Reconnecting with the Dead via Facebook: 
Examining Transcorporeal Communication as a Way to Maintain Relationships 
Extended Dissertation Abstract 
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The purpose of this study was to examine the grief-related communication on Facebook memorial group walls. Three research questions guided the study as I sought to explore general characteristics of messages posted, how people regarded their own participation in the groups, and characteristics of Transcorporeal Communication (TcC), the communication between the living and the deceased.

To respond to the research questions, I used grounded theory methods and asynchronous online interviews. I also utilized several of Goffman’s notions of human behavior to provide a more thorough analysis of the communication in the groups. In the pilot study, I used grounded theory methods to examine messages directed to the deceased on 10 memorial group walls. Analysis of a second set of walls challenged and tested the initial themes discerned in the pilot study. To further explore people’s participation in the groups, I also conducted online, asynchronous interviews with five people who wrote regularly on Facebook memorial group walls. Interviewees indicated that their relationship and communication with the deceased remained similar to the relationship and communication that they had with the deceased before he or she died. In these analyses, I found that three types of communication, based on the senders and the receivers, were utilized in the groups.

First, people were writing to the deceased as if the deceased was still alive. This functioned to both make sense of the death and maintain bonds with the deceased. By writing to the deceased, people were attempting to maintain relational continuity with their loved one. This appeared to be an important aspect to people’s griefwork, as they were trying to reorganize their worldviews to now include a world in which their friend is dead. Talking to the deceased friend is one way to help the living make sense the death and still maintain a sense of normalcy. If you look at some of the postings from people to their deceased friends, they talk about everyday events – who went to prom with whom, engagements, parties, etc. I termed this kind of communication “Transcorporeal Communication.” “Trans” indicates that the communication occurs in a different state, and “corporeal” indicates a relationship to a physical material body. Deceased people no longer maintain a physical presence, thus, the messages are directed at someone who is in a different state of being physically present. The transcorporeal communication on the walls fell into one of 12 categories: shock, technology-related references, prose, spirituality, lamentations and questions, phatic communication, memories, continued presence and reminders, updates, appreciation, promises and requests, and eventual reunion.

In addition to writing messages to the deceased, people wrote to other group members, utilizing task and relational messages. People communicated with other group members using both task and relational communication – much like any other group uses. They were supportive and caring, much like an online support group would function. They also accomplished tasks, such as planning informal, post-funeral memorials or making T-shirts and wristbands to memorialize the deceased.

Finally, I recognized the presence of people who didn’t know the deceased. These “Emotional Rubbernecker” wrote to the deceased and to the group members, even though they had never met the person who died. These people stumbled across the group or saw the death in the newspaper and searched them on Facebook. I likened these people to the same people who
slow down to look at car crashes – or those who love to watch others arguing. The Emotional Rubbernecker appeared to want to identify with the death without actually being emotionally involved. They offered condolences, asked how the person died, and talked about how sad they were about the death. It seemed that some of the Rubbernecker just wanted the attention of others because they “knew” the deceased, while others appeared to genuinely be upset about the loss of a young person. Sometimes group members disliked the Rubbernecker’s presence, and other times they welcomed the support.

Overall, the wall analyses and interviews revealed that people posted messages to multiple audiences: the self, the deceased, group members and “lurkers.” Due to the numerous audiences, the wall posts served various functions. These overarching objectives included grieving, maintaining relational continuity, giving or receiving social support, and Rubbernecking. Analysis of the walls and interviews also indicated that individuals utilized a unique form of communication, TcC, as they wrote messages to the deceased. This act raised theoretical questions about the nature of the communication. I posited a model of TcC and its components, including continued bonds, the deceased’s presence, and the inner representation of the deceased. The study concludes with a discussion of its limitations and suggestions for future research.