

LOG-ON, CHECK IN, AND SEEK SUPPORT:
A COMPARATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS ON THE IMPACT OF COLLECTIVE
MOURNING AS A MODERN FORM OF GRIEF COMMUNICATION

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Communication

Austin Peay State University
May 2020

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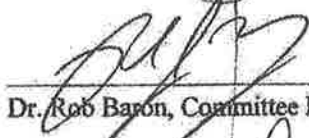
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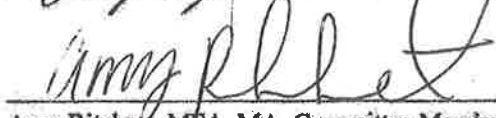
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Hailey D. Perry

04/22/2020

This research is dedicated to all of those we grieve. A special dedication is given to my grandparents, Walter and Meelan Perry, and my best friend, Jo Ellen Huffman. Your lives will forever be loved and cherished.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my parents, Todd and Teresa Perry, for instilling in me a strong work ethic and an understanding of the beauty in creative thinking. Without their guidance, none of my success would be possible. I would also like to thank my siblings: Erin, Joseph, Josh, and Karissa. You all make life worth exploring. I would like to thank my wonderful and supportive friends Tara and Casey. Your support during these years has been appreciated and welcomed more than you know. I would also like to thank Dr. Tracy Nichols for the constant encouragement throughout my time at APSU. Without you, this thesis would not be as impactful as it is. I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Robert Baron and Professor Amy Ritchart who spent a great deal of time pouring over my research and providing guidance on improvements. Of course, I must thank the entire Department of Communication at APSU and each of the faculty members who have invested in my education. You all have truly made these two years wonderfully exciting. Lastly, I would like to thank my husband, Tyler Williams, for all of his love, support, encouragement, and patience. You have helped me make all of this possible and I am forever grateful for all of the meaning that your life adds to mine.

ABSTRACT

Grief has evolved throughout the digital age with the introduction of social media platforms and online support groups. This comparative content analysis focused on selected social media support groups and the interactions that impact the users' ability to process and communicate personal grief. Specifically, this study examined communication theories and processes related to grieving the death of a loved one. Patterns of human behavior via computer mediated technology emerged utilizing a content analysis methodological approach to analyze online memorialization, grief sharing, and collective social support. Two Facebook support groups were examined. From personal stories to pleas for help and hope, the postings revealed communication patterns associated with human behavior and the perceived connection that social media provided the bereaved members of both selected groups. As society progresses and technologies advance, the presentation and communication of emotion have evolved. Group posts, comments, and interactions observed in this study provided an example of grief communication that social media groups may offer grieving individuals. Findings indicated in the research conducted may indicate a cultural shift in the healing role computer mediated communication (CMC) may deliver throughout the journey of grief.

Keywords: grief, grief communication, grief sharing, online memorialization, social media, privacy rules and disclosure, collective mourning, mourning rituals, post-mortem identity, cybermemorials, eternal memorialization, conversational maxims, social exchange theory, and social penetration theory.

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Chapter I

Introduction

For two decades, researchers have spent considerable time and resources strategically examining the similarities and differences that exist in face-to-face and online communication. Existing research explored the significant impact of both forms of communication on interpersonal relationships (Basinger, Wehrman, McAninck, 2016; Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Frost, Honeycutt, Heath, 2017) the success and failure of online communication (Brandon, 2016; Carr, Hayes, Sumner, 2018; Okdie, Guadagno, Bernieri, Geers, McJorney-Vesotski, 2011), as well as the ability to relate to one another using computer-mediated communication (Brubaker, Gillian, Dourish, 2013; Carroll & Landry, 2010; Giaxoglou, Döveling, Pitsillides, 2017; Jiang, Bazarova, Hancock, 2013). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been defined as communication taking place through multiple electronic mediums and has specific characteristics such as a lack of formal conduct expectations, a multimodal structure, and its impermanence (McQuail, 2005). Research presented in this thesis was specifically designed to examine the intricacies of online interactions regarding grief communication via a comparative content analysis that utilized selected social media Facebook groups to examine collective mourning as a form of modern grief communication.

Statement of the Problem

A unique dichotomy exists between the two types of communication. It has been claimed that face-to-face communication (FtF) is a more intimate approach to interpersonal relationships (Okdie, Guadagno, Bernieri, Geers, & McJorney-Vesotski, 2011). Okdie et al. (2011) explored impression formation and the results indicated that FtF communication allowed for a better gauge of character. The findings also indicated that those using CMC were more self-centered

compared to their FtF counterparts. Okdie et al. (2011) attributed this finding to the fact that during FtF communication individuals focus more on the other party due to the physical space and normative behaviors regarding listening cues. However, with the rise of online groups and social media, online communication has increased as many individuals are connecting through social media. This development of online communication caused communication researchers to continue to take into consideration the evolution of social interactions by means of developing technologies. The ability to communicate connections through technological advancements has also been considered yet additional examination to determine the impact of a relatively new form of interpersonal communication is needed.

Recent research by Brandon (2016) implied that FtF did indeed produce a higher amount of connectedness but was only minimally ranked higher than CMC. As online communication has allowed the user to transcend both time and space, CMC has embodied new meanings. Hine (2000) used the term “flow” to explain how this phenomenon of connectedness takes place. Simply stated, the emphasis on connection is much greater than that of location, and this type of connection can take place in “a disordered temporal collage of jumbled tenses” (Hine, 2000).

One potential reason social media users may experience a sense of increased connectedness lies in the ability to create their own messages that can cover a variety of topics, otherwise known as user-generated content. The rise in user-generated content has created an environment unique to any from our past. From blogs and YouTube channels to social media support groups, users are becoming more willing to self-disclose with one another more than ever before. Interconnectedness does not end with posts, comments, or trivial “likes.” Friendships are formed over mutual interests and shared common experiences. The lines between FtF communication and online CMC are increasingly blurred by the ability of technology to

connect individuals using video software that allows for a similar experience to being present, in a physical space, with another individual. Researchers continue to evaluate the progress of communication in the virtual world and online communication as it relates to the concept of connectedness that is experienced in a traditional FtF encounter.

Grief Communication

Grief communication is one of the lesser developed areas of interpersonal communication. Significant sources of information that exist regarding grief communication may often be discovered in an educational context. In an educational setting, textbooks including DeVito's *The Interpersonal Communication Book*, eschew communicating grief within interpersonal relationships. This approach may leave students ill-equipped to address the life-altering and unavoidable events that follow loss. In addition, grief communication is commonly isolated to a section within a chapter of interpersonal communication (DeVito, 2016).

Beyond the interpersonal communication, grief communication is also absent from a majority of organizational communication literature and research. Based on the gap in existing research on this specific aspect of grief communication, organizational communication scholars who invested in understanding more about grief and how it is communicated in virtual and online venues might potentially increase the ability to understand the effectiveness, or lack of effectiveness, of communication for organizations. Grief communication research conducted previously indicated that this form of communication can strengthen interpersonal relationships (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005), as well as increase awareness, promote leadership strategies, and challenge organizational culture regarding employee needs and leader-member relations (Kelly, 2002; Bauer & Murray, 2018). With increased focus given to the impact that grief can have in everyday life and professional communication, the more individuals may become aware of how

it manages to permeate interactions in both individual and collective organizational communication. Effective grief communication can forge relationships by giving individuals the opportunity to explore these topics with their families, friends, and in some cases, co-workers.

Grief communication addresses the physical act of communicating needs and desires during a pivotal moment in time and may assist those experiencing the loss of a loved one to better understand the process of grieving as a whole. Understanding grief and the barriers that it presents in communication practices may be a vital component to unlocking more meaningful communication messages. The exclusion of grief communication from curriculum and institutional research may promote the taboo nature of this form of communication and continues to propel the value of additional research in this area by scholars. Ryan Ord (2009) explained this concept in his research:

There are many ways for people to engage with and embody grief. What these engagements have in common is that they are considered "alternative" and often discouraged. Western society does not adequately recognize the diverse ways in which people grieve, and thus does not readily facilitate alternative ways of grieving. This is indicated in labour laws and policies that allow individuals to take only minimal time off from employment without consequence following a death. This shows a clear lack of recognition of the unique experiences every individual has with loss and serves to reinforce dominant discursive constructions of grief. It also reinforces the great need to ask questions and be critical when thinking about grief. (p.207)

By continuing to see grief as an emotional process with specific, linear steps, individuals who do not follow the normative pattern are left to feel isolated. Existing stigmas revolving around discussions about the deceased are prevalent and can limit an individual's willingness to share

feelings associated with their loved one's life and death. The professional norms of the workplace may mandate specific actions (i.e. not discussing personal struggle with grief, little mention of the deceased, or an expectation to "move-on" quickly), but employers and human resource teams may work to establish a workplace environment that provides an opportunity for employees and ensure that their grief is treated with care while bereaved.

A gap in research exists regarding the way online users interact with one another, and to what degree they interact with one another, within the online grief groups that they belong. With the invention of Facebook and other social media platforms, the use of online support groups is growing. There may be value in examining online relationships in order to measure their possible effectiveness and the reasoning behind meaningful disclosure. Social exchange theory and social penetration theory provide a roadmap to how online users may interact. However, exploration of the dialogue of comments is needed in order to determine if social media interactions follow established interpersonal FtF norms.

Description of Terms

For the purpose of this study, a description of key terms has been included in order to help guide the reader through the use and interpretation of key words or phrases presented in the research. The terms included were used throughout this paper and the descriptions provided were intended to clarify what was meant by the vernacular that may have been unfamiliar to the reader or presented in a manner in this research that characterized a different perspective.

Blogs. Defined as a website where an individual person, or people representing an organization, write regularly about recent events or topics that interest them, usually with photos and links to other websites that they find interesting (Oxford Learners Dictionary Online, 2020). In this research, a blog represented a medium of communication that individuals used to

remember their loved ones. Typically, blogs are consistently updated webpages that create a space for the author and contributors to reminisce about a person's life and were written in a more conversational style. Blogs were maintained by an individual or a small group of people such as a family or friend group.

Collective mourning. Defined as grief that is felt by a community. This size of the community may vary depending on the scope of the loss (i.e. natural disasters, celebrities, figureheads). Social media has allowed for the act of collective mourning to take place in a digital space, uniting people who are bereaved by electronic means. These individuals may or may not know one another personally. Rather, they may be connected to one another via the deceased individual's life (What's Your Grief, 2017).

Computer-mediated communication (CMC). McQuail (2005) defined this term as communication that takes place with at least two or more electronic mediums.

Connectedness. Hine (2000) defined connectedness as the feeling that individuals experience as they learn more about one another and begin to feel a sense of belonging or affinity towards another person or group.

Cybermemorials. The primary function of a cybermemorial is to create a space in which others may share stories of the deceased or provide a digital online space for individuals to mourn. A cybermemorial may exist in the form of a blog. However, there are many online memorial options. Cybermemorials included the deceased individual's Facebook page or a Facebook RIP (rest in peace) page that was created in honor of the individual (Brubaker, Gillian, & Dourish, 2013). A cybermemorial is synonymous with an online memorial for the purposes of this study.

Face-to-face (FtF) communication. Crowley and Mitchell (1994) defined this type of communication as a social interaction carried out without any mediating technology.

Communication taking place in which all parties are physically present with one another. This category of communication allows each party to convey facial expressions and verbal and nonverbal cues, as well as interpret the body language used by one another.

Grief clichés. Defined by the researcher as a platitude or phrase that has become commonplace to use while offering condolences to a bereaved individual. Examples of these types of grief clichés include “I’m sorry for your loss,” “Time heals all wounds,” and “It is all part of a greater plan.” These phrases have been used for years to offer superficial comfort but have more recently become the antithesis of social support.

Grief sharing. A term created that described the ideology of individuals sharing their loss with others in order to ease the burden of carrying their grief independently. Facebook groups, such as the ones explored in this study, provide a virtual setting for this type of online divulgence to occur. (Giaxoglou, Döveling, & Pitsillides, 2017).

Impact. Defined as the powerful effect that something has on somebody/something (Oxford Learners Dictionary Online, 2020). This research utilized the term to emphasize the profound effect that openly discussing grief and bereavement via Facebook support groups may have on an individual.

Original Content. Defined by the researcher as the crafting of a unique and personalized Facebook posting to the support group feed. This action requires including private information about an individual’s life and experience related to the topic of grief.

Perception. Defined as an idea, a belief or an image an individual may have as a result of how something is seen or understood (Oxford Online Dictionary, 2020). For the purpose of this study, the researcher utilized this term to explain how members of the Facebook support groups selected for analysis understand and discern the interactions surrounding seeking out social support that took place on the social media platform.

User(s). Defined by the researcher as an individual who has an account on a social media platform that is used to communicate with others in the same social media platform.

Self-disclosure. The communication process of revealing information about oneself to others. The amount of self-disclosure may be related to the relationship that individuals have with another person. Self-disclosure includes a variety of information that may include demographics, personal preferences, or deeper revelations about individual aspirations or fears. When a person begins to self-disclose to another person, one or both parties may begin to feel a sense of connectedness based on the level of self-disclosure that has occurred between the individuals (Ignatius & Kokkonen, 2007).

Contribution of the Study and Research Plan

The research presented in this paper seeks to explore and provide clarification in the areas of grief communication that have been discussed to this point. The data for this study was conducted over a period of eight days utilizing a comparative content analysis focusing on the communication theories of Social Exchange (Homans, 1961), Social Penetration (Altman & Taylor, 1973), and the Maxims of Conversation (Grice, 1975). The criteria for the social media content selected for this research was based on member count, consistent activity (i.e. postings, comments, and reactions from group members) within the group, and original content within the postings that resulted in ongoing conversations in the comment sections. Two Facebook groups

were then selected for examination. This study attempted to fill an existing gap in research related to the topic of grief communication by answering research questions and hypotheses about specific grief communication and social media applying constructs from the social exchange theory, the social penetration theory, and conversational maxims.

The goal of Chapter Two was to provide a review of the literature associated with the proposed research plan to establish the history, context, and gaps that existed related to grief communication and social media as outlined previously for this specific investigation. Three research questions and two hypotheses are proposed based on grief communication as expressed utilizing the theories of social exchange theory, social penetration theory, and the maxims of conversation as evidenced in the selected social media groups presented in this study.

Chapter Three will deliver detailed information regarding the theories and methodology employed in the study to address the research questions and hypotheses presented at the conclusion of Chapter Two. The research design, data collection process, and analytical methods will be shared in this chapter to develop the comparative content analysis between the two selected Facebook groups.

In Chapter Four, the researcher will highlight the results of the study. Chapter Four will discuss the key discoveries made through the content analysis. In addition, a summary and discussion of the findings as well as suggestions for potential limitations of the study, and implications for further research will be explored in this final chapter.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

This chapter examined literature, theories, and recent texts surrounding online memorialization and grief communication. This review of literature provided abundant resources from previous studies involving online grief communication as well as an examination into interpersonal factors that contribute to the inclination of an individual to discuss the personal bereavement experience with their social support groups.

Theoretical Framework

Social exchange theory was developed by George Homans. Homans (1961) pursued the explanation of human relationships in a method that would resonate and help to educate others on the thought process of decision making within relationships. The researcher noted that relationships involved the use of individual internalized cost-benefit analysis. Individuals within the relationship must use their own deduction system to determine if the relationship is worth pursuing. This type of behavior is ongoing with all parties taking constant inventory of the costs versus benefits of further disclosure. The cost in this research was the amount of effort or resources that were being expended by an individual. In their text, *Theories of Human Communication*, Littlejohn and Foss (2011) state, "If something will be very costly, you will think twice before you do it. If the results could be very rewarding, you may go ahead, despite the costs" (p. 236). Benefits are gained by utilizing those resources or exerting those efforts. The profit is the net gain between the two factors. Homans (1961) also claimed that the behaviors described were self-directed and a result of an internal process, contrary to what behaviorists believed about external motivations for such actions.

Simplified, every individual may have asked the question, “What is in it for me?” Applying this theory to the grief communication that has taken place in online support groups, individuals possibly responded to this question in a variety of ways. Potential costs associated with sharing about loss and grief included the fear of opening up to others about a very intimate topic, emotional wellbeing that may be affected by retelling a painful experience, or the fear of not having personal emotions or thoughts be validated by group members. The benefits of sharing personal grief within a social media support group included having a space to openly communicate an individual’s deepest feelings associated with the death of a loved one, group members attesting to the intense emotions that are brought on by grief, and the understanding that the user is not alone in a seemingly isolated life experience after the death of a loved one.

Homan’s (1961) Social exchange theory was founded on five specific propositions: success, stimulus, value, deprivation-satiation, and rationality. First, the success proposition stated that individuals will repeat specific behaviors if they are more likely to be rewarded. The stimulus proposition maintained that replication of rewarded behaviors have similar stimuli to previously remunerated actions. The third proposition was that of value. If the value of a behavior is higher, it is more likely to be repeated. The deprivation-satiation proposition explained that if a behavior does not result in the perceived reward, the individual may become aggressive. Likewise, if a behavior receives an unexpected reward, satiation will occur. The last proposition is that of rationality. Homans (1961) believed that people made their behavioral decisions in a rational manner. Rational deductions are calculated by an individual’s internal perceived profit. Thus, if the benefit was higher than the cost, an individual was more likely to move forward with the relationship or action based on a higher profitability.

Social penetration theory was developed by social psychologists Altman and Taylor (1973) and the research the authors conducted proposed that relationships develop over time through deepening interpersonal communication between parties and focuses on mutual self-disclosure between individuals. Social penetration theory has three foundations: breadth, depth, and frequency. Altman and Taylor (1973) suggested the complimentary “onion theory.” The onion theory claims that to grow a relationship, the peeling back of layers is mandatory. Through disclosure, individuals get to the “core” of themselves and the relationship as a whole. Littlejohn and Foss (2011) state, “Those things that are close to your center are farthest from your outside, farthest from what others can see or detect” (p.237).

Social penetration theory consists of five stages: orientation, exploratory affective, affective, stable, and de-penetration. The first stage is superficial in nature and focused on the breadth of a relationship. The first stage topics of discourse may include small talk and basic introduction of demographics. Overtime, and through frequent mutual self-disclosure, the theory claimed that individuals will progress into the exploratory affective stage. This stage begins to delve deeper and express personal opinions on a variety of topics. As meaningful conversation continues and individuals become more comfortable with one another, the individual will begin to discuss deeper feelings and expose truths about themselves trusting that there will be no judgment. This was referred to as the affective stage in the research and it was a result of deeper puncturing of self and forged friendship. Frustrations and criticisms may occur during this phase due to the disclosure of private matters and decisions. However, if the individuals progress forward, the relationship may begin to evolve into a more permanent interpersonal connection.

Over time, friendships and relationships may plateau into what is known as the stable stage. Individuals may remain very affectionate towards one another. The true cognitive self is

found at the core of this stage but is rarely ever shown even in the most intimate friendships. The last stage established in the social penetration theory is that of de-penetration. In the de-penetration stage, individuals must significantly weigh the costs and rewards of disclosure. During this time of personal gain analysis, some relationships may begin to deteriorate due to a variety of reasons (i.e. moving, change in personal circumstances). It is at this point that the social exchange theory emerges. Relationships will dissolve over time if an individual, or both individuals, believe that the costs of the relationship are greater than that of the reward (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

There are various distinguishing aspects to social penetration theory. Altman and Taylor (1973) believed that disclosure takes place at a much more rapid pace in the beginning stages. As individuals are getting to know one another, they are eager to share surface-level information. However, as the topics begin to intensify, the pace of conversation begins to slow. This may be a result of using caution while proceeding in the relationship. Over-disclosure or under-disclosure may keep the parties from continuing forward. Personal and cultural boundaries may also be a factor. Dynamics such as reciprocity are also evident through the passage of shallow disclosure to an intimate disclosure.

Online grief share adheres to the same stages that are established in the social penetration theory. Individuals may first introduce themselves to those in the online group and then begin explaining specific reasons for joining an online support group. It is possible that over an undetermined amount of time, they will begin to share about their struggles and challenges. Users may even find themselves giving their opinions on their idea of “the afterlife.” Through online platforms, users begin to have discussions and offer condolences to other online group members. It is through frequent and purposeful disclosure that members of the online group will

begin to interact on deeper levels and offer more insight to intimate personal struggles with grief and the details of the death of family members or friends.

This study also explored and utilized the four conversational maxims defined by Grice (1975). The four maxims included quantity, quality, relation, and manner. When the gravity of grief communication is added, the importance of the principles is heightened. Littlejohn and Foss (2011) explained the role of maxims and cooperation by stating, “Cooperation here does not necessarily mean expression of agreement, but it does mean that one is willing to contribute something in line with the purpose of the conversation” (p.195).

The first maxim is that of quantity. It is within the maxim of quantity that an individual begins to self-disclose information that is informative. During conversations, this maxim dictates that the information that is provided does not become excessive. Next, the maxim of quality is explored. Quality, in the context of this study, is noted by the content shared within the postings and comments within the two Facebook groups observed. Within conversations, this maxim focuses on truthfulness. The quality of the message shared within a conversation must help to contribute to the relationship in a way that is open and honest.

The maxim of relation dictates that in order for a conversation to be purposeful to those involved, the contributions must be pertinent to the discussion taking place. In the case of social media, posts that are added or comments that are offered need to be correlated to the larger discourse taking place. Facebook has specifically designed the “groups” feature with this thought in mind. Groups allow users to have a virtual space to talk openly about a variety of topics. Some groups enforce rules that ask that the posts and comments on those pages stay on topic. This creates a sense of unity as well as maintains the integrity of the collective purpose.

The maxim of manner is directly associated with the way in which information is shared. Grice (1975) gave specific rules regarding the manner in which conversation takes place. Obscurity, ambiguity, and intricate language is discouraged. Those engaged in conversation must be able to understand and interpret what is being shared. Clarity is key when progressing to more meaningful interpersonal connections in communication. Grice also indicated that the content should be presented in a brief and orderly fashion. The individual should be highlighting the main details in a way that the receiver can make sense of the content. Of the four maxims, manner, is often most frequently broken. This may be due to the emotional nature of grief communication. At times, individuals may be at a loss for words and a user may rely on obscure thoughts or feelings to share personal stories. In order to “feel heard” an individual may choose to type a lengthy post rather than a brief synopsis. By defying this maxim, individuals may engage in more meaningful conversations and bond over the inability to easily communicate the feelings associated with grief.

Online Grief

The rise of social media and the willingness of users to publish more intimate details of their lives have indicated a common thread - grief share and public mourning are more present now more than ever before. Online grief sharing is the act of publicly announcing a loved one’s death and the struggles of navigating personal grief. It becomes a more personal obituary and, in some cases, evolves into a user-created eulogy.

However, as social media users continue the trend of online grief sharing, it has become evident that the general population is ill-equipped to discuss death or loss. Facebook users may be able to identify individuals who are struggling with grief when other users interact on a deceased individual’s Facebook profile. However, as Lippert (2013) explained:

Many interviewees used Facebook as a cue to let them know when their friends or family needed support in-person. The bereaved in this study did experience discomfort when discussing their grief with other people in-person, underscoring the potentially harmful taboo of avoiding death in conversations in Western culture. Facebook – as a tool to process grief – may be a first step towards easing this taboo in Western culture. (p. 53)

Individuals may stray away from discussing death and grief. The bereaved may feel more comfortable approaching the subject through an online medium in order to have these conversations at a distance through social media platforms. This step towards participation in grief communication may promote future FtF conversations.

From the increased number of personal social media pages to online groups devoted to those who have experienced the death of a loved one, the topic of death and dying may find a platform that is no longer alienated or treated as taboo. Users are reminded of their loved ones when memories resurface from years past or when others post on the deceased person's social media profiles. In addition, the memorialization of social media pages continues to increase as users die, while families and friends utilize this relatively new feature to immortalize the deceased. This process of memorialization may be achieved through a variety of means. Users may find themselves posting about the deceased on their own pages or on the deceased person's social media page. Social media users may create dedicated pages to sharing memories or photos of their loved one as a form of communication during the grieving process.

The act of grieving has evolved into a public mourning ritual that can be found on a variety of social media platforms. Some of this transition is a result of the role social media has come to play within society. What has always been considered an isolating feeling is slowly

becoming a more widely connected engagement with others, some of whom may be strangers. In his book, *Journalism and Memorialization in the Age of Social Media*, Peter Gloviczki notes the importance of how social media provides a relatively new aspect to communicating about the difficult taboo topics within our lives. Gloviczki (2015) writes:

Framing these discussions as legacy construction, much in the same way as online memorial group users tend to frame their conversations in the aftermath of tragedies, may make the conversations easier to engage in within American culture, though such topics remain rather difficult nonetheless. (p. 103)

With this, Gloviczki provided validity to the potential importance of studying this form of online interaction with special consideration given for the Western cultural avoidance of conversations on death and dying. The virtual memorials mentioned created a new space for users to login and participate in conversations of remembrance in an environment that may be less threatening for the user.

Previous research on grief communication examined a wide array of topics surrounding online grief and social media. Online support groups from social media platforms such as Facebook have given users a place to create a sense of community and openly discuss, without judgment, personal loss and grief. Users have a perceived safe place to share about grief in a way that is still somewhat taboo in FtF communication. The accessibility and purposeful nature of an online support group brings together individuals who may have previously felt isolated from those who inhabit their physical environment. It may be challenging to understand or empathize with someone grieving the death of a friend or family member unless an individual has experienced a similar loss. Kakar and Oberoi (2016) listed the following as a potential reason for the interpersonal shift in grief communication to social media and online mourning:

This possibility could be the major reason why people are increasingly using social media and internet blogs to voice their grief, they are able to experience a catharsis by simply expressing their grief on a virtual portal, without having to face the perceived lack of empathy of a fellow human. (p. 373)

Through this online grief sharing, discussions on death and dying are not only becoming more common, but also the very idea challenges the cultural stigmas that have been in place for years. Pennington (2013) used qualitative interviews with Facebook users to chart interactions with the deceased person's page. The researcher found that users maintained their "friendship" on the social media platform. In addition, most of the interviewees indicated the ability to "visit" with their friends or loved ones was helpful to the personal grieving process. According to Pennington's research, posting pictures or writing messages to the deceased were effective coping mechanisms. However, if a spouse or parent kept the page open, some reported that this impacted their bereavement in a negative way. The necessity to continuously keep the page updated created work for the bereaved, and in some cases, the individuals did not want to continue the conversation in a public format. However, the desire to delete the page made the individuals feel guilty.

Currently, Facebook offers members a "legacy contact" to keep a deceased person's Facebook page active. The legacy contact option ensured that the deceased person's "digital self" (i.e. statuses, photos, videos, and memories) became immortal. Radermacher, Puvogel, and Cervantes (2017) claimed that Facebook prefers that users who have died remain online and "available." The researchers concluded that new and creative ways would be developed in order to promote interactions with the deceased through their platform.

Brubaker, Gillian, and Dourish, (2013) further explored how online mourning may affect the digital identity post-mortem. The researchers expanded on the content that is shared to individual Facebook walls, post-mortem, is not approved by the user and thus is left open for interpretation. Friends and family members have the ability to share pictures and stories freely if a legacy contact was not named. Even in cases where a “legacy contact” was chosen, the representative may choose to allow posts that the deceased would not have wished to be part of the public forum. The researchers stated, “Unlike obituaries, cybermemorials, or Facebook groups, post-mortem profiles are not created by a loved one to honor the dead. They were created by the dead and are appropriated by diverse survivors with disparate needs” (Brubaker, Gillian, & Dourish, 2013, p.36).

Researchers have spent considerable time and effort deciphering both the shift to online interpersonal communication and understanding the value that those relationships bring to everyday lives. The main comparisons that can be drawn from the previous literature examined include the evolution of social media as a primary tool for interpersonal communication, the utilization of social media for seeking support after experiencing the loss of a loved one, and the impact of the relationships and interactions on online support groups.

The very act of speaking about grief has been challenging for many to comprehend or practice. In an effort to explain how language can be used during times of excessive bereavement, researchers developed a model called Languages of Grief (Corless, Limbo, Bousso, Wrenn, Head, Lickiss, & Wass, 2014). This model was formed by combining aspects of the four modes of expression, the four types of language, and the three contingent factors. The researchers considered this area of linguistics as essential since grief is universal yet varies from person-to-person. The model is composed of verbal and nonverbal responses as well as physical

responses and activities. By utilizing this model, grievors can choose communication tactics from many different options based on their situation and experiences (Corless et al., 2014).

Even in the age of collective mourning, the act of grieving loss within a group of friends, family or even admirers in the case of celebrities, is a point of delicate and cumbersome discourse. Ashley Pattwell (2016) researched the perplexing subject of parasocial online mourning of celebrities. She stated, “Perhaps celebrities provide us a mourning middle ground where we can practice our public, communal grief in a managed setting—still authentic, still valid, yet mediated by fame and social networks” (Pattwell, 2016, p.149). This ideology introduced the idea that people can be brought together over the death of a celebrity. People of diverse ages, races, and backgrounds can “feel” and experience collective grief. However, Pattwell (2016) indicates that this parasocial grief does not make it less authentic. Rather, it simply provides individuals with a new medium in which to grieve alongside one another in a public way that adds value to the need for conversations surrounding death and grief.

Celebrities are not the only individuals who receive this type of parasocial online mourning. Klastrop (2014) conducted research into six deaths of young people in Denmark. The deaths each received media coverage that increased the number of people commenting on their Facebook RIP pages. Each of the six individuals received a substantial amount of press coverage and each of the deceased's Facebook RIP page was mentioned in the articles. Klastrop (2014) examined many different areas relating to the RIP pages, but the most notable for this study being whether those who were commenting on the page were friends or strangers of the deceased. Klastrop stated, “Only 6% of the commenters make very clear in this way that they did not know the person whose virtual shrine they are visiting. On the other hand, it is only 6% who make explicit references to the deceased as a friend or acquaintance, which is an unexpectedly

low number” (2014, p.160). The findings indicate that the same percentage of people who openly admitted to not knowing the deceased was also the same percentage of people who made transparent posts about their direct connection with the deceased. Klastrop’s research provided evidence that even individuals who may not know the deceased or have a parasocial relationship with the deceased may still comment or interact on a Facebook memorial page.

Face-to-Face vs. Computer Mediated Communication

One major dynamic of online grief share is that users must remember that they are reading and writing the narrative from a personal point-of-view. At times, the views presented can be flawed for numerous reasons. Individuals may use the deceased as a character within the narrative that the individual created without realizing the changes taking place within the posting (Carroll & Landry, 2010). This may be a natural process, however, members should take into consideration that some messages must be deciphered, not simply taken at face value.

Understanding the complexities of online identities and demographics assisted in understanding the type of grief taking place (Döveling, 2017). The willingness to share experiences, even those that are painful and complex, indicated a shift in the concept of grief communication.

This new form of displaying grief publicly challenged past taboo subject matter while also maintaining the importance of specific normative behaviors (Leonard & Toller, 2012). Limitations existed for both the informant and the reader, but friendships and relationships continued to form regardless of the constraints. Emotions communicated through social networking sites are in constant turmoil between reality and the digitized memorialization (Giaxoglou, Döveling, & Pitsillides, 2017). Society has been taught a new way to grieve their loved ones and social media continues to transform the way communication about the deceased occurs (Lingel, 2013).

The importance of meaningful messages and continued support for others in an online environment is essential for online communities (Owlett, 2018). By seeking support from others who experienced a similar emotion or life transition, users received hope. By sharing memories and stories, individuals who may not be geographically connected can help one another through the grieving process (Levitt, 2012). Even in recent years, the use of online grief support groups has transitioned. Previously, researchers found that “negative” emotions such as guilt, anger, depression, and disbelief were not being shared on Facebook (Morehouse & Crandall, 2014).

Jiang, Bazarova, and Hancock (2013) examined self-disclosure intimacy occurring in CMC versus FtF. The researchers proposed that perception-behavior intensification would be a factor in the communication taking place. They also proved that the medium of communication did play a role in the self-disclosure of frequency with more disclosing in CMC situations. However, there was no evidence that the medium dictated more or less intimacy in CMC or FtF interactions. Frost, Honeycutt, and Heath (2017) explored how the bereaved participate in relational maintenance as well as how they received and sought social support. By conducting research with those who experienced sudden and unexpected deaths, Frost et al. (2017) acknowledged the differences within the grieving process in relation to cause and expectancy of death. In addition, positive correlations have also been found among individuals who utilized social media as a relational maintenance strategy during the aftermath of death or sudden loss of a loved one (Frost et al., 2017).

Brandon (2016) used previous research as a foundation and adjusted her research to address limitations including the operational definition of the CMC platforms as well as the software programs used. In addition, other research (Walther, 1993; McKenna et al., 2002) examined further exploration of contradictory theories that have existed surrounding the

effectiveness of CMC and FtF communication. Brandon (2016) conducted two studies on CMC and FtF communication. The researcher's initial hypothesis was that, with the new adjustments, CMC and FtF communication would rank similarly on how close participants felt to one another. This was not the case. However, Brandon (2016) attributed participants feeling significantly closer in FtF communication to their perceptions only. The data collected did not indicate that there were any differences in positivity or closeness, therefore, Brandon (2016) deduced that future research must explore the amount of self-disclosure that took place versus individuals' perception of self-disclosure.

Herkert (2000) researched the concept of grief communication from many different perspectives. Herkert's purpose for the research was to examine both relational and situational factors surrounding bereavement. This study involved assessing targets and sources, the role of relational intimacy, gender affects, and death expectancy. Results revealed that too often griever (targets) were not being supported in ways that they needed by non-griever (sources). The research also indicated that, regardless of relationship, the messages used were not significantly more comforting during their bereavement. Males were more likely to be future orientated with statements such as, "Time heals all wounds" whereas females were most likely to encourage additional conversation. Further, this study highlighted the concept that death expectancy was the most difficult to research and that the results were inconclusive surrounding the communication tactics used.

Social Exchange Theory

Navigating the communication platform of social media may benefit by research that explores an understanding how and why users engage with one another. What is considered normal behavior patterns among online users is directly related to the communication taking

place within an online group. Normal behavior patterns may include posting supportive messages. Just as many individuals may find a transgression in FtF communication about the deceased, speaking negatively of the deceased is also considered a violation of CMC. When negative comments are made, research indicated that someone in the group will swiftly delete the post or defend the deceased (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). What remained was a one-sided view of the individual, thus altering the individual's postmortem identity. Uysal (2016) discovered that by observing others exchange support, online members began to understand group norms. The researcher also contended that the research findings indicated that in order to create successful social collaboration, active member participation should be emphasized. Active members are considered to be the members who consistently post, comment, or react (i.e. "like" posts) to posts within the group. Members should potentially be willing to craft engaging messages as well as creatively interact with others in the group.

Bosticco and Thompson (2005) examined the role of storytelling within a family's grieving system. One of the major conclusions from the research was the renegotiation of roles within the family unit. Just as reciprocity is important in CMC interactions, family members must be willing to exchange personal stories or feelings of loss with one another. This interaction allows family members to renegotiate roles, cope with their loss, and keep the deceased alive through creative storytelling and communication. However, Bosticco and Thompson's (2005) research was inconclusive on the best way that this can be accomplished or how the renegotiation of roles takes place over time. Due to the sensitivity of the research, Bosticco and Thompson (2005) found it would be an arduous endeavor to continue to pursue this based on the data that would need to be collected from grieving families.

Researchers have also spent time exploring effective methods for communicating while experiencing grief. Charles Larson (1973) examined the intrapersonal and interpersonal communication that takes place while those mourning navigate their feelings. During his research, Larson coined the term “Cosmetic Approach” based on the Western view of death. This approach claimed that words and situations are used in a way that will soften the reality of the situation. His research also inspected the physical symptoms and emotional disorders that mourners experience. Examples of the symptoms and disorders experienced based on this study included changes to appetite, libido, feelings of hopelessness, and personal guilt.

While reciprocity has always been a focus of social exchange theory, not all researchers have agreed on the degree of its significance. Molm, Schaefer, and Collett (2007) found that disclosure does not always rely on reciprocity. The researchers tested actors and computer-simulated partners on their mutual exchange by examining instrumental value, probability, and predictability. Data collected in this study suggested that there are contexts of alternative choices in exchange networks that do not indicate a link that the most well-liked or trusted partner will also be the one that discloses information the most frequently (Molm et al., 2007).

Social Penetration Theory

Social media users engage in many multi-user activities. However, there are many singular dynamics involved in social media use. From social comparison to communicating reciprocity, the online user is affected by many digital cues. CMC has frequently been noted as lacking non-verbal communication and cues. As self-presentation became the forefront of online interactions, “likes” and reactions have developed into the non-verbal communication component that essentially assists in predicting patterns in users’ willingness to disclose (Carr, Haynes, & Sumner, 2018). By investigating the “success” of a post, the researchers uncovered

the expected reciprocity of receiving “likes” and reactions based on the amount of interaction given to others and their postings. Users may be quick to judge others by their online persona and unwilling to establish a relationship or friendship if they feel like they have learned “enough” about an individual based on their Facebook presence.

The research related to online dating has helped to further the discussion on CMC and perceived relational success. Utilizing social penetration theory, researchers have revealed patterns of honesty among users who plan to use CMC to develop FtF relationships with others (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). The findings aligned with social penetration theory’s reliance on self-disclosure. Self-disclosure leads to relational intimacy and was present in Gibbs et al. (2006) study into the online dating domain. Cost-benefit analysis remained constant in the online communities and further supports Altman and Taylor’s (1973) theory on the decision to disclose personal information as a relationship developed with new individuals.

Altman and Taylor (1973) provided a personality structure for the disclosure of information. Within that structure, Altman and Taylor (1973) stated that revealing one’s true self started with sharing biographical characteristics then evolved into the disclosure of expectations, attitudes, and opinion. Finally, at the core of the personality structure, values, feelings, and needs would be revealed. However, some researchers have determined that the opposite is true in an online platform. Ji and Lieber (2008) sampled 200 Chinese dating profiles and found that a majority of the content posted (52%) revolved around the disclosure of emotions, feelings, and needs. Further, their research indicated that 37.5% of the self-disclosed content was tied to expectations, attitudes, and opinions. The remaining 10.5% was biographical information about the user. Ji and Lieber (2008) claimed that this information demonstrated how Altman and Taylor’s (1973) social penetration theory is reversed in an online dating setting.

Maxims of Conversation

Wagner (2018) conducted a systematic review of 25 different journal articles discussing the norms related to social media mourning. The researcher identified three different types of norms: technology-related norms, interaction-related norms, and social and cultural norms. Users tended to rely on their daily social media behaviors for both technology and interaction-related norms. In regards to social and cultural norms, Wagner (2018) stated, “Traditional norms on privacy of mourning, modest expression of grief, and appropriate ways to remember someone seems to prevail and are often transferred from other contexts to social media platforms” (p.8). The study results concluded that the norms examined were constantly being renegotiated and ever changing between online users.

There are three main areas of privacy rules surrounding conversations on grief that include personal selectivity, the decision to avoid, and the use of positive speech when speaking about the deceased (Basinger, Wehrman, & McAninch, 2016). Basinger et al. focused their research on uncovering why people who are grieving choose to communicate or avoid communication after experiencing a great loss. At times, the rules established in the study had been violated by others and created barriers for future communication on the topic of personal grief. Although the rules listed are not the only rules of disclosure, they established a basic foundation. Basinger et al. (2016) also highlighted the idea that grief communication can be negative and those conversations may be uncomfortable for others leading individuals to practice avoidant behaviors.

Atifi, Mandelcwaig, and Marcoccia (2011) researched the maxim of quantity in CMC newsgroup discussions. The researchers were interested in its importance, discursive behaviors, and violations of the maxim. The researchers used McLaughlin’s (1995) definition of Netiquette

as their guideline for normative behavior and rules. Netiquette is made up of six different categories with rules relating to politeness, message composing, topics, “real life” conventions, recipient’s identification, and adaptation to the technical constraints of the network (Atifi, Mandelcwaig, & Marcoccia, 2011). The study results found that Gricean maxims of manner and relation were addressed, yet quantity was rarely addressed in the Netiquette. While brevity was discussed, little more was written on the maxim of quantity. The researchers concluded that CMC may violate Gricean maxims due to its very nature (i.e. anonymity from behind a screen), yet it follows discursive communication patterns.

Walter (2014) explored the differences that exist between online and offline mourning. More specifically, he was interested in the norms that govern social media grief share. Even online, mourners may be pressured to conform to group normative behavior. However, mourners may also begin to feel more freedom in their ability to post online about their loss and their deceased loved one. Online norms included talking with the deceased in a public forum, expression of afterlife (even if religiously affiliated), an expanded amount of time to articulate grief, and a more enfranchised relationship with grief.

The Impact of Grief Communication

In the digital age, research is needed in order to propel society forward with useful tactics and understanding of how communication has impacted as well as addressed similarities and differences that exist between face-to-face and online forms of communication. A foundation of the basic inquiries associated with grief communication were pivotal in developing the structure of the proposed research for this current study. In order to breakdown the larger system of ideas, research questions have been developed to guide the research, analysis of results, and further discussion:

RQ1: What role does social exchange theory play when users from the selected Facebook groups post in online groups about their experiences with the death of a loved one?

RQ2: Utilizing the social penetration theory, are patterns of personal intimacy present within the selected social media support groups in this study for those experiencing loss and grief?

RQ3: What role, if any, do conversational maxims present in selected social media communication versus face-to-face communication?

In addition to the research questions, the following hypotheses were developed as a result of the gap in existing literature as it related to grief communication, selected social media groups, and the identified theories:

H1: Individuals who express their grief via online communication, even with the pain and intimacy of their postings, will still engage in the rewards and costs system of the social exchange theory.

H2: Individuals who share their personal stories and console others will form deeper relationships with others in the support group via the rules of social penetration theory.

The review of existing literature relating to grief and online mourning demonstrated a gap in the research that this study has attempted to explore. The comparative content analysis presented aims to provide a unique approach to understanding the potential impact of mourning through the use of social media and the previous theory patterns mentioned to include social exchange theory, social penetration theory, and maxims of conversation.

Chapter III: Research and Methodology

The research conducted in this study attempted to consider the ambiguous and idiosyncratic nature of the human condition when addressing grief communication. By tracking posts, member reactions, and comments made in a specific window of time, certain assumptions regarding human behavior in an online format dedicated to grief expression were evaluated. Emphasis was placed on taking into consideration the support that was offered between the selected Facebook group members through the examples of storytelling. Observations and communication theory application assisted the researcher in establishing correlations between behavioral patterns and expectations.

Klaus Krippendorff defined content analysis as, “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (2004, p. 4). Krippendorff further explained that this technique should include principles of reliability, replicability, and validity. For the purpose of this research, a content analysis also provided the researcher the opportunity to approach the data in a pragmatic and semantical method. Janis (1965) explained that the pragmatic approach includes “procedures which classify signs according to their probable causes or effects” while the semantical approach includes, “procedures which classify signs according to their meanings (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 44).” Both of these methods were necessary in order to explore the research questions and hypotheses presented in this study.

Kimberly Neuendorf defined content analysis as “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” (2017, p. 1). Neuendorf also explained the phenomenon surrounding the expanding use of content analyses into many different areas of inquiry. “Content

analyses have resulted in eclectic and often surprising findings” (2017, p. 1). Neuendorf (2017) explained that while myths surrounding this approach to research exist, content analyses do not limit the researcher’s ability to explore large scopes with complex layers of investigation, that substantial research planning is necessary for successful analyses, and that a content analysis is, indeed, a specified course of research.

Research Design

The overall purpose for the research in this study was to conduct a comparative content analysis to determine the role that social exchange and social penetration theories play in online grief communication as well as document any unique maxims of conversation within the selected online support groups. The content analysis in the research conducted for this study attempted to discover answers to the three research questions and to test the two hypotheses proposed at the conclusion of Chapter Two.

Data Collection and Information

The data collected for this study was retrieved from two unrelated Facebook grief support groups. To protect the anonymity of members of both groups and in an effort to maintain ethical standards, specific descriptors will be used to differentiate Group A from Group B for the comparative content analysis. In order for members to join either group, individuals were required to request access through an administrator of the group. Once approved, members were directed to the groups “About” page to learn the rules of conduct for each group. Although members needed to ask permission to join, it was a gatekeeper step and an easy process to complete with both groups providing approval to join with ease. The rules existed to ensure that members treated one another kindly and with respect as every individual grieves differently. The two groups varied in the number of group members that participated. During the data collection

period for this study, Group A had a population size of 3,462. Group B had a population size of 23,048 members.

The two Facebook groups were labelled for individual and group interaction. In order to collect data and analyze the patterns occurring on each group page, a timeframe of data collection was established. For the purposes of this study, data was collected for eight days in order to create ample opportunities of observation. The time frame established was from December 22, 2019 to December 30, 2019. This observation period was selected in order to record postings that might be initiated from the Hanukkah and Christmas holidays as people might potentially experience exacerbated grief for loved ones during the holidays offering an opportunity for increased content to research in a smaller window of time due to study constraints. The data was collected, names were coded to ensure anonymity, and the content was charted. Comments and interactions were dissected and ranked. Data of interest for this research included: personal investment in telling personal stories of loss, attachments (including links, personal pictures, grief images), quantity and quality of comments per post, and the number of interactions (like, love, laugh, cry, or anger) on posts.

In order to ensure enough time had passed and that commenting had slowed or completely stopped on the posts within the timeframe, the collection of data did not take place until January 13-26, 2020. This permitted sufficient time to pass before pulling the statistics related to each post. To be considered for the collection, each post must have included original thought (i.e. individual's personal thoughts, feelings, or stories related to grief) on behalf of the user. Although a form of communication, any post with only a link or generic photo (i.e. poems or shared content) was not collected for this research. Original Content (OC) is the term used

throughout the data collection analysis and later discussion of results to distinguish the initial post from the comments that followed.

Group A Data

The first Facebook group analyzed for content related to grief communication was a group formed by individuals interested in creating a space that anyone could join and openly talk about their grief. This Facebook group was formed by private individuals and was not connected with any larger entity or group. The administrators of the group created five short rules for members to follow: be kind and courteous, no hate speech or bullying, no promotions or spam, respect everyone's privacy, and practice understanding. The administrators created a special note that they are not counselors, rather, that they formed this space to encourage others to speak about their grief and need for social support. Members of this group varied in age, gender, geographic location, and the amount of time that had passed since their family member or friend had died. Although the demographics mentioned were not measured or notated, the group participants' varying differences were documented during the initial data collection.

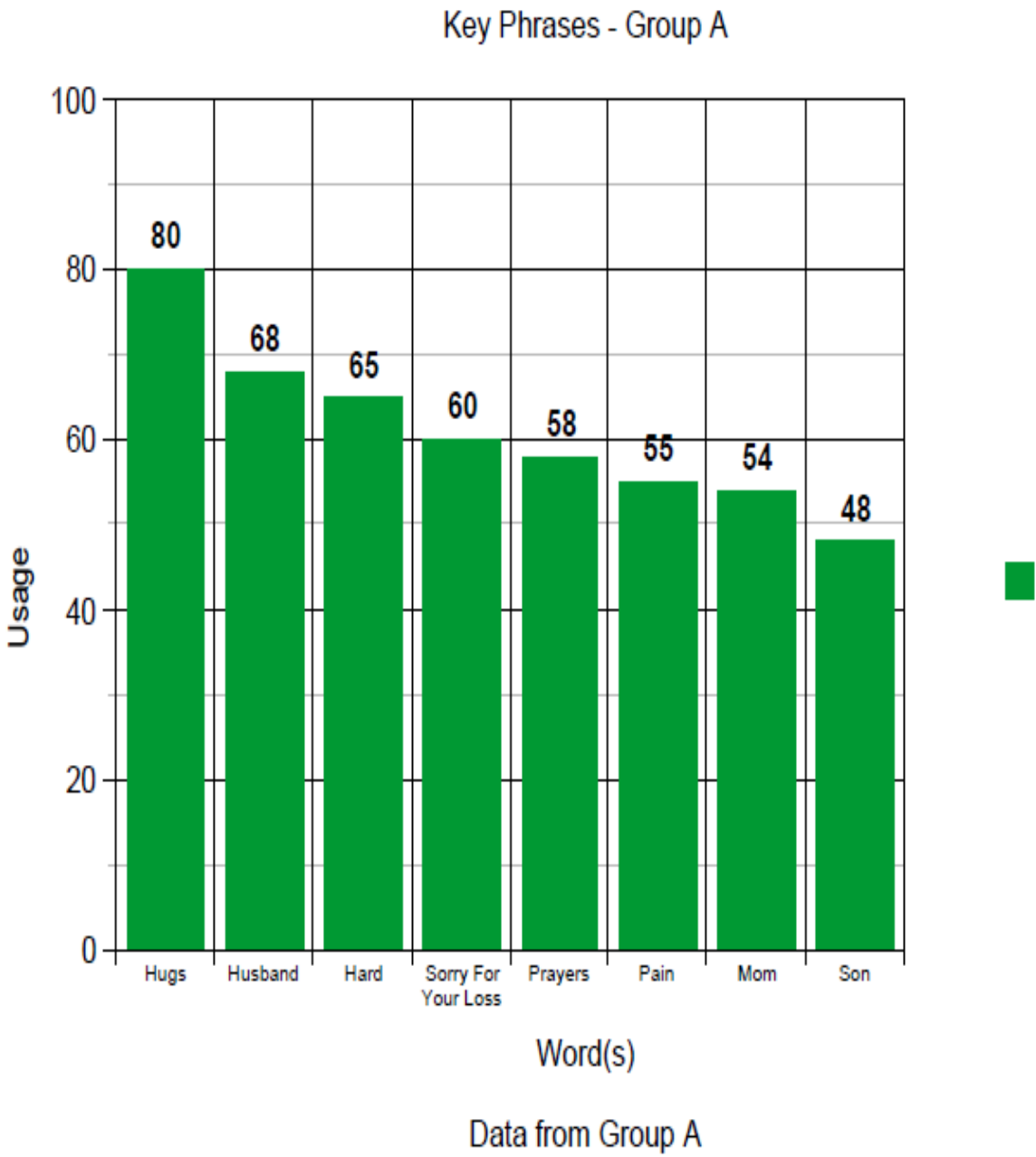
Group A had a population size of 3,462 members. There were 102 OC posts authored by 72 different members during in an eight-day period. The majority of the members, 70.8% (*n*51), posted only once. Other members, 29.1% (*n*21), posted multiple times throughout the collection window. Two members posted four times while five others posted three times in the eight days. The remaining 19.4% of multi-post members (*n*14) posted OC twice. Christmas Day demonstrated the most activity with 28.4% (*n*29) of the OC posts originating during this holiday.

Some online group members included attachments (i.e. songs, self-help and religious links, or personal pictures) with their OC postings. The majority of the OC posts, 73.5% (*n*75) did not include an attachment. However, 11.7% (*n*12) of the OC postings included personal

pictures with their deceased loved ones. The remaining 14.7% (*n*15) of attachments included links to obituaries, songs, poems, products, self-help articles, and shared posts. Four of these attachments were related to Christmas time grief.

There were 889 comments authored by 278 members collected and reviewed throughout the eight-day period. Of the 102 OC posts collected, 13.7% (*n*14) did not receive any comments. The largest number of comments on a single post was 44 comments on post AP042. The average amount of comments per post in Group A was 8.71. Figure 1 (below) illustrates the eight phrases or words that were most prevalent in Group A's comments. These phrases or words indicate the primary topic of discussion for Group A. (See Appendix A)

Figure 1



The most frequently used word in Group A was “hugs.” No previous relationship with the mourner was necessary in order to offer this type of solace. The second most prevalent word, “husband,” indicates that many of the users on Facebook Group A were discussing the death of a husband or life as a widow after the passing of their spouse. Words like “hard” and “pain”

demonstrated that many of the users were open to discussing the pain that they were or had been experiencing within the members of Facebook Group A.

Facebook users also have the ability to “react” to each OC posting. Group A had a total of 1,389 total reactions on the 102 OC posts. The reactions documented included the emotional options of liked, loved, laughed, surprised, saddened, and angered. The most utilized reaction in Group A with 39.1% (*n*544) of all reactions was “saddened.” The remaining reactions included 34.8% (*n*484) choosing liked, 23.9% (*n*333) reacting with loved, 0.93% of users selecting laughed (*n*13), 1.0% reacting with surprise (*n*14), and .07% (*n*1) choosing the angered reaction. It is possible that the one angered reaction may have been selected by mistake given its proximity to the saddened reaction emoji. (See Appendix A)

Group B Data

The second Facebook group analyzed for content associated with grief communication was a group that formed after a popular Facebook series depicting the grief of a widow aired. Group B was the initial Facebook group selected for this research due to the nature of the material covered in the Facebook Watch series. By observing the supportive messages offered in this group, the original research proposal for a content analysis that explored online grief support groups was formulated. None of the group member postings during the eight-day data collection window mentioned the show even though the Facebook group was created as a result of the series. Rather, the group member postings reflected on their own lives and personal loss.

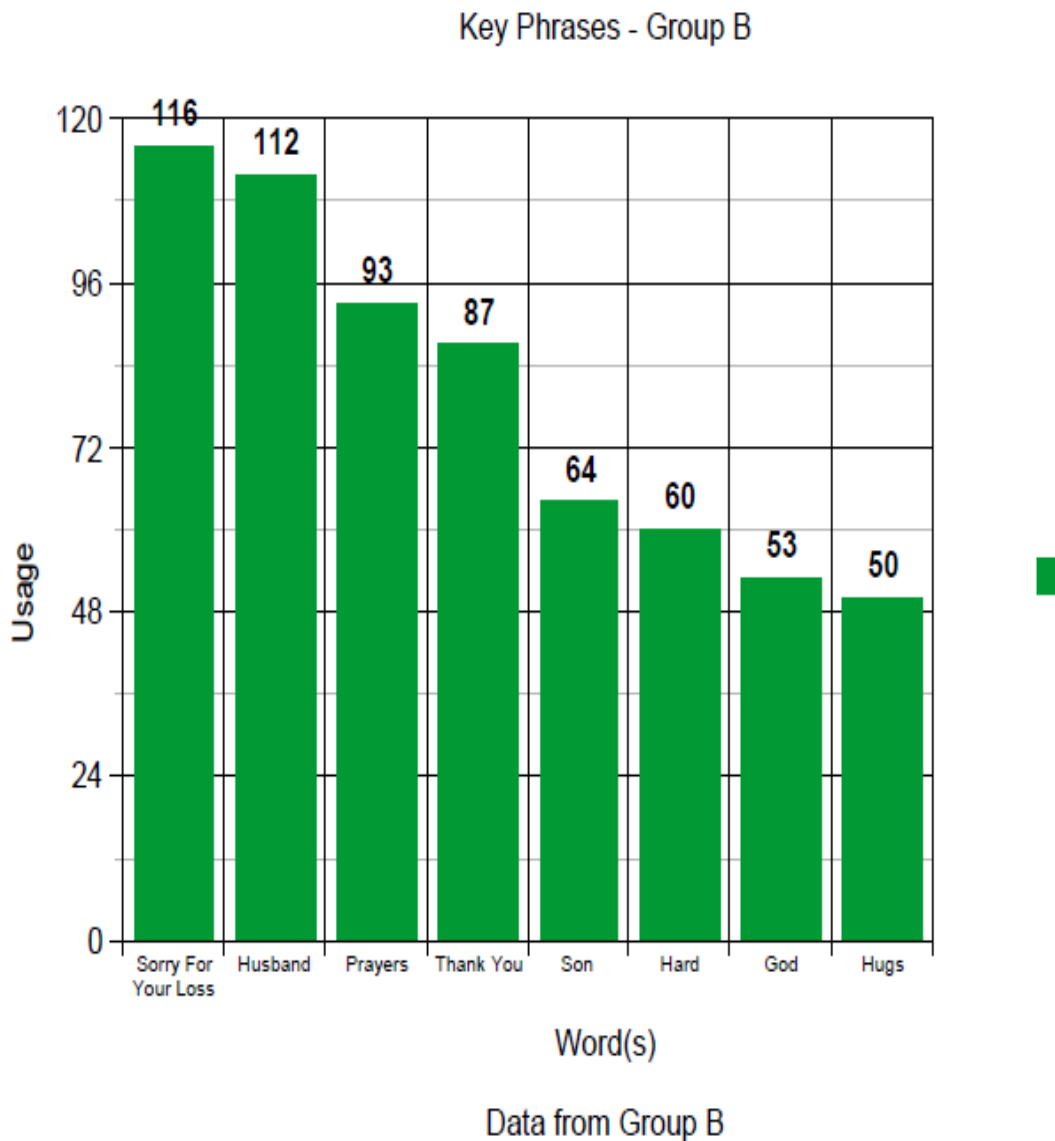
Group B had a population size of 23,048 members. There were 69 OC posts authored by 58 different members reviewed in an eight-day period. Eighty-one percent of members (*n*47) posted only once during the data collection timeframe. However, 18.9% of members (*n*11) posted twice during the collection window. Throughout the eight-day collection timeframe, two

days did not contain any OC postings. The two days were Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. On December 26, 2019, the largest number of OC posting activity occurred for Group B with 55.0% (*n*38) of the posts originating on that day.

Attachments of songs, self-help links, religious links, or personal pictures were also included on the OC postings. However, not all of the posts included such attachments. Of the 69 OC posts, 46.4% (*n*32) did not contain attachments. Of the 53.6% of posts (*n*37) that have attachments, 37.84% (*n*14) were personal pictures, 18.92% (*n*7) were generic grief images, 18.92% (*n*7) links to songs, 13.51% were grief poems (*n*5), and 10.81% were various self-help links (*n*4) (a book, an article, a TedTalk, and a religious link).

For Facebook Group B, there were 1,050 comments authored by 498 members collected and reviewed during the eight-day period. Seventeen percent (*n*12) of the OC posts did not receive comments. The largest number of comments on a single OC post was 104 comments on post BP019. The average amount of comments per post in Group B was 15.21. The content in Figure 2 demonstrates the eight phrases or words that were most prevalent in Facebook Group B's comment threads.

Figure 2



The most frequently used phrase in Group B was “sorry for your loss.” The word “husband” was the second most prevalent word from Group B’s comments. Words like “prayers” and “God” indicated a religious theme among the group members who posted and commented on Group B’s page. The Facebook series that served as the source for this group has no religious affiliation. For Group B, “hugs” was one of the most frequently used words among the members.

Group B had 4,323 total reactions on the 69 OC posts. While members may not have commented, members were actively reading and reacting to the OC posts. The most utilized reaction in Group B with 36.8% of all reactions was “loved” (*n*1,591). The remaining reactions included 34.4% choosing liked (*n*1,489), 28.5% reacting with saddened (*n*1,230), 0.11% of users selecting laughed (*n*5), 0.19% reacting with surprise (*n*8), and zero users choosing the angered option. (See Appendix B)

Comparison of Data

Through the collection of data retrieved for this research, comparisons between Group A and Group B can be made. Contrary to the data collected within Group B, Group A members posted every day in this support group. However, Group B did not have any member activity on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

Similar to results from Group A, “hugs” was one of the most frequently used words in the ongoing dialogue of comments in Group B. This pattern represents a willingness to offer quasi-physical support through a digital medium. The usage of “hugs” signifies a pattern of normative online behavior that is accepted by Facebook users. Similar to Group B, 5.7% of Group A’s comments (*n*60) included the phrase “Sorry for your loss.” While this is a grief cliché, members may have been at a loss for words, or find it normal to use this phrase, and chose to offer support by acknowledging the loss experienced by group members. “Husband” was a prevalent word from Group B’s comments. The Facebook series that served as a foundation for Group B revolved around a young woman who had experienced the death of her husband. The phrases or words extracted from the content included six of the same prevalent words as Group A including hugs, husband, son, hard, prayers, and sorry for your loss.

Group B had 4,323 total reactions on the 69 OC posts. This was a considerable increase in reactions when compared with Group A ($n=1,389$) although Group B had fewer OC postings. This could be attributed to the larger population size of Group B ($N=23,048$). Group B had more members given the popularity of the Facebook Watch show from which the group was based. Group B members may have crafted less OC posts, but continued to be active on the group by reacting to the OC posts created by other users. However, even though Group A had a smaller population ($N=3,462$) size, OC posts and comment count indicated that members belonging to Group A were much more active than those in Group B.

The Facebook group that formed Group A was chosen because of the distinctively different traits that existed from Group B. Group A had far fewer members. In addition, Group A was made up of private individuals who had formed the group out of a need, rather than a reaction to popular media. Group A was discovered through a Facebook search for “Grief Support Group.” After an extensive exploration of Facebook Group A, it was selected based on the amount of consistent postings and interactive level of ongoing dialog through comments of the members.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

This chapter is organized according to the main sources of content analyzed to answer the three research questions and to determine the outcome of the two proposed hypotheses. This chapter discusses the results from the research conducted as well as present the limitations and implications for further research. The discussion of significant discoveries within the analysis of data collected from the user postings and comments is also explored in this chapter.

Results of the Study

An interesting point of research found in Group B was the use of grief clichés (i.e. “Sorry for your loss”, etc.). Group B was formed as a fan group of the Facebook Watch show *Sorry For Your Loss*. The show depicts how complex grief can be especially in cases of suicide. It was made clear throughout the show that the name was chosen ironically to emphasize how these phrases do not do the mourner and their feelings justice. The show goes to great lengths to develop a storyline that highlights grief as a non-linear process and that the bereaved need more than condolences for adequate social support. While family members and friends may be wishing their bereaved loved ones the best, individuals miss that those experiencing grief may require time and attention in order to feel comfortable sharing their grief and struggles. The understanding that grief clichés can limit the willingness to continue a conversation about grief and willingness to seek social support from others is ignored. “Sorry for your loss” was the most used phrase from the comments posted in Group B. The phrase was used 116 times throughout the eight-day collection period. The over-use of the phrase may indicate that viewers missed the intention of the show or that even after watching the storyline unfold felt at a loss for what to say to others experiencing the loss of a loved one within the dynamics of this Facebook group.

Discussion of Findings

There are two significant factors to note regarding the data from Group A. First, the members of this group expressed their gratitude for one another and the support that the group provided. This was evident by both “thank you” and “thanks” being frequently used terms within the comments of the postings. The second important detail is that even though Group A had significantly fewer members, the group was more active than Group B during the data collection period. This could indicate an increased connectedness that the users may have experienced in their interactions one another.

There are key takeaways from Group B’s data collection. First, Group B had two days that no activity took place on the group. These days were Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. This may have been attributed to the feelings that many who are bereaved feel during and after the holidays. In addition, “husband” was the second most used term within the group during the eight-day collection period. Since the original show that the group was based on followed a widow who had lost her husband to an unconfirmed suicide, a feeling of familiarity with losing a significant other may have been why many of the members chose to join Group B.

It was also surprising that the Facebook members of Group B did not mention the show or its storyline. One potential reason that the postings did not mention the plot of the show may have been that the show had already finished the second season months before the data timeframe was set. Without new episodes to discuss, the group members utilized the page for personal storytelling.

Both Group A, 23.9% (*n*333), and Group B, 36.8% (*n*1,591), had many users who reacted to posts with the “love” reaction. While it may seem ill fitting to “love” an individual’s posting

about grief, “loving” can also be a reaction expressing empathy. Members may “love” a post because they relate to the content or emotions expressed by the author.

While social media has been a relatively new channel of communication, it may be viewed as a modern twist that it is very similar to letter writing. In both instances, the sender and receiver are not usually in the same physical space. By acknowledging that the method of delivering messages has changed, but the quality of the response and relationships built by the communication has remained, value is given to the interactions taking place.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, previous studies led researchers to believe that “negative” emotions such as guilt, anger, depression, and disbelief were not openly expressed on Facebook (Morehouse & Crandall, 2014). However, this is no longer the case for many members of grief groups. The data collected for this study provides qualitative evidence that Facebook users, specifically those in online support groups, will outwardly express “negative” emotions and, at times, look to others for advice on how to cope with those feelings.

Three research questions were developed to assess the data collected among the Facebook users belonging to the two selected grief groups online. Each question was created to potentially address the different theories associated with the online grief disclosure process. RQ1 examined the role that Social Exchange theory plays when users post in online groups about their experiences with the death of a loved one. RQ1 was answered by the back-and-forth exchange that was present in the comments of the OC postings. Users who crafted the OC postings found that by expressing their pain, depression, or guilt affiliated with their grief, they may find social support or advice that outweighs the cost of their self-disclosure. Users who commented and engaged in an online discussion may feel that they are equipped to listen and provide meaningful feedback. This was apparent in Group B when a user (B014) had written an OC post (BP015)

regarding whether or not she should continue to go by “Mrs.” or transition to “Ms.” This question received 74 comments, the third highest amount of comments by users offering insight and advice.

Social Penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) dictates that as individuals develop a relationship, they peel back “layers” and self-disclose more information about themselves. RQ2 addressed the application of this theory and any patterns of personal intimacy present within social media support groups for those experiencing grief. Through the OC postings and comments on the Facebook groups, there is evidence that users in the Facebook groups selected for this research engaged in the orientation, exploratory affective stage, and affective stage. Specific patterns in behavior such as giving information about where they live, what they used to do for fun with their deceased loved one, and how much time had passed since their death demonstrated the willingness to disclose information in the orientation phase. This phase was examined primarily through OC postings and the content of their comments. Users continued their conversations through comments and that is where the exploratory affective and affective stages took place. By empathizing with one another, offering advice, use of coping mechanisms as well as being willing to listen to member stories, group participants moved from the orientation stage through the exploratory affective and affective stages. However, it was difficult to prove that users experienced the stable or de-penetration stages due to the eight day parameter of this study. Overtime, it is possible that individuals who had built a rapport with one another via the comment section of their posts will begin to stop interacting with one another as the relationship begins to plateau. It is also possible that users will become inactive or leave the group as they begin to enter the de-penetration stage of the social penetration theory.

RQ3 addressed the conversational maxims functioning in the same roles on the Facebook groups versus FtF communication. The data in this research highlighted that the conversational maxims operated in very similar roles for CMC and FtF communication. Based on the ongoing dialog, the conversational maxim that was violated most frequently in this study was the maxim of manner. As with FtF communication, this pattern holds true. The reasoning may be that users on the selected Facebook groups tended to write rather lengthy and at times ambiguous OC postings about their grief. Users violated this maxim by not being clear or brief with their posts and comments. For example, on both selected Facebook groups, 29.2% of users (*n*38) would share 100-350-word posts explaining why the death of their loved one has been a struggle for them to work through. Within these posts, authors shared personal stories that were lengthy in order to express their feelings. Users did not seem concerned with keeping to a brief statement. In fact, this behavior was encouraged by moderators and commenters asking them for more details about their loved one. Grief is complex and trying to maintain the maxim of quantity can make brevity impossible even in an online space.

Hypotheses 1, individuals who express their grief via online communication, even with the pain and intimacy of their postings, will still engage in the rewards and costs system of the social exchange theory, was proven to be true. Users wrote descriptively about the pain and isolation they felt from their grief. However, those intense feelings did not keep them from sharing with others. In some cases, users shared more than once in the eight-day collection window. Even if a user did not craft an OC posting, many users reacted and commented on posts sharing their own stories of struggle and coping mechanisms that they found useful. Many users chose to reply to OC posts by sharing portions of their own stories rather than offer condolences. It was in these shared stories that further conversations began to develop about the “never-

ending” process of grief. These intimate writings showcased the users’ willingness to be vulnerable by believing that the reward of online group sharing outweighed its cost.

Hypothesis 2, individuals who share their personal stories and console others will form deeper relationships with others in the support group via the rules of social penetration theory, was not fully proven due to less definitive data. It is apparent that Facebook friendships had formed through the support groups. Examples of these friendships are found within the comment sections. One user (A184) in Group A expressed this through a comment offering help, “Truly sorry for your loss. Please feel free to message me anytime, night or day. I have lost siblings myself. This is a great site. Someone is always here to give support. Sending hugs to you.” Within Group A, 1.4% of comments (*n*13) on OC posts focused on telling the author that they were more welcome to send them a friend request to chat further. Group B had three members offer their Facebook friendship as an option for the OC post authors.

However, the research conducted was unable to prove, unequivocally, that these relationships were more intimate as a result of belonging to the online support group. It was proven that users operated, in most cases, via the rules of social penetration theory. Users frequently commented and responded in lengthy dialogue with both breadth and depth while describing their emotions and stories. Proving that this self-disclosure resulted in more intimate and lasting friendships outside of the support group was inconclusive.

Social exchange and social penetration theories drive communication including CMC. The social exchange patterns of cost versus benefits as well as success with postings were evident. For example, if an individual weighs the cost (i.e. vulnerability) of posting online about their death of their loved one and finds that the benefits (i.e. support via Facebook users in the group) outweigh those costs, they will continue to post due to the success of the postings.

Regarding social penetration theory, if individuals feel that they are connecting with other members and working through the five stages of penetration, they will continue to further these relationships in order to benefit from sharing with one another. The rules of the theories explored in this research apply in the digital realm just as they apply in FtF self-disclosure. CMC may experience a higher surface-level of interaction. However, there are no patterns from this research that indicated that the CMC taking place was any less meaningful. The self-disclosure through OC postings and comments proved that individuals can, and will, share personal information related to their bereavement.

The maxims of conversation act as a guide for helping users understand when and how to interact with others. For the groups that were observed, quantity was key for extracting patterns and making predictions about behaviors expressed from group members. This maxim relies on available information. In order to engage meaningfully, group members must be willing to provide a great deal of personal information to others within the group. The information should be informative for others to comment and offer support to one another. As with all communication, especially via a social media platform, members must remember that all of the information being provided is both intimate and from a single perception in time. This is especially crucial when discussing grief as a result of death. Every person will experience personal grief in a different manner and with that, every individual will communicate about personal loss in tones that express the unique aspect of grief.

For the purpose of this research, quality can be ranked as the most important maxim in social media support groups. Ironically, it can also be the most ambiguous. Quality is described as being truthful with individual claims. The second focus of the maxim of quality is only offering information that is backed by evidence. This is the area in which complexity occurs.

When looking at something as personal as grief communication within an online support group, the discussions taking place are surrounding the death of a loved one. At times, the shared information may not be backed by science. There is not always a reasonable explanation for the feelings associated with grief. With this understanding, the maxim of quality relies on members to be authentic rather than only producing and providing facts. Based on the qualitative examination of the back-and-forth dialog that took place in the comment sections, Group A displayed a more authentic group personality. This is evident by the openness and self-disclosure that the members used when addressing one another and their struggles.

The maxim of relation and its emphasis on pertinence was not commonly observed. While pertinence of messaging is important, by joining the group, users were already directed on the purpose of the group. It can be assumed that users understood that the group had been formed for a specific reason, as none of the OC postings collected deviated from the topic of grief and loss. The maxim of manner addresses the way in which information is shared. This manner is difficult to measure as many of the users admitted that they were at a loss for words. Users wrote in ways that addressed just how confusing and ambiguous death can be for an individual. Members wrote, in detail, how consumed they were with the grief and the impact that the exhaustion had on their ability to fully communicate their feelings.

By utilizing the maxims of quality, quantity, manner, and relation, users crafted supportive messages and storytelling posts that other group members related to and were able to interact with. From comments to Facebook reactions, members on Facebook support groups can find social support by utilizing these tools. The digital age continues to shape how grief is expressed and how support is sought from others. The rules provided by conversational maxims may produce successful conversations and communication, even within the virtual world of

social media. By applying the conversational maxims mentioned, it may become evident that online discourse required the same methodical techniques as face-to-face communication. In the case of online mourning, maxims of conversation may control the rules and violations of privacy as the maxims are applied to the Gricean theory.

Limitations

The study had limitations in both data collection and access to continued group member conversations with one another in a private setting. The content analysis was based on the ability to collect data from Facebook groups. However, users may have continued their conversations privately through Facebook's Messenger option. Facebook's direct messaging system, Messenger, creates a space for one-on-one communication that may take many forms including instant messaging, audio calls, or video chatting. This system is private and it would require the consent of both parties in order to study the content of the CMC interactions. Relationships may have developed behind the scenes and could not be further explored based on the public information available during the timeframe for this research study.

In addition, interpreting the intentions of others with their use of language and Facebook reactions meant relying on subjective reasoning. Without conducting interviews with each user, the comments and posts were translated without the absolute knowledge of the group member's intentions being addressed. Limitations included not knowing the tone or motivation behind the social support or advice given to the OC post member. It is possible that the group members may have a friendship or relationship outside of their Facebook group membership. The lack of interpersonal relational knowledge could impact what the messages were intended to provide or address with other members.

Coding issues can always be a limitation, even for the most diligent researcher. Multiple efforts were undertaken in order to ensure that all coding was thorough and correct. However, any researcher can make mistakes during the coding process. Additionally, it is possible that the data collected is correct, yet that the users themselves accidentally clicked the wrong emoji reaction without realization.

Another limitation was the lack of demographic information on each Facebook user. For this research, the OC posts and comments were extrapolated. Beyond using the member's name for coding purposes and conversational tracking, little was known about each group member reflected in the study. Had it been possible to collect data on age, gender, race, and religious affiliations, this data could have mapped out predictions based on the demographics of each member of the Facebook groups selected for this research.

Implications and Further Research

Future research should prioritize collecting data in these areas to test hypotheses surrounding user identification. Future research should examine the relationships and friendships that develop over time between users in Facebook groups such as the groups selected for use in this study. While the data in this research followed the patterns of dialogue within the comments section, future research should examine whether those who may "friend" one another on Facebook after belonging to support group find common interests in other areas and remain friends. Research devoted to continuing the analysis of these interactions as well as measuring the interactions against daily FtF communication taking place will increase the knowledge about grief communication and continue to narrow the gap that exists in this area. This knowledge could help support claims that social exchange and social penetration theories lead to a deeper level of intimacy and include a breadth of topics and interests.

Future research should also consider the risks of overexposure to the support groups. It is probable that some of the users may be stuck in a cyclical stage of reading, writing, and commenting on these posts. Future research may uncover that while the Facebook support groups are helpful for the immediate need of catharsis writing, an overindulgence in the group could negatively impact an individual's life and ability to move past their loss. This could stunt and prevent the group members moving through the grieving process both on a professional and personal level.

Although information related in an educational setting is beneficial to understand this complex area of communication, further research in other aspects of communication would minimize the gap that exists regarding grief communication in CMC. Additional research in organizational communication, intercultural communication, mass media, race and gender could potentially close the gap and address the complexity of grief communication.

Concluding Thoughts

The review of literature outlined in this paper has proven that grief communication has evolved throughout the digital age with social media playing a large role in the evolutionary process. Social media support groups offer a new way for the bereaved to grieve. This comparative content analysis focused on two selected Facebook support groups and the meaningful interactions that took place among the group member's posts, comments, and reactions while applying the social exchange and social penetration theories as well as conversational maxims to their behaviors.

This comparative content analysis examined communication theories and processes related to grieving the death of a loved one. Patterns of human behavior via computer mediated technology emerged utilizing a content analysis methodological approach to analyze online

memorialization, grief sharing, and collective social support. By examining the personal stories and users' interactions of conveying hope, the postings revealed communication patterns associated with human behavior and the perceived connection that social media provided the bereaved members of both selected groups.

Technology will continue to evolve and develop and with this progress, the rules and normality of online interactions will also continue to change and advance. What is considered "personal information" has changed drastically over the last two decades as users began posting more intimate narratives of personal lives online. As society continues to adapt to life online, society may continue to experience a shift in the normative behaviors surrounding the FtF and CMC of grief communication and collective mourning.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Group A – Coded Data, Post, Reactions, and Comments

The data presented below represents the coding structure used for the research within this thesis.

Table A1 highlights the data collected from the original content (OC) post and includes the ID given for the OC posting, the date the post was created, the message itself, the author's coded ID number, and the total amount of comments on the post.

Table A2 is a continuation of the example posting of AP003 from Table A1. Table A2 highlights the data pertaining to the reactions from other members on the OC posting as well as the column of calculated totals that was used to double-check the researcher's data collection. The final column is the date that the data from Table A1 and A2 were collected.

The comment section of the postings was collected on a separate table. Table A3 highlights the data collected from the example OC posting of AP003. Table A3 contains the posting's ID number, the order of the comment within the dialog, the comment author's ID number and the message that was posted.

Table A1: Group A Post/Author Coding and Data Collection Example

Post ID #	Date	Original Post	Coded ID#	Attachments	Comment TOTAL
AP003	12/22/2019	Gratitude can help us heal in our grief.	A054	Link to article	19

Table A2: Group A Reaction and Data Collection Date Example

Reaction TOTAL	LIKE	LOVE	HAHA	WOW	SAD	ANGRY	Calculated Totals	Collection DATE
8	6	2	0	0	0	0	8	1/26/2020

Table A3: Group A Comment Findings Example

Post ID #	Comment Order	Comment Author ID#	Comment
AP003	1	A025	Thanks! This is helping with my neuro science research into grief... i hope to find a way to turn grief inside out
AP003	2	A054	I would love to hear more about your work!
AP003	3	A025	A054 this grief... it debilitates us. It renders most people dysfunctional. It is essentially not a good thing... we have to learn what we can do to wrestle it and turn it on its head. Yes its there but no it will not hold us captive. Some days i am clear n can think straight to further this. Some days i m down in the pits being dysfunctional. I just want to permanently leave dysfunction behind
AP003	4	A054	A025 as a grief coach, my soul purpose is to help griever ease some of the pain to move forward in a life without their loved one. I am working on helping to reframe the word death in a way that doesn't bring terror or trauma but rather allows the processing and healing within the grief in a way that brings in light and peace.
AP003	5	A025	A054 for me words don't hold much weight... It's as if i no longer understand languages as no word in no language aptly describes the pain of the loss... or the process of the grief... It's as if it cannot be talked out of or labelled or worded... but rather actions need to be executed...
AP003	6	A054	A024 I agree with you but unfortunately death has a strong connotation to it like it is a dirty word but the fact remains, it is a part of life. The actions of how to continue to live a life without our loved ones are absolutely critical. However, science has shown that words do affect not only emotional but physiological cellular make up - DNA. I agree language cannot aptly describe the pain or the grief process and for everyone it can be different depending on their past experiences etc. For me, I am here on this earth for a purpose and that purpose is to be a light for those who mourn, helping to illuminate the darkness so they can step ahead, seeing their path versus stumbling blindly in the dark. Grief sucks the air right out of us at times and reframing how the concept of death triggers us can help in our healing through our awareness. Once we have the awareness, then action is critical to move ahead. Much love and blessings to you and all who have joined this group because death has deeply impacted their life.

Appendix B

Group B – Coded Data, Post, Reactions, and Comments

Table B1: Group B Post/Author Coding and Data Collection Example


Post ID #	Date	Original Post	Coded ID#	Attachments	Comment TOTAL
BP063	12/28/2019	<p>Hello everyone, thank you all for sharing your stories here. I have a question, how do you deal with your friends during grieving? In the past, I was always the happy/optimistic person around my friends, I'm rarely sad/emotional. I'm the listening ears, I attract people. I connect with a lot of acquaintances and a couple of close friends group. But now, I just feel like it's not always easy to be that person, so I avoid them because when I meet them I somehow turn to this easy going person all over again, while inside I'm transforming to another person. Therefore, as I look okay, some people just stop checking up on me and think I'm fine (but seriously not). Also, it's like maybe I'm scared they won't accept me? Or just try to avoid being vulnerable to them because I know some of them have never been through grieve before and they might not understand so I avoid them (?) However, I also don't blame them because before all this, I'm also not sure what to do to those who grieve. All of this realizations makes me wonder what is the point of friendship and creating bonds if people come and go + the people who will stay with you till the end (at least in my case) are my family. Thank you everyone for reading, sending love to all of you </p>	B053	N/A	22

Table B2: Group A Reaction and Data Collection Date Example

Reaction TOTAL	LIKE	LOVE	HAHA	WOW	SAD	ANGRY	Calculated Totals	COLLECTION DATE
13	7	6	0	0	0	0	13	1/13/2020

Table B3: Group B Comment Findings Examples

Post ID #	Comment Order	Comment Author ID#	Comment
BP063	7	B061	I have been thinking about friendships a ton too. I understand going over it a billion times. I have had to let some friendships go which is so difficult and it hurts. Friendships can be so hard in a time where nothing makes sense and everything is unpredictable. The people I have really gotten close to are the ones who tell me it really is hard and they are proud. I need that reassurance because grieving is just so much. This is a vulnerable time and to reach out is another act of vulnerability which can just be exhausting. It's ok to ask or reach out if you need to. It's an act of self care. The people who will be there for you will. If it needs to be just family right now that's ok too. Be so kind to yourself.
BP063	8	B053	Thankyou ❤️❤️ I guess this reflection about friendship is a part of the process itself because yup as you say friendship and just basically everything is hard when everything doesn't make sense
BP063	9	B059	My true friends get a glimpse beyond the "mask" I wear, as I too am a happy optimistic person, It has been 11 years and sometimes the grief comes crashing down on me even still.
BP063	10	B053	May I ask how do you know they are the true ones? I somehow now also kinda reconsider all of my friendships 😞😞
BP063	11	B059	When I say my true friends I mean the ones that never left my side during my son's death, funeral and burial. They let me text them in the middle of the night and are always happy to see me.
BP063	12	B053	Ahh I see, good for you, thankyou ❤️
BP063	13	B059	If you ever need to talk I am here for you! I don't mean to sound like all of my friends have been great to me, I had one pretend that she didn't see me to avoid talking to me right after it happened.
BP063	14	B053	Thankyou B059, really appreciate this 🙏❤️