

# A Means to an End: Suicide Messages Visually Communicated

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the communicative relationship between visual and textual elements in postcards regarding suicide displayed through the blog Postsecret.com. A semiotic analysis is used to examine three postcards, which were published throughout the year on April 1, 2007, June 24, 2007 and October 14, 2007. The critique focuses on how visual elements interact with textual elements when conveying controversial topics within genres such as suicide and what universal characteristics emerge within each of the postcards that contribute to establish the genre of postcard suicide communication. The establishment of this genre is important for future communication studies as it addresses a highly overlooked aspect of communication that is typically avoided due to its controversial nature. This paper seeks to confront the topic, analyze universal characteristics and determine a genre that will aid in the future research of this phenomenon.

*Keywords: visual communication, suicide, postcards, rhetorical analysis*

## **INTRODUCTION**

*"In 2004, suicide was the third leading cause of death among youths and young adults aged 10--24 years in the United States, accounting for 4,599 deaths" (Lubell et al., 2007, p. 905).*

Nearly 11 percent of the population that died in 2004 occurred as a result of intentional self-inflicted injuries (Miniño, 2006, p. 4) but of this vast percentage of the population, how many of the attempts and completions were reported on the evening news? How many of these were discussed at the water cooler at work the next morning? How many of these were even uttered beyond the doors of those they directly impacted? Although suicide has occurred throughout the history of mankind, it has only been since the Middle Ages that this phenomenon has been viewed negatively in the societal mindset (Cvinar, 2005, p.14). It is this historical perception that has plagued communities and cultures from being able to adequately cope with this subject and deal with it effectively and has therefore stifled the openness to communicate topics related to suicide, in turn transforming it into a socially taboo subject to be discussed (ibid, p. 15).

Within the psychology, sociology and psychiatry fields an extensive amount of research has been conducted on the enactment of suicide and the social implications

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## A MEANS TO AN END

(Cvinar, 2005; Range & Kastner, 1988; Bridge et al, 2006). However the communication field is currently lacking in studies focusing on the communicative aspects of suicide such as how those considering committing suicide convey their intentions or how familial survivors of members who have committed suicide cope with their bereavement. This lack in research leaves a gap in the study of human communication that would benefit from examining this phenomenon.

In an attempt to bring awareness to and address this socially taboo phenomenon, this paper uses a semiotic analysis to examine three different postcards published throughout 2007 on April 1, 2007, June 24, 2007 and October 14, 2007 on [www.PostSecret.com](http://www.PostSecret.com). This analysis seeks to determine the relationship between the visual and textual elements within each message and the overlapping characteristics between each that comprise the genre of suicide communication conveyed through postcards (or postcard suicide communication). After the semiotic analysis, the organizing principles of the genre will then be detailed in order to affirm its existence as lack of research has yet to yield such a determination. Establishing this genre is necessary in order to produce future studies that yield holistic and significant results.

### ***An example of suicide communication: PostSecret.com***

When looking at the communication of those dealing with suicide, whether a person contemplating it or the survivor of a completed suicide, there are many media formats and many more messages that appear. There are suicide notes left behind from those who have committed suicide, there are messages from people contemplating suicide as a cry for help, as well as messages conveyed by people who are trying to cope with the loss of a loved one when trying to make sense and understand how and why this could have happened. This paper will focus on the rhetoric of those who have contemplated suicide or have been impacted by someone who has committed suicide.

In speaking out on this phenomenon, many outlets are available, from hand-written notes, verbal conversations, paintings or postcards to e-mails, blog postings, instant messages and everything in between. One outlet this paper will focus on is the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to address such a socially taboo subject. Through the World Wide Web anonymity has created a cloak with which to hide under, it facilitates the ease of discussing topics that are not normally discussed in the public forum (Bargh, 2004). Through anonymity anyone can reveal her or his worst inner secrets without fear of ignorance, rejection or denial. According to Eun-Ju Lee, "By creating this pseudo-private communication environment, computer mediation is believed to minimize concerns about public evaluation by allowing complete anonymity among users. This, in turn, likely liberates people from the norms and regulations that govern their ordinary life" (2002, p.350). People are capable of sending a message and having it received without obstruction of personal visual cues (such as appearance), vocal inflection or intonation, or any other societal bias that may occur during face-to-face communication (this is supported by cues-filtered-out theory [Kiesler et al., 1984]). Given the fact that most Internet users are between the ages of 18 and 29 (PEW Internet and American Life Project, 2007), and recalling the earlier statistic regarding the

## A MEANS TO AN END

suicide rate amongst people within that age group, it's no wonder so many have found their voice through CMC to discuss the topic of suicide.

One aspect of CMC in particular, the blog, could be conducive to the creation of an ideal anonymous environment for users to discuss such socially controversial topics like suicide. PostSecret is one such blog that has captured the interests, attention and connection of millions around the world since its inception in 2004. The site began as part of an art project where the founder, Frank Warren, handed out 3,000 self-addressed postcards to a random sample of people asking them to mail him a secret that a) had never been shared with anyone and b) is true (Warren, 2005, p. 1). Although it is impossible to determine whether the secrets have fulfilled these requirements or not as they are mailed in anonymously, it is irrelevant because whether or not these secrets are true for the sender, they are true and connect with any one of the receivers of these messages through the blog.

As stated on the PostSecret blog:

Each secret can be a hope, regret, funny experience, unseen kindness, fantasy, belief, fear, betrayal, erotic desire, confession, or childhood humiliation. Reveal anything - as long as it is true and you have never shared it with anyone before. (Warren, 2007)

At inception, Warren received only 100 responses but soon after started receiving several hundred. As of January 2007, Warren had received over 100,000 postcards, with up to 200 a day (Cable News Network, 2007). Warren updates the site weekly by handpicking and posting 24 postcards that have yet to be revealed. The responses the site yields touch upon every human emotion and controversial topic imaginable. Through these private secrets the cloak of anonymity bonds complete strangers and unites a severed society.

Along with the aspect of the anonymity, PostSecret also allows the ability to visually communicate as well as textually communicate socially controversial topics. This ability to share visually as well as textually is one of the aspects of PostSecret that separates it from other, similar blogs and websites. The imagery accompanying the secrets in each postcard is able to convey just as much or complement the textual message in such a way that it can sometimes be indecipherable to determine the message without the visual aspect. This relationship then becomes a necessity in order to fully convey a message that is as personal and as controversial as that of suicide. The next section will look at how these aspects combined allow for the creation of the postcard suicide communication genre.

### ***Determining a genre: Theories and definitions***

To begin the definition and description with which to cultivate the genre of postcard suicide communication, one must first look at the overarching criteria which all genres must conform to in order to be classified as a genre. According to Harrell and Linkugel (1978), "Rhetorical genres stem from *organizing principles* found in *recurring situations* that generate discourse characterized by a family of *common factors*" (p. 263-264). Over the years many scholars have written what they believe are the defining characteristics that delineate a genre in general. For example, Harrell & Linkugel identify four organizing principles of genre: de facto classification, structural

## A MEANS TO AN END

classification, motivational classification and archetypal classification (1978, p. 264). Based on these categories, the genre of suicide communication could either fall under the de facto classification, in which its “organizing principle is common-sense perception” or the archetypal classification that identifies “organizing principles based on persuasive images deeply imbedded in the audience’s psyche” (ibid). The common-sense perception implied is based on the direct connection that suicide communication is determined as a genre based on the fact that it addresses and deals with topics concerning suicide. The genre can also be perceived as archetypal as the concept or generally accepted idea of suicide on the universal level has already been ingrained into societal mindsets subtly even though many people may not ever have had a direct connection with the experience (either through their own personal contemplation or attempt, or through helping someone else cope with her/his own contemplations or attempts or even through having dealt with the loss of someone due to suicide). Determining the place of this genre within these classifications helps to delineate the organization patterns with which to identify a stable definition of the genre.

According to Carolyn Miller (1984), “A genre is a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence; it motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent” (p. 163). In this light, the genre of suicide communication (through the form of a mass mediated, digital postcard) seems incredibly relevant as not only does the actual content and form of this genre connect the personal to the private, but the characteristics of the category serve that purpose as well. Through the medium of the Internet, creators of postcard suicide communication messages are able to continually create messages that fit the form of this genre. Jan-Ola Östman addresses this aspect of recurrence in her example of the media convergence that occurs when traditional postcards become digitized:

Although traditionally a prototypical media token is published, copied, and distributed in many copies, one copy for each receiver, there are also texts that can be made in only a few copies, or even in only one copy: for example, a(n official) note on a bulletin board, or a note handed around to people, to one person at a time, to be read and then to be passed on to the next person. As is the case with distribution over the Internet, the ‘copying’ can take place in virtual reality. (2004, p. 427)

When looking at the messages displayed on PostSecret, the primary characteristic that binds all of the messages together is the form of the postcard. Despite varying content, images, linguistics and topics, every message conforms to the guideline requirement to create a 4 x 6 postcard mailed through a public postal system to be posted onto an even more public World Wide Web. According to Östman, “The postcard is a meeting place, not only for cultural phenomena . . . but also for several different semiotic modes, and for a plurality of language varieties” (2004, p. 437). These postcards however, can’t be viewed as simply postcards because as in traditional postcard format they are initially mailed to one sender, but unlike traditional postcard behavior they are then scanned and posted on the Internet for anyone with an Internet connection to view. No longer private or even semi-public as Östman posits, but entirely public and available for mass consumption.

## A MEANS TO AN END

The other aspect of the digital postcard that differs from the traditional is the fact that viewer can not hold the postcard, turn it over in her or his hands, view *both* sides, or even see who the sender is or where it is being sent from. These aspects are reserved solely for the Webmaster and whomever he decides to share them with in hardcopy. Regardless of this loss of physical interaction, viewers online can still be emotionally touched as well as virtually connected to the message. This connection is supported by Walther's hyperpersonal communication model (Walther, 1994) that states that "The absence of nonverbal cues, as well as editing capabilities, identity cues, and temporal characteristics may prompt CMC users to engage in selective self-presentation and partner idealization, enacting exchanges more intimate than those of FtF [face-to-face] counterparts" (Tidwell & Walther, 2002, p. 319-320). Although Walther found that intimacy is conveyed more over time, it is still capable of being transmitted through CMC and anonymity.

Now that the definitions of the genre have been established, the next section will explore the semiotic theories that underline the necessity of studying both textual and visual elements, which will aid in the analysis of the postcard suicide communication.

### ***Semiotics and semantics: A visual interpretation***

As visual communication can be seen as a more complex form of communication in comparison to verbal language, a *semiotic* approach is applicable to examine the various detailed and intricate elements that comprise visual language. Walther states in his 2004 article "Language and Communication Technology" that it is worthy to research the adaptation of semiotics for users moving from one set of symbols to another (p. 386). The theory of semiotics is defined to be the examination of the relationship of sign and symbol elements within language and communication (Agnes, 1999, p. 1304). Charles Peirce established one theoretical approach to the semiotics of visual communication that examines the receiver's perception of a word or image sign in turn determining the meaning of another object or concept. In other words, this theory states that receiver knowledge of visual communication is mediated and framed through the usage of signs (Moriarty, 1996, 167-168).

Stemming from the focus on the semiotics of visual language, research has also specifically focused on the rhetoric, pragmatics and semantics of visual communication as well. All foci can be used to analyze visual communication, each looking at a different aspect, but this study will lean mostly on the visual semantic approach as it is the most applicable for the end goal of this analysis to determine the relationship between visual and textual elements in postcard suicide communication and how that relationship affects the overall message conveyed. The visual semantic approach looks at the grammar, syntax or logic that is used in imagery and design to determine the underlying meaning within the organization of the message. Although this approach has been greatly utilized in the art and psychology fields in prior years, it has recently come into the communication spotlight in the past five years as younger communication scholars seek to analyze visual aspects in new media (Barnhurst et al., 2004, p. 630 & 632).

## A MEANS TO AN END

Because language metaphors tend to predominate the visual semantic approach, criticism has arisen stating that visual aspects of the imagery is subordinated to verbal aspects, although recent studies have successfully tied together both visual and verbal aspects in a cohesive analysis (Barnhurst et al., 2004, p. 630). Some theorists argue that interpreting visual communication is in fact easier than interpreting verbal in that a period of learning the comprehension and meaning within the verbal is extensively longer than visual as well as the ability for visual language to permeate several cultures without the meaning being entirely lost in translation (Messaris, 1993, p. 290). This visual semantic approach is therefore valuable for this study as it will assist in thoroughly analyzing the visual and textual relationships within the organization of the content and determine the latent as well as manifest meanings within them.

When examining the connection between the semantics of verbal communication and the semantics of visual communication, several similarities exist. Although they are mostly based on the same conceptual founding they are not entirely applied within the same manner. The relationship between semantics and verbal communication is based on the characterization of verbal language “by arbitrary, purely conventional relationships between individual elements (sounds or words) and their meanings” (Messaris, 1998, p. 71). The nature of this relationship is also restricted to established rules of ordering in regards to words or phrases, which creates a comparably inflexible syntax.

In comparison to this correlation, the relationship between semantics and visual language shows that imagery also follows certain semantic conventions; however, imagery is not reduced to arbitrary characterizations nor confined to such a rigid syntactic structure. Visual theorists, although in agreement with the correlation between semantics and visual communication, also acknowledge that this relationship can be so fluid at times that it may appear to be exempt from any semantic rules whatsoever (Messaris, 1998, p. 71). According to Peirce, visual language is more available for interpretation in comparison to verbal because its relationships are not determined through arbitrary meanings but instead through personal experience and perception (Moriarty, 1996, p. 169). Susan Hagan expands on the bond between visual and textual language and message interpretation in her 2007 article, “Visual/Verbal Collaboration in Print: Complementary Differences, Necessary Ties, and an Untapped Rhetorical Opportunity.” In this article, Hagan states that various communication media intertwining both text and visual aspects:

Can potentially produce *cross-modal meaning* that clarifies, contradicts, or challenges ordinary meaning. Cross-modal meaning is defined here as shared understanding gained by an audience that must both look and read. Cross-modal meaning is communicated when concrete visual and verbal elements collaborate to challenge, contradict, or clarify the ordinary, or associative, meaning of isolated modalities. *Ordinary meaning* refers to the denotative and connotative understandings common to a particular audience. *Associative meaning* refers to individually held meaning. (p. 54)

The concept of cross-modal meaning is not new to communication research however, and has been effective in analyzing visual versus verbal affects when combined with

## A MEANS TO AN END

semiotic and rhetorical concepts since the 1960s. In recent scholarship analyzing cross-modal meaning, theorist J.A. Blair discovered that when combined with text, images contribute to logical arguments and assist in the conveyance of messages (ibid, p. 55). When examining the visual content of the postcards through the PostSecret blog, most postcards are heavily dependent on both textual and visual elements to convey a message. Taking the cross-modal meaning into account when conducting this analysis will help to efficiently analyze the complexity of the messages and the various components involved, in turn ensuring a more thorough examination into the construction of the messages.

In reference to determining visual semiotics through *pre-texts*, Sandra Moriarty quotes Victor Burgin in her 1996 article “Abduction: A Theory of Visual Interpretation,” and states “responses such as ‘racist’ or ‘sexist’ are not in the photographs themselves, but rather they are a ‘complex of texts, rhetorics, and codes woven into the fabric of the popular pre-conscious’” (p. 179). This idea of pre-texts stems from Peirce’s focus on receiver perception, but takes it one step further in recognizing that these perceptions are drawn from pre-conceived notions as well as cultural inundations when encountering conceptual visual language. This particular theory is quite relevant to this study as it focuses on visual language conveying obscure concepts that not only touch upon human emotions but controversial topics like suicide.

In 1987, Donald Morley progressed visual perception and interpretation theories with the development of the *subjective message construct theory* (SMCT). SMCT is based off the same premise that the meaning within the sign or symbol resides within the receiver perception. Because receivers’ perception is likely to be determined by whether the message is comprehensible, this ability for message comprehension supports a subjective construct of meaning associated with communicative strategies and personal experiences (Parrott, 2005, p. 424-425). This theory is supported by Moriarty’s assertion that:

Because of the way the interpretant functions in sign interpretation, the responsibility for signification lies with the audience rather than with the text, and that is true for visual texts as well as written or spoken texts but is particularly important for visual texts. (1996, p. 179)

The next section will apply these theories as a foundation to conduct a semiotic analysis of three postcards addressing the topic of suicide communication through the PostSecret blog. This semiotic analysis will determine the visual and textual characteristics present within the suicide communication genre.

### ***Determining a genre: The artifacts at hand***

#### ***April 1, 2007 Postcard***

The first postcard in this analysis was posted on PostSecret.com April 1, 2007 (see Figure 1). This postcard consists of a black and white image of a suspended bridge with hand scrawled lettering in black ink on the upper right portion that states, “I TOLD MY DEPRESSED EX GIRLFRIEND THAT I DIDN’T CARE ANYMORE. THAT SHE MIGHT AS WELL JUMP OFF A BRIDGE.” In the bottom right-hand portion in slightly smaller

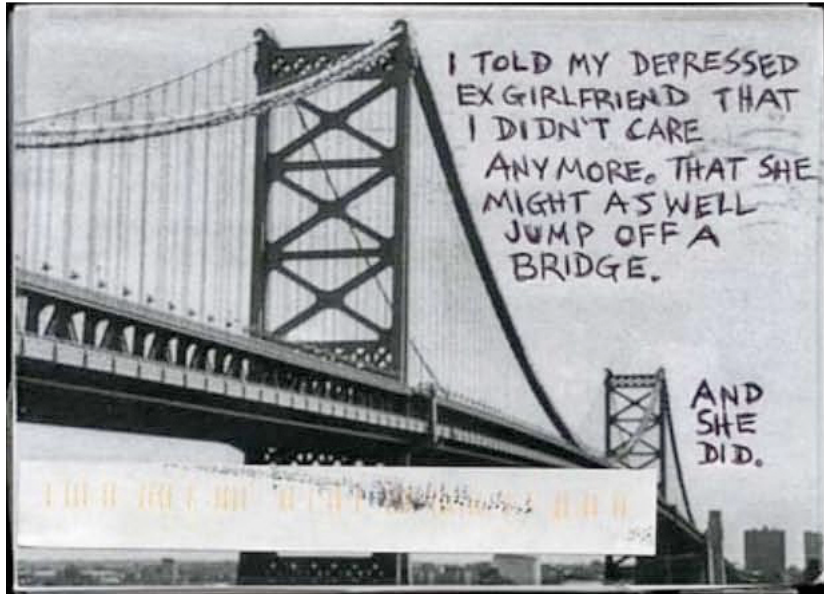
## A MEANS TO AN END

lettering it also states, "AND SHE DID." The message reaffirms its postcard origination with a postal barcode that was affixed to the left side of the image by the post office for mailing. Although the identity of the sender is anonymous, the bridge pictured in the image is the Oakland Bay Bridge, which shows that the sender has at one point in time had some sort of connection to the San Francisco area. Other than that, no other images or clues are provided which might give indication of the creator's identity. The handwriting could be interpreted to be in the scrawl of a male's penmanship, especially given the verbiage stated, but given the openness of same-gender relationships and the amount of speculation that would impose it is hard to determine further gender identification from the handwriting. The relationship between the image and the text seems to have manifest meanings in that the image of the bridge directly corresponds to the statement regarding the suicide of the girl from a bridge (not necessarily assumed to be the same bridge as pictured), which shows the relationship of the image to the text to be one of reinforcement.

This message addresses the topic of suicide communication indirectly by not explicitly stating the word suicide but instead depicting an example of suicide that directly impacted the creator. Without the context of the situation or knowledge of precursor it is difficult to determine whether the creator used this medium to express anguish, remorse, shock, guilt, peace, content, joy or any other range of emotion to deal with the suicide. From the standpoint of the viewer, the resulting emotion is one of shock when considering both the concept of directly or indirectly being responsible for a suicide and the thought of having to cope with the suicide of a loved one or friend (or ex-girlfriend). The fact that both the image and text are in black and white conveys a sense of coldness and detachment. The anonymity of not only the sender but the bridge (it is unlabeled in the message and therefore unknown to a more general, diverse audience) also leaves a feeling of detachment but nonetheless does not stifle any feeling of shock the textual message provides. If the message were viewed with only the image portion it would not convey the association with suicide that the texts provides and is therefore dependent on the text for meaning. On the other hand, the text alone could sufficiently convey a message regarding suicide but the image provides a more distinct and cultivated perception on what the situation may have entailed. Overall, the message provides characteristics for the genre of suicide through the textual message's manifest meaning with a dependent visual variable for clarification.



## A MEANS TO AN END



**Figure 1.** April 1, 2007 Postcard

### *June 24, 2007 Postcard*

The June 24 postcard (see Figure 2) is an interesting design in that it is a still shot from a 1967 D.A. Pennebaker film, *Don't Look Back*, in which a very young Bob Dylan goes through a cue card scene in the introduction of the film. The image itself is a picture of 23-year-old Bob Dylan in a building construction site holding a series of cue cards in which the top card states, "LOOK OUT!". The significance of that particular shot pulled from the film is interesting as it is buried 50 seconds within the initiation of cue cards, which could allude to the age of the creator as possibly being from that generation or at the very least very knowledgeable of that genre of music and video. The words provided in the cue cards in the original context are lyrics for the song "Subterranean Homesick Blues" which references 1960s culture and political issues. With this in mind, this image serves an especially iconic role as a referent for those conceptual meanings. These could then be attached to the creator as possibly being related to the 1960s culture, drug paraphernalia or radical government views. Along with the image, three lines of text are taped over the picture of Bob Dylan in a basic sans serif font stating, "I no longer" "for high places to hang myself from" "when I walk down the street." In relation to the text in the image, the total message reads, "I no longer LOOK OUT! for high places to hang myself from when I walk down the street." The textual and visual elements are conveyed in black and white conveying a sense of seriousness and coldness attached to the message.

This message addresses the topic of suicide directly by conveying a continuing personal impulse to commit suicide. Through the use of historical contextual reference and hand-made manipulations to the original message, this postcard is seemingly more artistic than the first in its attempt to address the issue of suicide. In this message the textual element is dependent on the visual for both meaning and context. The fact that the image takes place in a construction site for the erection of a large building is not merely coincidental and again ties the textual in with the visual. There is a direct

## A MEANS TO AN END

dependence between the two on the part of the textual element in its reliance on the image's text to complete the message for coherence and meaning. The visual element in turn is also dependent on the textual as without it would have no reference to suicide communication, which could therefore strip it of its significance, leaving it susceptible to being misinterpreted as commodified nostalgia as part of the latest trend. Overall, this message provides characteristics for the genre of suicide communication through the interdependence of the visual and textual elements that address the personal desire to consider committing suicide. This message differs from the previous not only in direct versus indirect affect to the creator but also in that this message conveys a sense of hope as the creator *no longer* considers committing suicide. Messages like this one help build a sense of community through the PostSecret website as it conveys a hopeful message that some of the viewers who have experienced similar thoughts can relate to. It's a positive message addressing a rather bleak topic.



**Figure 2.** June 24, 2007 Postcard

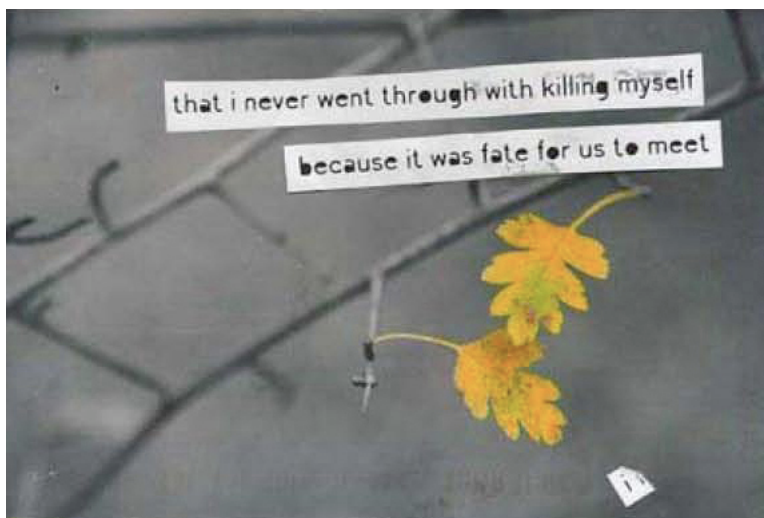
### *October 14, 2007 Postcard*

The third postcard this study will critique was posted on October 14, 2007 (see Figure 3). This postcard again uses a black and white image with a black computer font superimposed above. One aspect that makes this message different than the previous two is that it is not entirely black and white. The image is a black and white photograph of a close-up of a branch with two leaves touching; however, the two leaves are shown in color, displaying an autumn version of the changing of the color of the leaves to depict the yellow and green shades typical of that time of year. The use of color is significant for several reasons. First, it could be meaningful for the creator through its representation of the corresponding time of year that this message was sent (October). More importantly, the fact that the leaves are depicted to correspond with change in nature as in change in life directly relates to the textual message, which is detailed further below. The color of the leaves is also significant in direct relation to the text as a sign of hope. The black and white background represents the bleak and depressing topic of suicide communication while the colorful leaves represent the hope the creator feels in striving to move past her/his association. The text in the message is similar to the previous message in that it was typed through a computer, printed, cut into two

## A MEANS TO AN END

strips and affixed to the image directly above the referent portion of the image (the leaves). The text simply states, “that i never went through with killing myself” “because it was fate for us to meet”. The statement has an overall sense of hope in that although the person once considered suicide now no longer does because of the importance of meeting someone in her/his life. The text itself is interesting in that the entire statement is typed in lowercase font, including the pronoun “i”. The sense of feeling smaller or insignificant is conveyed through this and reinforces the suicidal tendencies the creator once had.

This postcard addresses the topic of suicide directly by conveying a personal sense of accomplishment over not giving in to the temptation of committing suicide. Through its selective and intentional use of color this message conveys a sense of artistic value. This postcard is different from the previous two in that the textual element and the visual element can both successfully convey similar messages independently of each other. The textual element is a straight forward, manifest message that clearly states the creator’s association with suicide and her/his current status of overcoming suicidal tendencies. The visual however conveys a latent message that can be interpreted under the genre of suicide communication by addressing the specified, intentional selection of color-usage against the backdrop of a black and white background. The leaves signify change of life and renewal and the background signifies the overwhelming bleakness associated with suicide. The two leaves can be interpreted to signify the creator and the person who has impacted the creator’s life. Granted, the specifics of the context more than likely couldn’t be conveyed so clearly through just the visual alone, but the visual could in turn effectively convey the same meaning. So in this respect both elements work independently of each other while at the same time support and clarify one another to tell a concise and more detailed message. Overall, this postcard provides characteristics of the genre of suicide communication through the manifest textual message of overcoming it and the latent visual message of change and moving beyond it.



**Figure 3.** *October 14, 2007 Postcard*

## A MEANS TO AN END

The characteristics that are found within each of these examples are the characteristics that will serve to formulate the organizing principles of the genre of postcard suicide communication. This organization will be further refined in the next section as the characteristics and specifications for this genre will be concisely defined.

### ***Determining a genre: The defining characteristics***

With the definitions and limitations discussed earlier in this paper in mind, the characteristics that are specific in establishing the genre of postcard suicide communication identified in the three artifacts analyzed will now be defined. In this paper, within each of the postcards are elements that address the topic of suicide. The perspective from which this occurs varies between each card and could vary in other examples of the genre, but overall the content must address suicide from either the perspective of someone who has contemplated committing suicide or attempted suicide or from the perspective of someone who has been affected by someone else who has either contemplated, attempted or committed suicide. The overtone of emotion addressing this subject can also vary as was shown through the artifacts. Some postcards addressed the topic in a hopeful manner while others were disconnected or detached. Other possible emotional reactions could include regret, sympathy, remorse, fear, denial, or even joy; the genre of suicide communication is not limited by perceptual approach.

These examples powerfully and effectively conveyed the seriousness of the topic through color choices, style of arrangement between visual and textual elements, the overall relationship between the textual and visual elements, as well as tone, word choice, grammar, syntax and aesthetic. The cross-modal meaning within each of the postcards revealed that the visual elements reinforced the textual message, although that need not happen to successfully convey the message. Some of the more interesting postcards on PostSecret are the ones that depict a conflicting message between the visual and textual elements.

While some genres like a eulogy could in part be restricted to media format, the topic of suicide communication spans media and even the convergence of media. The one latent and cultural limitation imposed on this genre is the reluctance to address it in a public forum. Rarely do we hear of suicide on television, lest the person already be a central public figure like a celebrity. It's not polite conversation for the dinner table and is usually spoken of in hushed voices, carried under the breaths of those affected. In this respect, PostSecret.com accommodates this situational constraint effectively and creates a space in the public forum to address a very serious topic that desperately needs to be discussed.

Other aspects of the genre noted above indirectly addressed an individualistic tone. Through the restriction to mainly black and white hues and low color values, the images convey a sense of isolationism with an overtone of cold, detachment from the creator. Granted these are inherently detached due to the anonymous nature of the website, but through these visual choices the creator intentionally creates a sense of solitude. Other aspects of the postcard that contribute to the formulation of this genre

## A MEANS TO AN END

address the independent versus dependent relationship of the textual and visual elements. What these relationships provide is a determination that when addressing this topic visually, the creator could successfully use dependent and independent elements to convey the seriousness of the topic, although the more interdependent the variables are the more concise and coherent the message. Overall, these various characteristics lead to the clarification of the issue by forming common factors that can be replicated through various media without mis-contextualizing the message and providing insight into the issue for viewers who may be unfamiliar with it.

### **CONCLUSION**

Throughout this study an attempt has been made to determine and define the characteristics that establish the rhetorical genre of suicide communication. Because of the societal situational constraints and limitations imposed on this topic it has received very limited focus as an important aspect of communication. Determining a genre to approach an analysis of the effectiveness, appropriateness, and even at times aesthetic clarification of this issue, “helps the critic both describe and evaluate the rhetoric” (Rowland, 2002, p. 203), and in turn will provide a more complete analysis of this area of communication. Genre has also been deemed as a useful tool to help illuminate vague areas of rhetoric by providing not only historical but contextual information that might otherwise be overlooked. According to Campbell and Jamieson (1978), “A genre is composed of a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic” (p. 21). The affirmation that the genre of postcard suicide communication is in fact a genre seeks to provide an analytical tool to aid in the process of not only critiquing but also addressing and acknowledging this vastly overlooked topic of communication.

This study specifically looked at the relationship between textual and visual elements in postcards dealing with suicide as specific characteristics of this genre and found that by using both elements the message is conveyed more completely and concisely. However, what was not addressed in the artifacts examined is how conflicting texts and images affect the message. Research has been conducted on this relationship in general (Arnheim, 1974), but when specifically looking at the messages postcard suicide communication convey it would be helpful to look at other artifacts where the balance in message is not parallel. This leaves open an era for future research in delineating more concrete boundaries that define this genre.

The issue of suicide is one that rarely gets touched upon in most areas of our society, academia included. Speculation could state the justification being that the topic is too depressing, too controversial, and too personal. Unfortunately though, if this topic is never addressed in the public sphere than those who are coping with it will never know that they are not alone in coping with this phenomenon. PostSecret is making a step in the direction of allowing for this to someday happen openly in public. When this transition from the socially taboo to the socially addressed and responsible occurs, this established genre will be able to help convey a more complete picture. Until then, the issue of suicide will continue to be hushed under held breaths, hidden from the socially accepted to the backs of our minds where the socially taboo reside.



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## A MEANS TO AN END

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