write to, and sometimes even ask them for guidance, consultation, and protection” (p. 28). While members recognize that others might read the messages, the messages were primarily intended for the deceased. When writing messages on the walls, the posters appeared to be visualizing the deceased reading the posting. One interviewee indicated that she often imagined the deceased reading her messages. The senders then give themselves feedback based on what they think their deceased friend would say to the posting.

*Self-Determined Feedback*

Transcorporeal communication looks similar to Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) early, linear model of communication where communication flows in only one direction, from the sender to the intended receiver. The main difference between TcC and Shannon and Weaver’s concept is that the receiver in the transcorporeal communication model does not have a physical body or the ability to reconstruct the message from the signal, as described by Shannon and Weaver. In the case of TcC, there is no proof that the receiver (the deceased) receives and decodes the message. TcC also differs from the interactive communication model (Schramm, 1954), as the receiver does not have any possibility of providing feedback. The message sender does recognize the intended receiver’s limitation in this area.
The interviewees pointed out that they generally talk to the deceased as they did before the death, but they no longer get a physical response. In her interview, Beth described her communication with the deceased as being very similar to the communication before her friend died. She identified the main difference as the fact that she no longer gets a response from her friend. Although the sender recognizes that the intended receiver will not respond, the he or she chooses to encode a message and transmit it to the receiver. Deidre, another interviewee, explained that while her communication with the deceased has changed after Danielle’s death because she no longer receives verbal feedback from her, Deidre can still imagine how Danielle would reply to a message. She explained, “Of course there’s a lack of verbal response, but in ways, I know how she would respond. She manages to influence my decisions still.” Knowing how the deceased would respond is not atypical. The deceased continue to be a factor in the lives of the living, as people often turn to the dead for guidance in specific situations (Klass & Walter, 2001; Marwit & Klass, 1995).

The senders appeared to be sending their messages to what they visualize as the deceased’s self. This visualization transpires as the inner representation of the deceased. The sender then provides feedback to him or herself based on how the deceased would respond, akin to Marwit and Klass’ (1994-1995) and Attig’s (1996) findings. Because the deceased remain an important part of individuals’ lives, the individuals often engage in an internal dialogue with the inner representation of the deceased when making important decisions (Attig, 1996). Carli described this dialogue: “As I’m typing, it’s like I’m speaking, and I see him responding just as he always would. I always imagine a response. It’s always something he would/used to say. Typically some funny remark.”
Carli also indicated that she talks to Cole verbally and asks him for help with a tough situation. As a result, and in line with Marwit and Klass’ (1994-1995) argument, the deceased continue to act as role models and offer guidance to the living. We interact with others in a way to live by moral principles. Some choose to live their lives as a way to perform a duty for the dead.

Because people often believe that they will meet their deceased friend later in time (as indicated in Chapter Five), thoughts of reconnecting with the deceased can affect how they behave and interact with others (Werner & Haggard, 1985). People sometimes carry on in their lives as they think the deceased would want them to do. They also consult the dead and sometimes imagine what the dead would have recommended as a course of action in certain circumstances (Marwit & Klass, 1994-1995). The living “recall” the deceased, to use Giddens’ (1984) term. Giddens defined recalling as “the means of recapitulating past experiences in such a way as to focus them upon the continuity of action” (1984, p. 49). The living recall the deceased by focusing on their memory and talking to them as if they are a part of a person’s life as it continues after the death of a friend. Continuing with the idea of the internal representation of the deceased, the sender also provides feedback to him or herself based on how he or she believes the deceased would have responded. As evident, the deceased continue to have an influence on the life of others, signifying interaction with the inner representation of the deceased (Attig, 1996; Fairbairn, 1952; Marwit & Klass, 1994-1995).

Communication with the dead is common, as it underlines the idea that social interaction does not end simply because someone is not physically present (Mitchell, 2007; Sigman, 1991). In the case of communicating with the deceased to continue bonds
with them, no material or physical interaction transpires. Maintaining bonds with the dead leads people to utilize a unique form of communication, TcC, with the deceased in order to uphold the relationship. The wall analyses and interviews presented evidence of people utilizing TcC to accomplish relational continuity with a loved one following the loved one’s death.

**Relational Continuity**

I argue that the idea of a person continuing a relationship with someone who is deceased serves as the foundation of TcC as it functions in Facebook memorial groups. People need to believe that a relationship still exists in order to continue orienting themselves toward it and engaging in communication with the deceased as a way to cope. People often imagine a continued social relationship with the deceased (Hallam et al., 1999). Simpson (1998) explained, “The imagined world itself is populated with characters ‘felt to be there’ which continually splice into the real world” (p. 129). Giddens (1984) further explicated, “Relations with those who are physically absent, as I have said, involve social mechanisms distinct from what is involved in contexts of co-presence” (p. 37). In the domain of TcC, social mechanisms include using one’s imagination to visualize the receiver.

When the living continue to communicate their feelings to their deceased loved ones, they exhibit signs of attempting to maintain the relationship between them and their now deceased friend. The results of my pilot study present a distinctive view of relational continuity, which I examined further with a second analysis of memorial group walls and interviews with active group participants. As a result of my analysis of Facebook memorial group walls and interviews with group members, it appeared that individuals
posted messages to the deceased on the groups as an attempt to maintain relational continuity. This follows Sigman’s (1991) argument in that relationships can be continuous despite absences of physical and interactional co-presence. The relationship only ceases to exist when two people stop communicating and fail to anticipate future interaction.

_Effect of Multiple Audiences on TcC_

The presence of multiple audiences in the Facebook memorial groups can affect the TcC that transpires on the walls. Because people often write to the deceased while still keeping the other audiences in mind, the message can be influenced. Additionally, as described in Chapter One, group members can upload pictures and videos depicting the deceased in various ways. These visual representations potentially shape how people generate and visualize their inner representation of the deceased, which can, in turn, shape the self-determined feedback.

While the idea of talking to deceased individuals may appear to be rare, it is actually quite common. This type of communication demands extensive consideration and development. Concepts of relational continuity, presence, and inner representations of the deceased comprise the concept of TcC. Transcorporeal communication is clearly an area of communication that needs further exploration.

_A Model of Transcorporeal Communication_

The Facebook postings directed to the deceased serve as incredible exemplars of transcorporeal communication; however, talking to deceased individuals is just one way in which people engage in TcC. The goal of grounded theory methods is to “construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). The data should serve
as the newly developed theory’s foundation. Based on the exploration of Facebook memorial group walls and the messages posted to deceased people, a simple model of TcC can be put forth. In this section, I discuss my proposed model of transcorporeal communication and its possible applications. I present a visual representation of the TcC model in Figure 4.

![Diagram of the Model of Transcorporeal Communication](image)

*Figure 4. Model of transcorporeal communication.*

The fundamental model of TcC includes components of a sender, receiver, a message (delivered in any one of various available channels), and feedback provided to the sender based on what the sender believes the receiver would say. In this type of communication, the receiver does not actually physically receive the message sent by the sender. Rather, the sender creates an inner representation of the absent receiver (dead or alive) and intends his or her messages to go to that inner representation, not necessarily to the actual person. The presence of multiple audiences can affect TcC, as mentioned in my
discussion of TcC on Facebook memorial group walls. As TcC becomes a more private affair (e.g., widows speaking to their deceased spouses while alone), the presence of multiple audiences has a diminishing impact on TcC.

While written messages are present in TcC on Facebook, it is not a necessary component of TcC. Messages can be sent using any channel, including writing, talking, or typing. Then, the senders orient themselves to the inner representation and give themselves feedback based on what they think the intended receiver would say. This type of communication potentially occurs in many situations other than just on Facebook memorial group walls.

Potential Applications

As indicated earlier, people utilize TcC in a variety of situations. One potential use of TcC includes practicing what one might say to another person in particular situations. For example, one might rehearse what he or she will say to a teacher regarding a low grade. In this situation, the student might think about what he or she will say, the teacher’s reaction, and responses to what the teacher said. Essentially, the sender has a dialogue with an imagined recipient, and the interaction is similar to the concept of imagined interactions (II) (Honeycutt, Zagacki, & Edwards, 1989). Imagined interactions are “attempts to simulate real-life conversations with significant others” (Honeycutt et al., 1989, p. 168). More specifically, these are the interactions that people expect to have, as opposed to conversations that involve highly improbable encounters.

IIIs also function in several ways that coincide with concepts of TcC. First, IIIs often function to keep a relationship alive. Honeycutt (1995) argued, “IIIs can psychologically maintain relationships by concentrating thought on relational scenes and
partners” (p. 143). Additionally, IIs include a visualized person as the recipient of the message. The recipient does not actually receive the message in IIs, just as is the case in TcC. Just as people in long-distance relationships use IIs to maintain relationships (Allen, 1990; Honeycutt, 2003), a person separated from his or her friend due to death can also utilize IIs to continue relationships with the deceased. Within the IIs, the sender uses TcC to maintain the relationship.

Although my research did not initially set out to advance the research of Imagined Interactions, it appears that my concept of TcC, as it inductively derived from examining Facebook walls, responds to the call for further research (Honeycutt, 2003, p. 112). Honeycutt questioned if IIs could be used to maintain relationships with deceased individuals and indicated that further research was needed to answer his question.

It is important to note that not all interactions that utilize TcC are IIs. The main difference between TcC and IIs is that the initial message produced in TcC can be in writing (such as Facebook wall postings) instead of being kept exclusively to oneself (in the imagination). TcC moves beyond IIs. The messages in TcC can be externalized, or physically produced (in written or spoken language), whereas the messages in IIs are all internalized. Potentially, TcC is the communication utilized during IIs, but TcC is not exclusive to that context.

Summary

The messages on Facebook memorial group walls were posted in a forum comprised of more than one audience. People posted messages to the deceased, but the messages were public and a wide audience could view them. As a result, Facebook memorial groups have multiple audiences, consisting of the deceased and an extensive
public. Because the audience serves as an important element of communication, it was important to identify the various publics.

The communication visibly directed to the deceased appeared to be distinctive and different from traditional transactional communication. Although multiple audiences exist for messages posted publicly, I focused on the apparent pattern of communication that appeared as an individual wrote messages to the deceased. This pattern was unlike other types of communication previously examined by other communication scholars. TcC contains the components of a sender, a message, an inner representation of the receiver, and self-feedback based on what the sender thinks the receiver might say. TcC is likely employed in a variety of situations, including imagined interactions (IIIs).
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

In Chapter One, I introduced the idea of grieving in an online setting, specifically, by writing on Facebook memorial group walls. Chapter Two reviewed scholarly literature related to grief and grieving, coping behaviors, online memorials, and maintaining interpersonal relationships with the deceased. In Chapter Three, I presented my pilot study, which resulted in the identification of 10 message themes and 3 communicative functions present on Facebook memorial group walls. Chapter Four described the methods I used to explore the Facebook group walls postings further. I utilized grounded theory methods as well as asynchronous, online interviews.

In Chapter Five, I provided an analysis of additional Facebook memorial group walls to test the initial themes and functions discerned in the pilot study. The analysis included an examination of the communication to the deceased, to other group members, and from strangers. Chapter Six was an analysis of interviews with five active members of Facebook memorial group walls. The interviewees provided information about their relationships and communication with their deceased loved ones before and after the death of their friends. In Chapter Seven, I discussed the overarching findings that stemmed from the wall analysis and interviews. I argued that people writing on the walls did so with multiple audiences in mind. I also posited my conceptualization of TcC, a model of communication that accounts for an intended receiver that has no possibility of providing feedback.

In this concluding chapter of the dissertation, I summarize the findings of my explorations of the messages on Facebook memorial group walls. First, I revisit the research questions posed at the beginning of the study, providing responses to the
questions as unearth through Facebook memorial group wall analyses and interviews with people who post on the group walls. Second, I discuss implications of the findings for griefwork and for the communication field. Next, I identify limitations of this study. Finally, I offer directions for future research.

Conclusions

This dissertation aimed to explore the communication present on Facebook memorial group walls. Specifically, I posed three research questions to focus my inductive investigation of the messages. These research questions were:

RQ₁: What characterizes the messages posted on the Facebook memorial group walls?

RQ₁ₐ: What is the relationship between authors of the wall messages and the intended message recipient?

RQ₁₉: Who are the messages’ intended recipients?

RQ₁₃: What topics are discussed on the walls?

RQ₁₄: What functions do the messages appear to serve?

RQ₂: How do people describe their own participation in the Facebook memorial groups? That is, what meanings do people attribute to their participation in the Facebook memorial group?

RQ₃: What characterizes transcorporeal communication?

To answer these questions, I first conducted a pilot study where I, using grounded theory methods, simply examined the messages on Facebook memorial group walls that were directed to the deceased. This analysis resulted in the identification of 10 message themes and 3 communicative functions. Then, I examined another set of Facebook
memorial group walls to challenge and test the initial findings from the pilot study. In addition to verifying findings by adding, combining, and modifying themes, I also identified three new themes. Finally, I conducted online, asynchronous interviews with five individuals who identified as writing on group walls regularly.

Discussion of Research Question One

The first research question asked about the general characteristics of messages posted on Facebook memorial group walls. To answer this question, I first identified 10 Facebook memorial groups. Then, using methods of grounded theory, including open-coding and constant comparison, I analyzed the discourse present on the group walls. I identified 10 message themes and 3 communicative functions present in the wall postings. The 10 themes identified in the pilot study were Shock, Technology-Related References, Original and Non-Original Prose, Spirituality, Lamentations and Questions, Phatic Communication, Memories, Continued Presence and Reminders of Past Presence, Updates, and Emotional Rubbernecking.

I then took an additional measure to validate the initial findings. I identified an additional set of 10 Facebook memorial groups. I compared the message themes and functions to the initial set of themes and functions to test the initial findings. My second analysis resulted in modifications to initial themes and the creation of additional themes. The revised list of themes included Shock, Technology-Related References, Original and Non-Original Prose, Spirituality, Lamentations and Questions, Phatic Communication, Memories, Continued Presence and Reminders of Past Presence, Updates, and the new themes of Appreciation, Promises and Requests, and Eventual Reunion.
In addition to examining the communication intended for the deceased, I also identified communication with other group members as intended recipients of messages. People wrote to other group members for social support and when seeking or giving information. Analysis of messages intended for other group members resulted in the recognition of task and relational messages as well as identity statements. Additionally, people who did not know the deceased (the Emotional Rubberneckers), wrote on the walls as well. When exploring the messages posted by people who did not know the deceased, I discovered that different levels of Rubberneckers existed and people seemed to Rubberneck for various reasons. Generally, The Rubberneckers identified with some aspect of the deceased (e.g., age, cause of death, some hometown). The Rubberneckers appeared to want to identify with the other group members’ grief, while remaining emotionally distant from the tragedy.

Because of the various people writing on the walls and the apparent intended receivers (the deceased, the self, and other Facebook members), the posts on the walls served various functions. The overarching functions or objectives for writing on the memorial group walls included grieving, maintaining relational continuity, giving or receiving social support, and Rubbernecking.

Discussion of Research Question Two

Research Question Two solicited information regarding people’s participation in Facebook memorial groups. I conducted online, asynchronous interviews with five people who identified themselves as writing regularly on Facebook memorial group walls. I inquired about the interviewees’ relationships and communication with the deceased before and after the loved one died. I discovered that the individuals’
relationships with the deceased after the death remained remarkably similar to the relationships with the deceased before the death. People continued to maintain an image of the deceased as he or she perceived them before the death.

The amount of communication and messages from the living to the deceased also appeared to remain the same post-death. If people communicated frequently with the deceased before the death, they continued to send messages to the deceased frequently after the death. Likewise, if someone did not talk with the deceased regularly before the death, the person did not post messages to the deceased frequently after the death.

When posting messages to the deceased, people recognized that individuals other than the deceased could, and probably would, read the messages. This signified the concept that people wrote messages with a multiple audiences in mind. When composing the messages, they thought of both the deceased and other Facebook members as the audiences. Although they primarily meant the messages for the deceased, they also knew that the messages could have value for others who read them. Additionally, the interviewees indicated that writing on the walls helped them handle their grief, resulting in the writers as their own audience as well.

I also asked about the communicative structure of the posts themselves. In doing this, I identified various components of transcorporeal communication, including the inner representation of the deceased as the intended receiver and self-determined feedback, which aided in responding to Research Question Three.

Discussion of Research Question Three

Responses to the first two research questions helped answer the third research question, which inquired about characteristics of transcorporeal communication, as it
functioned on Facebook memorial group walls. The presence of TcC was first recognized in this dissertation’s pilot study. The subsequent analysis of Facebook memorial group walls and interviews with active group participants further aided in characterizing TcC and developing a model of TcC.

TcC is a type of communication in which the sender has an intended recipient in mind and sends a message to him or her, knowing that this recipient cannot respond. The sender then generates feedback to the initial statement, based on how the sender believes the intended receiver would respond. This type of communication is evident in situations other than the living writing messages to the deceased, most notably in Imagined Interactions. A full discussion of TcC can be found in Chapter Seven.

Implications

The findings of this study indicated that Facebook memorial groups function as a beneficial mechanism to use when coping. The interviews with active Facebook memorial group participants supported this claim. They acknowledged that writing to the deceased and seeing that others were feeling the same emotions were beneficial to them in their grieving process. While they could not pinpoint exactly why this seemed to help them, the participants clearly indicated that they were helped by writing on the group walls.

Facebook groups appear to provide the capabilities for any or all of the four coping behaviors discussed in Chapter Two to transpire. The groups themselves serve as a virtual memorial for the deceased. The other members of the memorial groups act as social support, so the memorial also functions as a support group. Within the groups, grieving people write and talk with others who are in a similar situation, which is another
way to cope with a death. Finally, the walls allow people to direct messages at the deceased, the last means of coping discussed.

The findings of this research also indicate that people who have lost loved ones should be encouraged to join the groups to share their feelings of bereavement with others. Facebook memorial groups provide a place that minimizes the interpersonal risks that are characteristic of face-to-face interactions, so people are able to grieve more openly and honestly (Finn & Lavitt, 1994). It is also beneficial for group members to be able to recognize that others are grieving as well. I recommend that group administrators take advantage of the privacy settings allowed by Facebook. Administrators can choose to establish a by-invitation-only group. With this setting, the administrator approves a person’s membership to the groups before he or she can join and write on the wall. Another setting allows only group members to view the wall. These privacy settings would aid in decreasing interpersonal risks even further and alleviate problems with the Emotional Rubberneckers.

The current study provides a different view of grieving, as people have the opportunity to grieve online rather than in face-to-face settings. As discussed in Chapter Two, particular characteristics of online communication can aid in the grieving process. Lower interpersonal risks, a sense of anonymity, and lowered inhibition can cause people to be more genuine in their grief-related posts online (Finn & Lavitt, 1994; Scott, 2004).

The study also offers another view of relational continuity as first presented by Sigman (1991). Relational continuity does not have to occur just between two living people who are separated by distance. This study revealed that someone who is living can
attempt to maintain relational continuity with someone who has died. Frequently, attempts at relational continuity with the deceased involve communication.

Due to my exploration of Emotional Rubberneckers’ messages, I determined that Emotional Rubbernecking was not necessarily a negative action. Rather, Rubbernecking is a way in which people cope with a death that affected them in some way. Essentially Rubbernecking serves to facilitate the function of communal grieving and should not be condemned.

Finally, my research empirically illustrates a type of communication that has not yet been closely investigated by communication scholars. TcC and its characteristics have previously not been included in our understanding of communication. As I have shown in my discussion of TcC, this kind of communication does exist, and it does appear to function as a beneficial means of grieving. Scholars have focused so much on the traditional transactional model of communication, which does not take into account situations where the receiver has absolutely no opportunity for feedback. TcC is communication with an intended participant, where the sender is aware that the intended participant has no opportunity for feedback. The sender then generates his or her own feedback based on what he or she thinks the receiver would respond. This type of communication was utilized almost exclusively on Facebook memorial group walls when people wrote messages to the deceased. I maintain that we need to focus our scholarly efforts on examining TcC more closely and continuing to discover its benefits or harms, especially for those who are grieving.
Limitations

As discussed in the Chapter Two, Facebook includes aspects that both enable and constrain the communication that transpires on the website. While many of Facebook’s features allow for or promote particular actions, some of Facebook’s features restrict how the medium is used. These limits potentially hamper one’s communication with the deceased or other group members, resulting in limitations of this study.

While the posts do offer a candid view of how people grieve, there is a limitation to the message content in that the deceased are always represented in a positive light. Group members appeared to want the deceased to be remembered as a good person. This was evident in many posts where people said they would remember their friend as a good person instead of remembering the fights they had. They also somewhat censored the stories or memories told on the message boards. One poster demonstrated this when she said, “never forget the hotel..i won’t tell ppl about that cuz that’s kinda embarrassing for you.” While the Internet does allow for inhibition and reduced interpersonal threats (Finn & Lavitt, 1994; Scott, 2004), people are still constrained by social rules (as discussed by Goffman, 1967). Because of this limitation, we do not get to see all uncensored aspects of the grieving process.

Another potential limitation of this study lies in that only women responded to my request for interviews with people who regularly write on Facebook memorial group walls. As a result, the information and analysis garnered from the interviews reflects only one gender’s perspective of communicating on Facebook memorial group walls. Based on my analysis of Facebook memorial group walls, it does not appear that one’s gender...
has an influence on his or her communication in the groups, but further research would help verify this claim.

Finally, the analysis does not necessarily account for lurkers as Rubberneckers, or those who visit the virtual memorials without posting, thus leaving no evidence that they visited the memorials. Because they leave no indication that they visited the group, it is difficult to know how many people read messages intended for the deceased and what they thought of these messages.

Areas of Future Research

While this study provides a thorough explanation of transcorporeal communication, it is merely a starting point. Additional investigation of TcC is necessary. We, communication scholars, need to broaden our perspective of what relational communication is. We must shift our conceptualization of relational communication beyond corporeal communication between two people to include transcorporeal communication. I also advocate further investigation of TcC’s role in IIs to determine how the living imagine their communication with the deceased.

As discussed in Chapter Two and in the limitations section, Facebook enables and constrains the communication that occurs on the website. Because the nature of Facebook permits multiple audiences to view communication in the memorial groups, the audiences can affect the communication within those groups. Future research should investigate how multiple audiences can affect TcC, as well as how the characteristics of the medium affect TcC.

To further my research on the potential benefits and harms of online memorializing, I encourage interviewing more people who have written on other online
sites that memorialize the deceased in some way. These websites can include MySpace profiles, MyDeathSpace profiles, individual Facebook profile walls, other virtual memorial sites, and funeral home guestbooks.

I also propose that CMC garners additional research in terms of how the Internet is used for grieving purposes. Based on my research, Facebook appears to create a safe and socially acceptable place for young adults to grieve. People posted various messages on memorial group walls that related to one of the 10 emergent themes described in this study. The characteristics of computer-mediated communication seem to aid in the grieving process. Virtual memorials allow people to join a small group of others who are also coping with the death of a loved one. As researchers, we need to continue examining the benefits of CMC’s influence on grieving, as well as the idea of transcorporeal communication.

Although I advocate for created “closed” memorial groups on Facebook, outcomes of this are unknown. Closing the groups to outsiders might isolate those who visit the online memorials as a way to grieve but are not yet emotionally strong enough to post messages. Further research on lurkers is needed to determine what role visiting the virtual memorials plays in their grieving process.

Finally, the presence of Emotional Rubbernecks near dramatic situations serves as another point of interest. There appears to be a tension between conflicting emotional needs as the Rubbernecks choose to identify with or to distance themselves from the deceased. I advocate exploring what seems to be a dialectical tension between the Rubbernecks appearing to identify with the deceased while also trying to remain emotionally distant. The concept of the multiple audiences might also affect the
Rubbernecks’ messages, as they might be writing to the deceased as a performance for other Facebook members. Continued grief-related research would benefit from interviews with Emotional Rubbernecks in an attempt to discover why the people Rubberneck.
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Title of Research Proposal  
Reconnecting with the Dead: Examining (Inter)personal Communication as a Way to Reorganize Self

Primary Investigator

Name Jocelyn DeGroot  
Department Communication Studies

Address Lasher Hall 006
(If off-campus, include city, state and zip code)

Email jd884506@ohio.edu  
Phone 740-818-8433

Training Module Completed? X Yes □ No  
(Attach Certificate as Appendix H)  
(http://cscwww.cats.ohiou.edu/research/compliance/citiprogram.html)

Advisor Information (if applicable)

Name Scott Titsworth  
Department Communication Studies

Address Lasher 203

Email titswort@ohio.edu

Training Module Completed? X Yes □ No  
(Attach Certificate as Appendix H)

Anticipated Starting Date August 1, 2007  
Duration ____mos____ 1____ yrs
(Work, including recruitment, cannot begin prior to IRB approval. This date should never precede the submission date)

Funding Status

Is the researcher receiving or applying for external funding? □ Yes X No  
(Note – This refers to funding from entities outside of Ohio University)

If yes, list source

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(NOTE – If an application for funding has been submitted, a FULL copy of the funding application must accompany this form as APPENDIX G)

If yes, describe any consulting or other financial relationships with this sponsor.

Is there a payment of any kind connected with enrollment of participants on this study that will be paid to persons other than the research participants?

☐ Yes       X No
(If yes, describe.)

Review Level

Based on the definition in the guidelines, do you believe your research qualifies for:

X___Exempt Review    Category ______4_________
___Expedited Review   Category_________
____Full Committee Review

Final determination of review level will be determined by Office of Research Compliance in accordance with the categories defined in the Code of Federal Regulations

Prior Approval

If this or a similar protocol been approved by OU IRB or any other, please attach copy of approval and label as Appendix E.

Recruitment/Selection of Subjects

Estimated Number of Human Participants ________________________________

Characteristics of subjects (check as many boxes as appropriate).

☐ Minors   ☐ Physically or Mentally Disabled    ☐ Elementary School Students
☐ Adults    ☐ Legal Incompetency        ☐ Secondary School Students
☐ Prisoners ☐ Pregnant Females        X___University Students
☐ Others (Specify)________________________

Briefly describe the criteria for selection of subjects (inclusion/exclusion). Include such information as age range, health status, etc. Attach additional pages if necessary.

The participants will be registered Facebook users. Due to the nature of Facebook, it is sometimes difficult to discern the demographics of the people leaving the comments that will be analyzed.

How will you identify and recruit prospective participants? If subjects are chosen from records, indicate who gave approval for the use of the records. If records are "private" medical or student records, provide the protocol, consent forms, letters, etc., for securing consent of the subjects for the records. Written documentation for
cooperation/permission from the holder or custodian of the records should be attached. 
(Initial contact of subjects identified through a records search must be made by the 
official holder of the record, i.e. primary physician, therapist, public school official.)

Ten Facebook memorial groups (i.e., webpages) will be identified through various news 
articles noting the existence of said groups. Members of those groups posting on the 
group wall, or message board, will be considered to be participants. These documents 
are publicly available on the world wide web.

Please describe your relationship to the potential participants, i.e. instructor of class, co-
worker, etc. If no relationship, state no relationship.

I have no direct relationship with any of the participants, nor do I intend to join these 
groups.

Attach copies of all recruitment tools (advertisements, posters, etc.) and label as 
APPENDIX B

There are no recruitment tools utilized.

Performance Sites

List all collaborating and performance sites, and provide copy of IRB approval from that 
site and/or letters of cooperation or support.

The research project will take place only on the Facebook Internet site.

Project Description

Please provide a brief summary of this project, using non-technical terms that 
would be understood by a non-scientific reader. Attach an additional page, if 
needed, but please limit this description to no more than one typewritten page.

Facebook memorial groups were created as a means to remember deceased friends and 
relatives. On the message boards within these groups, many group members write 
sentiments of hope, fear, frustration, etc. for public viewing. Nearly all of these 
messages are directed toward the deceased individual. This study will examine the one-
way interpersonal communication between the living and the deceased individuals to 
determine how people communicate with the deceased and what topics are mentioned. 
The wall postings will be analyzed, and emergent themes will be discussed. There will 
be no interaction with the group members, only publicly available documents will be 
examined.

Please describe the specific scientific objectives (aims) of this research and any previous 
relevant research.
While many people sense the dead and perceive their conversations with them to be meaningful (Klass & Walter, 2001), very little communicative research has been conducted on the concept of communication with deceased individuals. Shuchter and Zisook (1993) have studied widows and found that more than one third of the widows and widowers surveyed admitted they regularly talked with their deceased spouse. However, in the case of studying widows, the researcher had to rely on interviews and self-reported information from questionnaires (Shuchter & Zisook, 1993).

The aim of this research is to examine the wall postings of ten Facebook groups to determine if commonalities in topics, attitude, or mood exist and identify those themes. This will greatly aid future research on death, the grief process, and bereavement. It may also open up a new area of communicative study with the concept of one-way interpersonal communication.

Methodology: please describe the procedures (sequentially) that will be performed/followed with human participants.

Ten Facebook memorial groups will be identified from newspaper articles detailing the use of such a group to honor a deceased individual. The public discourse that appears on the walls, or message boards, of these groups will be analyzed. I will examine how the different group members seek to reconnect with the dead in order to come to reorganize their lives and their identities. I will also be examining the form of communication that is used to do this.

Describe any potential risks or discomforts of participation and the steps that will be taken to minimize them.

No risks are foreseen.

Describe the anticipated benefits to the individual participants. If none, state that. (Note that compensation is not a benefit, but should be listed in the compensation section on the next page.)

None

Describe the anticipated benefits to society and/or the scientific community. There must be some benefit to justify the use of human subjects.

Due to the unique opportunity presented by Facebook, communication with deceased people can be observed in an unaffected environment. Statements to the deceased are in an individual’s own words, written at the time he or she wanted to converse with the deceased. This type of permanent, public, and instantaneous documentation is rare. Seldom do researchers have access to people interacting in their own environment (the
online group) without the awareness that a researcher was observing them create a public record of their conversations with their deceased friend.

Additionally, this project will examine a unique form of communication: one-way interpersonal communication. This means that the wall postings to the deceased are not intrapersonal (talking to oneself), yet they are not interpersonal (conversing with another). These messages are situated in the chasm between the two types of communication.

Describe procedures in place to protect confidentiality. Who will have access to raw data? Will raw data be made available to anyone other than the Principal Investigator and immediate study personnel (e.g., school officials, medical personnel)? If yes, who, how, and why? Describe the procedure for sharing data. Describe how the subject will be informed that the data may be shared.

Pseudonyms will be used in place of Facebook members’ real names and in place of the deceased individuals’ names. I will also remove or change any uniquely identifiable information displayed within the postings.

Will participants be: Audiotaped? ☐ Yes  ☑ No

Videotaped? ☐ Yes  ☑ No

If so, describe how/where the tapes will be stored (i.e. locked file cabinet in investigator office), who will have access to them, and at what point they will be destroyed. N/A

Provide details of any compensation (money, course credit, gifts) being offered to participants, including how the compensation will be prorated for participants who discontinue participation prior to completion. N/A

Instruments

List all questionnaires, instruments, standardized tests below, with a brief description, and provide copies of each, labeled as APPENDIX C. N/A

How will the data be analyzed? State the hypothesis and describe how the analysis of the data will test that hypothesis.

There are no hypotheses or research questions because this is a discourse analysis of publicly available texts. This is an inductive study, and the themes will emerge from the
discourse. I will examine each group’s individual themes and then compare those to the themes from the other groups to determine the theme’s universality. The same concept holds true for the assessment of type of communication used (intrapersonal/interpersonal). I will observe the communication displayed on the walls and inductively determine common themes.

**Informed Consent Process**  
Attach copies of all consent documents or text and label as APPENDIX A.

Informed consent is a process, not just a form. Potential participants/representatives must be given the information they need to make an informed decision to participate in this research. How will you provide information/obtain permission?

N/A

How and where will the consent process occur? How will it be structured to enhance independent and thoughtful decision-making? What steps will be taken to avoid coercion or undue influence?

N/A

Will the investigator(s) be obtaining all of the informed consents? □ Yes □ No

If not, identify by name and training who will be describing the research to subjects/representatives and inviting their participation?

N/A

Will all adult participants have the capacity to give informed consent? If not, explain procedures to be followed.

N/A

If any participants will be minors, include procedures/form for parental consent and for the assent from the minor.

N/A

Are you requesting a waiver or alteration of Informed Consent? □ Yes X No

An IRB may approve a consent that does not include, or alters, some or all of the elements of informed consent. Provide justifications below for the waiver.

a. Describe how the proposed research presents no more than minimal risk to participants.

N/A

b. Why will a waiver of informed consent not adversely affect the rights and welfare of participants?
N/A  
c. Why is it impracticable to carry out the research without a waiver or alteration of informed consent?  
N/A  
d. How will pertinent information be provided to participants, if appropriate, at a later date?  
N/A  

Even if waiver of written informed consent is granted, you will likely be required to obtain verbal permission that reflects the elements of informed consent (if appropriate). Please specify below information to be read/given to participants.  
N/A  

Will participants be deceived or incompletely informed regarding any aspect of the study? □ Yes X No  
If so, provide rationale for use of deception.  
N/A  

Attach copies of post-study debriefing information and label as APPENDIX D.  
N/A  

Investigator Assurance  

I certify that the information provided in this outline form is complete and correct.  
I understand that as Principal Investigator, I have ultimate responsibility for the protection of the rights and welfare of human subjects, conduct of the study and the ethical performance of the project.  

I agree to comply with Ohio University policies on research and investigation involving human subjects (O.U. Policy # 19.052), as well as with all applicable federal, state and local laws regarding the protection of human subjects in research, including, but not limited to the following:  

- The project will be performed by qualified personnel, according to the OU approved protocol.  
- No changes will be made in the protocol or consent form until approved by the OU IRB.  
- Legally effective informed consent will be obtained from human subjects if applicable, and documentation of informed consent will be retained, in a secure environment, for three years after termination of the project.  
- Adverse events will be reported to the OU IRB promptly, and no later than within 5 working days of the occurrence.  
- All protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. Research must
stop at the end of that approval period unless the protocol is re-approved for another term.

I further certify that the proposed research is not currently underway and will not begin until approval has been obtained. A signed approval form, on Office of Research Compliance letterhead, communicates IRB approval.

Principal Investigator Signature_________________________ Date _______

Co-Investigator Signature______________________________ Date _______

Faculty Advisor/Sponsor Assurance

By my signature as sponsor on this research application, I certify that the student(s) or guest investigator is knowledgeable about the regulations and policies governing research with human subjects and has sufficient training and experience to conduct this particular study in accord with the approved protocol. In addition:

- I agree to meet with the investigator(s) on a regular basis to monitor study progress.
- Should problems arise during the course of the study, I agree to be available, personally, to supervise the investigator in solving them.
- I assure that the investigator will report significant or untoward adverse events to the IRB in writing promptly, and within 5 working days of the occurrence.
- If I will be unavailable, as when on sabbatical or vacation, I will arrange for an alternate faculty sponsor to assume responsibility during my absence.

I further certify that the proposed research is not currently underway and will not begin until approval has been obtained. A signed approval form, on Office of Research Compliance letterhead, communicates IRB approval.

Advisor/Faculty Sponsor Signature________________________ Date ___

*The faculty advisor/sponsor must be a member of the OU faculty. The faculty member is considered the responsible party for legal and ethical performance of the project.
Title of Research Proposal: Reconnecting with the Dead Via Facebook: Examining Transcorporeal Communication as a Way to Maintain Relationships

Investigator(s) Information

Name: Jocelyn DeGroot  Department: COMS
Address: 006 Lasher Hall
Email: jd884506@ohio.edu  Phone: 740.818.8433
Training Module Completed?  Yes  No

Advisor Information (if applicable)

Name: Laura Black  Department: COMS
Address: 111 Lasher Hall  Phone: 740.593.4960
Email: blackl1@ohio.edu
Training Module Completed?  Yes  No

Anticipated Starting Date: January 20  Duration: 0 mos  1 yrs
(Work, including recruitment, cannot begin prior to IRB approval. This date should never precede the submission date)

Funding Status

Is the researcher receiving or applying for external funding?  No

If yes, list source: N/A

If yes, describe any consulting or other relationships with this sponsor: N/A
Is there a payment of any kind connected with enrollment of participants on this study that will be paid to persons other than the research participants?

☐ Yes  ☑ No

(If yes, describe.)

Review Level

Based on the definition in the guidelines, do you believe your research qualifies for:

☑ Exempt Review  Category  

X Expedited Review  Category 7

☐ Full Committee Review

Recruitment/Selection of Subjects

Maximum Number of Human Participants 10

Characteristics of subjects (check as many boxes as appropriate).

☐ Minors  ☐ Physically or Mentally Disabled  ☐ Elementary School Students

☐ Adults  ☐ Legal Incompetency  ☐ Secondary School Students

☐ Prisoners  ☐ Pregnant Females  ☑ University Students

☐ Others (Specify)______________________

Briefly describe the criteria for selection of subjects (inclusion/exclusion). Include such information as age range, health status, etc. Attach additional pages if necessary.

The participants must be Facebook members who write public comments on Facebook memorial group walls. I require that all interview participants be 18 years of age or older.

How will you identify and recruit prospective participants? If subjects are chosen from records, indicate who gave approval for the use of the records. If records are "private" medical or student records, provide the protocol, consent forms, letters, etc., for securing consent of the subjects for the records. Written documentation for cooperation/permission from the holder or custodian of the records should be attached. (Initial contact of subjects identified through a records search must be made by the official holder of the record, i.e. primary physician, therapist, public school official.)

In order to recruit participants for the in-depth online interviews, I will utilize the snowball method of recruitment. I will locate acquaintances of mine who are members of a Facebook memorial group and ask them to refer me to another active member of a Facebook memorial group. The snowball method “yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141). Because discussing the death of a friend is a sensitive topic that requires a degree of trust between the participants and researcher, the snowball method appears to be most useful.
If the snowball method of recruiting does not yield enough participants, I will post a call for volunteers on a national Communication Studies listserv. Both the snowball method and invitations through listservs have been identified as appropriate and effective means of recruiting participants for online asynchronous interviews (Meho, 2006).

Please describe your relationship to the potential participants, i.e. instructor of class, co-worker, etc. If no relationship, state no relationship.

No relationship

Attach copies of all recruitment tools (advertisements, posters, etc.) and label as APPENDIX B

Performance Sites

List all collaborating and performance sites, and provide copy of IRB approval from that site and/or letters of cooperation or support.

N/A

Project Description

Please provide a brief summary of this project, using non-technical terms that would be understood by a non-scientific reader. Please limit this description to no more than one typewritten page, and provide details in the methodology section.

In a prior study (IRB # 07E161), I examined the communication that occurs on Facebook message boards that are dedicated to memorialize someone who has died. Through my investigation, I have found that people often write messages that are aimed directly at the deceased as if the deceased could respond. With my proposed current study, I seek to interview people who write messages addressed to the deceased in order to further explore this communication and learn what writing on the memorial group walls means to the participants.

Please describe the specific scientific objectives (aims) of this research and any previous relevant research.

Examining how relational continuity appears online should give greater insight as to how people begin to recreate relationships with the deceased and reorganize their identities to include their friend as a deceased member of their reality (Attig, 2001). Based on concepts of relational continuity and attachment (Sigman, 1991; Bowlby, 1969, 1972), I expect that the topics posted to the deceased will be similar to the types of postings we would make to living friends. I argue that we attempt to maintain the relationship with an absent loved one in similar ways, regardless of the permanent or temporary nature of the person’s absence. Further, I seek to identify what people accomplish, cognitively or emotionally, in writing posts to the deceased on the memorial group walls. I want to
discover how people regard their own participation in the groups. Uncovering the meanings that participants give to their communication on the Facebook memorial walls can help us understand their perceptions of why they participate, what they get out of the participation, and whether or not they feel that participation benefits them in some way.

Methodology: please describe the procedures (sequentially) that will be performed/followed with human participants.

After recruiting participants utilizing the previously described snowball method, I will e-mail the participants an invitation to participate in the study and an electronic copy of the consent form. To obtain consent, I will have the participants respond to this invitation by stating that the consent form was read and agreed to (as discussed in Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004).

I will then e-mail the interview questions to the participants. They will type their answers and e-mail them back to me. Follow-up questions will be utilized as necessary to expand on answers or to clarify answers. Following the online asynchronous interviews, I will conduct phone or face-to-face interviews with the same participants. These interviews will be audiotaped with permission. The online interviews and the phone or face-to-face interviews will use the same interview protocol (Found in Appendix C)

Describe any potential risks or discomforts of participation and the steps that will be taken to minimize them.

I anticipate minimal risks, as talking about an emotional issue can be therapeutic. Participants will be informed of this, and also assured that they are free to (a) refuse answering any question and (b) cease participation in the study at any time while completing the interview without penalty. Participants will also be advised that despite the security features of e-mail, I cannot guarantee that their information will not be intercepted by a third party (either purposefully or accidentally). Due to the nature of the topic, participants will also be provided with contact information for counselors, should they need the service.

Describe the anticipated benefits to the individual participants. If none, state that. (Note that compensation is not a benefit, but should be listed in the compensation section on the next page.)

Writing about an emotional experience helps individuals both mentally and physically, as emotional responses to memories become less intense when one constantly writes about or addresses a traumatic event (Pennebaker, 1997a). Communicating about the death is a natural occurrence as we have a fundamental need to express ourselves (Pennebaker, 1997a). People who write about their traumatic incidences experience consistent and significant health improvements (Pennebaker, 1997b). Additionally, disclosing emotional issues results in lower ratings of hopelessness and depression (Segal, Bogaards, Becker, & Chatman, 1999). Rosenblatt (1993) argued that the bereaved turn to others to
understand themselves and their grief. This discourse is important, as making sense of a friend’s death was linked with decreased levels of emotional distress (Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver, 2000).

Describe the anticipated benefits to society and/or the scientific community in lay language. There must be some benefit to justify the use of human subjects.

Exploring how people grieve can help indicate and uncover actions that comprise “healthy griefwork.” Uncovering what constitutes healthy grieving can result in prescriptive recommendations to aid those who are grieving.

Please discuss the confidentiality level for the data collected. For example, indicate whether records will be labeled with the subject’s name, or whether they will be labeled with a code number. If code number used, provide detail about the key that links name and code number (where stored/when destroyed, etc.).

I will take measures to maximize participants’ confidentiality, which includes utilizing pseudonyms and removing personal identifiers before including information in the write-up. Transcripts of the online interviews and face-to-face or telephone interviews in addition to any audio files will be saved in password protected documents. All transcripts will include the use of assigned pseudonyms. A codebook listing the participants and their assigned pseudonyms will be kept in the main investigator’s locked desk.

Audiotapes of the interviews as well as raw data will be kept in the main investigator’s locked desk. These will be destroyed in April, 2010. Participants’ identities in this study will be treated as confidential. The results of the study may be published for scientific purposes but will not state the participants’ names or include any identifiable references.

With whom will identifiable data be shared outside the immediate research team? For each, explain confidentiality measures.

No identifiable information will be shared with people outside of the immediate research team. Pseudonyms will be used in place of Facebook members’ real names and in place of the deceased individuals’ names. I will also remove or change any uniquely identifiable information discussed in the interviews.

Will participants be: Audiotaped? X Yes □ No

Videotaped? □ Yes X No

If so, describe how/where the tapes will be stored (i.e. locked file cabinet in investigator office), who will have access to them, and an estimate of the date they will be destroyed.
The audio recorder with audio files will be stored in a locked desk in the main investigator’s office in Lasher Hall. The audio files will be saved in password protected documents on the main investigator’s computer in Lasher Hall. They will be destroyed one year after the completion of the study, which I anticipate to be in April, 2010.

Will participants receive any compensation (money, course credit, gifts)?
No

If so, please detail amount/session and total compensation possible. Additionally, describe what compensation amount is paid to participants who discontinue participation prior to completion.*

N/A

If University funds are used to compensate participants, minimally, the name and address of participants will need to be provided to the Finance Office at OU. If participants will be paid $100 or more in a calendar year, participant social security numbers must be provided to Finance. The consent form must reflect this.

Instruments

List all questionnaires, instruments, standardized tests below, with a brief description, and provide copies of each, labeled as APPENDIX C.

See APPENDIX for a copy of the interview protocol that will be used. This protocol will be utilized for online interviews as well as the phone or face-to-face interviews.

How will the data be analyzed? If applicable, state the hypothesis and describe how the analysis of the data will test that hypothesis.

Using grounded theory methods, the researcher will analyze the interview data by using the e-mailed responses and transcribing the interviews in an attempt to find central themes. Open coding and axial coding will be used primarily as a means to uncover common topics and issues mentioned.
As this is an inductive study, no hypothesis has been formed.

Informed Consent Process
Are you requesting a waiver or alteration of Informed Consent? ☒ Yes □ No
(If yes, check one, and answer a - e)

☒ Waiver of signature
☐ Deception (incomplete disclosure)
☐ Complete Waiver of consent

a. Provide justification for the waiver.
Because the interviews will initially be conducted online and participants are not likely to reside in the immediate area, an online consent form is essential.

b. Describe how the proposed research presents no more than minimal risk to participants.

Participants will be active members on the memorial group walls, thus they are accustomed to talking about their deceased loved ones in a public forum. Discussing the deceased in a private setting (i.e. one-on-one with the primary investigator) presents no more risk than writing in a public, online medium.

c. Why will a waiver of informed consent not adversely affect the rights and welfare of participants?

Because the participants are able to e-mail their acceptance of the consent form, I see no reason to also require a physical copy of the signed consent form.

d. Why is it impracticable to carry out the research without a waiver or alteration of informed consent?

My only requested modification is to not require a signature, but rather send me an e-mail indicating the participants’ acceptance. This is a more practical method of obtaining consent for an online interview.

e. How will pertinent information be provided to participants, if appropriate, at a later date?

Because I will be e-mailing the participants the initial and follow-up interview questions, I will have their e-mail addresses on hand.

Even if waiver of written informed consent is granted, you will likely be required to obtain verbal permission that reflects the elements of informed consent (if appropriate). Please specify below information to be read/given to participants.

To obtain consent, I will have the participants respond to an e-mailed invitation by stating that the consent form was read and agreed to (as discussed in Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004). I will assure the participants that I will take measures to maximize their confidentiality, which includes utilizing pseudonyms and removing personal identifiers before including information in the write-up. A copy of the consent form is provided in Appendix A.

Attach copies of all consent documents or text and label as APPENDIX A. Please use the template provided at the end of this document.
Informed consent is a process, not just a form. Potential participants/representatives must be given the information they need to make an informed decision to participate in this research. How will you provide information/obtain permission?

Before completing the online survey, participants will be presented with a consent form (see Appendix A) via an e-mail attachment. Participants will reply to the initial e-mail indicating that they agree with the terms and conditions.

How and where will the consent process occur? How will it be structured to enhance independent and thoughtful decision-making? What steps will be taken to avoid coercion or undue influence?

After finding participants, I will e-mail them an invitation to participate in the study as well as an electronic copy of a consent form. To obtain consent, I will have the participants respond to this invitation by stating that the consent form was read and agreed to (as discussed in Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004). Participants will be informed that they are free to (a) refuse answering any question and (b) cease participation in the study at any time while completing the survey without penalty.

Will the investigator(s) be obtaining all of the informed consents? X Yes □ No

If not, identify by name and training who will be describing the research to subjects/representatives and inviting their participation?

Will all adult participants have the capacity to give informed consent? If not, explain procedures to be followed.

Yes

If any participants will be minors, include procedures/form for parental consent and for the assent from the minor.

-no participants will be minors-

Will participants be deceived or incompletely informed regarding any aspect of the study? □ Yes X No

If yes, provide rationale for use of deception.

N/A

If yes, attach copies of post-study debriefing information and label as APPENDIX D. Additionally, complete the questions related to a consent form waiver or alteration on page 9.

N/A
Investigator Assurance

I certify that the information provided in this outline form is complete and correct.

I understand that as Principal Investigator, I have ultimate responsibility for the protection of the rights and welfare of human subjects, conduct of the study and the ethical performance of the project.

I agree to comply with Ohio University policies on research and investigation involving human subjects (O.U. Policy # 19.052), as well as with all applicable federal, state and local laws regarding the protection of human subjects in research, including, but not limited to the following:

- The project will be performed by qualified personnel, according to the OU approved protocol.
- No changes will be made in the protocol or consent form until approved by the OU IRB.
- Legally effective informed consent will be obtained from human subjects if applicable, and documentation of informed consent will be retained, in a secure environment, for three years after termination of the project.
- Adverse events will be reported to the OU IRB promptly, and no later than within 5 working days of the occurrence.
- All protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. Research must stop at the end of that approval period unless the protocol is re-approved for another term.

I further certify that the proposed research is not currently underway and will not begin until approval has been obtained. A signed approval form, on Office of Research Compliance letterhead, communicates IRB approval.

Primary Investigator Signature ___________________________ Date _________

(please print name) ___________________________

Co-Investigator Signature ___________________________ Date ___________

(please print name) ___________________________
Faculty Advisor/Sponsor Assurance

By my signature as sponsor on this research application, I certify that the student(s) or guest investigator is knowledgeable about the regulations and policies governing research with human subjects and has sufficient training and experience to conduct this particular study in accord with the approved protocol. In addition:

- I agree to meet with the investigator(s) on a regular basis to monitor study progress.
- Should problems arise during the course of the study, I agree to be available, personally, to supervise the investigator in solving them.
- I assure that the investigator will report significant or untoward adverse events to the IRB in writing promptly, and within 5 working days of the occurrence.
- If I will be unavailable, as when on sabbatical or vacation, I will arrange for an alternate faculty sponsor to assume responsibility during my absence.

I further certify that the proposed research is not currently underway and will not begin until approval has been obtained. A signed approval form, on Office of Research Compliance letterhead, communicates IRB approval.

Advisor/Faculty Sponsor Signature ________________________ Date ______

(please print name) ____________________________________________

*The faculty advisor/sponsor must be a member of the OU faculty. The faculty member is considered the responsible party for legal and ethical performance of the project.
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT E-MAIL

For my dissertation, I am exploring people’s participation in Facebook memorial groups. The groups I’m looking at are the groups that memorialize deceased friends and family members (For example, "In memory of Sarah" or "RIP Tom"). I’m looking to interview adults who are active members of these groups. Participants for my study should be 18 years of age or older and write on the group walls about once a month.

I will conduct online (e-mail) interviews with participants, possibly resulting in a brief face-to-face or telephone interview following the e-mail interview if the participants are willing. The online interview is a list of 14 questions that participants can answer at their own pace and send back to me. I will be asking participants about their relationship with the deceased before and after the person died, as well as why they write on the group walls. Real names will not be used (you can pick your own fake name), and participants can refuse to answer any questions.

If you think you would want to be involved in the research - and meet the criteria (18+ and write on the walls) - please let me know by e-mailing me at jd884506@ohio.edu so I can send you a consent form and then the interview questions. Also, please pass this e-mail along if you know of anyone else who might be interested in being interviewed for the study.

Thank you
Jocelyn DeGroot
Ohio University
Hello [Name]

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study, “Reconnecting with the Dead Via Facebook: Examining Transcorporeal Communication as a Way to Maintain Relationships.” This study aims to explore people’s participation in Facebook memorial groups. Again, participants in this study should be 18 years of age or older, be a member of at least one Facebook memorial group, and write on a Facebook memorial group wall regularly (approximately once per month). If you do not meet these criteria, please respond to this e-mail, indicating your inability to participate.

Attached is the consent form for those who do meet the aforementioned criteria. The consent form contains detailed information regarding this study’s purpose, potential risks, benefits, and issues regarding confidentiality. To participate in this study, please respond to this e-mail with the following phrase in the body, “I have read and agreed to the information presented in the consent form regarding my participation in “Reconnecting with the Dead Via Facebook: Examining Transcorporeal Communication as a Way to Maintain Relationships.”” Then, type your full name beneath the phrase.

Following receipt of your acceptance of the consent form terms, I will e-mail a list of interview questions to you. Please answer these questions to the best of your ability, sharing stories and examples as applicable. If you do not understand a question, please e-mail me for clarification. Once you have answered the questions, e-mail them to me at jd884506@ohio.edu. Answers in the questions can be in the body of the e-mail or as an attachment. After reading through your answers, I might contact you again via e-mail for follow-up questions. Additionally, I might contact you to see if you would be willing to answer questions face-to-face or via the telephone in a relatively short (30-minute) interview. Your participation is voluntary. You can choose not to answer any of the questions, and you can withdraw from the study at any time.

Thank you once again. I look forward to hearing from you.

Jocelyn DeGroot
Reconnecting with the Dead Via Facebook:
Examining Transcorporeal Communication as a Way to Maintain Relationships
Researcher: Jocelyn M. DeGroot
Ohio University

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to respond to the e-mail to which this form was attached. This will allow your participation in this study. You should print a copy of this document for your records.

EXPLANATION OF STUDY
This study aims to explore participation in Facebook memorial groups through interviews. Essentially, this study seeks to explore the messages posted on Facebook memorial group walls and identify what people accomplish, cognitively or emotionally, by posting to the memorial group walls. I want to discover how people regard their own participation in the groups.

Initially, online interviews will be conducted. Interview questions will be e-mailed to the participants. Participants should type their responses to the questions and return them to the researcher via e-mail. Follow-up questions will be utilized as necessary in order to clarify answers or expand on issues. Following the online interviews, phone or face-to-face interviews will be conducted if the participant is willing. These interviews will last one hour or less, and they will be audiotaped with permission.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
Minimal risks are anticipated, as talking about an emotional issue can be therapeutic. Participants are free to (a) refuse answering any question and (b) cease participation in the study at any time while completing the interview without penalty.

BENEFITS
Writing about an emotional experience often helps individuals both mentally and physically, as emotional responses to memories become less intense when one constantly writes about or addresses a traumatic event. Researchers have discovered that people who write about their traumatic incidences experience consistent and significant health improvements. Additionally, disclosing emotional issues can result in lower ratings of hopelessness and depression.
Additionally, exploring how people grieve can help indicate and uncover actions that comprise “healthy griefwork.” Uncovering what constitutes healthy grieving can result in prescriptive recommendations to aid those who are grieving.

**CONFIDENTIALITY AND RECORDS**
Measures will be taken to maximize participants’ confidentiality, which includes utilizing pseudonyms and removing personal identifiers before including information in the write-up. Transcripts of the online interviews and face-to-face or telephone interviews in addition to any audio files will be saved in password protected documents. Audiotapes of the interviews as well as raw data will be kept in the main investigator’s locked file cabinet. Audio files will be destroyed one year following the completion of the study. Participants’ identities in this study will be treated as confidential. The results of the study may be published for scientific purposes but will not state participants’ names or include any identifiable references. Pseudonyms will be utilized as necessary. Additionally, despite the security features of e-mail, participants cannot be guaranteed that their information will not be intercepted by a third party (either purposefully or accidentally).

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:
* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU;

**CONTACT INFORMATION**
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Jocelyn DeGroot at jd884506@ohio.edu or (740) 593-4837, or you may contact her academic advisor, Dr. Laura Black, at blackl1@ohio.edu or (740)593-4690.

**Should you find it necessary to seek help regarding your grief or psychological health, please contact Tri-County Mental Health, Athens, OH, (740-592-3091); O’Bleness Hospital, Athens, OH, (740-593-5551); or any other licensed professional specializing in grief counseling.**

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

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To indicate your willingness to participate in this study and understanding of the possible risks and benefits, please respond to the e-mail that accompanied this consent form. In your response, you should indicate that you have read the consent form and understand what the project entails.
By responding to the initial e-mail, you are agreeing that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions
- known risks to you have been explained to your satisfaction.
- you understand Ohio University has no policy or plan to pay for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this research protocol
- you are 18 years of age or older
- your participation in this research is given voluntarily
- you may change your mind and stop participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled.
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability, sharing stories or providing examples as applicable.

1. Please describe your relationship with the deceased before he or she died.
2. Please describe your communication with the deceased before he or she died.
3. Please describe your relationship with the deceased now that he or she is dead.
4. Please describe your communication with the deceased now that he or she is dead.
5. How have aspects of your relationship with the deceased changed?
6. What, if anything, has remained the same in your relationship with the deceased?
7. How have aspects of your communication with your friend changed?
8. What, if anything, has remained the same in your communication with the deceased?
9. How often do you write on the Facebook memorial group wall?
10. What is the focus of your posted messages?
11. Why do you write on the wall?
12. When writing messages on the walls, who is your intended recipient of the message?
13. When writing messages on the walls, to what extent do you think of other people who might see your post?
14. What does writing on the group wall mean to you?
15. How old were you when the deceased died?
16. How old was the deceased when he or she died?
17. How old would the deceased be now?
18. Is there anything else you would like to share about the deceased or your communication on the Facebook wall?
Follow-Up Questions

1. How important is it for you to write on the walls as a way to maintain a relationship with the deceased? Is it the only way to talk with him/her or do you do other things to communicate to him/her?

2. When writing to the deceased, do you picture him/her in your mind? Can you describe what you visualize if you do picture him/her in your mind?

3. When you do write to the deceased, do you imagine how he/she would respond? Can you describe how this process occurs?

4. Does anyone else in the Facebook group say anything about your postings to the deceased? If so, what do they say?

5. Does anyone who did not know the deceased post messages? If so, how do you feel about the strangers writing on the wall?