



Qualitative Exploration of Pet Bereavement Experience among Indonesian Pet-Bereaved Individuals

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Abstract

Bereavement is often associated with the loss of a human being. However, bereavement could also occur when an individual loses a pet. According to various studies, the response to grief and the effects of pet bereavement and human bereavement have no significant differences. Even so, social norms often consider pet bereavement a trivial and less significant grief. There is relatively little literature researching pet bereavement, especially in Indonesia. For this reason, an exploratory study was conducted through qualitative research using an open-ended questionnaire to explore the experience of pet bereavement. There were 101 participants involved in filling out the questionnaire, which was dominated by women (82%), people aged 18-24 years old (57%), and grieving the cat species (71%). From the inductive thematic analysis, four themes were found that represent the components of the pet bereavement experience, namely, (1) bereavement reactions, (2) bereavement coping, (3) support system, and (4) self-growth. With these findings, the support system around the bereaved can better understand their perspectives and provide the support needed by those who mourn their pets.

Keywords: pet bereavement, explorative study, inductive thematic analysis, qualitative, support system, Indonesia

Introduction

The concept of animal companionship has evolved significantly over time. Historically, animals were primarily kept for practical purposes such as work or protection, with the shift toward emotional-based pet ownership beginning around the 19th century (Wills 2017). This

evolution is also evident in the Indonesian context. Historical reliefs on the Borobudur temple, constructed around the 8th century AD, depict the practice of raising animals, particularly dogs, which were likely utilized to guard crops in Indonesia's agrarian society (Prasetyo 2023).

Despite these historical functions, contemporary Indonesians now view pets not only for practical reasons but also for emotional support. The concept of '*anabul*' or '*anak bulu*,' meaning fur child, reflects the deep affection and familial bonds many Indonesians, especially in urban areas, form with their pets. This trend is particularly noticeable among middle and upper-class families who treat pets as family members, allowing them free access to homes and celebrating their milestones, such as birthdays (Illume Network 2023). Furthermore, the psychological benefits of pet ownership are widely recognized in Indonesia. A survey involving 10,442 Indonesian participants indicated that pets are primarily kept for psychological benefits, such as reducing stress and overcoming sadness (41%), and for companionship (36%) (Rakuten Insight, quoted in Prasetyo 2023).

This aligns with global trends where pet companionship is valued for its predictability and emotional support, which are seen as less complicated than human relationships (Sable 2013, 93). Moreover, studies involving American and French-Canadian participants highlight beliefs that pets provide unconditional love, presence, and acceptance to their owners (Petrich 2008, 72; Packman et al. 2014, 347). The humanization of pets has led to greater emphasis on their health, diet, and overall well-being, mirroring concerns typically reserved for human family members.

Despite these positive sentiments, pets have a shorter life expectancy (LE) compared to humans. Humans generally have an LE of 73 years (WHO 2021), while dogs' LE ranges from 8-13 years, and cats' LE ranges from 2-18 years (Tucker 2021). Although there is no accessible data regarding the death rate of pets in Indonesia, the LE statistics suggest that grief due to the death of pets (pet bereavement) is a common experience for pet owners. This disparity in life expectancy means that pet owners frequently face the loss of their beloved animals, making pet bereavement a significant aspect of the human-animal bond.

Pet bereavement is defined as the grief experienced due to the loss of any animal species that holds significant meaning for its owner (Quackenbush 1985, 395-396; Chur-Hansen 2010, 14). Pet bereavement can be followed by two responses: mourning and grief. Mourning is a behavioral response to honor and remember the deceased (Quackenbush 1985, 396; Rémillard 2017, 154). Grief is an emotional response to loss (Podrazik et al. 2000, 363) often expressed internally (Quackenbush 1985, 396).

There exist many theories relating to grief. One of the most well-known grief theories is the "Five Stages of Grief," which consists of five phases of emotions in the grieving process: (1) denial, (2) anger, (3) bargaining, (4) depression, and (5) acceptance (Kübler-Ross & Kessler 2014, 40). Having said that, there are opinions stating that this theory simplifies the

complexity of a grieving process too much (Hall 2014, 8). Two alternative theories that describe the complexity of grief are “The Dual Process Model of Grief” and “Tasks of

Mourning. “The Dual Process Model of Grief” elaborates on stress management through loss-oriented or restoration-oriented models that occasionally oscillate (Stroebe & Schut 1999, 212-213). “Tasks of Mourning” states that grief is a continuous process (Worden 2008, 53). The theory also elaborates that to adapt to loss, several tasks of mourning need to be done, such as accepting reality, processing wounds, adjusting to life without the deceased, and remembering the deceased in an adaptive manner (Worden 2008, 39-50). However, it must be considered that the three theories above explore grief in the context of humans. Meanwhile, the elements and process of grief in the context of animals are only explored by Quackenbush (1985, 396). Similar to Kübler-Ross and Kessler, Quackenbush explains the process of grief due to pet loss in five stages, which are (1) denial, (2) anger, (3) guilt, (4) depression, and (5) resolution (Quackenbush 1985, 396).

From Quackenbush’s theory, it is known that grief due to pet loss is a natural phenomenon. Although a pet owner can also experience grief, unlike the loss of a human being, grief due to the loss of a pet is often underestimated (Spain, O’Dwyer, & Moston 2019, 555; Packman et al. 2014, 345). When humans pass away, their death is honored and celebrated. Someone who has lost someone close to them will receive condolences and sympathy from people around them. However, that privilege is often not presented to pet owners.

Grief that is disregarded is called disenfranchised grief. Disenfranchised grief is a grieving experience that is not validated and does not receive enough sympathy from its social surroundings (Packman et al. 2014, 334). An example of disenfranchised grief in pet bereavement is the assumption that pet owners can overcome grief by simply getting a new pet (Cordaro 2012, 287-288; Toray 2004, 247). Moreover, the grief of pet owners is regarded as unjustifiable because the relationship between a human and an animal is not considered as meaningful as the relationship between humans (Cordaro 2012, 288; Chur-Hansen 2010, 16). Pet owners also tend to invalidate the grief of losing pets that are not cats or dogs (Laing & Maylea 2018, 227). However, the presence of grief is unrelated to the pet species. Instead, it relates to the significance of the relationship between the pet and its owner (Chur-Hansen 2010, 14). As a result, disenfranchised grief further complicates, deepens, and extends the pain felt during grieving moments (Kaufman & Kaufman 2006, 61). Feeling stupid and shameful due to grief (Petrich 2008, 111-112), high severity of grief (Habart et al. 2017, 658; Petrich 2008, 110; Packman et al. 2014, 346), anxiety (Bussolari et al. 2021, 390), insomnia (Sable 2013, 96), delayed posttraumatic growth (Spain, O’Dwyer, & Moston 2019, 555), depression, psychosomatic disorder (Bussolari et al. 2021, 390; Habart et al. 2017, 666; Packman et al. 2014, 343), suicidal tendencies, and hindered productivity (Packman et al. 2014, 343-346) are the risks caused by the inconveniences of this experience. This is especially concerning because losing a human figure and a pet is not very different.

As many as 47.5% of animal care workers (veterinarians, animal shelter staff) state that the intensity of grief experienced when losing an animal and a person feels identical (Marton,

Kilbane, & Nelson-Becker 2019, 5). Research exploring the process of grief through linguistics also found that the frequency of the words “grief,” “anger,” “sadness,” and “negative emotions” used to describe experiences of grief caused by losing a human and an animal are not vastly different (Lyons et al. 2020, 14). Other studies also found that intimacy built before death is the strongest predictor of grief severity levels in both human and pet bereavement (Eckerd, Barnett, & Jett-Dias 2016, 275). These findings highlight that pet and human bereavement are equally significant, reinforcing why pet bereavement is considered an important issue and recognized internationally.

Research from Canada has shown that losing a pet can lead to intense grief (Kwong & Bartholomew 2011, 421). Similarly, a study from Hong Kong found that the intensity of pet bereavement is influenced by factors such as the strength of the human-animal bond (Wong et al. 2017, 103). In Australia, Lavorgna and Hutton (2019, 521) emphasized the importance of acknowledging and validating grief resulting from pet loss. Additionally, a systematic review has compiled studies on pet bereavement from various countries, including the USA, Sweden, and Romania (Cleary et al. 2022, 2170-2172).

Despite extensive international research, there are limited studies on pet bereavement in Indonesia. Among the three psychological studies conducted in Indonesia, Sembodo (2018) explored grief experiences using Videbeck's theory, Juliadilla (2021) highlighted the crucial role of parents in supporting children through pet bereavement, and Sundari (2018) investigated how attachment influences the level of grief experienced by pet owners. However, these studies do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the typical experiences faced by pet owners in Indonesia during pet bereavement. To address this gap, the current study aims to explore pet bereavement experiences from the perspective of Indonesian pet owners.

Methods

Participant

This explorative study involves 101 participants (N = 101) with informed consent to be included in this research process. The inclusion criteria are set to be those who have experienced grief due to the loss of a pet and are at least 18 years of age. The exclusion criterion is those who have experienced loss within the past six months. This exclusion criterion minimizes the involvement of participants still experiencing intense grief that generally occurs within the first six months following a loss (Maciejewski et al. 2007, 718; Zhang et al. 2006, 1189). Participants for this study were assembled through purposive sampling by sharing a questionnaire link with various animal lover communities on Instagram and Twitter. To expand the range of participant involvement, snowball sampling was also conducted by inviting participants who had completed the questionnaire to share the link with others who have experienced pet bereavement. From this recruitment process,

101 participants were gathered, with demographic characteristics dominated by females (82.2%) and individuals younger than 25 years old (57.4%), as shown in Table 1.

Additionally, the participant recruitment process was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Gadjah Mada (EC No: 5444/UN1/FPSi.1.3/SD/PT.01.04/2021).

Table 1. *Data Demographics*

No.	Characteristic	N	Percentage
1	Gender		
	Female	83	82.2
	Male	18	17.8
2	Age		
	<25	58	57.4
	25-30	9	8.9
	31-35	8	7.9
	36-40	10	9.9
	41-45	9	8.9
	>45	7	6.9

Procedure

The primary researcher (ASAP) developed the initial questionnaire based on several information sources: (1) Personal narrative, (2) Literature review, and (3) Focus Group Discussions (FGD). The personal narrative consisted of the researcher's personal experiences with the pet bereavement phenomenon, thematically coded to identify possible themes associated with pet bereavement that could be explored. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to further guide the development of the questionnaire, ensuring it was informed by existing studies while identifying potential research gaps that might be underexplored. The initial questionnaires were then circulated to the entire team to be reviewed and finalized.

Next, we conducted an FGD with five participants who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria to assess the questionnaire's effectiveness and to identify any new themes related to pet bereavement. No new themes emerged from the FGD; thus, no additional questions were added to the questionnaire. However, some questions were eliminated due to confusion and repetitive responses during the FGD. Combining these three methods ensures that the questionnaire is comprehensive, culturally sensitive, and reflective of both individual experiences and broader societal patterns, leading to a more robust and effective tool for studying pet bereavement.

After finalizing the questionnaire based on the pilot study, the researcher distributed it widely. Once the data was collected, analyzed, and presented in the research results, a final member-checking process was conducted. Rather than conducting individual interviews, this method was chosen for its flexibility, allowing the researcher to explore the complex ideas and experiences of numerous participants efficiently.

Instrument

This research uses an open-ended questionnaire originally written in Indonesian as its instrument, created using Google Forms, and divided into several sections. The first, second, and third sections include a research information sheet and informed consent. The fourth section contains self-demographic data, with questions regarding the participant's name/initials, gender, age, and contact details. The fifth section is comprised of open-ended questions regarding relations with pets, which includes the following questions:

1. Cause of grief (state species of the particular pet)
2. What was the significance of said pet to you?
3. How close were you with said pet?
4. How big was the grief that you felt at the time?

Additionally, the sixth section is made up of open-ended questions on experiences of grief due to the loss of a pet, as shown below:

1. Please elaborate on your experience and feelings at the time of grieving
2. Is there something you did to remember the deceased?
3. How did that grief affect your daily life?
4. How did you overcome grief?
5. What support do you wish you had received while grieving? (Please mention the source and form of support).

To end the questionnaire, the seventh section contains a thank you greeting, information about online psychological services, contact information for the researcher, and a link to the questionnaire. The responses gathered from this questionnaire were answered in Indonesian and were translated to English.

Analysis

Qualitative analysis was conducted through inductive thematic analysis, a bottom-up process where the researcher analyzes data without relying on specific theoretical frameworks and focuses on the essence of the obtained data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 83). In this approach, themes and sub-themes were derived directly from the data itself rather than being influenced by external theories or preconceived notions. This method allowed the data

to drive the analysis, ensuring that the identified themes were a true reflection of the participants' experiences and perspectives. The absence of pre-existing theoretical frameworks during the initial stages of analysis ensured that the themes remained grounded in the data, providing an authentic and unbiased interpretation.

From the various questions asked in the research instrument, only eight questions could be analyzed thematically. These questions included the second to fourth questions in the fifth section of the questionnaire and the first to fifth questions in the sixth section. From these eight questions, 808 responses were obtained from 101 participants and analyzed thematically.

The analysis process began with familiarization with the data by all authors, achieved by reading and noting keywords from each response. These keywords were then grouped into several sub-themes. The sub-themes created were subsequently organized into more prominent themes that defined the essence of the pet bereavement phenomenon experienced by the participants. Furthermore, the narration of these themes and sub-themes was discussed with the research supervisor to ensure accurate interpretation and definition. The research outcome was then distributed to participants for the synthesized member-checking process (Birt et al., 2016, 1) to verify its validity, ensure that interpretations of the respondents' answers were correct, and confirm that the research outcome adequately represented the bereavement experiences of the participants.

Result

Sample Characteristics

As seen in Table 2, the sample characteristics can be inferred from their relationship with their deceased pet. From the table, it is shown that the majority of participants were grieving the loss of a pet cat (71.3%), the majority of participants felt very close (76.2%) to the deceased and were very bereaved (49.5%) due to the loss of the dead. Participants also have a variety of significance attached to their pets, from seeing them as friends (32.6%) to family (27.8%) and more.

Table 2. *Sample Characteristics*

No.	Characteristic	N	Percentage
1	Grieving for		
	Cat	72	71.3
	Dog	16	15.8
	Bird	5	4.9
	Rabbit	2	1.9
	Weasel	2	1.9
	Hamster	1	0.9

	Turtle	1	0.9
	Fish	1	0.9
	Sugar glider	1	0.9
2	Intimacy with the deceased		
	Very close	77	76.2
	Close enough	13	12.8
	Not close	1	0.9
	Non-specific answer	10	9.9
3	Level of bereavement		
	Very bereaved	50	49.5
	Bereaved enough	10	9.9
	Bereavement unable to be described in words	6	5.9
	Indifferent	1	0.9
	Non-specific answer	33	32.6
	Non-relevant answer	1	0.9
4	Significance of pet		
	Friend	48	32.6
	Family	41	27.8
	Source of comfort and healing	25	17.0
	Valuable Pet	12	8.1
	Source of safety and security	6	4.0
	Life companion	3	2.0
	Others	12	8.1

Main Findings

We divided the findings into four main themes from the inductive thematic analysis process to the 808 responses given by 101 respondents (Table 3).

Table 3. *Main Findings*

No.	Theme	Sub-theme
1	Bereavement response	Affective Response Cognitive Response Behavioral Response Physical Response

2	Bereavement coping	Engagement Coping Disengagement Coping
3	Support System	Form of Support
4	Self-Improvement	Source of Support Acceptance of grief Acceptance of loss Increased awareness of pet animal welfare

Bereavement responses

According to the responses given by 101 participants, a variety of bereavement responses were found, which could be divided into four types of responses which are (1) affective, (2) cognitive, (3) behavioral, and (4) physical. From the affective response, 26 kinds of emotions were found to be experienced by participants during bereavement, which are sadness, feeling destroyed, emptiness, shock, loneliness, loss, anger, guilt, hopelessness, frustration, sensitivity, restlessness, feeling pressured, longing, pain, stress, regret, difficulty to let go, disarray, numbness, anxiety, bad mood, trauma, disappointment, feeling fragile, and relief. In one of the cases, the anxiety experienced by the participant developed into an anxiety disorder. However, it wasn't confirmed whether the anxiety disorder was the result of a professional diagnosis.

"I experienced anxiety disorder, and to this day, whenever I see photos from the deceased's last moments, I still become anxious, and the sadness comes back" (Female, 23 years old, grieving the loss of a cat).

The pressure from feelings of loneliness and bad mood is also found to cause baby blues syndrome in a breastfeeding mother.

"... the loneliness that I felt at the time also triggered my baby blues syndrome. Taking care of a baby was hard in itself, but the grief I felt after losing my beloved dog added to it" (Female, 39 years old, grieving the loss of a dog).

Other than affective response, various cognitive responses were also found, such as hope to meet the deceased again, clear memory of occurrences leading to the loss, frequently remembering the deceased, confusion, lingering thoughts of loss, trouble concentrating, suspicion towards others, suicidal thoughts, hallucination, and thoughts of failure, undeserving of love, uselessness, stupidity, worthlessness, undeserving of support, and incompetence. Some participants expressed that they experienced visual, tactile, and auditory hallucinations while dealing with bereavement.

“Quite often, when I pass by the door to the backyard, from the corners of my eyes, I see a rabbit running and jumping or just lying down on the ground. Sometimes, when I sit down on the floor, I feel something hairy (like a rabbit’s head) nudging my leg” (Female, 21 years old, grieving the loss of a rabbit).

“I feel like I can still hear their footsteps” (Female, 40 years old, grieving the loss of a cat and a dog).

Additionally, for some participants, the grief they experienced affected their self-esteem and made them feel worthless and incompetent as pet owners and veterinarians.

“... what made it the hardest was that I had to calm my pet down while screaming in pain... I could not take it. And as it turns out, while I was looking for its heart, it died before I could euthanize it. I cried after that, remembering how incompetent I was as its owner... I even questioned whether I was worthy or not of being a veterinarian. Sometimes I ask myself, am I even cut out to be a vet?” (Male, 21 years old, grieving the loss of a rabbit).

“I am a veterinarian, and I had a Labrador who was seven years old. Six years ago, it passed away due to leptospirosis, and as a vet, I couldn’t save my own dog... To this day, I still don’t treat small animals... I only treat farm animals... I lost confidence in myself...” (Female, 38 years old, grieving the loss of a dog).

When faced with grief, participants also show several behavioral responses, such as searching for a lost pet, praying, going to the deceased’s favorite place, talking to others about the deceased, crying, holding back tears, mourning, becoming quiet, becoming gloomy, spacing out, withdrawing themselves, experiencing a decrease in appetite, and experiencing disruptions in their sleep cycles. Additionally, participants also experience a downgrade in performative behaviors, including disturbed learning activities, reduced work performance, lack of motivation to do things, inability to do activities, limiting hobbies, and overusing gadgets. Participants also conduct memorializing behaviors, like holding a funeral for the deceased, creating a reminder for the anniversary of the loss, making and distributing commemorative posters, visiting the grave of the deceased, looking at the documentation of the deceased, printing documentation of the deceased as ornaments, keeping the deceased’s belongings, buying ornaments resembling the deceased, using the deceased’s name as a username and/or password, creating a social media account to remember the deceased, and adopting a new pet that resembles the deceased. On the contrary, some participants choose to get rid of the deceased’s belongings, avoid things that could remind them of the deceased, and lose interest in having pets.

Apart from affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses, participants also experienced physical responses from the grief experienced. These responses manifest in the form of chest pains similar to stabbing, tightness in the chest, soreness in the chest, feelings of heat in the

chest, body weakness, weakness in the legs, typhus, and disruption in the production of breastmilk.

“The most difficult part early after its death is because I just had my first child... I was stressed from taking care of the baby, and combined with the sadness from losing my dog, it caused a decline in my breastmilk production, and in the end, it stopped” (Female, 39 years old, grieving the loss of a dog).

Bereavement coping

Not only do they experience various bereavement responses, but participants also have numerous coping strategies to handle and ease the bereavement they're experiencing. Generally, there are two types of coping methods used by the bereaved, which are engagement coping and disengagement coping. Engagement coping is a coping strategy involving grief factors to lessen the pressure experienced during bereavement. This strategy can be done in five ways. First, the bereaved can memorialize and continue the bond with the deceased (continuing bond). This can be done by holding a funeral, visiting the grave of the deceased, commemorating important days, going to the deceased's favorite places, and documenting the deceased in many ways, as done by a 42-year-old female participant grieving the loss of a cat, *“I have lots of pictures and videos of Marco, and when I miss Marco, I look at its videos.”*

Second, the bereaved can care for a new pet that reminds them of the deceased (caring). Caring can be conducted through donations for pets, adopting a new pet, and improving the quality of treatment for other pets that are still alive. By doing this coping strategy, the bereaved seem to want to reduce the feeling of guilt and prevent other losses.

“... donating to animals in need of money for medical treatments or other things to reduce guilt” (Female, 29 years old, grieving the loss of a dog).

“... adopting another pet and improving the treatment and care given to them, so that the same thing doesn't happen again” (Female, 49 years old, grieving the loss of a cat).

The third kind of engagement coping is thinking positively about the deceased. This coping strategy is done by reminiscing good moments with the deceased and convincing themselves that the deceased is not in pain anymore and is in a better place. This method is demonstrated by a 21-year-old female participant, grieving the loss of a cat and a dog, *“I realized that my cat and dog are now in a better place; it's sad that we can't be together anymore, but I also know that they're always with me at heart.”*

The fourth kind of engagement coping is catharsis, a strategy that is done by facing and releasing the grief that is felt. This strategy is manifested in the form of telling other people about the grief they're experiencing, crying until they feel relieved, telling stories about the deceased, and expressing sadness as they please. This is shown by a 20-year-old female participant, grieving the loss of a cat, *"Every time I'm sad or reminded of what happened, I let myself cry until I feel relieved so that it doesn't add up, and I take in all the sadness I'm feeling until I feel better because I think that everything takes process."*

The fifth and final kind of engagement coping is spirituality. In this coping method, the bereaved bond with themselves, a divine figure, or the deceased. This method is done by meditating, praying for peace and happiness for the deceased, praying for forgiveness from the divine figure for any mistakes made while taking care of the deceased, and praying to thank the divine figure for the chance to take care of the deceased, and praying to be reunited with the dead in the afterlife.

In contrast to engagement coping, disengagement coping is a coping strategy that avoids grief factors, so the bereaved do not focus too much on the bereavement experienced. Disengagement coping can be manifested in three kinds of strategy. First, some of the bereaved tend to distract themselves from the grief they're experiencing by doing other activities such as watching comedic videos, watching movies, going outside, working, and cleaning the house. One of these is shown by a 20-year-old female participant grieving the loss of a cat, *"I try to advert my attention to other things that can make me happy, like going outside or watching movies."*

Second, some bereaved are likely to avoid by purposely not reminiscing about the deceased, not wanting to encounter pets that may remind them of the dead, refusing to touch animals, refusing to adopt another pet, and getting rid of the deceased's belongings. This is demonstrated by a 42-year-old female participant grieving the loss of a cat, *"I gave all its belongings to my friends. My heart hurts when I see its plate, cage, and bed."*

The third disengagement coping method is surrendering or ceasing resistance. Surrendering is done by letting the bereavement pass as time goes on. This is shown by a 20-year-old female participant, grieving the loss of a cat, *"It passed just like that because there's life to live."*

Support System

Despite having their coping methods to overcome bereavement, some of the bereaved also need external support from their support systems. Generally, a support system has two essential elements: the form and source of support. From the sub-theme form of support, three types of support can be identified, which are emotional, instrumental, and informative support.

The first form of support is emotional support. Emotional support can manifest in seven main ways. First, the supporting individual can express their condolences. Condolences can be shown in ways such as helping out during the funeral preparations, commemorating the grief, and expressing their condolences through words. Second, the bereaved can receive emotional support through grief validation. Grief validation can be shown by not deeming the grief experienced excessive, not underestimating the grief experienced, and agreeing that the grief is significant. Third, the supporting individual can show empathy to the bereaved. Empathy can be exhibited by putting themselves in the position of those bereaved and understanding their grief. Fourth, the supporting individual can provide active listening for the bereaved. Active listening can be executed by fully listening to the bereaved without cutting off their lamenting. Fifth, the supporting individual can provide positive affirmation. Positive affirmation can be shown by not blaming the bereaved for the loss they have experienced, telling the bereaved that they have done their best for the deceased, comforting, convincing that the deceased is in a better place and that the deceased is happier somewhere else, and giving an understanding that the death of the pet means they're not suffering anymore. Sixth, the supporting individual can be present and comfort the bereaved (presence & comfort). This support can be exhibited by giving hugs, attention, entertainment, and accompanying the bereaved through bereavement. Seventh, emotional support can be shown by giving space to grieve. Space to grieve can be provided by taking a distance, space, and time for the bereaved to suffer. One example of said support is shown in a response from a 26-year-old female participant, grieving the loss of a cat, *"Just a sincere condolence message from my friends was very much enough. I felt like my sadness was accepted, and others understood how I felt. Moreover, I really appreciated it when my friends would accompany me to talk about it and convince me that Romeo was in a better place. I expected the opportunity from my family to share our stories and feelings. Letting out our emotions together and convincing each other that we're there for each other during these hard times."*

Other than emotional support, the second form of support is instrumental support. This support can be provided by giving material things or tangible actions to ease the bereavement process. Specifically, this type of support can be given by giving financial help to get a new pet or offering adoption options for a replacement pet, helping the process of adoption research, building a habit of protecting animals, helping the bereaved to live their daily lives, and helping out during the trauma recovery process. However, when giving instrumental support in the form of a new pet, whether the bereaved considers the deceased irreplaceable should be considered. This support can be inappropriate if the bereaved thinks the dead is irreplaceable. A 21-year-old female participant grieving the loss of rabbits stated, *"I feel like Murphy and Pepper are rabbits that are one of a kind and can't be replaced. I've visited pet shops, but I didn't feel enthusiastic when I saw other rabbits. I was scared I wouldn't be able to love new rabbits like I did to Pepper, Murphy, and their siblings."*

The third form of support is informative support. Informative support can be shown by advising ways to minimize the possibility of another loss and information on the adoption of new pets.

To provide said forms of support, a source of support is needed. Sources of support can be categorized into primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include the family, friends, and partner of the bereaved. Meanwhile, secondary sources can be the society surrounding the bereaved or animal lover communities. With these support systems, the bereaved are expected to experience self-improvement after their loss.

Self-Improvement

After experiencing bereavement response, conducting bereavement coping methods, and receiving support from their support system, the bereaved have the potential to experience self-improvement. Self-improvement is the maturing progress taking place after a grieving process. Three indicators of self-improvement can be found: acceptance of grief emotions, acceptance of loss, and increased awareness of animal welfare. Acceptance of grief emotions can manifest in acknowledging and accepting the presence of sadness, feelings of loss, and other emotions relating to grief. For example, a participant stated that their self-improvement was accepting and making peace with grief. She was even able to encourage family members who were also grieving.

“I just accepted that I was sad and bereaved, and I also accepted that I was greatly shocked by Romeo’s sudden departure. My family and I kept reminding each other that we had done our best because sometimes we felt guilty—we all felt we couldn’t care for Romeo well. If we couldn’t encourage each other, we cried together until we felt relieved and could think straight again” (Female, 26 years old, grieving the loss of a cat).

The second indicator is acceptance of loss. This can manifest in sincerely accepting the loss, the belief that no being is eternal, the understanding that the loss was out of their control, and the belief that losing is a part of fate. This acceptance is shown in the following response.

“After one month passed, I was able to let go. I held on to what I had left and let what’s gone become a lesson” (Male, 21 years old, grieving the loss of a cat).

The third indicator is increased awareness of pet animal welfare. This can be exhibited in one’s attitude and actions, like the motivation to take better care of pets, an improvement in awareness and care for sick animals, the willingness to learn about illnesses on animals and educating fellow pet owners, to the initiative to take care of pet animals that are uncared for. Those indicators are shown in the two responses below,

“Learning about the illnesses they’re suffering from and giving information to fellow pet owners whose pets are experiencing the same thing” (Female, 40 years old, grieving the loss of a cat and a dog)

“Adopting abandoned cats. After losing my cat, I felt better by taking care of abandoned cats” (Female, 21 years old, grieving the loss of a cat)

Self-improvement is an experience that is categorized as a potential, which means the bereaved does not always experience it. During the member-checking process, one participant stated that the bereavement that she experienced was ignored, which deprived her of the self-improvement experience in the context of pet bereavement,

“Maybe because my grief (it was my first time experiencing that) wasn’t ‘labelled’ by my parents. I felt the emotions alone and didn’t communicate with anyone. So, it was just something that happened once and disappeared just like that; I didn’t process those emotions, nor did I use them for self-improvement” (Female, 37 years old, grieving the loss of a dog).

Member-checking

After narrating the results obtained from the thematic analysis, a member-checking procedure is conducted to ensure the validity and accuracy of the interpretation. Out of the 101 participants contacted, only 42 participated voluntarily in the member-checking. Women dominate as many as 81% of member-checking participants, 64.3% of participants are younger than 25, and 45.2% are high school graduates. Meanwhile, 65.2% of participants grieved over the loss of a cat.

During member-checking, participants are asked to read the theme and sub-theme elaborations narrated in the research findings. After reading, participants are asked to assess the interpretation accuracy in the research findings through one close-ended and one open-ended question:

1. Has the elaboration represented your bereavement experience accurately? (1 = Inaccurate; 2 = Not accurate enough; 3 = Unsure; 4 = Accurate; 5 = Very accurate)
2. Please explain in detail why you chose a certain number.

From these two questions, the accuracy of the interpretation of the four themes can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Member-Checking Results

No.	Theme	Accuracy (On a scale of 1-5)	N	Percentage
1	Bereavement response	● Very Accurate (5)	20	47.6
		● Accurate (4)	21	50
		● Unsure (3)	1	2.4
		● Not Accurate Enough (2)	0	0
		● Inaccurate (1)	0	0
2	Bereavement coping	● Very Accurate (5)	19	45.2
		● Accurate (4)	20	47.6
		● Unsure (3)	2	4.8
		● Not Accurate Enough (2)	1	2.4
		● Inaccurate (1)	0	0
3	Support System	● Very Accurate (5)	16	38.1
		● Accurate (4)	18	42.9
		● Unsure (3)	6	14.3
		● Not Accurate Enough (2)	1	2.4
		● Inaccurate (1)	1	2.4
4	Self-Improvement	● Very Accurate (5)	25	59.5
		● Accurate (4)	13	31
		● Unsure (3)	3	7.1
		● Not Accurate Enough (2)	0	0
		● Inaccurate (1)	1	2.4

According to Table 4, some participants gave a score of 1 (inaccurate), 2 (not accurate enough), and 3 (unsure) for some themes. Generally, participants who have given those scores feel like their bereavement experience does not align with what is elaborated within those themes. To improve the validity of research findings, those critics are added to some of the themes in the main findings section.

Additionally, from the table, it can be inferred that for the theme “bereavement response”, as many as 47.6% of participants stated that the theme accurately represented their pet bereavement experience (score of 5). One of the participants who gave a score of 5 stated that:

“The explanation on bereavement responses really represented what I had experienced. There are even some responses that I “missed” and didn’t input in the

questionnaire even though I experienced them, and it made me think... 'Right, I felt that too!' As I read the explanations, there were no descriptions that I disagreed with or at least thought, "Hm, that's not really true." Although there are other respondents whose situation and responses are different from mine, I still found some common ground that made it easier for me to empathize with their stories—in the end, we're all just families of these pets that have been left behind. And in my opinion, that means that the elaboration (considering all the different experiences and backgrounds of all the respondents) have resulted in the right theme, to the point that it was able to represent my experience" (Female, 26 years old, grieving the loss of a cat).

From the theme “bereavement coping”, 45.2% of participants gave a score of 5. One of the participants who chose “very accurate” thinks that:

“I chose that number because I feel like I really did everything that was described by the writer. The description also made me realize that some actions that I took were a result of my bereavement” (Female, 23 years old, grieving the loss of a cat).

Meanwhile, as many as 38.1% of participants gave a score of 5 for the theme “support system.” One of the participants who gave this score expressed that:

“The forms of support elaborated in this research are very accurate. Receiving a lot of support from many sources and in many forms is very important for someone grieving. The support helped me during the process of accepting what had happened. Validation and acceptance from the surroundings of the bereaved regarding their experiences are very much-needed forms of support. I also realized that informative support is critical to reducing the recurrence and regret of loss and grief” (Male, 21 years old, grieving the loss of a cat).

Lastly, for the theme “self-improvement,” 59.5% of participants gave a score of 5. One of the participants who gave that score believes that:

“I agree with the above description regarding the three self-improvement reactions after my pet bereavement. I experienced acceptance of the emotions of grief, acceptance of loss, and an increase in awareness regarding pet animal welfare. I accepted that my dog couldn't make it at the time and tried to encourage my grieving family members after it passed away. After a while, I could finally fully accept that my dog had gone through many healing processes. Then, in the long term, I raised my awareness of the grief I had experienced. I prevented other dogs from entering areas with poison and told the owners that their dogs almost entered those areas and asked them to pay more attention to that” (Female, 21 years old, grieving the loss of a dog).

Discussion

Main findings

Our findings highlight four main themes resulting from the qualitative exploration: bereavement response, bereavement coping, support system, and self-improvement. Regarding the bereavement response, we found a wide spectrum of bereavement responses

across affective, cognitive, behavioral, and physical reactions. Participants also used a range of engagement and disengagement coping mechanisms to process the loss. Interestingly, the bereavement responses and coping mechanisms shared by participants mimic what most human-bereaved individuals often express, signifying the similar reactions of pet bereavement to its counterpart.

Results in the context of other studies

The intensity of these varied responses arouses a question of what influenced these responses. According to Packman et al. (2014, 347), pets can provide acceptance, presence, and unconditional love to their owners, and the loss of a figure that offers all of those things can trigger a strong reaction to loss. We found that 76.2% of our participants felt very close to their pets. This intimacy factor can also be a reason for the bereavement responses. The research of Eckerd, Barnett, and Jett-Dias (2016, 279-280) found that the closer a pet owner is to their pet, the more intense the bereavement they experience. Other than that, from the various responses, several other perceived impacts of grief are found, such as the decline of cognitive functions, performative actions, psychological welfare, and physical health. These effects induced by pet bereavement were also found in studies on human bereavement (Atalay & Staneva 2020, 1; Pitman et al. 2018, 1; Tal et al. 2017, 4; Tseng et al. 2017, 1; Spillane et al. 2018, 1). This shows that pet bereavement could trigger a similar significant experience as human bereavement.

To overcome the various responses and effects of grief, the bereaved also have two types of coping strategies: engagement coping, where grief factors are included in the grieving process, and disengagement coping, which ignores grief factors. The categorizing of coping strategies using these terms was also found in the research of Carver and Connor-Smith (2010, 685). They defined engagement coping as a strategy conducted by facing the stressor and disengagement coping as a strategy conducted by distracting oneself from the stressor. Meanwhile, using the terms engagement and disengagement coping in discussions on pet bereavement is still rare. However, suppose the definition of these two coping methods is considered. In that case, there are several coping methods in pet bereavement studies that can be categorized into these two strategies. For example, in a literature review on pet bereavement and coping mechanisms, a couple of coping methods can be categorized as

disengagement coping (e.g., isolation) and engagement coping (e.g., spirituality) (Park, Royal, & Gruen 2021, 7-9).

In addition to bereavement response and coping as elements of pet bereavement, the theme support system is also crucial. This study found two primary components of the support system: the form of support (emotional, informative, and instrumental) and the source of support (primary and secondary). This categorization is also found in the social support theory found by Kort-Butler (2017, 1-2). In the context of bereavement, support is found to ease depressive symptoms in the grieving individual (Stroebe et al. 2005, 1045). Support is also found to prevent complicated grief (Packman et al. 2014, 343).

Furthermore, giving support can also help inflict self-improvement after a loss (Wong et al. 2017, 103-104). The theme of self-improvement is an important part of the grieving process, and it can happen due to stressful experiences like grief (Calhoun et al. 2010, 125). In this research, three indicators of self-improvement post-bereavement are found: acceptance of grief, acceptance of loss, and increased awareness of animal welfare. Individuals who accept loss as a natural part of life are predicted to have fewer symptoms of bereavement (Boyratz, Horne, & Waits 2015, 1).

Strengths & Limitations

According to the member-checking result, this study can depict the respondents' experience of pet bereavement accurately. Therefore, the findings of this study can be used by the support system of the bereaved (medical personnel for animals, psychological professionals, the public society, community, family, friends, and partners) to understand the experience of pet bereavement deeper in order to give appropriate support. This research also has a theoretical implication in the form of a psychology literature contribution regarding pet bereavement, which is rarely studied in Indonesia.

Findings from this study must also be understood within the context of its limitations. From the instrument aspect, the researcher did not include a question regarding the cause and time of loss, which could have been used to better understand the context of the bereavement in more depth. Also, instead of using close-ended questions, this research used open-ended questions when asking about the severity of loss and the intimacy with the deceased, which caused some answers to be less specific. Subsequently, this research's findings cannot be generalized due to the socio-cultural limitations posed by the participant sample, which consisted solely of Indonesians. Additionally, the majority of participants were grieving over cats, which may affect the nature and intensity of grief differently compared to other pets. Focusing on pet lovers, this study may not capture the bereavement experiences of those with weaker attachments to their pets. Moreover, this research does not involve the process of inter-coder reliability, so the reliability of this research is not examined.

Future Studies

For researchers who would like to further explore the topic of pet bereavement with an open-ended questionnaire, it is recommended to include questions regarding the cause and time of loss to understand the context of grief more profoundly. To achieve a more representative sample, purposive sampling can be conducted across various social media platforms that attract a broader audience. It is also recommended that the inter-coder reliability process be conducted to ensure the reliability of future studies. Additionally, when asking about the severity of loss and the intimacy of pet owners with their pets, it is recommended to use close-ended questions and provide a scale of 1-5 to help the researcher understand the levels of grief and intimacy. Furthermore, suppose the researcher would like to understand the psychological dynamics of the bereaved further. In that case, it is recommended to use an in-depth interview method because this method can help the researcher probe the respondents' answers more deeply.

Conclusion

This research has thoroughly explored various perspectives on bereavement resulting from pet loss, revealing that pet bereavement can lead to significant psychological and physical impacts, prompting diverse coping mechanisms among the bereaved. These findings provide valuable insights for veterinarians, mental health professionals, and other support sources, enabling them to better understand the grief experienced by pet owners and to offer the essential support and encouragement needed to help them navigate their sorrow, fostering their journey towards healing and personal growth.

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Author's contribution

ASAP and AKP conceived and designed the study. KKY contributed to the questionnaire design. ASAP contributed to recruiting participants and the data collection process. ASAP and AKP contributed to the inductive thematic analysis process. Member-checking was conducted by ASAP. ASAP and AKP drafted the paper with significant additional input from all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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