

# *DIGITAL DEATH TECH*

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*DOCTORAL STUDENT*

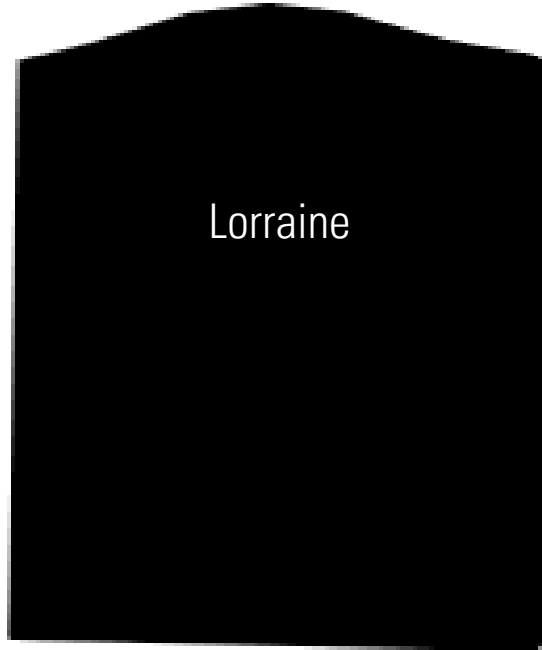
*TILBURG UNIVERSITY*

*SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND DIGITAL SCIENCES*

*ADVISORS: DR. MARTIN HOONDERT AND DR. MAX SPOTTI*



# *ABOUT ME*



- I live in Cleveland, OH
- I was destined to study thanatology as my mother chose my name off a tombstone
  - Intellectually: Death and dying course at Western Michigan University (WMU)
  - Emotionally: Death of my dog, Luke
- MA in Spirituality, Culture, and Health from WMU
- MS in Thanatology from Marian







# *CONTENTS*

- Introduction
- Project overview
- Recap of Communications Scoping Review

# *A WORD ABOUT CITATIONS*

- In the interest of readability, I removed the citations from this presentation. If anyone would like to see the draft that was submitted to Omega that has citations, please let me know.

# Introduction



# *DIGITAL DEATHTECH*

- Digital deathtech is technology built specifically to aid in communication, memorialization, online funerals, or other purposes and tools such as social media platforms, which have another primary purpose, but have been adapted for use in communicating with the dead.



- Communication via Digital Deathtech:
  - Online Memorial Walls
  - Private one-way communication using text and email
  - Simulated two-way communication using griefbots
- Memorialization via Digital DeathTech
  - Facebook
  - Stand alone memorial walls
  - Other social media such as Instagram and X
- Digital Death Rituals
  - Hybrid Funerals
  - Online Memorials
  - Other digital death rituals



# *CONTINUING BONDS*

- The theory of continuing bonds maintains that our bonds with the dead do not end at their death and are not static, but just as our relationships with the living grow and change over time, so must our relationships with the dead .
- Healthy relationships with the dead allow for the bereaved to mourn their loss, but also to go on to live a meaningful life without totally abandoning their relationship with the deceased.



# *PROJECT OVERVIEW*

I will be doing three sets of related studies with the scoping reviews informing the case studies

## Scoping Reviews

Communicating with the Dead via Digital  
Deathtech Scoping Review

Memorializing the Dead via Digital  
Deathtech Scoping Review

Digital Death Rituals Scoping Review

## Three Comparative Case Studies

Communicating with the Dead via:  
Online Memorial Walls  
One Way Communication (Email, Messaging)  
Simulated two way communication (Griefbots)

Memorialization via:  
Facebook  
Other Social media  
Stand alone online memorial walls

Digital Death Rituals:  
Hybrid Funerals  
Recorded Funerals  
Online Memorials



# *CURRENT STATUS*

## **Scoping Review: Digital Communication with the Dead:**

- Submitted to Omega on May 6
- Presented at Association of Death Education and Counseling (ADEC) Annual Conference in April 2025
- Presented at DDD17 in August 2025

## **Overall Proposal**

- Draft Completed
- Ethics Review in progress

## **Comparative Case Studies**

- Solicited participants at ADEC
- Will begin working on the Communications Comparative Case Study once I have Ethics Review Board Approval

*RECAP OF  
COMMUNICATIONS  
SCOPING REVIEW*



# *METHODS*

## Research Questions:



- What relevant themes are identified from the review of the literature?
- What is the impact of communications using digital death tech?
- What are the gaps in the research

## Identifying Studies



- Three searches of 25 databases
- (bereaved or grief) AND technology AND communication
- Automated messaging from the dead
- Posthumous Messaging
- Review of references in selected articles
- 842 studies found

## Study Selection



- English Language
- Substantial information about the use of digital death tech to communicate with the dead

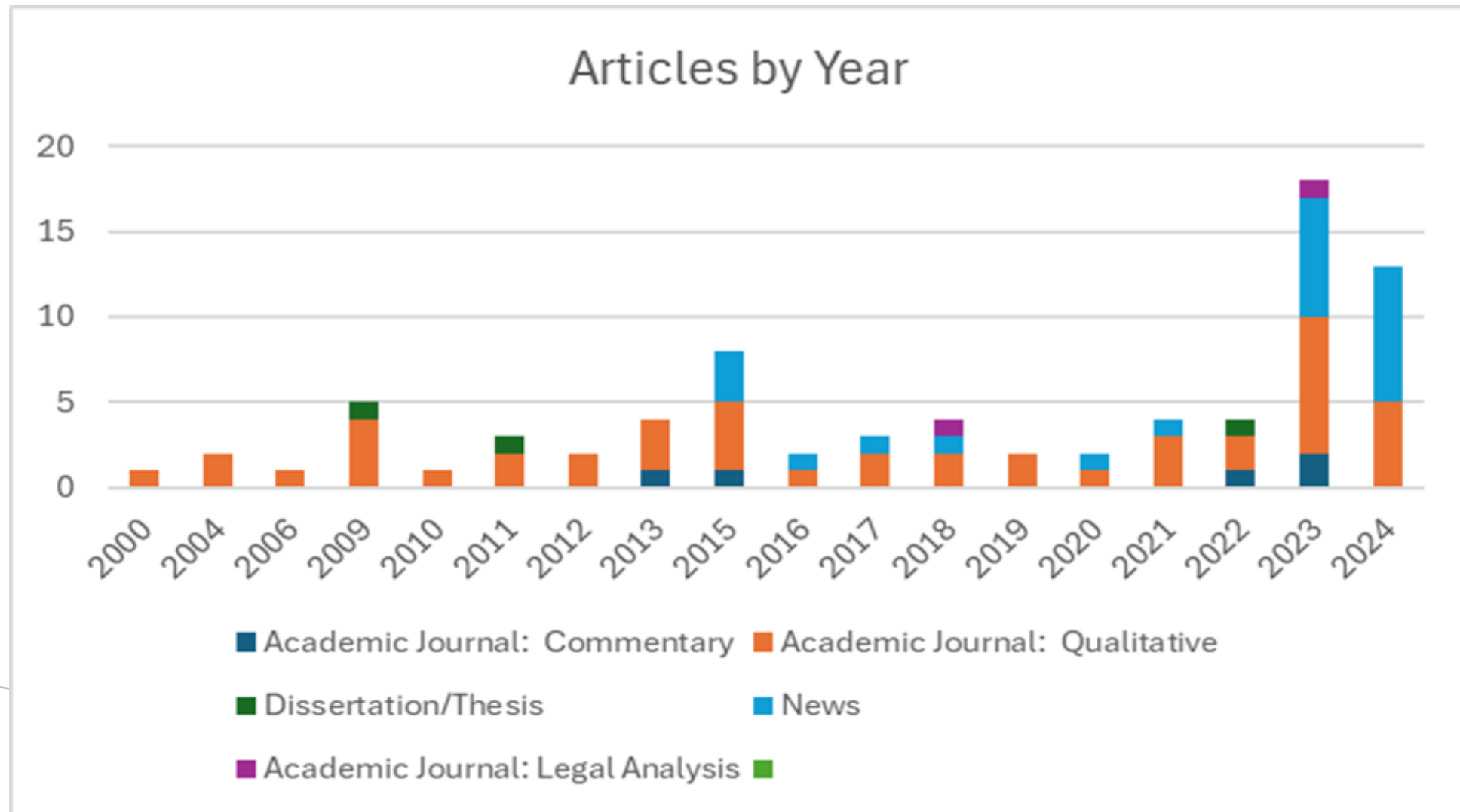
## Selected Articles



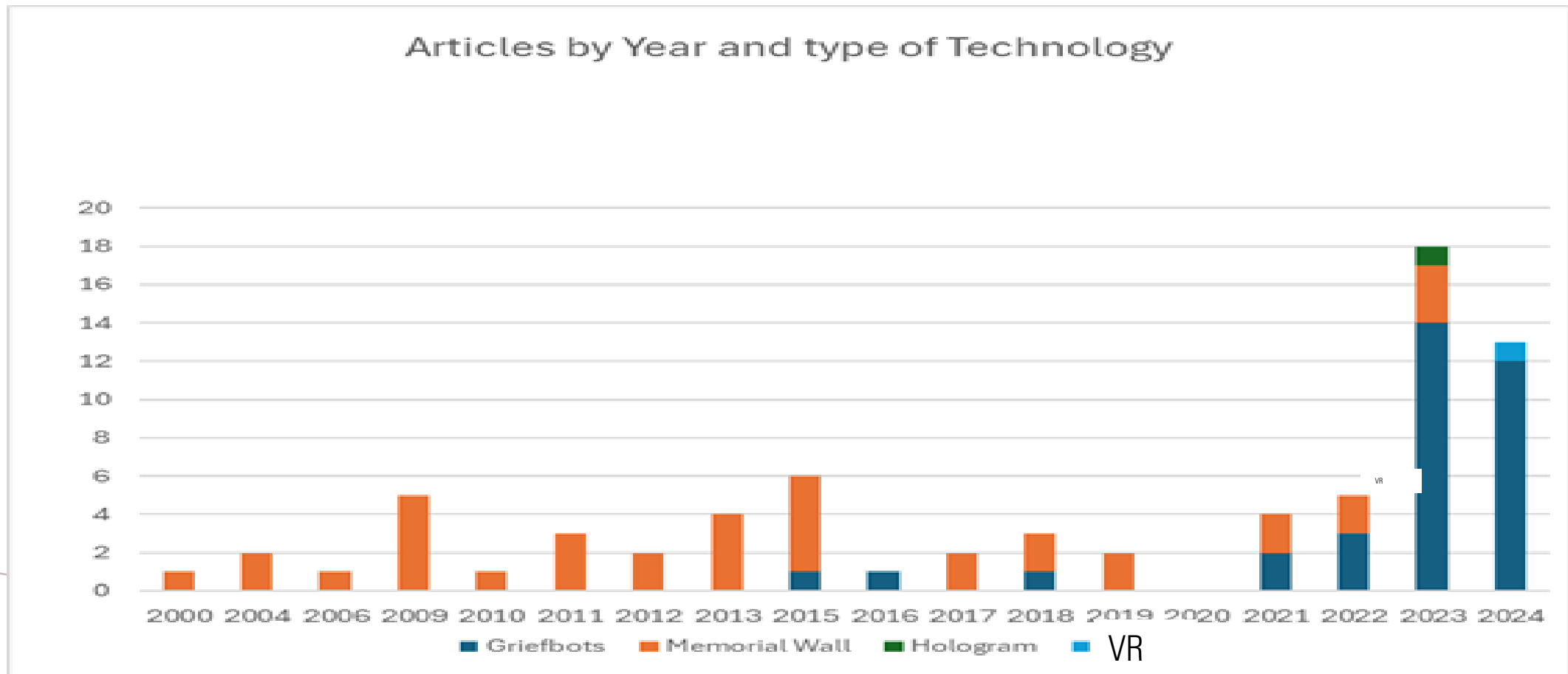
- 78 articles were selected for review
- 27 were studies from academic journals
- 27 were news articles
- 6 were commentary
- 6 were dissertations
- 2 were legal analysis



# *STUDIES BY YEAR*



# *STUDIES BY TYPE OF TECHNOLOGY*



# *THEMES*



People are embracing digital death tech that is familiar to use and shunning more complicated technology.



Digital death tech allows the bereaved to maintain continuing bonds with the deceased through communication that is similar and dissimilar to existing communication methods and it is often used in tandem with other communication methods.



Communication with the Dead via Digital Death Tech has impacts on the Bereaved, the Deceased, and Society



Reasons for using Memorial walls and griefbots are similar



Concerns about the use of Digital Death Tech to communicate with the dead





# *USE OF TECHNOLOGY*



Technology used

- Memorial walls, especially Facebook
- Griefbots
- Instant messaging
- Messaging apps



Technology Not being used

- Posthumous Messaging
- Virtual Reality
- Holograms

# *MAINTAINING CONTINUING BONDS THROUGH COMMUNICATION*

## Similar

- Specific Space
- Types of Messages .
- Private messages
- Paranormal experiences

## Dissimilar

- Private messages are public
- Two-way communication
- 24/7

## In-Tandem

- People visit Facebook and the grave

# *REASONS FOR USING DIGITAL DEATH TECH*

Feel close to the  
deceased

Sense of  
closure/goodbye

Keep memories  
alive

Find comfort

Deal with their  
loss

Help elderly  
relatives (China)



# *IMPACTS*

## Bereaved

- Learn new things
- Place for marginalized mourners

## Deceased

- Persona altered from shared memories

## Society

- Change how we grieve
- Facebook made grief more public
- Griefbots more private

# *CONCERNS*

## Digital Inequities

- Not everyone has access to digital tools

## Posthumous concerns

- Who owns the image?
- Who speaks for the dead?
- Who owns the data

## Ill Intentions

- Identity theft
- Phishing
- RIP Trolling

## Interference with Grief

- Emotional dependency
- Not wanting to connect with humans
- Minimize Death
- Second Loss
- Say things they would not say

## Commercialization

- Monetization
- Feed addiction(
- Product placement

# *LIMITATIONS*

- English language only
- NO comparative studies between types of digital death tech or different demographics
- Many of the studies only looked at artifacts, such as Facebook postings, and did not interview people

# *AREAS FOR FUTURE STUDY*

## Communication

- How are people using email and messaging to communicate with the dead?
- Does the use of different tools, memorial walls and griefbots, impact people differently?
- Who is using which communication tools?
- How does the accuracy of griefbots impact the bereaved?

## Memorialization

- Is communication via Facebook more meaningful as it is used for both memorialization and communication?
- How will the digital divide impact the mourning and death rituals of people who do not have access to digital death tech?

# *NEXT STEPS*

## Communication

- Comparative Case study project looking at whether different communication methods affect the bereaved differently

## Memorialization

- Memorialization Scoping review
- Memorialization case study project
- Studying different types of digital memorialization

## Death Rituals

- Death rituals scoping review
- Death rituals comparative case study project
- Study of different digital death rituals

Looking for interview participants, both professional and bereaved who use digital death tech. If you believe any of your students would be interested in participating, please let me know and I can provide an introduction to the project for you to give them.



*Thank you for attending this presentation!*

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Please reach out if you would be interested in participating in one or more of my studies