

GRIEVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE: USING FACEBOOK PROFILE PAGES TO MAINTAIN  
RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE DECEASED

by

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B.A., Doane College, 2011

A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Communication Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2013

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## **Abstract**

Advancements in technology, particularly the introduction of online social networking sites, have expanded the modes available when handling the death of a loved one. This study examines how individuals use the Facebook profile pages of deceased persons to cope with loss and maintain relationships with them. An extensive content analysis of Facebook profiles of ten deceased individuals was conducted to investigate what the living discuss in their messages to the deceased in the semi-public setting of a Facebook profile page and if this content changes over the course of time. This analysis revealed that messages to the deceased reflect three themes: 1) processing the death, 2) remembering the deceased, and 3) maintaining the relationship. In addition to these dominant themes, the data also indicated that the content of messages shifted over time. Messages that contained the processing of death remained consistent over time, while posts that reflected remembrance of the deceased decreased, and messages that demonstrated relationship maintenance increased with time. This study utilizes the theoretical frameworks of continuing bonds and social information processing to draw implications of these findings. By examining the content written and how messages change over time, this study provides insight into how people cope with loss and maintain relationships with their deceased loved ones in the digital age.

Key terms: Facebook profile, relationships, deceased, grieving, virtual memorial, social information processing theory, continuing bonds

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## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Dr. Soo-Hye Han for her continued guidance on this thesis. Her support and enthusiasm provided the perfect blend of motivation to keep this project progressing, and her insight and dedication challenged me to think critically throughout the process. In addition, her feedback reminded me that even when there are many, each word matters.

I would also like to thank Dr. Sarah Riforgiate and Dr. Charles Griffin for agreeing to be members of my committee. Their insight challenged me to think outside of the box and kept the reality of this project in check, for which I am incredibly appreciative.

I would also like to thank Dr. William Schenk-Hamlin for his assistance processing the statistics of this thesis. His patience and willingness to help were extremely valued.

Finally, I would like to thank Lucas. His encouragement and belief in me never faded, even when I was discouraged. Words cannot express how grateful I am for his support.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the two individuals who inspired this project. Steven and Cody, you left this earth too soon. May you always rest in peace.

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

you can ask and ask, but no one can really tell you how to deal with loss. i think its because it is such a unique and personal thing, and everyone copes differently. i can try to take the advice from people on how you are supposed to think or feel but nothing really works. losing you was by far the hardest thing ive ever had to go through- even though i had to lose you, i would have rather known and lost you than to have not known you at all. (a message posted on a deceased person's Facebook profile page, friend to friend, 2010)

Within the last decade, advancements in technology have continued to change the way the world operates, from economics and shopping, to expanding global communication. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the evolution of online networking sites contributed to this transformation, provoking an unprecedented shift in the way individuals communicate. In 2002, the release of the first major social networking site (SNS), Friendster, enabled people to form online communities and connect with one another in the virtual world for the purpose of making new friends, introducing old friends, and even finding someone to date (Goble, 2012). In 2003, these sites were altered from connecting friends, to connecting businesspeople, allowing millions of users to network with business professionals on a different SNS, LinkedIn (LinkedIn.com, 2013). While various social networking sites continued to surface, such as MySpace and Flickr, the release of Facebook in 2004 truly capitalized on the social networking medium for personal conversation, thus significantly changing the methods of modern communication (The Social Network, 2012). As a free and accessible site to any person with a valid email address and Internet connection, Facebook has united more than one billion individuals from various backgrounds, networks and locations (Smith, Segall, & Cowley, 2012).



Alongside the site's developments that allowed users to grow virtual crops, raise virtual farms, and take virtual vacations, the world's largest social media network extended another element of reality to the virtual world in 2009: memorialization of the deceased (Kelly, 2009). With this new Facebook feature, bereaved individuals could now use social networking sites as more than a place to communicate with friends, but also as a place to memorialize and maintain relationships with deceased friends. Whereas other social networking sites delete a user's account upon death, Facebook 'memorializes' the deceased by keeping their profile active. Profiles are memorialized when family members or friends notify Facebook of the death (Facebook.com, 2013). With the exception of removing sensitive information and securing passwords, these accounts remain intact, providing mourners with a new discursive space for coping with loss (Kelly, 2009). By writing messages, sharing links, and posting photos, the bereaved can now maintain relationships with the deceased through a tangible outlet. While other online memorials – such as funeral home websites or guest books – enable users to speak *about* the deceased and seek comfort from peers (Barnhill & Owen, 2007), as the post at the beginning of this chapter highlights, the Facebook profile page allows the bereaved to write directly *to* the deceased. Utilizing social networking sites for memorialization has transformed the offline grieving rituals typically practiced in private to a public experience shared by many (Carroll & Landry, 2010).

The versatility of social networking sites allows them to provide a support system for the bereaved of all ages. Specifically, the act of writing either to or about the deceased after death can help the bereaved express emotions or recognize grief (Lattanzi & Hale, 1985). Post-death writings are most useful when they focus on the death and how the bereaved individual is adjusting to that loss (Lichtenthal & Cruess, 2010). Though located in the public setting of the

Internet, social networking sites provide a place for the bereaved to express and document their feelings. Writing as a means of coping was exemplified in the examination of 20-deceased individual's profile pages from anonymous social networking sites, which found that adolescents used these pages to emotionally or cognitively cope with the loss (Williams & Merten, 2009). For instance, adolescents displayed messages indicative of Kübler-Ross's (1969) stages of coping with loss (anger, denial, bargaining, depression and acceptance) alongside other emotions for coping, such as guilt for past deeds and humor. Additionally, these comment posts suggested that SNS were used as a medium to communicate directly with the deceased (Williams & Merten, 2009). This notion of speaking *to* the deceased is indicative of maintaining relationships with those we have lost, rather than letting go of their memory.

The development of online memorials and Facebook profile pages as memorials has particularly attracted younger audiences (Carroll & Landry, 2010). Of the more than one billion global Facebook users (Smith et al., 2012), 29 percent are between the ages of 18 and 25; the highest percentage assigned to any age group (Johnson, 2012). According to a study of 100 students by Carroll and Landry (2010) within this demographic, 60 percent of users had viewed or interacted with a Facebook memorial page. For this demographic, social networking sites are the virtual equivalent of 'hanging out' in the offline world because they are a comfortable and familiar place for expression, conversation, and entertainment (Pennington, in press).

Moreover, for the majority of college students, participation in SNS memorials is not only socially acceptable, but also considered a *normal* coping mechanism, thereby decreasing taboos associated with public expression and bond continuation (Pennington, 2013). Though not all college-aged individuals will publically post on a deceased's profile, and instead, may visit the sites to read the posts and memories shared by others, reminisce through photos or watch old

videos, Pennington's (2013) research concluded that this online presence does provide comfort. Because of this new medium and the rise in the younger audiences who tend to visit these sites, continued interaction with the Facebook profile pages of deceased users has the potential to provoke a cultural and societal shift in not only the way we talk about death, but *how* we talk about it (Barnhill & Owen, 2007). Additionally, because these pages cannot be deleted, this new form of communication abolishes socially constructed timeframes for "moving on" after death (Moss, 2004) allowing Facebook profiles to redefine how we seek and provide support for the bereaved (Pennington, in press).

In Western cultures, death-related communication is taboo and awkward for both the bereaved and those in the surrounding social circle, often leaving emotions unspoken in a public setting (Leonard & Toller, 2012). In her study of college students following the Virginia Tech massacre in 2007, Wandel (2009) noted that this discomfort is often exacerbated by geographical distance from family, memorial sites and public services, thereby causing the bereaved to engage in solely private mourning without the comfort of loved ones nearby. This solitude, however, has the ability to provoke unresolved grief, which can result in loneliness, depression and lower self-esteem.

When a Facebook wall is memorialized after death, the deceased are able to continue living a virtual life; but perhaps more importantly, this continued presence allows the living to maintain relationships with those who have gone before us. When one partner in the relationship is physically absent, maintenance falls on the living individual. This emphasis on individual effort, however, is similar to maintaining traditional adult relationships (Rawlins, 1994). For instance, adults who are geographically separated or too busy for physical interaction can maintain relationships by holding on to the thought and presence of the other individual in their

lives and by making the effort to stay in touch (Rawlins, 1994). Simple efforts, such as writing letters or sending holiday greetings, can be enough to maintain such relationships. Similar efforts of staying in touch and thinking about the other are reflected when the living write messages to the deceased, indicating that despite the physical existence, a relationship can continue.

Home to more than 30 million deceased users (Blaha, 2012), Facebook provides a place for living individuals to maintain communication with their deceased loved ones. As this form of communication to the deceased continues to increase, Facebook has the potential to change how society thinks about death. Given the growing number of deceased Facebook users and the importance of coping with loss, this study examines how online memorial pages provide a venue for relationship maintenance with the deceased. More specifically, this research examines what the living discuss when writing to the deceased in the semi-public setting of that individual's Facebook profile page. An exploration of this medium is significant because for those seeking solace, these pages mirror what were normal acts of communication between the individuals prior to death. This normalcy provides a comfortable place for the bereaved to cope with loss and maintain relationships with the deceased. By learning how Facebook profile pages can be utilized to maintain communication with the deceased, this study aims to provide a richer understanding of the grieving process in the digital age, and ultimately offer insight into how bereaved individuals can find comfort through this medium.

The following chapters review the existing literature in the realms of Western grieving practices and commemoration on virtual memorials and social networking sites. This is followed by an explication of the methodology employed for the study, the findings of this analysis and a discussion of implications.

## **Chapter 2 – Literature Review**

“Western society has over the past millennium tried to tame grief in very different ways...but grief is undisciplined, risky, wild” (Walter, 2006, p. 72). As Walter explains, the emotion of grief is complex and unpredictable, resulting in a multitude of methods and mediums for expression. To understand the scope of coping mechanisms in Western cultures, this chapter will discuss the traditional perceptions and practices associated with Western grievance and elucidate the theoretical evolutions provoking these conventions. Next, it will illustrate how the grieving process is being experienced through the online mediums of virtual memorials and social networking sites. Furthermore, this chapter will outline the theoretical framework guiding this study.

### **Grieving in an Offline Setting**

#### ***Coping with Loss in Western Cultures***

The emotions associated with the grieving process are cross-culturally and cross-historically consistent (Granek, 2010), yet despite this universality, the customs for coping with loss vary significantly by culture (Walter, 1996). While many cultures perceive death as an ongoing process existing of stages, Western societies primarily define human existence according to two distinct forms – life and death (Becker & Rothaupt, 2007; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). Through this taxonomy, individuals are perceived as either with us, or no longer with us, thus inciting the need for an instantaneous acknowledgement of loss. Encompassing such dichotomous definitions has provoked Western cultures to historically emphasize *letting go* of loved ones, whereas other societies strive to *hold on* to the deceased. For instance, Western cultures focus on moving on with one’s life without the deceased, while those

practicing the religions of Buddhism and Shintoism maintain contact with the departed through continuous care, such as delivering food to gravesites (Becker & Rothaupt, 2007).

Moreover, while death is a taboo topic that is typically avoided in Western cultures (Walter, 1996), in other cultures such as Egyptian communities, displays of grief are openly practiced through unrestricted emotional expressions (Becker & Rothaupt, 2007). Furthering the practice of letting go is the idea that grievance in Western cultures is rooted in managing the emotions of the bereaved, ultimately ignoring the characteristics of and relationships with the deceased (Walter, 1996). This practice places the ability to cope solely within the emotions and experiences of the surviving individual, rather than recognizing the newly modified relationships with the deceased. As a result, the bereaved mourn individually by managing personal feelings instead of focusing on redefining relationships.

This sense of individual mourning is also stressed through the Western rituals that are often associated with grieving. In some non-Western cultures, mourning the loss of a loved one is a relatively public act, with friends or family members coming together to perform rituals as a means of keeping the deceased individual alive, such as group prayer or meditation (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). In Western cultures, however, this public display of grief does not often extend beyond the funeral or wake. Western funerals and wakes are not adequate methods for coping with loss, because these instances of public remembrance rarely extend beyond a one-time event (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). Moreover, these rituals primarily occur shortly after the loss – or in the initial stage of grief – which does not allow for public mourning after this preliminary period (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004). This ritualistic immediacy typically enables a shift in grieving from a public atmosphere to a private setting in efforts to not deviate from societal norms of coping (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004; Moss, 2004; Walter, 1996). These socially

constructed timeframes often inhibit the bereaved from mourning in public after an average of one-calendar-year, leaving those who are coping to “move on” or mourn in solitude (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004). By restricting the timetable for displaying emotions, the bereft are not given time to seek the support and guidance needed to make sense of the loss and learn how to live life without the deceased. Consequently, if “normalcy” is not achieved within this limited scope, it often becomes uncomfortable for those in the social circle of the bereaved. Walter (2006) explains that Western timeframes “reflect the popular notion that grief is something one should get over quickly, and that it is embarrassing/inconvenient if colleagues’ or family members’ functioning is impaired by grief for extended periods” (p. 74).

Contributing to the practice of private grieving is also the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved, particularly, who is permitted to grieve. As de Vries and Rutherford (2004) state, there are “unwritten, but familiar rules...about who is entitled to grieve” (p. 7); a perception Pennington (in press) and Wandel (2009) explain is highlighted in a public setting. For those who are not directly related to the deceased individual, questions of authenticity are more likely to occur. Illustrating sadness in the public sphere may result in the perception that some of the bereaved are simply jumping on a bandwagon of mourning (Wandel, 2009). As a result, these social stigmas may prevent bereaved individuals from communicating grief beyond a specific date, or even grieving publicly. Doing so, however, has the potential to limit the mourner’s ability to manage the loss, ultimately decreasing their capacity to develop relationships and friendships with new living individuals (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998).

### ***The Evolution of Grief Theory***

Though most individuals will experience grief at some point in their lives (Granek, 2010), scholars have yet to prescribe a multidisciplinary, multicultural theory for bereavement

(Becker & Rothaupt, 2007). However, despite this lack of a universal philosophy, scholars have attempted to both theorize and depict the bereavement process in Western cultures. The foundations for these theorizations range from the traditional and dominant prescriptions of letting go of the loved one, while the more contemporary theories recommend maintaining relationships with the deceased.

In his 1917 essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud became the first of these academics to report about the impact of grief on psychological functioning – arguing that one should ‘let go’ after loss (Becker & Rothaupt, 2007). Initially, Freud provided a definition for what it means to mourn, noting, “mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, and ideal, and so on” (Freud, 1917, p. 242). With this definition in mind, Freud proposed grief as a *process*, proposing that two things must occur for one to find solace after a death:

hypercathecting, or investing extreme energy and emotion, and decathecting, or withdrawing all feelings and emotions (Becker & Rothaupt, 2007). Ultimately, Freud’s proposal suggested that the bereaved must eliminate attachment to the deceased individual, thus formally shaping Western thought toward the idea of “letting go” after loss. This is supported by his firm belief that death signifies the end of existence. Freud (1917) explains, “reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists” (p.243). It is by mentally detaching ourselves from the deceased, that Freud quipped would allow the bereaved to experience resolution and the building of new relationships (Becker & Rothaupt, 2007).

In 1969, Kübler-Ross expanded upon Freud’s idea of letting go, by identifying the processes used to accomplish this task and accept death of a loved one (Becker & Rothaupt, 2007). While this explanation was initially established to describe the processes experienced by



those who were dying, this model has been applied to reflect stages experienced by the bereaved, making it the foundational framework for exploring grief (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). The Kübler-Ross (1969) stages for letting go are to be fulfilled in a linear fashion: 1) denial, or the shock related to the loss, 2) anger, or the feelings of resentment, 3) bargaining, or the attempt to make sacrifices and reach out to higher beings to make a deal in exchange for an improved situation, 4) despair, or the sadness associated with loss, and 5) acceptance, or the acknowledgement of loss that is not accompanied by anger or depression. It is only upon the completion of the previous stage that the bereaved move onto the next, with the assumption that by the end of the fifth stage resolution for the bereaved will be achieved through acknowledgement and acceptance of death (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

Modifying the concept of *stages* of grief, Bowlby and Parkes (1970) developed phases for the bereft. Still meant to describe Freud's (1917) suggestion of letting go, this alteration was primarily significant in explaining how the grieving process is resolved. While Kübler-Ross (1969) emphasized letting go through acceptance of the loss, Bowlby and Parkes (1970) advocated for acceptance of loss through the reorganization of the bereft's life after the loss of loved ones using four phases: 1) numbness, 2) yearning and protest, 3) despair, and 4) reorganization (Becker & Rothaupt, 2007). Initially, the phase of numbness is associated with feelings of shock and denial, with the inability to accept the reality as fact. The next phase, yearning and protest, is classified by emotions of anger and anxiety about the loss with an emphasis on desiring the deceased to return, while the third phase, despair, indicates the incapability to function normally within everyday life. The final phase, reorganization, involves letting go of the deceased in order to regain structure in one's life (Bowlby & Parkes, 1970). Essentially, these adapted stages require the bereaved to recognize that life will continue without

the deceased, and thus, develop a new ‘normal’ way of living without that individual.

Furthermore, Bowlby and Parkes (1970) contend that experiencing these elements can happen in any order and can be recurring themes in the aftermath of loss.

Though these sets of stages remain prominent when describing modern grief, by the 1990s and early 2000s, some scholars proposed a shift away from the concept of “letting go” through *stages* to that of redefining a connection with the deceased (Becker & Rothaupt, 2007). With this transition, Worden (1996, 2009) argued that the bereaved should cope with loss by redefining the role of the deceased individual in the bereft’s life. This redefinition should occur through four tasks, to be completed in any order. The first task, accept the reality of the loss, explains that individuals must recognize the deceased person is gone. Second, the bereaved should work through the pain, including the emotional, physical and behavioral aching that exists because of loss (Worden, 1996, 2009). This second task suggests individuals must accept the associated emotions and confront them, rather than trying to ignore these thoughts. The third task, adjust to a world without the deceased, requires the bereaved to understand how life works externally, internally and spiritually without the deceased, such as living alone. Worden’s (1996) final task was initially supportive of Freud’s concept of “letting go” however, was modified to reflect maintaining a connection with the deceased. Specifically, Worden (2009) explains we must maintain an emotional connection with the deceased, but this connection should be of significantly lower intensity than it was when both parties were still alive. With this approach, mourners still say ‘good-bye,’ but the deceased is not forgotten (Attig, 1996).

Though grief theories evolved, there are three descriptive aspects to the Western grieving process that have remained consistent for most when mourning, despite the end goal for the bereaved: 1) coping with loss always includes an element of shock – or a disbelief in the

occurrence of a death, 2) coping requires emotional and cognitive acknowledgement – meaning the bereft must transition from disbelief to acceptance of death, and 3) the bereaved must reconstruct their lives, or find a way to return to normalcy after a loss (DeGroot, 2012).

Furthermore, with each new grievance theory, scholars progressively shifted away from the idea of complete detachment, to some form of maintaining emotional connections with the deceased. The most recent literature, however, takes the concept of emotional connection one step further – to maintaining bonds with the deceased.

### ***Contemporary Grievance: The Theory of Continuing Bonds***

Continuing a bond with the deceased was often a sign of “psychological problems” and “unresolved grief,” however, by the mid-1990s, scholars began to reverse this perception in academia by redefining what it means to maintain connections (Attig, 1996; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). In 1996, Klass, Silverman and Nickman found that although scholars had dominantly prescribed ‘letting go’ as a means to cope with loss, this practice was not explicative of the Western grieving process. Rather, talking to the deceased or seeking guidance from that person, along with cultural traditions, such as visiting cemeteries and building memorials, suggest that ‘letting go’ may be advised, but is not how most Westerners handle loss. As a result, in introducing the theory of continuing bonds, these scholars argued that maintaining relationships with the deceased should no longer be classified as “pathological grief,” or something that is indicative of an unresolved acknowledgment of the reality. Instead, they suggest that maintaining connections and relationships is a healthy sign of normalcy when adjusting to the loss of an individual (Klass et al., 1996). As the theme “continuing bonds” would suggest, this practice is beneficial for the bereaved as it provides a sense of continuity in their lives, while allowing them to eliminate time limits typically associated with grieving

(DeGroot, 2012; Pennington, in press). To fully understand relationship maintenance as a coping mechanism, this theoretical framework guides this study.

According to this perspective, bereaved individuals are encouraged to maintain relationships with the deceased, despite the physical absence of one partner; however, this maintenance should be redefined to account for the change in interaction capabilities. While the focus is on continued interaction with the deceased, the redefinition of this relationship is flexible to the individual, based on the perimeters established by the living partner. For instance, the bereaved can establish a place for the deceased in their lives, such as an inspirational figure or a provider of moral guidance. Pennington (2013) illustrates this sentiment, explaining:

In some instances, it may be a reminder that your father who died would not approve of something you are considering doing, or fulfilling a dream that you always talked about with a friend, who may not physically be there to share that dream with you, but are in your heart and mind as you move to enact that dream (p. 3).

When the bereaved reconstruct the social identity of the deceased, they are continuing bonds with that individual by keeping the narrative and memories of the deceased alive (Klass, 2006). This reconstruction redefines how the living interacts with the memory of the deceased. Redefining relationships as a means to maintain connections is the crux to continuing bonds theory, because holding on to the living relationship as it existed prior to the death prevents the bereaved from making time in their social lives for the development of new relationships (Klass et al., 1996). When redefining the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased, the communication transpires from something concrete to something more abstract (Attig, 1996). However, despite the foundation of maintenance, Klass (2006) explains that scholars have yet to define all of the interactions that can be labeled as continuing bonds. This generalization allows

the bereaved to interpret and implement continuing bonds in a way that best suits his or her mourning needs.

Furthermore, this lens illustrates that a relationship is not over simply because one member is no longer present, but rather, as DeGroot (2012) explains, a relationship ends when communication between the parties ceases to exist. Relationships with the deceased are expected to change over time, such as a decrease in the frequency of communication, however, the foundational core to this theory always links back to maintaining some level of connection (Klass et al., 1996). Once both parties cease to seek future interaction, the relationship can then be defined as terminated (DeGroot, 2009). According to this theory, the grieving process is never over, but rather, is controlled in a way that allows the living to regain a sense of peace.

Becker and Rothaupt (2007) explain, “The notion that all bereaved people must mourn in certain prescribed ways to successfully adapt to living is fading” (p. 9). With such contrasting theories of bereavement, from letting go and redefining relationships to maintaining lifelong connections with the deceased, there is a wide array of coping mechanisms practiced by the bereft. This contention illustrates that our knowledge and practice of the grieving process is transitioning away from a singular tradition into a multifaceted procedure. The foundation of Western grieving perceptions, practices and theories in an offline atmosphere is critical to understanding how these grieving elements are applicable to contemporary mourning and evolving outlets for coping. As the aforementioned literature illustrates, the scholarly understanding of these grieving stages is predominantly rooted in an offline setting; however, with the outlets for grieving expanding each day – particularly through the World Wide Web – it is important to examine whether these theories and stages can be applicable in the digital age.

## **Grieving in a Digital Age: The Medium**

As history illustrates, the advancement of communicative technologies evolved the ways we communicate about and understand our relationships with the deceased. Prior to the creation of the printing press, learning about the death of a loved one was dependent upon word-of-mouth; as newspapers were developed, obituaries aided in spreading the word and memorializing the dead, while the advent of radio and television broadcast obituaries to larger audiences (Carroll & Landry, 2010). The growth of the Internet was no different, taking what were exclusively offline rituals and creating a place for them in the virtual world.

### ***Virtual Memorials***

Virtual memorials – also referred to as web cemeteries – are described as online spaces that provide a place to honor and remember the deceased, from memorial webpages and online funeral home guest books, to blogs, discussion boards and social networking sites (DeGroot, 2012; de Vries & Rutherford, 2004; Roberts & Vidal, 1999; Sofka, 2009). There are significant similarities between offline and online memorials, such as the feelings evoked, the texts articulated and the imagery utilized (Moss, 2004); however, more notable are the differences between these places for mourning. While many exist, they can be categorized into four major components: 1) flexible timing, 2) access, 3) visiting and 4) sharing (Roberts & Vidal, 1999).

The first element, flexible timing, refers to the notion that the bereaved can access the memorial when it is convenient for them. Not only does this provide users with the opportunity to mourn at any time of day, but also for varying lengths after the death (Roberts & Vidal, 1999). Because grief cannot be confined to immediate post-death rituals or socially constructed timeframes (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998), this outlet is even more significant for those who grieve at varying paces. Furthermore, moments of despair are often unexpected, thus this easily

accessible place to express grief is helpful in moments of spontaneous mourning (DeGroot, 2012).

Second, the access to virtual memorials is unrestricted. With the exception of those who do not have Internet access, these memorials are available to the public through open websites (Barnhill & Owen, 2007). Accordingly, this medium ensures that no user can be denied participation in the public grieving process. Roberts and Vidal (1999) explain, “those who have felt disenfranchised in the death system are given the opportunity to engage in a public ritual when they may have been denied access to others” (p. 523). As a result, individuals who are not “entitled” to grieve in the traditionally public settings, such as funerals and wakes, are given the opportunity to share condolences and mourn within a different type of public setting (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004). The notion of access also applies to the ability for users to join in the grieving process from any geographical location. Wandel (2009) explains this accessibility through the lens of college students, noting that those who live far away from home can use virtual memorials to find comfort and pay respects without having to travel. By providing a space accessible from any location, the bereaved can find solace from miles away.

The third module suggested by Roberts and Vidal (1999) is visitation. This aspect illustrates the timelessness of virtual memorials because these sites act as “permanent records” for memorialization. Essentially, these web cemeteries will always be available for users to visit, whether they desire access 30 days after the death, or 30 years after the death. Though this was an original proposition, some scholars argue that permanence cannot be guaranteed because websites may crash or be deleted by its host; however, the potential for a site to be deleted should not outweigh utilizing the source as a coping mechanism (Barnhill & Owen, 2007).

The final component to virtual memorials, sharing, identifies the role these sites can play in developing bonds and receiving social support. This element assumes users will share knowledge about the site with others who also choose to mourn online, and will participate in the remembrance of the deceased (Roberts & Vidal, 1999). In her research on the functions of web memorials, Roberts (2006) noted that some individuals found comfort viewing the sites and expressing emotions alone, however, 90 percent of virtual memorial creators shared their websites with others for the purpose of communication. Of that 90 percent, 75 percent had visited their web memorial in the presence of someone else, thus coping simultaneously.

While these are four major components distinguishing online from offline memorials, the accessibility of these sites extends beyond Robert and Vidal's (1999) categories. Flexibility, modification and communication also play important roles in the creation and employment of virtual memorials in the grievance process. Offline memorials are bound by cost, size of the memorial (physical space needed), length (space for photos or text in newspaper obituaries, funeral guest books, etc.) and permanence; however, online memorials have no rules dictating what elements must be featured or even presented (DeGroot, 2009; Roberts & Vidal, 1999). With few restrictions, virtual memorials can include a range of content, from text and discussions, to photos, videos, music and links (Sofka, 2009). This expansiveness paints a more complete picture of the deceased individual's life, but also provides the bereaved with a wide selection of communicative methods for expression.

While providing a 'permanent' place for mourners to gather, the content on these virtual sites is not perpetual. Contributors to these pages have the ability to alter the look, feel and content of the pages at any time (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Foot, Warnick, & Schneider, 2006). For example, a memorial may begin as a place for organizing funeral arrangements and



announcing the death, but as time passes, that same site can morph into a record of the deceased's life (Foot et al., 2006). While offline sites cannot be changed once constructed, the bereaved can adapt online sites to reflect current emotions or recollections.

When using virtual memorials to communicate – whether speaking to a community of mourners or directly to the deceased individual – the utterances are transferred through a third party: the computer. With all of this discourse occurring in the public arena of cyberspace, virtual memorials are not only providing a place for mourners to gather, but are altering the way these users discuss death. Rather than expressing emotions or condolences in a traditional face-to-face (FtF) setting, virtual memorials allow users to sidestep the discomfort typically associated with death-related communication (Carroll & Landry, 2010; DeGroot, 2012). Through this channel, users can take an unlimited amount of time to write, edit and post messages, while carefully monitoring self-presentation and tone (DeGroot, 2012). Barnhill and Owen (2007) explain that writing provides a healing method for the bereaved, thus, this process of determining what to write helps the mourner express what is difficult to say to others. In their analyses of college students, both Carroll and Landry (2010) and Wandel (2009) found that participants in virtual memorials appreciated the ability to think about their writing, particularly when they weren't sure what to say, but still wished to express condolences.

While more control is given to the user in terms of the message presented, virtual memorials decrease control over who can see, comment or respond to that emotional expression (Barnhill & Owen, 2007). By writing a message for the World Wide Web, mourners are sharing their feelings and thoughts with the public (Foot et al., 2006). In Western cultures, public grieving typically ceases after the funeral, however, web cemeteries now allow individuals to “celebrate private mourning in a public place” (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004, p. 23). This public

venue also invites others to participate in the memorialization process, thereby diminishing timeframes for acceptable public grief (Hess, 2007). Doing so shifts the typically private act of post-funeral grievance to the public sphere for an extended period of time.

For 91 percent of adults, turning toward virtual memorials during the grieving process was found to be helpful when coping with loss (Roberts, 2006). In his analysis of web memorials created after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Hess (2007) argued that this medium for coping is beneficial when memorials are created and maintained by individuals, rather than those created by ‘official’ sources and organizations. Whereas sites developed by news media, public safety offices and even funeral homes tell the story of loss from a top-down perspective; these public sites give individuals the power to illustrate the ‘common’ viewpoint to the masses. Hess explains, “The voices heard in the [public] websites come from the position of the ‘ordinary,’ which provides a reshaping of public memory from perspectives other than the privileged voices heard through granite and roped-off areas” (p. 820).

By allowing multiple voices to write the narrative of the deceased’s life, a computer medium for discourse can strengthen the voice of the vernacular (Hess, 2007). In a content analysis of 244 virtual memorials, de Vries and Rutherford (2004) found that letters to the deceased were the most common messages on these sites, but interestingly, obituaries and eulogies – a somewhat official piece of text – were the second most popular. Moreover, children of the deceased were the most likely to create and participate in an online memorial, followed by friends and family groups (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004). While virtual memorials provide an outlet for the bereaved to build narratives of the deceased and seek support from fellow participants, the rise of Facebook in the virtual memorial scene provoked yet another change in how the deceased are digitally remembered.

### *Facebook: Virtual Memorials with a Contemporary Twist*

In the mid-1990s, the concept of virtual memorials came to fruition, growing in popularity and utilization (Roberts, 2006). By the 2000s, however, another medium joined the ranks for online memorialization: social networking sites (SNS). Defined as, “a website that uses specialized software to enable people to connect or collaborate to form online communities and communicate with them online” (Sofka, 2009, p. 158), these networks provide another contemporary outlet for online grieving. Essentially, these sites such as Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn provide an online place for members to create a “profile” of personal information that also doubles as an online message board. On these profiles, users can share photos, videos, music and news with members of their social network, while commenting on the posts of their ‘friends’ (Williams & Merten, 2009). By 2012, 48 percent of adults in the United States were members of a SNS, while 80 percent of teens were connected (Brenner, 2012). Perhaps more notable, however, is that 86 percent of adults aged 18-29 were active users of a SNS (Brenner, 2012). With this vast usage, SNS provide a “logical platform for people to memorialize and grieve” (Carroll & Landry, 2010).

Though the medium is the same – a SNS – each site has a different policy for public mourning. For instance, the sites of MySpace, Twitter and LinkedIn delete a user’s page after he or she has died (upon notification of the death from family or friends), but allow for the creation of memorial pages through this venue. MySpace even has a special website, [www.mydeathspace.com](http://www.mydeathspace.com), which is an online archive of publically available information pertaining to its deceased members (Leonard & Toller, 2012). Researchers have studied these sites to understand how users discuss death via these networks. Topics such as communicating about suicide (Leonard & Toller, 2012) and themes of posts from the bereaved (Carroll &

Landry, 2010; Williams & Merten, 2009) have been explored, alongside Tweets about the death of celebrities (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010), but there is limited research focused on grievance displayed on the most popular of these networks: Facebook.

With approximately ten thousand of its 955 million users dying each day (Thogmartin, 2012), Facebook has adopted a unique policy for its deceased users. Rather than deleting the profile page after death, or archiving it through another site, Facebook ‘memorializes’ pages by keeping them alive (unless a family member requests otherwise). These living profiles leave a deceased individual’s page intact, with the exception of deleting contact information and addresses. As a result, users can interact with their deceased Facebook friend, just as they would with those who are still alive (DeGroot, 2012). When a profile becomes memorialized, only individuals who had “friend” status prior to death are given access to the page. This results in a community of mourners who are all connected to one another through their mutual friend.

In contrast, undeleted MySpace pages and virtual memorial websites do not restrict who can access and post, thus increasing the potential for individuals to discuss the death without knowledge of the individual (DeGroot, 2012). Instead, they may simply latch on to the cause of death to write about their own experiences, rather than memorializing the deceased – a practice labeled *rubbernecking* (DeGroot, 2012; Pennington, in press). Unlike other virtual memorials that are created after an individual has passed, Facebook profile pages are created by the user *before* death (Pennington, 2013). The timing in this creation is significant, as the self-created profiles contain status posts, images and activity that were generated by the user before he or she died, thus maintaining a sense of ‘normalcy’ in the relationship. Moreover, turning toward an individual’s pre-existing profile provides the bereaved with a ‘tangible representation’ of the deceased, making interaction feel more commonplace (Williams & Merten, 2009). This ongoing

relationship between a bereaved user and the deceased's profile page allows the bereaved to maintain bonds with their lost loved one (DeGroot, 2012; Pennington, in press).

There is a limited but growing body of research on Facebook as an outlet for grief communication. Carroll and Landry (2010) surveyed college-aged Facebook users to explore the habits associated with grief-related posting, such as frequency of page visitation, interaction with the page, and perceptions about those utilizing this technology. This research found that participants were twice as likely (85 percent) to visit a memorialized Facebook page than they were to read an obituary in the local newspaper (42 percent) (Carroll & Landry, 2010). The authors contend that these findings illustrate the changing landscape of grievance in the digital age. Additionally, this survey reported that while 60 percent of participants had visited the page of someone who was deceased, fewer than 10 percent had actually posted.

The notion that many visit but few actually comment was also confirmed by Pennington's (2013) study of 43 college-aged individuals. Using qualitative interviews and an exploration of deceased user's Facebook profile pages, Pennington's research revealed that 33 users (76 percent) visited the profile pages of their deceased friends, but only 10 (26 percent) had actually posted messages on the site. She labels the first group as "the silent majority" and the latter as "the vocal minority" (Pennington, 2013). Those who belong to the *silent majority* reported that they did not feel they were members of the group who were 'entitled' to grieve (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004), thus chose not to participate. Some of them also revealed that they avoid posting messages because of the public nature of the memorial. This indicates that while young-adults are the most likely to post messages on the deceased loved one's Facebook page, not all of them do. Simultaneously, the few members of the *vocal minority* who utilized these

pages reported doing so because they were helpful in coping with the loss and maintaining some form of a connection (Pennington, 2013).

While Carroll and Landry (2010) utilized the survey approach to Facebook analysis, and Pennington (2013) explored the perceptions and use of Facebook pages among college students through interviews, DeGroot (2012) employed content analysis of Facebook memorial walls to provide categorical explanations for what these posted messages reveal. Her findings suggest the bereaved utilize these pages specifically for the purposes of sense-making (cognitively understanding why the death happened) and bond continuation (maintaining relationships with the deceased). Within each overarching category, DeGroot (2012) also noted subcategories of posts. Subcategories associated with sense-making included: shock, technology references, original and non-original prose, spirituality, and lamentations and questions; while categories indicative of continuing bonds included: emotional expressions, memories, presence, updates, appreciation, promises and requests and eventual reunion. These categories, DeGroot (2012) suggests, are evidence for the living attempting to maintain relationships with those who are no longer alive.

In addition to her content analysis, DeGroot (2009) also conducted five interviews to further explicate how relationships changed before and after a death occurs. This portion of her research revealed that those who had close relationships with the deceased chose to utilize this outlet as a means for keeping one's memory alive, to maintain bonds, and to aid in personal healing. When inquiring about the outlet as a means for bond maintenance, DeGroot (2009) found that those who had close relationships with the deceased prior to death described their relationships as having a similar function after death, because of continued interaction through a Facebook memorial wall.

Though methodologies and approaches vary, these scholars (Carroll & Landry, 2010; DeGroot, 2012; Pennington, 2013) agree that the use of Facebook as a medium to cope with the loss of the loved one is both beneficial and altering the landscape for how we grieve in a contemporary era. Particularly, Pennington's (2013) study revealed that college-aged individuals formed such strong connections with the profiles of their deceased Facebook friends that not one individual even considered 'de-friending' the deceased individual. Participants in this study indicated that deleting a friend was the equivalent to deleting the memory of that person from their lives; therefore, further supporting the transition from 'letting go' to 'maintaining bonds' (Pennington, 2013).

### ***Maintaining Bonds Online: Social Information Processing Theory***

To understand how computerized medium can be used to facilitate bond maintenance with the deceased, this research employs the theoretical framework of the social information processing theory (Walther, 1992).

Computer-mediated-communication (CMC) is still a relatively new medium for research exploration, particularly regarding its role in helping users maintain relationships online (Rabby & Walther, 2003; Tong & Walther, 2011). As a result of the relative youth, theoretical explanations for how users maintain relationships in a CMC setting have yet to be fully established. Attempts at comparing offline relationship maintenance to their online counterparts have been made, but only within the context of a categorical type of relationship, such as romantic relationships (Tong & Walther, 2011). Furthermore, such comparisons have not illustrated consistency between mediums, resulting in a gap of applicability from offline to online settings and a lack of a comprehensive theory for relationship maintenance through CMC.

Despite these gaps in CMC theoretical literature, the social information processing theory (SIP) provides the foundation to understanding the maintenance of relationships online.

Relationships developed online have the potential to be just as meaningful as those formulated offline, however, they may take more time (Walther, 1992). Walther (2008) argues this is the case because the techniques used to establish rapport in the offline world can be easily translated to apply in the online world. Evidence for this notion stems from two major components of his theory: 1) translation of cues and 2) time and rate.

As SIP theory indicates, developing a relationship typically originates with the processing of social cues, such as physical appearance or conversation style (Walther, 1992); however, in a CMC world, these elements are absent. To account for these lost components, SIP suggests that individuals who have the intention to develop relationships will creatively adapt to the medium in order to connect with others (Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005). In a CMC setting, this means individuals will turn toward other aspects of communication to “do the work of those that are missing” (Walther, 2008, p. 394), particularly language and writing (Griffin, 2009). As a result, the messages are used in place of nonverbal cues to form and provoke impressions and opinions. Walther (2008) explicates that these two mechanisms of discourse are not only interchangeable with nonverbal cues, but stimulate the same levels of relational development, indicating overall equality in effectiveness.

The second piece to the social information processing theory is the time and rate at which the relationship is developed. For a CMC relationship to reach the same status as an offline relationship, more time must be devoted to the communication (Walther, 1992). If ample time for development is disregarded, the relationship will risk becoming impersonal (Ramirez, 2007). The justification for this timeframe requirement is threefold. First, in a CMC world, the time it



takes to exchange messages is not as efficient as oral communication – we simply speak faster than we can type. Second, in face-to-face communication, we are processing verbal and nonverbal messages simultaneously, allowing for an intake of more cues in a shorter amount of time. In the case of CMC, all of the cues stem from the single source of a message. As such, less information can be derived from each exchange “requiring more exchanges to reach the same levels of impression development and relationship status as occurs more quickly face-to-face” (Walther, 2006, p. 396). Third, because the communication does not happen in real-time, but rather, is asynchronous due to the nature of writing and responding, the process literally takes longer (Walther, 1996; Walther et al., 2005).

While reception cues and timeframe of communication are two overarching components of SIP, the anticipation for future interaction also plays a significant role (Walther, 1997).

Walther (1997) explains that when communicating via mediated networks, users are more likely to seek and disclose information if they expect to engage with that individual in the future.

Accordingly, CMC-based relationships are stronger when there is promise of subsequent interaction (Walther, 1997). DeGroot (2012) explains that this desire for future interaction is often prevalent on Facebook memorial pages through the message posts from the living to the deceased. Specifically, posts from the bereaved will often suggest reunification in an afterlife, thus speaking of this future anticipation and illustrating the use of Facebook to maintain contact until friends are together again.

Walther’s (1992) SIP theory emphasizes relational development, however, this theory has limitations when explicating how online relationships can be maintained. As a result, this research aims to extend the scope of SIP theory to reflect the ways relationships can be maintained online, particularly through the lens of maintenance with deceased ‘friends’. While

exploring the relationship between the living and dead presents a unique situation, the strategies used by the bereaved to maintain relationships, though they know the deceased cannot respond, can be reflective of traditional CMC relationships. Moreover, social networking sites are facilitators of relationship maintenance (Rabby & Walther, 2003), thus, they provide the perfect venue of analysis for this extension. Rabby and Walther (2003) speculate that CMC and SNS can aid in the maintenance for three reasons. First, sending a message lets the other individual know the other exists. Second, by sending a message, the individual is suggesting an attempt at being open, and third, this openness is indicative of the purpose behind the interaction (Rabby & Walther, 2003). Therefore, by extending the scope of SIP, this research can depict a major component of relationships that extends beyond initial development – preservation.

### **Research Questions**

As previously illustrated, existing literature on communication with the deceased via Facebook has been restricted to surveys (Carroll & Landry, 2010), content analysis of Facebook *memorial* pages (DeGroot, 2012) and qualitative interviews with those maintaining ‘friendship’ status with deceased Facebook users (Pennington, 2013). Despite this range in analysis, little attention has been devoted specifically to the content written on the Facebook *profile pages* of deceased individuals. This study aims to extend the existing literature by examining what the living discuss in their messages to the deceased via the deceased individual’s Facebook profile page and how these messages enable the living to maintain relationships with their deceased friends. This examination of profile pages is purposeful because user-created pages provide a space that most closely resembles that individual’s life prior to death, thus allowing for interaction that feels more normal (Williams & Merten, 2009). Furthermore, these pages are only available to those who had “Friend” status prior to death, allowing for a discursive space

that is more intimate than a post-death created memorial. However, because of this accessibility, profile pages are still public in that the whole community of the deceased's friends can access the site, but this community is restricted to those sharing the mutual relationship. DeGroot's (2012) analysis of Facebook memorial groups revealed 12 categories for the content of posts, but did not reveal the extent to which these categories were utilized. This study investigates the types of messages that construct communication with the deceased, and how this content changes over the course of time. Specifically, this study examines:

RQ1: What do the living discuss in their messages to the deceased when writing in the semi-public setting of the Facebook profile page?

RQ2: Does the content of messages to the deceased change over time?

RQ3: If so, how does communication to the deceased change over time?

By exploring the communication from the living to the deceased and the timeframe of this discourse, this study sheds light on how the living maintain relationships with their deceased loved ones in a digital age and how such maintenance may alter Western perceptions of continuing bonds.

## Chapter 3 - Methods

To answer the aforementioned questions, this study employs a quantitative content analysis of Facebook messages posted on the profile pages of deceased individuals. This methodology is used to “make replicable and valid inferences from texts” (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 24) and to identify trends in communication content (Berelson, as cited in Krippendorff, 2013), thus making it appropriate for this research. Utilizing the content analysis approach provides a comprehensive understanding of *what* the living discussed in this unique discursive space and *how* these messages have changed over time. While previous studies have analyzed the motivation prompting users to interact with Facebook profile pages and types of messages that appear on Facebook memorial group pages, less is known about the frequency at which certain types of messages appear (Pennington, 2013; DeGroot, 2012). This methodology allows for a statistical description of not only what content is written, but to what extent each type of message appeared. The following paragraphs describe procedures, data, and the coding scheme in greater detail.

### Data Collection

With the incentive of extra credit, university students were recruited from Communication Studies courses to provide access to the Facebook profile pages of deceased individuals. Participation was contingent on two criteria: 1) the student was a Facebook friend with a deceased individual, and 2) the student had complete access to the profile page of that deceased individual. Pages were collected at individual meetings between the researcher and the student, and took place in the researcher’s campus office. Each contributor signed a consent form agreeing to the terms of participation. Upon agreement, students used a laptop provided by the researcher to access the Facebook profile page of their deceased friend. This profile page,

beginning from the time of death, was then saved as a Portable Document Format (PDF) to the researcher's laptop, allowing for repeated access. The PDF files and other related documents were stored on the researcher's personal laptop to ensure confidentiality. After participation, student volunteers were read debriefing statements and were provided with the paperwork necessary to receive extra credit in the Communication Studies course.

### **Sample**

A total of 21 Facebook profiles were initially collected, for a combined 460 pages of data and 3,646 message posts. This sample was purposefully narrowed to 10 profiles, resulting in 289 pages of data and 2,533 message posts. Of the ten profiles, only one belonged to a female and the remaining nine belonged to males, all with varying causes of death (see Appendix A). Profiles were selected for analysis based on two factors: 1) age of the deceased and 2) year of death. First, to allow for an in-depth analysis of messages directed toward a specific age group, profiles were limited to those who were between the ages of 17 and 22 at the time of death. Death is likely unexpected for individuals of these youthful ages, therefore restricting by age created an overarching similarity among the sample. Although messages written to the deceased came from posters of all ages, this restricted age group corresponded with the age group that has the highest percentage of Facebook users, suggesting that this outlet was an available source for the peers of the deceased (Smith et al., 2012). Profiles within this age group also contributed a greater frequency of posts to the overall sample, which allowed for a closer examination of what content was posted over the course of time.

Second, to examine the changes in message types over time, profiles were narrowed by the year of death. The sample was collected in the fall of 2012; therefore, profiles were taken from years of death between 2009 (the first year of the Facebook memorialization process) and

2011. Of the 10 profiles, four came from 2011, and three came from both 2010 and 2009.

Message posts appearing within 24 months following the month of death were included in the analysis.

For this study, the unit of analysis was each separate message post that appeared on the deceased user's profile page. This included posts in which the individual was mentioned (including 'tags' such as "Thinking about \*Holly\* today") and the posts that shared links to other websites. The actual content of the links, videos or photos that were shared (such as the lyrics to a song) were excluded from the analysis. This study focused entirely on the messages written from one individual to the deceased, thus comments between living friends on the deceased individual's page and messages directed toward the community were excluded. In 2012, Facebook transformed its profile appearance, changing it from a continuous page to a timeline of events, categorized by dates and occasions. Because of this feature, viewing all of the posts on these pages was not possible. Instead, posts were restricted to a representative sample from each month of activity, rather than all posts that existed on the page. Though this feature confined the amount of data available on each page, these restrictions were consistent across the data set. Of the profiles that were analyzed, the number of message posts ranged from 66 to 673, with an average of 278 posts per profile.

### **Coding Scheme**

To dissect the content of messages, posts were coded into distinct categories. DeGroot's (2012) analysis of Facebook memorial group pages identified 12 categories of message content on these walls: shock, technology references, original and non-original prose, spirituality, lamentations and questions, emotional expressions, memories, updates, presence, appreciations, promises and requests, and eventual reunion. Although her focus was on Facebook *memorial*

*group* pages, these themes were adapted and expanded for Facebook *profile* pages. Two profiles from the sample were pre-coded according to the original scheme. This revealed both an overlap between categories and an inflation of the “Other” category, indicating needs for modification. This modification resulted in a coding scheme of 16 content categories (Figure 1). Seven new categories were added: character, relationship before death, dedication, checking in, common expressions, holidays, and emoticons. Furthermore, three categories were modified, including: shock and appreciation (combined with emotional expression) and spirituality (expanded to include all references to an afterlife). Content categories were not mutually exclusive (i.e., multiple categories could be assigned to a single post). For instance, in the post “Merry Christmas my man! I'm about to head over to grandma's for family dinner. I'll stop by and say what's up before I go, though ☺” the writer includes a holiday greeting, provides an update, checks in with the deceased, and uses an emoticon, respectively. Since a single post often contained multiple message categories, this approach provided a more comprehensive description of the types of messages sent from the living to the deceased.

Messages that described the poster’s emotional state of mind, either in the past or in the present, were coded as “Explicit Emotions.” In these messages, posters explicitly identified and explained how they were feeling to the deceased individual. These expressions were classified by type, including positive (such as happiness or gratitude), negative (such as despair or guilt), or a combination of both (see Appendix B). In the next category, “Acknowledgement of an Afterlife,” messages referenced the deceased as having transitioned to a new existence. This transformation was presented as either a change in identity (such as an angel) or in habitat (such as heaven or home). These posts indicated that while the deceased individual was no longer living on earth, they were still ‘alive’ elsewhere. Posts that utilized creative expression as a

means to convey a message were coded as “Original and Non-Original Creative Expressions.” These posts incorporated expressions that were constructed by the poster or borrowed from another source, such as poetry, song lyrics, quotations or biblical verses; however, the actual content of these posts was not coded. Next, if posts posed a question to the deceased or a higher being they were coded as “Asking Questions.” This category focused specifically on questions pertaining to the death (e.g., “Why did you do this?”), rather than general, lighthearted questions (e.g., “Why did it snow?”).

Messages that indicated feeling or witnessing the presence of the deceased were coded as “Presence.” In these messages, posters explained that the deceased person was recently (or currently) with them as either a metaphysical/spiritual feeling or in a physical reminder (such as the deceased’s locker, or a song). Posts that included reminiscence about moments in the past were coded as “Shared Memories.” These memories consisted of either very specific moments or of general memories that happened at a particular time. Posts that mentioned the unique traits and characteristics of the deceased were coded separately as “Character.” This category focused specifically on who the deceased was as an individual before they passed away, noting features like personality and physical traits. This category differs from “Shared Memories” in that it focuses entirely on the deceased individual (e.g., “You were the funniest guy there was”), rather than an event (e.g., “I remember you were so sweet that time I sprained my ankle during gym and you carried me to the car”). The next category is “Relationship Before Death.” In these posts, the message descriptively identified how the poster was linked to the deceased, before the death occurred. This linkage could range from minimal (e.g., “I never knew you”) to a close bond (e.g., “You were my best friend”). Next, messages that told the deceased how they were being honored were coded as “Dedication.” In these posts, the living individual shared how they



were doing something specifically for the deceased. Dedication could be formal, such as planting a tree or creating a scholarship fund, or informal, such as hitting a homerun.

The messages in which the poster asks the deceased to perform some sort of action that benefits the living individual were coded as “Making Requests.” Requests could pertain to both specific tasks (e.g., “help me win the race”) and broad favors (e.g., “protect us from harm”). The messages in which the living individual told the deceased what had been happening in his or her life, or the mutual environment that the living and the deceased previously shared (such as the latest gossip at high school) were coded as “Updates.” “Updates” focused specifically on events or actions and do not include personal updates on the poster’s emotional state (which are coded as “Explicit Emotions”). The category “Checking In” identified the messages in which the poster was deliberately trying to stay in touch with the deceased individual (e.g., “just stopping by to say hi”), or noted that they would visit that deceased person in the near future (e.g., “come to visit you tomorrow”). Next, posts that discussed having a future interaction with the deceased were coded as “Eventual Reunion.” In these messages, the poster acknowledged that the two partners would be reunited at some point in the future. These posts differ from “Checking In” because they emphasize that both partners will be interacting, as they did before death, at the same time and in the same place. Furthermore, the timeframe for this reunion is abstract (e.g., someday, soon, eventually), whereas planned “Checking In” visits provide a clear timeframe for the visitation (e.g., tomorrow, next week).

The next category accounts for “Common Expressions,” specifically, the general statements of “I love you” and “I miss you.” If messages include either or both of these statements, they automatically fit into this category. These statements could also be considered emotional expressions; however, they were categorized separately as to not inflate the emotions

Figure 1  
Coding Scheme

<b>Content Category</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example</b>
Explicit Emotions	Identifying or explaining the emotional state of the poster in the past or present. Emotions are categorized as negative, positive or a mixture of both.	I am filled with sadness. / Thinking about you makes me happy. / I still can't believe you are gone, but I am so thankful that I knew you.
Acknowledgement of an Afterlife	Suggesting the deceased is living in an alternative place, such as the heavens. References to a transformed identity (such as an angel) or habitat (living up there).	The Lord has called you home. / Hope you are having a good time up there. / You are my angel now.
Original and non-original creative expression	Sharing a textual form of creative expression, such as song lyrics, poetry or borrowed phrases. Messages are created by the poster or taken from other sources.	God gained an angel today, But you'll be with us, come what may. In my heart I'll keep you my friend, With Him you'll live on, life has no end.
Asking Questions	Seeking answers to persisting questions about the death.	Why did you have to do this? / Was there anything I could have done?
Presence	Feeling or witnessing the metaphysical presence of the deceased. Seeing or hearing things that trigger the memory of the individual.	I could hear your voice calling me. / I know you were protecting me last night. / I know you are with us. / I heard your song and it reminded me of you.
Shared Memories	Sharing specific or non-specific memories that occurred at a particular time.	Remember the summer that we camped out in the backyard and you got scared? / I'll remember the good times we had at school.
Character	Discussing the unique qualities and features of the deceased from when they were alive.	You were always the funniest girl. / You were the most honest, sincere and sweet person I've known.
Relationship Before Death	Acknowledging the type of bond between the living and deceased before death.	You were my best friend. / You were more than a cousin to me. / I barely knew you.
Dedication	Performing a formal or informal action in honor of the deceased.	I am living for you, now. / I hit a homerun for you. / I planted a tree in your honor.
Making Requests	Asking the deceased for a favor to be performed for the benefit of the living individual or the poster's surroundings.	Can you make it snow tomorrow? / Please protect my family and me as we travel. / Come back so you can teach me to golf.
Checking In	Telling the deceased how one is consciously working to maintain the relationship through communication or planned visits.	I am going to come and see you later this week. / Haven't talked to you in awhile, so thought I'd stop by.
Updates	Giving the deceased updates about the poster's life or about the mutual environment they shared.	Thought I would let you know I got accepted to college! / The Yankees finally lost.
Eventual Reunion	Planning to reunite with the deceased in the future.	I can't wait to see you again someday. / I know we will be playing football soon.
Common Expressions	Sharing standard statements.	I miss you. / I love you.
Holidays	Sharing general holiday expressions.	Happy New Year. / Happy Birthday.
Other	Posts that do not fit into any other category.	Your family is awesome. / Single words.

that more closely illustrated the processing of death. Messages that included holiday wishes were coded as “Holidays.” This included generic phrases, such as “Happy Birthday” or “Merry Christmas.” The final category, “Other,” was created for all messages that did not fit into any other category. Classifying posts according to this scheme provides an understanding of what the living discussed when talking directly *to* the deceased. The extensiveness of the list unpacks all of the messages that are written, rather than generalizing content, resulting in explanatory frequencies for each topic of discussion.

In addition to the content categories, each post was coded for the following features: the use of an Emoticon (virtual symbols for emotions, such as ☺), the inclusion of Technology features (such as links to songs, photos or other websites), Poster type (“family member” or “friend”) and Time from death (0 to 24 months). To identify a poster as a Family member or a Friend, two strategies were utilized. First, official online obituaries were located for each deceased individual. These written documents distinguished the living members of the deceased’s family, typically including parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles. Second, poster type was evident through a poster’s self-identification as a family member or friend. Poster names excluded from the obituary or messages that failed to self-identify were considered Friends of the deceased. Finally, it is important to note that all message posts included in this text are reported exactly as they appeared on the profile page, with the exception of changed names to protect the identities of the writer and of the deceased.

### **Reliability**

Coding the data sample took place in three rounds. First, all message posts were coded by the researcher. Second, to ensure intra-coder reliability, the researcher went through all message posts again and verified all coding decisions. Finally, a random sample (10 percent) of

the data set was given to a graduate student to test for inter-coder reliability. The graduate student was trained by the researcher. This procedure included an explanation of the content categories and unit of analysis, and was followed by a practice coding session. During the practice session, the researcher and graduate student coded a sample of messages together, and then the researcher observed the graduate student code an additional sample until agreements were consistent. The training process lasted about 90 minutes. Cohen's *kappa* ( $\kappa$ ) was used to determine the consistency between coders for each variable. The mean *kappa* was .90, with the highest at 1.0 and the lowest at .74 (see Appendix C).

The next chapter illustrates the results obtained from the content analysis and explicates the communication occurring on the Facebook profiles of deceased individuals in greater detail.

## Chapter 4 – Findings

I know people think well why are they still commenting on his page, but when ever we cared about what people though right? LOL! You are still apart of our family and talking to you like this and out loud are the only ways we can reach you. (sister to brother, 2012)

As expressed by the creator of this post, Facebook profile pages provide one of the few places for the living to send messages to deceased loved ones. The capability of such communication, according to this poster, allows her to stay in touch with her deceased brother, and without it, she may lose an outlet for discourse with him.

Just like verbalizing a message for the deceased to hear, documenting a message on a Facebook profile page prompts posters to believe that messages are received by their loved ones. Through single posts or a series of notes, this medium presented the living with the freedom to write or share messages that reflected a variety of topics. Although the pages existed in a semi-public setting with the capability for mutual friends to read the messages, each Facebook user had the ability to utilize the profile page in a personally meaningful way. Equipped with this flexibility, what do the living discuss in their messages to the deceased in the semi-public setting of a Facebook profile page?

The content analysis of Facebook messages revealed that “Common Expressions” including phrases such as “I love you” and “I miss you” appeared most frequently, in 72.6 percent of messages and generalized holiday greetings, such as “Happy New Year,” appeared 7.7 percent (see Appendix D). As habitual statements, the dominance of these categories was not surprising. Beyond these common expressions to the deceased, however, written messages reflected three major themes: 1) processing the death, 2) remembering the deceased, and 3) maintaining the relationship. In addition to these dominant themes, the data also indicated that

the content of messages shifted over time. This chapter describes these findings in detail.

### **I Can't Believe You're Gone: Processing the Death of a Loved One**

“a year ago yesterday, august 31, was the first day that I couldnt go anywhere because i couldnt handle myself. It was when i realized that youre never coming home.” (sister to sister, 2012)

As reflected in this post from one sister to the other, messages to the deceased elucidate the reaction, response, or handling of that person's death. These message posts revealed how the living explicitly acknowledged and managed the loss of their loved one. This is illustrative of the traditional norms associated with coping with loss, such as experiencing emotion, rejecting the loss as reality and questioning why the death happened (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Four content analytic categories illustrate how the living processed the loss: Explicit Emotions, Acknowledgement of Afterlife, Original and Non-Original Creative Expression, and Asking Questions. Despite the overarching topic of death that accompanied each profile, only 38.9 percent of messages included sentiments demonstrative of processing death.

#### ***Explicit Emotions***

The most dominant category within the processing death theme was the explicit expression of emotions (21.6 percent overall). This variable examined if posts included a description of the writer's emotional state, in either the past or the present. The emotion variable was further classified as negative, positive, or a combination of both (see Appendix B).

Emotions classified as “negative” comprised 68.6 percent of the total emotional appearances. These emotions signified a form of pain or despair, such as guilt, sadness, disbelief or anger. For example, one brother expressed guilt, noting, “I'm sorry for everything that happened that day if i didn't ask you to go with me you would still be here i love you bro

forever,” while another friend similarly stated, “I feel bad every time I realize i'm having a good time and you cant be here to enjoy it with me! Miss you!!” Sadness and confusion were other negative emotions expressed in this category, such as one friend who wrote, “I woke up in tears and just couldn't understand why all this had to happed. each day I get a little bit stronger, but then there are days where I feel week and cry.” Some posters expressed negative emotions by stating the feelings, while others described their mental state in vivid detail. This was the case for one friend who explained, “4 weeks ago from this very moment my life crashed down on me. the walls closed in, my heart shattered into pieces from the heartbreak i felt.” This vividness was also reflected in a post written by a mother who compared her pain to a past experience noting, “16 years ago today I lost my baby at 19 weeks. I had never experienced that kind of pain and loss...until you were taken from us. I still can't believe you are never coming home to us again.”

Not all of the negative emotions emphasized sadness, however. Some expressed anger or disbelief in the death. Several posts mirrored the lines written from friends to the deceased that stated, “it pisses me off, you never deserved this” and “I can’t believe it’s been a year since we lost you.” Others struggled to accept the reality writing posts such as, “Even to this day, i see your Facebook. i look at your pictures and i'm still waiting for you just walk around the corner...still doesn't feel real.” The collection of negative emotions highlighted the state of melancholy and suggested that negativity was a dominant force driving the emotions of the living posters.

Though negative feelings contributed to the majority of articulated emotions, posters also embraced positive feelings as a way to process the death, which accounted for 23.2 percent of the total emotional expressions. Positive emotions evoked a sense of tranquility or joy primarily through feelings such as acceptance of the death, happiness and gratitude. For instance, some

posters found peace by recognizing the deceased was no longer suffering. One friend explained this best when she wrote, “You are missed by so many. I'm just really glad you aren't suffering anymore. Love ya, Miss ya! ♥.” While some posters mentioned happiness through acceptance, others shared how they had regained their positivity. For example, one friend explained that it simply took time to move past the pain, noting, “Missing you a lot. Feeling happy now though.. Took some time (: love you,” while another friend found comfort in conversation, writing, “hey kiddo. after talking about how much i missed you tonight it really made me feel a little better.” By sharing the ways users found happiness, such as taking time and talking to others, these messages reflected how posters emotionally transitioned between feelings.

In addition to sharing feelings of happiness and comfort, some positive expressions reflected gratitude as a way for processing the loss. As one friend acknowledged, “I am so thankful that you came into my life....that I was lucky enough to know you....” as another exclaimed “I am soo thankful that I got the chance to know you baby girl!!! Love u:)))” In some messages, posters thanked the deceased for helping the living individual handle the loss, such as one friend who expressed, “Loved talking to you last night and thank you for getting me through everything” while another explained, “Thank you for getting me through everything I've been through in the past 8 months.” Expressing the emotion of gratitude demonstrated that the living processed death by appreciating the deceased for the actions they performed.

Overall, the expressed emotions indicated one general state of mind for the poster; however, the remaining 8 percent of emotional posts discussed conflicting feelings, and thus, mixed emotions. This was the case for one cousin of the deceased who wrote about his ability to mold feelings of angst into feelings of contentment. He wrote:



I'm still waiting on life to go back to normal. then I realize how amazing you are and that the feeling in my stomach Is there because of what you mean to me, and I kinda like that. I've grown attached to this feeling, I wake up with it and it reminds me of how much I love you.

This dual approach was also used to tell the deceased how the mere thought of that person's death evoked multiple feelings, even after a period of time. Multiple posts incorporated variations of the phrase "happy and sad at the same time," while others were more illustrative of the feelings. As one friend expressed:

Today was pretty hard. even without having classes with you, i still felt the emptiness throughout the halls. We all miss you. but i believe everything happens for a reason. i'm just glad you let me into your life while you blessed everyone with yours.

Sharing the existence of conflicting emotions not only enabled the living to verbalize the way they were feeling, but demonstrated the mental complexity of processing death.

By vocalizing one's emotions, rather than keeping them silent, posters semi-publically acknowledged their feelings and thus, took a step in processing the death. Through a variety of emotional expressions the posters confessed *to* the deceased the way they were feeling and thus, handling *that* person's death. Unlike traditional virtual memorials, where emotional communication is typically directed to living members within the mutual community, these messages were targeted at the deceased individual. This audience specification created an interesting partnership in processing the death, allowing the deceased to take a part, albeit silent, in helping the living process their own death. The incorporation of positive emotions exemplified this partnership as the living often thanked the deceased for their help in handling the loss. Meanwhile, the dominance of negative expressions suggested that the living no longer

used the deceased as a partner, but rather, as a provider of emotional support. In doing so, emotions were shared with someone who was “just there to listen.”

### *Acknowledgment of an Afterlife*

Another way that posters processed the death was through the acknowledgment of an afterlife. Discussion of an afterlife was mentioned second most frequently, appearing in 13.4 percent of the total messages. This variable examined if posters acknowledged a transformed, but continued existence of the deceased. One sister exemplifies this notion when she wrote:

i know you walked in to a new life with a new beginning and a happy ending! My faith is great and i believe in life after life. I will not say death because if there is just a life after then its not considered death it is considered another life! LIFE AFTER LIFE!

This variable primarily appeared as references to a changed identity or habitat, mentioning the deceased in more abstract and spiritual terms. Changes in identity emphasized language such as ‘angel’ and ‘the Lord’s child’ and often mirrored the words of one mother who wrote, “I love you, Angel!” and a friend who expressed, “now I have a guardian angel.” Posts mentioning changes in habitat discussed living in a new place, such as the ‘heavens,’ ‘in paradise,’ ‘going home’ and ‘up there.’ For instance, one friend mentioned changes in environment when she wrote: “if only heaven weren't so far away...!” while another friend exclaimed, “you always looked out for the rest of us! Now God's looking out for you, buddy... enjoy it, cuz you're in the greatest place ever!” Posts that explicitly described the transition between worlds further illustrated the processing of death, such as that from a sister to her brother:

God is your protector, he protects you from harm and heals you when you are ill. I know you would have not went if it was someone you did not trust. You made sure you trust he

who took your hand and guided you home. Paradise awaited you a cure awaited you your own personal thrown awaited you.

Posts not only reflected the processing of death by distinguishing changes in identity and location, but also by deeming the afterlife as the *cause* of death. Essentially, these posts suggested that gods of the afterlife were the reason the person died. A post from one friend typified this concept when she wrote, “i know we wish there was other way but GOD had another plan...he needed you...love ya bud..” while another explained, “Well buddy 6 months ago today god decided to take you away. Everyone misses you around here.” These messages, that acknowledge and accept the cause of death, show how the poster used the afterlife as a means of processing the situation.

Acknowledging an afterlife illustrated how the living speak to and about the deceased through the concept of a continued existence. Framing the death as the result of a larger spiritual plan demonstrated a unique way to process the loss, whereas the transformation of identity and habitat reflected the recognition of the continued existence. These references to a continued existence indicate that the poster began to redefine the relationship by transitioning it from something physical to something more spiritual (Klass et al., 1996). Specifically, the content of these messages acknowledge that the deceased no longer lives on earth or has a physical body, thereby, identifying the change in the relationship.

### ***Original and Non-original Creative Expression***

Some posters incorporated poetry, song lyrics and prose to articulate how one was coping with loss. Within the overall sample, 1.9 percent of message posts included either original (as created by the author of the post) or non-original (as taken from work produced by others) explanations for how one was handling the death. For example, one friend wrote her own poem,

expressing, “Still doesnt seem real / i think about you all the time / i miss your smiling face in the halls.” Others, however, borrowed from various sources, such as this friend who referenced the song, “I’ll Be Missing You” by Puff Daddy, quoting the lyrics, “Til the day we meet again / In my heart is where I’ll keep you friend / Memories give me the strength I need to proceed / Strength I need to believe... ♥” while another friend posted words from the song, “From Where You Are” by Lifehouse, quoting:

So far away from where you are / These miles have torn us worlds apart / And I miss you,  
yeah I miss you / So far away from where you are / I’m standing underneath the stars /  
And I wish you were here / I miss the years that were erased / I miss the way the sunshine  
would light up your face I miss all the little things / I never thought that they’d mean  
everything to me / Yeah I miss you / And I wish you were here.

Through the use of creative expression, the living articulated feelings that may have otherwise been difficult to express, thus allowing them to find the right words to describe how they were currently processing the death. The infrequent appearance of this category, however, suggests that posters preferred to share messages that were more straightforward.

### *Asking Questions*

The living demonstrated a need for closure or better understanding of the death by asking questions. Overall, less than 1 percent of posts included these queries (0.6 percent). Questions were directed to the deceased in single words, such as “Why?” while others were more descriptive, such as, “This is just a really long April Fools day prank right? And its all going to be over tomorrow.” Questions were also written to the deceased, but directed to a larger being, such as, “Why did it have to be such a great person?” and “Why did this have to happen?” Seeking resolution indicated that for some, an answer to a lingering thought would have been

helpful in understanding the death, and ultimately, processing the loss. Since all of the individuals in this sample died unexpectedly, it was anticipated that questions would be prominent on Facebook profile pages. The limited frequency of this category, however, suggests that the living were less concerned with unanswered inquiries and instead, focused on processing the feelings and answers that they understood to normalize the relationship.

Overall, communication to the deceased reflected four distinct styles for processing the death of a loved one (explicit emotion, afterlife, creative expression and asking questions). These four topics all openly acknowledged the loss, thereby providing context to the status of each person's profile. This content was expected for a virtual memorial. Website memorials, constructed specifically for the purpose of memorialization, have traditionally served as an outlet to discuss and process the death of a loved one. Within these sites, discussion of death is dominant (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004).

Because Facebook profile pages share similar qualities with website memorials, it is expected that the discussion of death would occur. However, in the setting of a virtual memorial, messages about death are directed to the deceased, but more importantly, are primarily directed to other, living members interacting in the discursive space (Roberts, 2006). In the setting of a Facebook profile page, posts of processing death are meant specifically for the deceased. As such, posters utilizing this medium are processing the death through communication with the deceased, rather than living family or friends.

Finally, the categorical frequencies within this theme indicate that the expression of emotion and acknowledgment of an afterlife are significantly more prevalent than creative expression or asking questions when processing the death. This dominance indicates that when

writing to the deceased, posters are primarily reacting to the loss and reshaping their understanding of the deceased's existence.

### **I'll Never Forget You: Remembering the Deceased**

Just remembered the summer that we all had the camp out in my backyard and all the girls were in one tent that contained a tv, multiple fans, and a tarp to cover the tent in case it rained:) while the boys tent contained your ps3 or something and no fan and no tarp...then I remember waking up to you and Andrew running home because it rained and your tent flooded :). (friend to friend, 2011)

As this post suggests, some messages were written to the deceased as a way of keeping the memories of that person alive. Within this theme, posters illustrated a range of styles to remember the deceased, from reminiscing on what the relationship used to be and carrying that memory into the present, to remembering the deceased through a transformed presence.

Essentially, these message posts described the deceased as both a memory of the past and a figure infiltrating thoughts of the present. Nearly half of all Facebook posts included messages that represented this theme (48.8 percent). With an emphasis on maintaining the memory of the lost loved one, these posts focused on the deceased individual, whereas posts in the previous theme focused on the living individual. This section details the five categories of posts that reflected a remembrance of the deceased: Presence, Shared Memories, Character, Relationship Before Death, and Dedication.

#### ***Presence***

Dominating the posts of remembrance were messages about the presence of the deceased in some capacity. These messages appeared in 23.1 percent of the total sample, making it the second most mentioned topic overall. This variable examined if posts revealed either feeling the

presence of the deceased in a metaphysical form or remembering the deceased because of a triggering reminder. Posts of presence suggested the living couldn't forget the deceased because they were continually reminded of that person.

Messages to the deceased about experiencing a metaphysical presence indicated that the living could feel the deceased person with them. This feeling was reflected in many forms, such as a generalized "I know you are with us" and "I could tell you were with me" or the more specific, such as this message from a friend, "the seniors are skipping today and we're going to pizza street, i was just about to txt that to you, but i remembered i didnt have to cuz your already going to be there!!!" Feelings of presence were often descriptive; telling the deceased about the specific moments the living felt their company. For instance, one mother mentioned:

I felt your presence with me at the lake as I rode in the front of the fishing boat while crossing the lake..., eyes closed, hair blowing in the wind-in that moment I knew I was where I was supposed to be that day and this weekend.

Some experienced the presence of the deceased through dreams, while others envisioned the deceased in daily life. As one mother explained:

On Wednesday I went to pick up Naomi from camp. We stopped at McDonalds I ordered a double Quarter pounder with cheese. When I was holding it, for a second, I saw your hand instead of mine. The burger looked so small, your long slender fingers hanging over the sides. Today, I was in my room fixing my closet and heard your voice call me.

Posters who felt the deceased or recognized a continued presence indicated that the deceased were with them and thus, remembered.

The category of presence extended beyond feelings of accompaniment, but also acknowledged presence of the deceased in some sort of object, thus provoking a trigger for the

remembrance of that person. This was the case for posters who heard songs that made them think of the deceased, such as, “Hi :) I'm in the car with my fam going to Jacks soccer game and "Lean On Me" is on the radio! Made me think of you and smile” and “Shiny toy guns came on my pandora the other day....they always remind me of you.” Physical objects also provoked this triggering, such as one friend who explained, “I met this little boy at the game last night. He told me his name was Jared. He was wearing a camouflage jacket. My mind immediately went to you” and “Misss you man. i see reminders of you every day, whether its seeing your tree, my wristband, or jonesy.” When telling the deceased about the triggering reminders, the living indicated that deceased would always be remembered because reminders of that person surrounded them.

Messages about presence not only dominated this theme, but also appeared with one of the greatest frequencies in the total messages analyzed. As such a prominent topic of discussion, it seems to suggest that remembrance wasn't always rooted in the past, but rather, that the living could carry the feeling of the deceased with them into the present.

### ***Shared Memories***

Reminiscing with the deceased was the second most prominent category within this theme, with 11.6 percent of all messages including shared memories. This variable examined whether posts incorporated very specific or generalized stories about the deceased from when that person was alive. Shared memories tended to be light-hearted and depicted the deceased in favorable light. One cousin wrote in this sentiment, noting, “remember when we would throw balls at your fence? I would throw a baseball cuz I was Greg Maddux, you would throw a football cuz you were Brett Favre :)” while another friend wrote, “i'll never forget you always textin me ‘Hey Renee come play some pong...dew pong that is haha oh & btw on your way out



get some dew.” Other memories were humorous in nature, indicating that the living remembered the fun moments shared with the deceased. As one friend wrote:

Remember when us three were playing catch with a football outside of our lodge and Kolby and I convinced you there was an axe killer who lived in the forest that was right by us and he was going to kill us that night, you started to cry, then our dads came outside and took us to get icecream and the whole way there you were saying we should tell our dads but Kolby and I said no if we tell our dads he will kill all of us, u cried even more, then some junky car pulled up behind us and we said it was his car and it followed us all the way to dairy queen and you figured out we were joking when an old guy got out of it.

Within the semi-public setting of a Facebook profile page, the messages of memories focused entirely on the positive, leaving negative recollections untold. Although negative memories likely exist, this emphasis on positivity may stem from the acknowledgement that others can view and read the posts as well. Rather than articulating these moments, posters may have been self-monitoring and upholding the integrity of the deceased and of themselves. Doing so paints the memory of the deceased at his or her finest, thus illustrating that while posters dwell on the past, they only dwell on the positive past.

### ***Relationship Before Death***

The writers also discussed how they were bonded to the deceased before the death occurred, such as “best friends” or “more than a cousin,” and even, “I barely knew you.” Within the sample, 7 percent of messages referenced this relationship, thereby, providing context for how the living remembered the deceased. For instance, a cousin referenced the deceased as family and a friend, noting, “I truly love you so much man you were not only my first cousin but

a great friend as well,” while another friend expressed the extent of the friendship writing, “I hate when someone calls you "my friend". You were sooooo much more important than that. I don't know how to describe such an amazing friendship that is irreplaceable.” While some posts regarded the deceased as a friend, others equated the relationship to that of a family member, writing, “I miss you :/ You were the closest thing I had to a big brother ♥.” Though references to the relationship were typically succinct, posts occasionally took longer, more descriptive forms, explaining how the earthly bond impacted the living. This was the case in one post from a sister who wrote:

we were much more than sisters and i love you so much. you make me a stronger person everyday and i feel confident in everything i do because i know that you'll always be there for me. i am who i am mostly through you cause i tried so hard to be you. who wouldnt?

Another element to this category was the recognition that although the poster did not have a close relationship to the deceased, they were still affected by the person and their death. This means that the friendship was more of an acquaintanceship, such as old classmates or friends from summer camp, and was maintained only through a Facebook connection. As a result, the poster knew the deceased, but was not close to that person. In these posts, messages often began with a variation of the phrases, “Hey even though i did not know you very well i will miss you!!” and “I know you don’t know me very well.” By outing the level of the relationship, posters who were otherwise classified as not “entitled to grieve” (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004) were provided with an outlet to express their condolences. Posts reflecting this limited relationship suggest that writing to the deceased on Facebook, specifically, telling them they are

remembered, is not limited to family and close friends, but rather, can include an expansive audience of the deceased's community.

### ***Character***

This variable tapped into whether a message contained specific references to the overall character of the deceased, such as the qualities and features of that individual. The results show that 7 percent of posts included explicit references to the character of the deceased. These messages often described what made the deceased unique as individuals.

Similar to the "Shared Memories," this form of remembrance was rooted in positivity and failed to mention any negative characteristics of the person. Posters wrote messages similar to, "you were such a great guy and you were always smiling and always tried to cheer someone up when they were down," "You could always make everybody laugh and smile. You were a Great person!" and "I miss and love you so very much! (your silliness, your hugs, your spontaneity, our talks, your texts and that laugh of yours...so many things!)" When writing to the deceased about his or her character, the living remembered the positive qualities that made the deceased individual exceptional.

### ***Dedication***

The messages of dedication appeared in 4.2 percent of the total posts. In this category, the living explained how they performed an action for or in honor of the deceased, whether formally or informally. Posts in this category are comparable to offline remembrance such as constructing a memorial or creating a scholarship in honor of the deceased; however, the virtual version often indicated the performance of an action rather than the creation of something physical. Some virtual forms of dedication were broadly constructed, such as "We will make a difference together...all of us - FOR YOU!" and "Today, I am going to have a great day for

youu. ♥,” while others wrote about the performance of specific actions, such as getting tattoos, “I’m getting a tattoo for you today ♥,” winning sports games, “Well they played for u and they won. They are going to state. They are playing for you son” and doing something the deceased loved to do, “Today I am drinking a dew for you!” Furthermore, the living communicated that they would become a living memorial for the deceased by living life for two people – themselves and the deceased. As one friend explained, “I would do anything to have you back....but I know that's impossible so now I live for both of us♥.” Through various forms of dedication, these comments indicated that the memory of the deceased shaped the actions of those still alive.

By writing about the presence of the loved one, reminiscing about shared memories, discussing the closeness of their relationships, praising the character of the deceased and honoring them with dedication, messages to the deceased emphasized that despite a physical absence, they were remembered. Content within this theme revealed that remembering the deceased wasn’t limited to recollections of the past, but instead, could occur in the present through feelings of accompaniment. Moreover, the high frequency of posts inclusive of “Presence” indicates that remembrance in the present is not rare, but instead, a dominant topic shaping communication to the deceased. Whereas those in an offline relationship would simply experience the presence of one another, these messages revealed that posters experience the presence and then, remind the deceased that the moment happened. In doing so, the living told the deceased they remembered the mutually shared moment.

Furthermore, the majority of posts in this theme were rooted in positivity. Whether discussing specific memories or the influence of the deceased, messages contained were restricted to the happy moments in the relationship or the deceased’s life. Messages within this theme appeared frequently, with nearly every one in two posts (48.8 percent) containing content

of remembrance. The variation in reminiscent messages illustrates that the poster had the flexibility to shape their memory of the deceased in a personally meaningful way and did so through the remembrance of positive past and present moments.

### **The Connection Continues: Maintaining the Relationship with the Deceased**

“death ends a life, not a relationship ♥ I love you!” (friend to friend, 2011)

As this friend recognizes, losing one member of a relationship does not mean the relationship itself has to end. In the overall sample, 63.4 percent of posts from the living to the dead illustrated the maintenance of the relationship with the deceased. Within this theme, posts reflected the return to a ‘normal’ relationship – or one that mirrored the relationship before death - through the presentation of ordinary topics of communication. Whereas messages in the first two themes (“Processing the Death” and “Remembering the Deceased”) were primarily rooted in the topic of death, messages in this theme are reflective of typical messages existing between two living friends. Four message categories fit into this theme: Making Requests, Checking In, Updates, and Eventual Reunion.

#### ***Making Requests***

One way to maintain the relationship with the deceased was to make requests. Much like when living friends ask one another for favors, the living continued to make requests of the deceased, and did so in 20.6 percent of all messages. This variable examined whether messages asked the deceased to perform a specific activity for the living individual, or someone connected to the poster.

Favor-based requests often petitioned the deceased for extra guidance and protection. Such requests mirrored the statements from these friends who wrote, “Please watch over our family so we all stay safe,” “keep watching over us,” and “help get me throw this rough patch.”

In addition to safety, messages also requested assistance for performing particular activities, such as at sports, work or school. For instance, one friend requested, “please be with me at Regions when we go against Cowley pal...i need all the help i can get and i dont think i can do it on my own...love ya pal!” while another friend asked, “ima need your help at job corps bro help me through it cuz i kno u would if u wash ere physically.” Meanwhile, several others asked for assistance on school tests, such as one friend who exclaimed, “I missed the math test. the people who took it said it was hard..you would have been fucked hahaha! off to juco tomorrow to take it, help me out!” and one aunt who noted, “Jeff has his biology final tomorrow. I need you to sit on hos shoulder and help him pass!” While the aforementioned forms of request asked for a type of guidance, others asked the deceased to make something happen. For instance, one friend wrote, “one request.. a snow day tomorrow would be great if you could get us the hookups! =>,” and others asked the deceased to help their sports team win, like one friend who wrote, “i know you had a little push of KU's loss tonight...now lets have a biiiigg pull for our CATS! :)”

This category of messages appeared with the highest frequency in the “Relationship Maintenance” theme, suggesting that posters incorporated the deceased in their lives through a continued partnership of exchange. Essentially, these posts depicted relationship maintenance because the living continued to communicate with the deceased and in turn, expected the deceased to fulfill the request. Moreover, posting requests on the semi-public Facebook page served as a form of documentation because publicizing the request suggested that the deceased would receive the message.

### ***Checking In***

While relationship maintenance occurred naturally through the act of posting, at times, the living wrote to the deceased that they were purposefully working to maintain the relationship.

Messages that included attempts at deliberate maintenance appeared in 20 percent of all posts. These messages were indicative of the effort necessary to continue a relationship. In this category, posters told the deceased they were purposefully, “stopping by to say hi,” remedying lengthy absences from interaction or making promises for future visitation. For instance, friends acknowledged a lack of Facebook maintenance, writing messages like, “sorry it took me so long to talk to you...” and “sorry i havent written on here in a while.. hope you know ive been missing you like crazy.” Posts in this category also promised future visitation, such as one cousin who noted, “Haven't wrote on your wall in a while bud! Ill come have a dew with you when i come home!” a friend who said, “hey bud! im n town for a few days so ull catch me visitn u sumetime soon! tlk a bit!” and a mother who promised, “I will be out to see you today. Mommy loves you.” Documenting efforts to maintain the relationship indicate that the living are taking responsibility for keeping the connection alive. Similar to traditional relationships planning a get-together, posts promising a future interaction hold the living accountable for making the visit. Finally, by consciously working to keep the connection, these posts tell the deceased that the relationship is worth maintaining.

### *Updates*

Updating the deceased was the third most prominent category in this theme. This variable examined whether the living told the deceased what had been happening in the life of the poster or the mutual environment that they shared. Overall, 13.9 percent of messages were written to keep the deceased person “in the loop” with the important news. These messages mimic those that appeared before death, and thus, appear as ordinary communication between two living friends. Updates included general snippets of information about the poster, such as a sister who wrote, “ITS THE LAST DAY OF SCHOOL ILL BE A JUNIOR AFTER 11:06!!!! (=” and a

friend who expressed, “i got my new cleats, they're sick...game tomo in the hat, on the turf!...im running low on new music, but ill keep searching...” Updates were also written in longer form, providing a series of details to make the news more specific. For example, a sister told her brother stories from her wedding day, and later, stories about her children. She wrote:

Hey Bud! I am married! Of course you know that! I know you were there but I still had a few breakdowns! I think I was the most scared/nervous when I was walking down the Isle to see Marc for the first time! It went away when I met his eyes! Jared, I love you! I will always share the SMITH name with you even though I am now a Jones! ... I want you to know you are a uncle to Shelby Lynn, she was born on June 26. She was a little early but she is doing great!

While a portion of the updates focused on news in the poster’s life, others kept the deceased informed about mutual friends, such as “Hey buddy. I just wanna inform you that garth is no longer a virgin, yes you heard me right..” and current events, such as, “Bro your packers won the superbowl!” and “Dude, Nebraska did WORK!! tonight against Arizona.” Updates served as a mode of ‘ordinary’ communication, mirroring discourse that occurred prior to one’s death. Sharing self-oriented updates tended to focus on the life of the living individual, rather than inquiring about updates from the deceased. These messages didn’t focus on the death, but rather, highlighted the normal events in the life of the living. Without a mention of death or remembrance, these posts removed the context associated with the profile page (that the user was deceased) and instead, made the page itself appear ordinary.

### ***Eventual Reunion***

Messages in this category indicated that both partners in the relationship would be reunited in the future, and thus, they simply had to wait. This variable appeared in 8.4 percent of



all messages. Posts about an eventual reunion were comparable to posts between friends in a long-distance relationship because it established an expectation for future interaction (DeGroot, 2012). For example, posts mirrored this sentiment from one grandpa that said, “I love you and I miss you so much! I know that one day we will be together again!” or the post from a friend that said, “i can't wait to see u again :)” Some messages were subtle, including phrases such as “see you soon,” “I’ll catch ya later,” and “see you when I get there,” while others described what they would do once they were reunited. One friend exemplified this notion when he promised to play basketball with his deceased friend, writing, “u told me to teach u ma skills n i jus realized i neva did! so sum day we will play again! dats a promise!” When writing to the deceased about an expected interaction, the living indicated that the relationship wasn’t over, but rather, both partners just needed to wait.

By making requests, deliberately working to maintain the relationship, sharing updates and anticipating a future interaction, the living wrote to the deceased as a way to maintain the relationship. Within this theme, communication didn’t mention the death but rather, focused on ‘ordinary’ topics. Furthermore, messages in this theme appeared with the greatest frequency in the overall sample (63.4 percent), as more than half of all posts included content about maintenance. These patterns suggest that the living redefined the role of the deceased in their lives, transitioning the relationship from physical interaction to virtual communication. In doing so, the Facebook profile page was primarily used as a means to continue this redefined connection with the deceased.

Within the content of this theme, two patterns emerged, particularly regarding the focus of the post. Two categories of maintenance reflected a self-oriented focus (“Making Requests” and “Updates”), whereas the other two categories (“Checking In” and “Eventual Reunion”)

emphasized the relationship. Despite distinctions, one focus did not outshine the other; but rather, both styles appeared with relative equality. Messages about the poster served two functions in the maintenance. First, and most dominantly, these posts indicated how the deceased were still a part of their lives. Though messages selfishly asked for favors, doing so suggested the living still turned to that individual for assistance, and thus, wanted to maintain the partnership. Second, messages that focused on the poster's own life updates kept the deceased "in the loop." Because the deceased cannot respond with his or her own updates, these messages served as a way to maintain a common interest in the relationship. In both instances, self-oriented posts steered content away from the death to instead, return to normal communication. Messages that recognized both individuals in the relationship reflected the continuation of a partnership. Specifically, messages that checked-in with the deceased let that person know the relationship wasn't being ignored, while discussion of an eventual reunion mimicked the planning of traditional get-togethers. As a whole, this dominant theme illustrated that a user's Facebook profile page after death, is used for more than memorialization.

Overall, the content analysis of Facebook profile pages revealed that beyond common expressions and holiday greetings, three distinct themes emerged. Messages that reflected the poster's "Processing of Death" were the least frequent appearing in only 38.9 percent of all posts. Messages that indicated a "Remembering of the Deceased" appeared with greater frequency, occurring in 48.8 percent of all messages. The most dominant theme that appeared on the Facebook profile pages of the deceased was messages that worked toward "Maintaining the Relationship" (63.4 percent). Though varying in frequencies, each theme reflected a different style for coping with the loss of a loved one and utilizing the Facebook profile page.

Messages within the “Processing the Death” theme revealed that the page was used as a means to cope with loss. Although the death of the individual motivated the posts, messages focused entirely on the thought process of the living poster. These messages revealed that even on Facebook, posters coped with loss in traditional ways, primarily by reflecting the early stages of conventional coping models. Specifically, four of the five stages of grief proposed by Kübler-Ross (1969) were reflected in this theme (though not in linear order, as the model suggests), including messages describing emotions of denial, anger, bargaining and despair. Furthermore, messages revealed attempts at accepting the loss as reality, working through the pain, and confronting emotions (Worden, 1996, 2009). The topics of discussion reflected traditional and expected coping norms, however, the venue for coping made these messages unique. Specifically, by publically sharing these messages with the deceased, the living individual sought the deceased for guidance in the coping process.

While the first theme highlighted the traditional ways to cope with loss, the second theme “Remembering the Deceased” reflected steps in the continuing bonds process. An essential piece to using bond continuation as a coping mechanism is redefining the relationship with the deceased, or finding the new role of that individual in one’s life (Klass et al., 1996). Posts that mentioned remembrance were indicative of this crucial step, as the deceased was transformed from a physical being to a past or present memory. In this theme, posters shaped the redefinition using many forms, such as feeling the presence of the deceased or reminiscing about the person. Overall, this theme provided the stepping-stone between understanding the death and maintaining the relationship as posters acknowledged the transformation in the relationship.

The “Remembering the Deceased” theme acted as a bridge for posters to reach the final theme of “Maintaining the Relationship.” Although the redefinition of that individual may

continually change, messages in this category revealed that posters were continuing the connection with the newly defined relationship. Whether focusing on the individual or the relationship, the presentation of ‘ordinary’ communication indicates that Facebook is utilized as a facilitator for returning the conversation ‘back to normal’ and maintaining the connection.

### **Message Content Over Time**

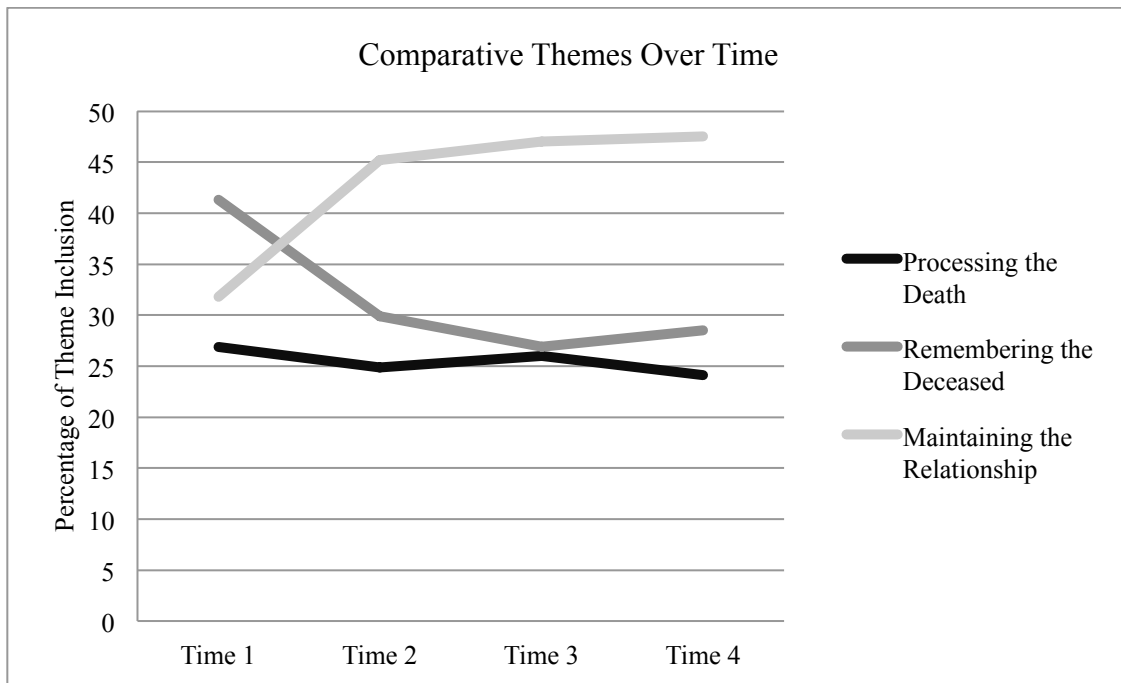
“I can't believe that it's been one year, one long horrible year” (friend to friend, 2011)

As reflected in this post on the one-year anniversary of her friend’s death, Facebook users were often conscious of how long it had been since they lost their loved one. With this awareness, do the messages to the deceased change over time? If so, how? To answer those questions, message posts were divided into four timeframes: 1. From the time of death through one month (Time 1), 2. Between two and six months from the time of death (Time 2), 3. Between six months and one year from the time of death (Time 3), and 4. Between one and two years from the time of death (Time 4). These timeframes were purposefully selected to illustrate if messages differed during the immediate reaction to loss, and if the content of messages changed as time progressed. The first year from death was divided into three timeframes because Western grieving literature explains that grieving in a public setting typically ceases after this one-year period. Dividing this timeframe into specific periods illustrated how grievance was presented during this time. The second year was viewed as a whole to provide relative consistency in the number of posts per timeframe.

Based on the analysis, three distinct patterns in the content emerged over time. Results show that 1) messages indicating the processing of death appeared fairly consistently, while 2) messages pertaining to remembrance of the deceased decreased over time, and 3) messages signaling relationship maintenance increased over time (Figure 2). A chi-square test revealed

that these patterns were significant,  $\chi^2_{(6, N=3723)} = 79.95, p < .001$ . In the first timeframe, both the “Remembering the Deceased” and “Maintaining the Relationship” themes produced notable frequencies, with the former producing its largest frequencies and the latter producing its smallest frequencies.<sup>1</sup> By the third timeframe, these patterns had reversed, with “Remembering the Deceased” at an all-time low, and “Maintaining the Relationship at its high.”<sup>2</sup>

Figure 2



These findings suggest that the handling the death of a loved one is actually an ongoing, fluctuating process, rather than something that ceases during this two-year timeframe. Furthermore, posters are immediately reacting to the death by telling the deceased they are remembered, indicating that messages at the forefront of the timeframe focus on the deceased individual, rather than the poster. Finally, as time progresses, posters are transitioning the conversation topics from death and remembrance to relationship maintenance.

<sup>1</sup> Processing the Death, Time 1,  $z = 7.5$ ; Maintaining the Relationship, Time 1,  $z = -8.1$  (2.39 for significance)

<sup>2</sup> Processing the Death, Time 3,  $z = -4.0$ ; Maintaining the Relationship, Time 3,  $z = 3.4$  (2.39 for significance)

### *Processing the Death is an Ongoing Experience*

Of the four variables used to process the death, three demonstrated significant changes in the frequency of content over time, including 1) expression of emotions, 2) acknowledgement of an afterlife and 3) asking questions. While the former two peaked in frequency shortly after death, the latter peaked after time had progressed. In the immediate timeframe following the death (Time 1) the frequency of messages that expressed emotions was at its highest.<sup>3</sup> As time progressed, however, this type of post to the deceased steadily decreased, presenting the lowest representation in the final timeframe (Time 4). A chi-square test revealed this transition was significant,  $\chi^2_{(3, N = 548)} = 14.29, p < .003$ , as the expression of emotions dropped by nearly nine percent over the course of time (Time 1: 27 percent > Time 2: 21.1 percent > Time 3: 21.2 percent > and Time 4: 18.3 percent). This drop-off indicates that the living immediately reacted to the death with emotion, but as the processing phase progressed, these expressions were replaced by other topics of communication.

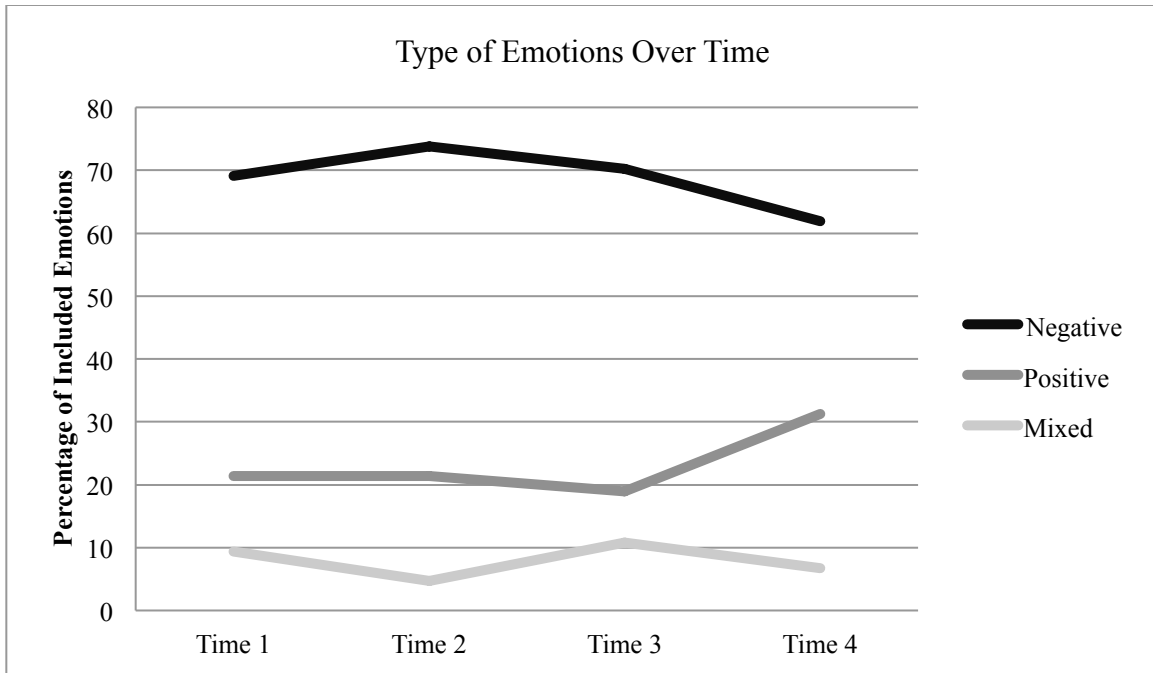
Despite an overall decrease in emotional expression, the frequency of positive emotions slightly grew over time. By the final timeframe (Time 4), the incorporation of positive emotions significantly increased, by nearly 10 percent (Time 1: 21.5 percent > Time 2: 21.5 percent > Time 3: 18.9 percent > and Time 4: 31.3 percent).<sup>4</sup> Though statistically insignificant, negative emotions were also mentioned with the least frequency during this timeframe, illustrating that as time progresses, the emotions expressed by the posters grow increasingly more positive (Figure 3). Overall, the incorporation of emotions started strong but faded over time (Figure 4).

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<sup>3</sup> Expression of emotions, Time 1,  $z = 3.5$  (2.24 required for significance)

<sup>4</sup> Expression of positive emotions, Time 4,  $z = 2.6$  (2.39 required for significance)

Figure 3



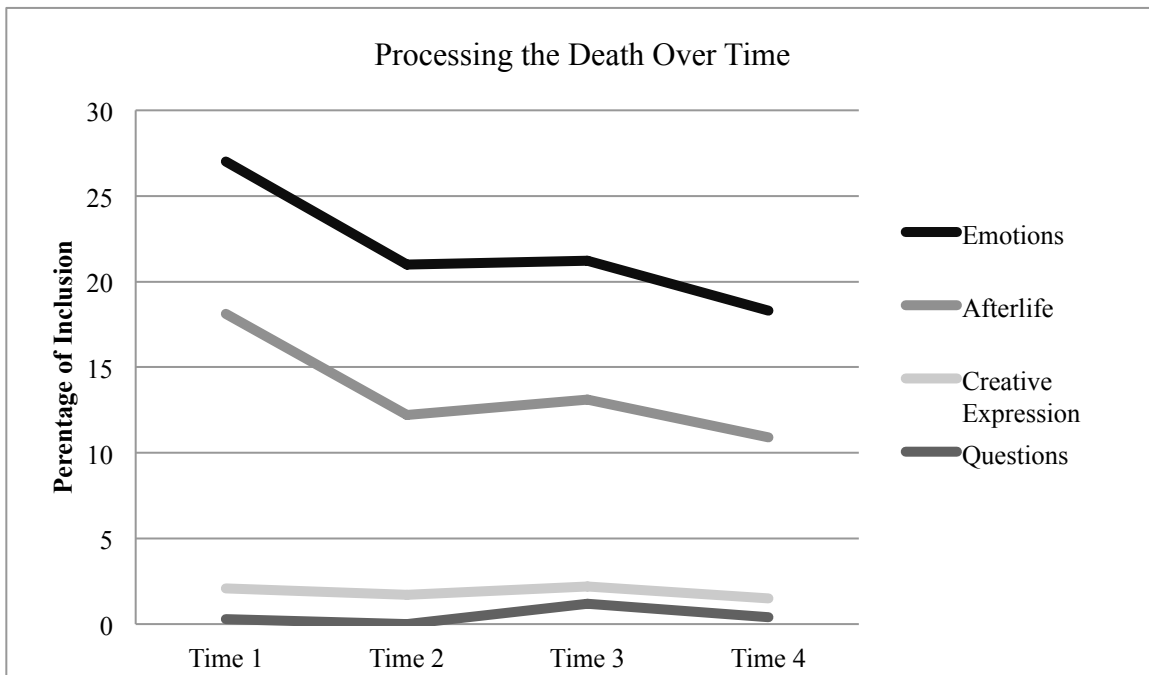
Similar patterns emerged for posts that acknowledged an afterlife. Like emotional expressions, discussion of the deceased residing in an afterlife was also prominent in the beginning (Time 1) but slightly faded over time.<sup>5</sup> A chi-square test revealed this transition was also significant,  $\chi^2_{(3, N = 340)} = 15.07, p < .002$ . Between Time 1 and Time 2, mentions of an afterlife decreased by six percent, and during the two-year span, dropped by more than 7 percent (Time 1: 18.1 percent > Time 2: 12.2 percent > Time 3: 13.1 percent > and Time 4: 10.9 percent). This shows that while posters reference the deceased in an afterlife shortly after death, as time progresses, this topic becomes less important. Furthermore, this pattern indicates that discussion of an afterlife is a dominant topic immediately used to process the death. In this early timeframe, posters may not have fully processed the death, but do indicate that they immediately

<sup>5</sup> Acknowledgment of afterlife, Time 1,  $z = 3.7$ , Time 4,  $z = -2.3$  (2.24 required for significance)

recognized the transition of the deceased from a physical, living being to a metaphysical, deceased being.

Asking the deceased a question was a rare act, however, the incorporation of these queries still morphed over the course of time. A chi-square test revealed a significant transition within the sample,  $\chi^2_{(3, N=14)} = 9.27, p < .026$ . Specifically, posters asked the deceased few questions during the first two timeframes (0.3 percent, 0 percent, respectively) but in the timeframe prior to one year from death (Time 3), questions became noticeably more prominent (1.2 percent).<sup>6</sup> By the final timeframe, asking questions dropped back to low frequencies (0.4 percent). Unlike the other categories in this theme that peaked in frequency during the immediate times following death (Time 1), asking questions appeared to be a processing mechanism utilized as time progressed. This suggests that unanswered questions may linger for a period of time and come out after the living has failed to find the answer.

Figure 4



<sup>6</sup> Asking questions, Time 3,  $z = 2.9$  (2.24 required for significance)



Analysis within this theme shows that in the immediate stages following the death of a loved one, messages that reflect processing the death appear with significant frequency. As time from the occurrence of death passes, however, these topics are rivaled by new content of communication. This is indicative of an instant reaction to the loss and the initial recognition of a transformed relationship. Although this clear transition occurs, patterns displayed within the middle two timeframes (Time 2 and Time 3) reflect that these messages do find consistency before decreasing. As a result, the decline in frequency after the initial timeframe is subtle.

### ***Remembering the Deceased Decreases with Time***

During the two-year timeframe, three message categories pertaining to the remembrance of the deceased illustrated significant changes. Specifically, 1) relationship before death, 2) character, and 3) shared memories decreased over time (Figure 5). All three of these message categories were dominant topics of discussion in the timeframe immediately after death (Time 1) and significantly decreased as time progressed.

Messages that referenced the relationship between the poster and the deceased produced the greatest change between timeframes. The results of a chi-square test illustrate this significance,  $\chi^2_{(3, N=178)} = 139.28, p < .001$ . Between the first two timeframes, inclusion of the relationship before death dropped by more than 13 percent (18.3 percent to 4.9 percent), and a by the final timeframe, a 14.4 percent drop occurred (Time 3: 3.1 percent > Time 4: 3.9 percent).<sup>7</sup> This drastic change indicates that posters are likely to establish the relationship early in the messages to provide the context for the posts that follow and thus, do not repeat the acknowledgement in every post.

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<sup>7</sup> Relationship before death, Time 1,  $z = 11.7$ , Time 3,  $z = -5.0$ , Time 4,  $z = -3.8$  (2.24 required for significance)

Messages regarding the character of the deceased mirrored these patterns, but did so with slightly less drastic measures. A chi-square test proved this was significant,  $\chi^2_{(3, N=177)} = 74.13$ ,  $p < .001$ . Immediately following the death of a loved one, posters wrote about the uniqueness of the deceased individual significantly more than during any other timeframe.<sup>8</sup> The frequencies within this period reflect immediacy in capturing and documenting the memory of the deceased and may be why posts in this category featured only the positive characteristics of the individual. From the initial to the final timeframe, posts that included a reference to the character of the deceased decreased by nearly 11 percent (Time 1: 15.2 percent > Time 2: 5.1 percent > Time 3: 4.7 percent > Time 4: 4.4 percent).

Over the course of time, messages that shared memories also decreased. Similar to the aforementioned patterns in this theme, the inclusion of memories was most significant in the first timeframe, and subsequently declined. The significance of this change was reflected in the results of a chi-square test,  $\chi^2_{(3, N=294)} = 76.06$ ,  $p < .001$ . During Time 1, almost 22 percent of all messages included a memory (21.9 percent), but this was cut in half (10.7 percent) in the second timeframe.<sup>9</sup> By Time 3, only 7.9 percent of messages consisted of memories and by Time 4, only 8.2 percent of messages included memories. These patterns show that, like discussion of relationship and character, writing about memories on Facebook is one of the prominent ways to respond to the death of a loved one immediately after the death.

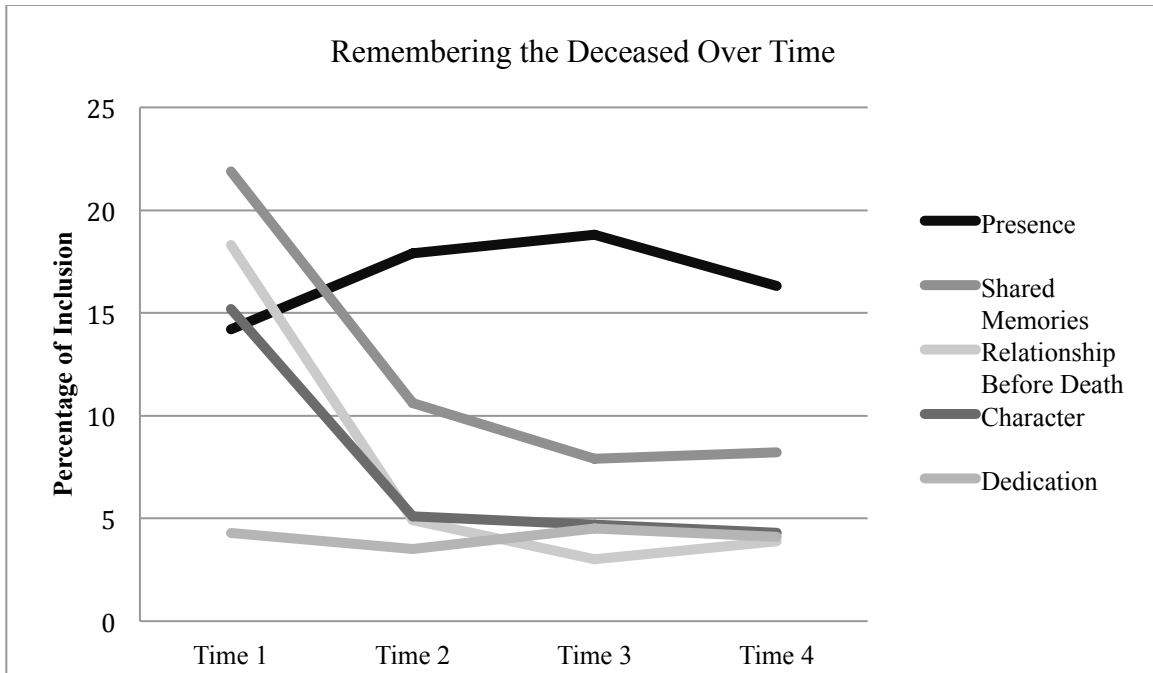
Messages associated with “Remembering the Deceased” illustrated significant patterns in the appearance over time. With the exceptions of “Presence” and “Dedication,” these posts dominated during the initial timeframe following death, but as time progressed, these messages became less prevalent. The categories of “Presence” and “Dedication” likely illustrated

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<sup>8</sup> Character, Time 1,  $z = 8.6$ , Time 3,  $z = -2.9$ , Time 4,  $z = -3.3$  (2.24 required for significance)

<sup>9</sup> Shared memories, Time 1,  $z = 8.6$ , Time 3,  $z = -3.7$ , Time 4,  $z = -3.4$  (2.24 required for significance)

Figure 5



opposing patterns because these forms of remembrance were not rooted in constructing the past memory of the deceased. Rather, these categories focused on remembrance of the deceased in the present through seeing, feeling or performing an action that reminded the living of the deceased. This pattern shows that remembering the deceased as they were on earth primarily occurs right after death, whereas thoughts of the deceased in the present continue over time. The consistency between all significant categories in this theme illustrates the prevalence of remembrance during the initial stages following loss. As previously noted, posts within this category are mainly focused on the deceased, rather than the living poster, therefore, indicating that immediately following the death of a loved one, posters focused on the best qualities of the deceased, rather than their own self-interests.

### *Maintaining the Relationship Increases with Time*

While messages within the aforementioned posts tended to appear more often at an early stage and decrease over time, messages suggesting relationship maintenance typically revealed the opposite patterns and increased over time (Figure 6). Within this theme, three categories of posts demonstrated significant changes as time from the death progressed, including 1) checking in, 2) updates, and 3) eventual reunion.

Messages that included casual check-ins with the deceased produced a significant change within this theme, which was reflected in a chi-square test,  $\chi^2_{(3, N=507)} = 14.09, p < .003$ . Check-ins were significantly lower in the timeframe immediately following death, than they were during the remaining three timeframes. During Time 1, only 14.7 percent of messages included these remarks.<sup>10</sup> During Time 2 the incorporation of this message-type increased by nearly five percent (to 19.5 percent), and by the third timeframe (Time 3), frequencies found consistency (Time 3: 22.3 percent > Time 4: 22.1 percent). Over time, messages that checked in increased by 7.5 percent. This pattern indicates once the initial reaction of death passes, the living regularly checks in with their deceased loved ones.

Paralleling the patterns that emerged in the checking in category, updates to the deceased were also featured with low frequency immediately following death. A chi-square test revealed a significant change,  $\chi^2_{(3, N=351)} = 12.59, p < .006$ . During the first month from death, considerably fewer updates appeared, and were followed by a period of growth.<sup>11</sup> Between the first two timeframes, updates to the deceased increased by 5.5 percent, and then subsequently leveled off (Time 1: 10.1 percent > Time 2: 16.4 percent > Time 3: 16.2 percent > Time 4: 12 percent). This framework illustrates that immediately following death, the poster is less likely to

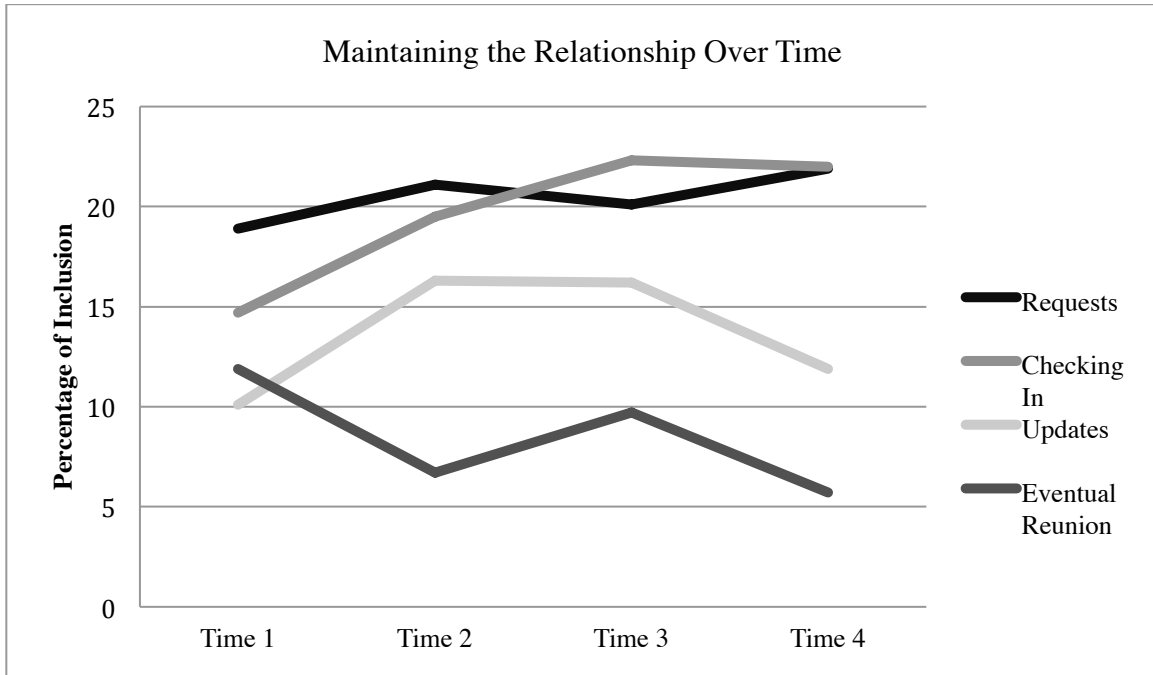
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<sup>10</sup> Checking In, Time 1,  $z = -3.5$  (2.24 required for significance)

<sup>11</sup> Updates, Time 1,  $z = -2.3$  (2.24 required for significance)

write about themselves and instead, focus on the deceased. After time from the death lapses, however, posters consistently kept the deceased updated.

Figure 6



Diverging from the patterns that emerged in the aforementioned categories of this theme, posts that discuss a future interaction with the deceased decreased over time. A chi-square test identified a significant decline as time progresses,  $\chi^2_{(3, N=214)} = 19.15, p < .001$ . Posts that mentioned an eventual reunion were the highest in the first timeframe after death (Time 1: 11.9 percent), fluctuated during the middle timeframes (Time 2: 6.7 percent > Time 3: 9.7 percent), and had dropped off significantly by Time 4 (5.7 percent).<sup>12</sup> This transition reflected around a six percent decline over time (6.3 percent), suggesting that the living are more concerned with an eventual reunion when the individual passed away, but over time, this reunification is less prevalent.

<sup>12</sup> Eventual Reunion, Time 1,  $z = 3.4$ , Time 4,  $z = -3.1$  (2.24 required for significance)

Posts about “Requests” and “Eventual Reunion” fluctuated over time, while the frequency of messages including “Checking In” and “Updates” steadily grew over the course of time. More importantly, however, once the posts reached a peak (typically during Time 2), the inclusion of such messages remained consistent in the remaining time periods. These patterns illustrate that immediately after the death occurs, the focus is on the deceased individual, not the relationship. As time progresses, though, posters demonstrate a return to normal topics, and thus, consistently communicate with the deceased using messages that maintain the relationship. These frequencies also illustrate that in the long-term, posters utilize the Facebook page as a way to continue to the connection with their deceased loved one.

### ***Friends Immediately Write to the Deceased, Family Takes Some Time***

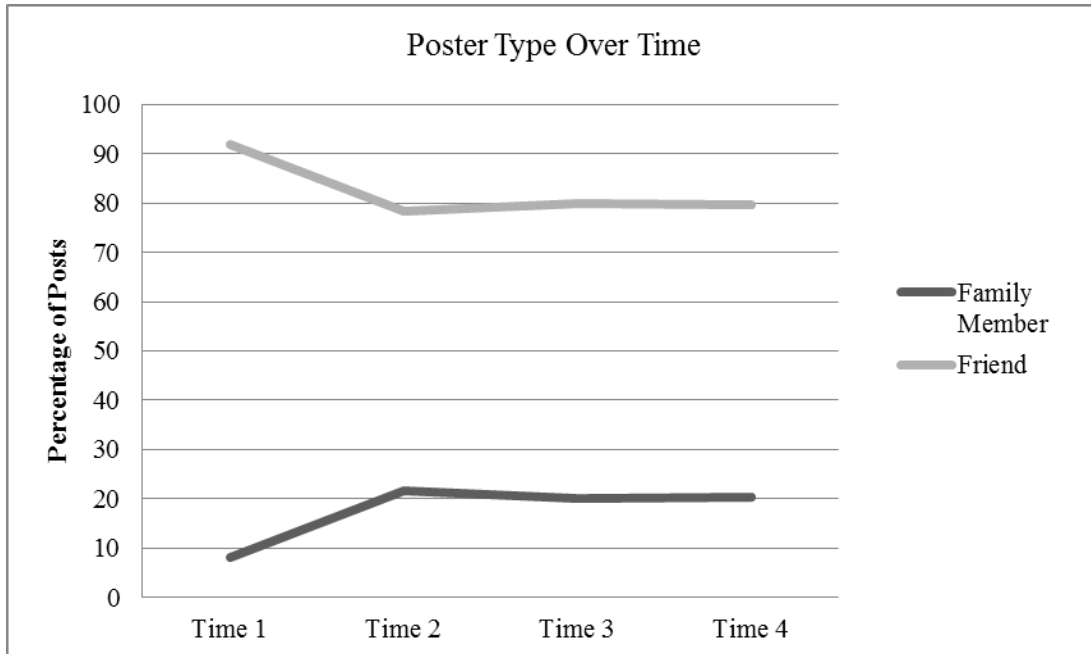
In addition to how the thematic content shifted over time, the analysis revealed how the posting habits for the different types of posters shifted over time (Figure 7). Within the two poster types, Family of the deceased and Friends of the deceased, noticeable and significant patterns emerged, producing a chi-square of,  $\chi^2_{(3, N=2533)} = 45.85, p < .001$ . The highest discrepancy between Facebook users occurred within the first two timeframes (Time 1 and Time 2). Immediately after death, Friends produced 91.8 percent of all messages to the deceased, while Family members only wrote 8.2 percent of messages.<sup>13</sup> After this timeframe passed, the gap decreased, as posts from Family members increased by 13.5 percent, accounting for 21.7 percent of messages, while Friends accounted for 78.3 percent of posts.<sup>14</sup> Following this initial shift, messages from the two poster types remained consistent, providing less than a two percent change in the remaining timeframes. Though initially drastic, these patterns illustrate that over the course of time, relationship to the deceased does not impact posting habits.

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<sup>13</sup> Friends, Time 1,  $z = 6.7$ ; Family, Time 1,  $z = -6.7$  (2.24 required for significance)

<sup>14</sup> Friends, Time 2,  $z = -2.5$ , Family, Time 2,  $z = 2.5$  (2.24 required for significance)

Figure 7



Overall, this analysis revealed that over the course of time, the types of messages written to the deceased shifted. This triad of results reveals three overarching patterns in the communication to the deceased. First, messages that showed “Remembrance of the Deceased” were generally focused on the life of the deceased individual and how that memory was carried into the present. These messages also indicated a crucial step in redefining the relationship with the deceased (from physical being, to memory). By dominating in frequency during the early timeframes and significantly decreasing in utilization over time, it shows that posters were most likely to respond to the death with the remembrance and initial redefinition of the individual. This pattern also illustrates that closer to the time of death, posters are more likely to focus their messages on the deceased individual, rather than themselves or the relationship.

Second, posts that “Maintain the Relationship” are initially infrequent, but as time progresses, the appearance of these messages increases. Through self-oriented or us-directed

messages, this theme of posts emphasized both partners in the relationship. Based on the patterns that emerged over time, this illustrates a shift in the focus of posts from the ‘other’ to the ‘us.’ Furthermore, the gradual increase to eventual consistency demonstrates that without the physical interaction (or other form of communication on earth), posters turn to the Facebook profile page as a way to continue the relationship.

Finally, throughout the entire timeframe, posters wrote to the deceased about how they were “Processing the Death.” Although the death of the other motivated these posts, they were generally focused on how the poster was handling or interpreting the loss, thereby emphasizing the ‘I’ within the relationship. The consistency of this theme across timeframes illustrates that although communication about “you” and “us” changes, the poster remains a prevalent topic in the posts. Finally, the consistency of this theme demonstrates that coping with loss is an ongoing experience. Without clear timeframes for public grieving, Facebook profile pages have the capability to eliminate socially constructed timeframes for publically processing death.

This chapter revealed that when writing to the deceased in the semi-public setting of a Facebook profile page, the living shared holiday greetings and told the person that they were missed and loved. Messages that were more insightful, however, revealed that the living wrote about topics that reflected three core themes. First, posters told the deceased how they were processing that person’s death. Second, the living told the deceased that they were remembered. Third, the living wrote messages that maintained the relationship. Between the time from death and the succeeding two years, the content of some of the messages shifted, suggesting that the timeframe from death does impact the types of messages that are written. Specifically, messages that remember the deceased peak immediately after death, while those that maintain the relationship begin at a low frequency and increase with time. Moreover, the analysis revealed



that no matter the category of post, writers involved the deceased individual in their lives. By using the deceased individual as a support system to help the living handle the loss, as the subject of reminiscence, or as someone to tell life's everyday stories to, posters illustrate that even in a person's physical absence, a relationship can be preserved. Finally, the variation in poster-types (family and friend) demonstrates that the Facebook profile is not restricted to a certain audience, but rather, is a place where a variety of individuals in the deceased's life can redefine a relationship and continue communication.

## **Chapter 5 - Discussion**

By writing on the Facebook profile page of a deceased individual, the living maintain a connection with their deceased loved ones, suggesting that relationships do not have to end at death. This study reveals that messages from the living to the deceased reflect the poster's processing of death, remembering of the deceased, and efforts of maintaining the relationship, while also noting that time influences the content of messages. This chapter discusses the theoretical and practical implications of these results.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To understand why and how Facebook profile pages provide an outlet for maintaining a relationship, this study employed the frameworks of the theory of continuing bonds and the social information processing theory. These theories help elucidate how communication is used to maintain a connection with the deceased.

#### ***Theory of Continuing Bonds***

Using the Facebook profile page to maintain a connection with the deceased is exemplary of the continuing bonds theory, because it illustrates that relationships with the deceased can occur using an online setting. Ongoing communication signifies that the deceased have not been forgotten, but instead, that the relationship continues through a transformed state. This theory contributes to an understanding of the communication that occurs on these Facebook profile pages because it explicates the fundamental action of continued contact with the deceased. Based on the main premise of this theory, which contends that relationship maintenance is a healthy strategy when coping with loss rather than a sign of unresolved grief (Klass et al., 1996), writing to the deceased via a Facebook profile page can be indicative of coping, rather than denying the loss.

The key feature of continuing bonds in a healthy manner, however, is maintenance through a redefinition of the relationship. The living individual is tasked with establishing the new relationship, allowing that person to define the terms for the continued connection (Klass et al., 1996). The Facebook profile page provides an outlet for the redefinition to occur, either through single posts or a series of messages, because posters are equipped with the flexibility to utilize the medium as frequently as they wish. For the 388 individuals who only posted one time (51 percent) – and who typically did so during the first month from the death – the redefinition of the online relationship happened by acknowledging the physical absence and saying goodbye, thereby signifying the end of the *virtual* communication. When writing on the Facebook profile page of the deceased individual stops, the living indicates that maintenance through a SNS is no longer necessary, because the other individual cannot respond.

For the remaining 369 posters (49 percent), the redefinition transpired through more than one message. What this indicates is that the bond was redefined from a physical and virtual relationship, to solely a virtual relationship. In this instance, the living identified the deceased as someone who could receive the messages presented on his or her Facebook wall, but could not respond. Doing so frames the deceased individual as someone who is present in some capacity, rather than being completely gone. As a result, the Facebook profile page was used to redefine the relationship to either virtually ended, or as having transformed from physical and virtual, to solely virtual.

While the Facebook profile page provides a venue for the redefinition and relationship maintenance to occur, this component of the theory suggests that failure to redefine the relationship could result in the negative implications of unresolved grief. If posters deny the occurrence of death and reject the necessary transformation, continued interaction with the

deceased user's Facebook profile page has the potential to resemble a false reality, rather than an outlet for healthy grieving.

Beyond the initial step of redefining the relationship (in this case, from physical to virtual), Facebook profile pages enable posters to maintain connections with their newly defined partner. By writing to the deceased, the living indicate that they are making the effort to keep the connection alive. As the theory identifies, the frequency of communication with the deceased is likely to decrease over time (Klass et al., 1996), which explains why the number of posts in this sample decreased over time. For instance, during the first timeframe following death (0-1 months), 551 messages were written, while the second timeframe (2-6 months) only totaled 507 messages.

The theory of continuing bonds explains that despite the level of interaction, bond maintenance depends on maintaining some level of communication (Klass et al., 1996). This is where the Facebook profile page serves an additional purpose. Because the accessibility of these pages are unbounded by time and location for those who are "Friends" with the deceased, the profile serves as a semi-permanent place 'meeting place' with the deceased, much like a gravesite (Klass, 2006). Therefore, though posters may drift away from writing in this setting, as long as they maintain "Friend" status, the profile page provides the continual feeling of physical proximity to the deceased, thus knowing that one has the option to communicate at any moment (Klass, 2006).

Another feature of this theory explains that because relationships with the deceased are maintained, rather than 'let go,' the grieving process is never truly over (Klass et al., 1996). This component was reflected in the posts from the living to the deceased, primarily within the theme of "Processing the Death." The messages in this theme are the closest equivalent to the

traditional modes of coping with loss. Whereas the other two themes revealed patterns in relation to time, this theme was the only to remain consistent over time. The regularity of these messages supports this theory, illustrating that by maintaining relationships with the deceased on Facebook, the posters are simultaneously processing the death. Finally, this reflects that by interacting with these pages, the living have not “let go” of the loved or the memory of their death.

For years, a variety of actions have constituted continuing bonds, such as visiting a cemetery and verbally speaking to the deceased, however, interactions with a Facebook profile page provide insight into how new digital media facilitate this form of maintenance. This virtual interaction suggests that bonds can be continued online, not only through remembrance on memorial pages (DeGroot, 2012), but also through a Facebook profile page. This outlet serves as the online representation of the deceased individual, thus this venue provides a unique place for continuing bonds, allowing the living to not only talk about the deceased, but to talk to the deceased. Deleting the Facebook account of a deceased user symbolically resembles the deletion of that person from one’s life (Pennington, 2013), thus, by maintaining “Friend” status, the living hold on to a place for communication with the deceased.

The ways to maintain a relationship with deceased individuals are plentiful and have not been confined to a prescriptive list (Klass, 2006); thus, this research provides insight into how a specific component of technology influences one approach of continuing bonds.

### ***Social Information Processing Theory***

Whether framed as unresolved grief or a normal form of coping, maintaining a connection with the deceased is not a new concept; however, doing so in an online medium is less than 25 years old. As suggested by the social information processing theory, relationships

formed online can be just as meaningful as those formed offline; the process for doing so, though, is somewhat different (Walther, 1992). This is especially true for relationships between the living and the deceased. The foundations of SIP explicate how two living strangers can develop an online relationship, but in this instance, the principles of SIP illustrate how individuals use an online setting to develop a redefined relationship.

The first component of SIP explains that in the absence of verbal and nonverbal cues, users will creatively adapt to the medium in order to connect with others (Walther et al., 2005). Despite the inability for one member of the relationship to respond, the nature of the Facebook profile page provides cues for the living individual to receive. In this setting, the living individual has the option to initiate the interaction – by writing a message – and can view the photos, videos and notes created by the deceased prior to death as a ‘response.’ These features are what make the Facebook profile page unique from other memorializing spaces, because they act as the permanent ‘messages’ from the deceased. These features contribute to the formation of the redefinition process by filling in the hole that has been left by verbal and nonverbal cues, thus allowing the living individual to adapt to the medium. What this means is that the living individuals write to the deceased, and simultaneously, use these available ‘cues’ to learn about or remember the deceased.

When forming relationships, SIP contends that individuals are likely to develop stronger bonds when there is the anticipation for future interaction (Walther, 1997). This is the most significant component contributing to the formation of relationships with deceased individuals. As evident by the presence of the “Eventual Reunion” category, discussing a future interaction with the deceased occurred in more than 8 percent of all messages. This finding suggests that even in relationships where only one partner can respond, the anticipation for a future encounter

assists in developing the relationship. Much like strangers meeting online who plan to eventually meet face-to-face, individuals expected to see their deceased loved ones at a future time, thus they utilized the medium to convey that expectation and stay in touch until they met again. Evidence of this core component supports the notion that relationships with deceased persons can be developed online, specifically because bonds are stronger when the individuals believe they will eventually be united (Walther, 1992).

The social information processing theory elucidates how relationships are formed online; however, the current theory is limited when providing insight into how existing relationships are *maintained* online. This research extends the SIP theory to accommodate for the missing link, arguing that online maintenance occurs through written messages reflective of proactive efforts. Similar to how offline relationships can be maintained through letters, holiday cards and the sheer thought of the other (Rawlins, 1994), online relationships can be maintained through continued contact. The act of posting suggests that the living is letting the deceased know the relationship is not over, and that the poster ‘still exists’ as someone in their lives (Rabby & Walther, 2003). Though this research focuses on maintaining the relationship with the deceased, it is also reflective of how the same features on the Internet can be used to maintain relationships between two living individuals.

Beyond the act of posting, the content of messages written from the living to the deceased also reveals how this process unfolds. When attempting to maintain a relationship online, four types of topics were discussed including requests, checking in, updates, and eventual reunion. These topics all reflected ‘ordinary’ communication, suggesting that relationships are maintained by having “normal conversation.” Making requests suggested the living still sought the deceased individual as a partner for exchanging favors and thus, relationships could be virtually

maintained through a continued process of reciprocity. The category of “Checking In” was exemplary of the purposeful efforts made to maintain the relationship because these messages indicated the living was working to stay in touch with the deceased, despite physical absence. Updates serve to keep the deceased informed on the day-to-day events in the poster’s life, while an eventual reunion indicated the relationship was being maintained in preparation for a future interaction. These message categories indicate that purposeful textual messages have the power to continue a connection with another individual or the deceased.

Furthermore, this analysis reveals that over the course of time, messages reflective of relationship maintenance increased, indicating that time is also a factor in maintenance. As the act of posting and the topics of these messages suggests, relationships cannot only be formed online, but existing relationships can be maintained online through the proactive effort of staying in touch.

### **Practical Implications**

In addition to providing theoretical implications, the results of this research illuminate three practical implications concerning how individuals communicate about death in this particular digital setting. Specifically, these implications reflect *who* can utilize the page and *how* communication reflects the reactionary process, along with providing insight into how technology is eliminating barriers to prolonged public grief and relationship maintenance with the deceased.

Grieving in a public setting is often restricted to those who are ‘entitled’ to mourn, typically meaning those who are closely tied to the deceased, rather than sheer acquaintances (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004). This analysis revealed that the Facebook profile page was utilized by members of a widespread audience, from acquaintances (such as old classmates or just



“Facebook” friends) to members of one’s immediate family. The variety in connection to the deceased indicates that 1) loose connections do not mean one cannot be impacted by a death, and 2) the Facebook profile page is providing an outlet where all groups of individuals can feel comfortable maintaining communication with the deceased. This finding has significant implications for all individuals who feel uncomfortable attending wakes or funerals, but still need an outlet for expressing emotion and communicating with the deceased. The Facebook profile page establishes a place where all individuals with “Friendship” status who are affected by a death can openly share feelings, and thus, can avoid suppressing grief.

### ***Reacting through Remembrance***

The timing of posts reflective of “Remembering the Deceased” provides insight into the initial and public thought process of posters. This theme dominated the messages in the first month following death, appearing in 41 percent of all messages posted, and dropping off immediately thereafter. It was anticipated that the theme “Processing the Death” would be the most frequent in the early timeframes from death because the content of these messages reflects traditional conceptions of reacting to loss, and that messages of “Remembering the Deceased” would be steady over time. Instead, the opposite of this was true, demonstrating that messages of remembrance are a dominant way to react to the loss of a loved one. Additionally, this is a practice that becomes less significant as time progresses, further illuminating the role of remembrance right after loss. This suggests that remembrance plays a significant role for individuals initially attempting to comprehend a loss, because it focuses on the deceased individual, rather than the reaction of the living individual (as is the case with messages that “Process the Death”).

More significantly, however, is that messages reflective of “Remembering the Deceased” were rooted almost entirely in positivity. This establishes the profile as a place for only those who will share fond memories of the deceased while preventing others from destroying that memory. For example, in the single instance where a negative memory was shared, the post was deleted and the sister responded:

Just wanted yall know if it comes down to it and it keeps being a problem you WILL be removed from this page! This page is for good memories not for bull shit so take it some where else! THANKS !!! ♥

This emphasis on positivity indicates that there is an unspoken code of conduct on memorialized Facebook profile pages, particularly when building the memory of the deceased individual. If posters chose to break this code of conduct, they risk being semi-publically shamed by the others sharing the discursive space. The establishment of this code indicates that although the space is accessible and utilized by a vast audience, there are limitations on the types of messages that can be posted. For posters who chose to communicate with the deceased, this implication suggests that messages should reflect positivity.

### ***Breaking Barriers: Expanding Acceptability for Relationship Maintenance***

Maintaining some form of a connection with the deceased in a public setting was often perceived as a sign of unresolved psychological grief and denial of loss. As a result, mourners in Western society typically suppressed public expression of such emotions after an average of one year (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004). The utilization of Facebook profile pages as a way to ‘continue bonds’ with the deceased has the potential to modify this perception and further the notion that continuing bonds is a normal coping mechanism (Klass et al., 1996). Altering perceptions can occur as a result of two factors. First, with more than one billion Facebook users

(Smith et al., 2012), and 30 million of who are deceased (Blaha, 2012), the familiarity of Facebook is growing. As individuals continue to utilize these pages, the peculiarity of this use may decrease and instead, appear as a perceptually normal way of coping with loss. In this study alone, more than 750 different users interacted with 10 profile pages, demonstrating that this utilization is not limited to a few select individuals and thus, has the capability to grow.

Second, the eventual return to ‘normal’ communication suggests that the living individual has returned to a ‘normal’ lifestyle without the deceased. As a result, communication of continued maintenance becomes a symbol for the redefined relationship, rather than a denial of the loss. This means that the living have redefined the bond as something that exists online and by finding a new role for that individual, the bereaved can find comfort (Becker & Rothaupt, 2007). When messages return to ‘normal’ the act of posting appears ordinary, and thus, can be considered a typical and helpful way to handle loss.

This perceptual change can assist the bereaved in finding comfort through redefined and continued communication, rather than emotional suppression; thereby, changing how we talk about death in Western society. Typically, after the constructed ‘one-year’ timeframe, those in the social circle grow uncomfortable talking about loss (de Vries & Rutherford, 2004); however, in this setting, comfort is not sought from those in the surrounding social circle. Instead, as these findings suggested, communication and support are sought directly from the *deceased* individual through continued maintenance. Though messages appear in a semi-public setting for others to read, they are primarily *not* directed to that community, suggesting that the profile page can replace the community as a source of comfort. Not only does this form of communication bypass the awkwardness associated with discussing death, but also demonstrates how the deceased individual, even after death, can provide comfort to the living.

Because communication from the living to the deceased mirrors familiar actions, does so in a 'common place,' and is utilized by a growing audience, the act of continuing bonds in this semi-public space may become a perceptually typical way to handle loss. By morphing the opinions rooted in continuing bonds to something that is accepted, utilization of this medium can change how death is discussed in Western cultures, and thus, provide the bereaved with a permanent and accepted public space for coping with loss.

## Chapter 6 – Conclusion

The significant and growing advancement of technology has altered the way individuals communicate about death in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2009, Facebook contributed to this transformation by memorializing the profile pages of its deceased users. In doing so, Facebook created a space where the living could maintain connections with their deceased loved ones, for as long as the living person desired. With the capability to write directly *to* the deceased, in a space that feels as if those messages are received, posters are utilizing the Internet as a facilitator for maintaining bonds and therefore, defying the roots of the Western practice of publically ‘letting go.’

Using a content analysis, this study reveals that when writing on the Facebook profile page of a deceased individual, posters reflect their processing of death, remembrance of the deceased, and efforts to maintain the relationship. As time from the death passes, communication from the living evolves from an acknowledgment of death through remembrance of the deceased, to typical and more ordinary topics of conversation. These results suggest that the Facebook profile page is an exemplary of how the living can maintain healthy relationships with their deceased loved ones. Moreover, this research reveals that whether one is an acquaintance or family member of the deceased, the Facebook profile page is as an inviting place for all types of “Friends” to maintain communication with their lost loved ones. Finally, through the lens of the social information processing theory, these findings indicate that through proactive efforts, relationships can be effectively maintained in an online setting, even when one partner cannot respond.

This research aimed to contribute to the growing body of literature unpacking the role of technology in communicating with the deceased. Perhaps more significantly, however, this

study strived to identify how writing messages to the deceased in a semi-public setting can provide comfort when coping with loss. Maintaining a connection with the deceased can be a healthy way to mourn the loss of a loved one, and using the Facebook profile page to maintain this connection aids the living in redefining the role of that individual in their lives.

### **Future Research**

Through the examination of 10 profile pages of deceased individuals, this study revealed what the living communicate to the deceased in a semi-public setting. This study was restricted to profile pages of individuals who died between the ages of 17 and 22, providing insight into what individuals write to members of a particular age group. Future research should conduct a similar content analysis of profiles from additional age brackets to determine whether age of the deceased has an impact on the types of messages that are written. Of the initial 21 profiles that were collected for this research, four belonged to individuals who died between the ages of 40 and 65-years-old, indicating that memorialized profiles are not limited to youth and young adults. These pages also consisted of messages, though there were significantly fewer overall. This expansion would continue to contribute to an overall understanding of how the living communicate with the deceased by revealing if the content of messages and frequency of interaction change based on the age bracket of the deceased individual. Doing so would demonstrate whether this communicative act is indicative of a widespread development, or simply dominant among younger audiences. This research found that individuals of all ages wrote to the deceased, from young siblings and friends to grandparents, however, it did not account for how (or if) age impacted the messages that were posted. In addition to age of the deceased, future research should account for age of the poster to determine whether this demographic feature impacts how the page is utilized for communicating with the deceased.

Beyond age, additional studies should continue to examine how maintenance strategies with the deceased develop over time. Because the memorialization of Facebook pages is still in its relatively early stages, posts could only be examined in the two-year timeframe following death. Within this span, the average number of posts decreased each month. The theory of continuing bonds suggests that any form of communication to the deceased is likely to decrease over time (Klass et al., 1996), thus, an expanded analysis of time would provide an outline for this communication and discover if there is a point when this form of contact ceases. Moreover, an extension of time would reveal if there becomes a point when messages indicative of “Processing the Death” also demonstrate a change. Within the analyzed two-year timeframe, this theme of posts illustrated no significant change and revealed that processing death is ongoing. An extension of time could determine if processing the death on these pages ever fades, and thus, be explicative of newly constructed ‘acceptable’ timetables for coping with loss in an online setting. Furthermore, this future study should be coupled with studies of offline grieving practices to uncover whether the Western cultural expectations and perceptions for “letting go” change as online relationship maintenance with the deceased continues.

Finally, future research should continue to examine the role of the Internet, particularly Facebook, as a medium for modern grieving practices. Additional Facebook studies should come in two areas. First, this research unpacked the content of messages written to the deceased and how this changes over time; however, additional research should question *why* those labeled the *vocal minority* (Pennington, 2013) write messages within these categories. Essentially, this examination should ask posters to identify the thought process and motivation provoking that person to write each particular message-type, such as sharing updates or checking in. Doing so would create a more complete understanding of how interacting with Facebook can be used as an

ongoing coping mechanism. Second, Facebook is continuing to create new features for discussing death and dealing with loss. For example, in 2012, just three years after developing the memorialization policy for profiles of deceased users, Facebook launched an app allowing deceased users to send messages to their living counterparts (Pujol, 2012). Titled, “If I Die,” this app allows individuals to prepare goodbye messages, videos or photos that will be posted on that individual’s Facebook wall after their death has been confirmed. Messages can be directed to wide audiences or particular individuals, allowing the deceased to have control in his or her final words (Pujol, 2012). Perhaps more significant, however, is that this app allows deceased individuals to use communication as a means to maintain their existing relationships, even after they have passed. Future studies should examine the function this app has in furthering online relationship maintenance with the deceased and whether receiving a digital “response” from the deceased is beneficial or harmful in the grieving process.

The purpose of this study was to identify how the living maintain relationships with their deceased loved ones by writing messages on that individual’s Facebook profile page. By dissecting the content written in this setting, this study revealed that in messages to the deceased, posters process the death, remember the deceased, and maintain the relationship. Although the prescriptions shaping the Western grieving process are rooted in the idea of ‘letting go,’ this research supports the contemporary recognition that death does not signify the end of a relationship. With purposeful communication, this venue provides a space for relationships to be maintained with the deceased over the course of time. One friend exemplifies this notion posting; “i know it’s not pointless to write on your facebook wall, so i’ll keep writing.”



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## Appendix A – Facebook Profile Pages Summary

<b>Profile ID</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Cause of Death</b>	<b>Number of Messages</b>	<b>Number of Posters</b>
1	Male	18	Unknown Illness	243	83
2	Female	17	Car Accident	494	85
3	Male	22	Car Accident	346	150
4	Male	18	Cancer	203	29
5	Male	18	Murder	239	92
6	Male	19	Drug Overdose	64	31
7	Male	19	Car Accident	117	66
8	Male	19	Car Accident	108	32
9	Male	17	Suicide	659	159
10	Male	19	Car Accident	60	30



## Appendix B - Emotion Classification

<b>Negative Emotions</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Guilt	I'm sorry. / I should have. / I wish I would have. / I feel guilty. This is my fault.
Sadness / Emotional Pain	This hurts so much. / I can't go on without you. / I can't stop crying. / I am so sad. (Descriptions of physical pains of emotion)
Anger	I hate that this happened. / I am so angry right now. / This is so wrong. / You did nothing to deserve this.
Confusion	I just don't understand. / I will never comprehend why this had to happen to you.
Denial / Disbelief	I cannot accept that you are gone. / I still think I am going to run into you. / I can't believe you've been gone. / This is so unreal to me.
Emptiness	I feel so numb. / I feel empty inside.
<b>Positive Emotions</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Gratitude / Appreciation	I am so grateful for all you have done. / Thank you for taking care of me. / Thank you for watching over us. / Thank you for the nice weather.
Happiness	I am finally happy again. / It made me happy thinking about you.
Tranquility	I am at peace. / I finally feel calm. / I can stop worrying about you.
<b>Mixed Emotions</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Positive and Negative Combinations	Every time I think of you, my heart breaks – but then I smile and am happy, because that is what you would've wanted. / I will never understand why this had to happen to you, but I take comfort knowing you have stopped suffering.

## Appendix C - Inter-coder Reliability of Message Categories

Category	Cohen's <i>kappa</i> ( $\kappa$ )
Explicit Expression of Emotions	.89
Acknowledgment of an Afterlife	.90
Original / Non-Original Creative Expression	1.0
Asking Questions	1.0
Presence	.89
Shared Memories	.88
Character	.96
Relationship Before Death	.82
Dedication	.90
Updates	.74
Making Requests	.89
Checking In	.84
Eventual Reunion	.97
Common Expressions	.97
Holiday Greetings	.92
Use of Emoticon	.97
Use of Technology	.84

## Appendix D - Categorical Frequencies in the Data Sample

Category	Percentage in Data Sample
Common Expressions	72.6%
Presence	23.1%
Explicit Emotions	21.6%
Making Requests	20.6%
Checking In	20.0%
Updates	13.9%
Acknowledging an Afterlife	13.4%
Shared Memories	11.6%
Eventual Reunion	8.4%
Holidays	7.7%
Relationship Before Death	7.0%
Character	7.0%
Dedication	4.2%
Other	3.2%
Original / Non-Original Creative Expressions	1.9%
Asking Questions	0.6%