

The Influence of Social Media on Pet Owners' Perceptions of Pet Funeral Services

Xiaoqi Zhang

*Beijing Haidian Foreign Language Tengfei School, Beijing, China
fionazhang013@gmail.com*

Abstract. With the rapid growth of the number of pets and the pet economy in China, pet funeral services have become an important industry. Meanwhile, social media platforms such as TikTok and RedNote have become key channels for pet owners to access content related to pet memorial services and funerals. However, few studies have investigated how these contents affect the attitudes and needs of pet owners. This study explores how social media content influences pet owners' perception and demand for pet funeral services. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six Chinese pet owners who had seen content related to pet funerals on social media, and a thematic analysis was carried out on the interview content. The research results show that social media plays multiple roles: it is the primary exposure, influences price perception, guides service selection, and in some cases can also generate distrust. Furthermore, all participants indicated that people without pets often fail to understand their sadness, which echoes the concept of disenfranchised grief, where pet loss is often not socially recognized. This study contributes to understanding the relationship between media exposure and consumer attitudes in the emerging pet funeral industry, and offers insights for improving public communication strategies.

Keywords: Pet funeral, Disenfranchised grief, social media

1. Introduction

Pet funeral services, including cremation, burial, and memorial ceremonies [1], have become a growing industry in China in recent years [2]. As reported by the 2025 China Pet Industry White Paper, the number of pets in Chinese urban areas exceeded 120 million in 2024, and the pet market reached 300.2 billion yuan. As estimated 3.6 million of pets die each year [1], how to properly handle a pet's death has become an increasingly significant issue. The pet funeral market, valued at 1.825 billion yuan in 2023, is projected to reach 5 billion yuan in 2025 [1].

As the pet funeral market keeps increasing, social media platforms, such as TikTok and RedNote, play an important role. Content related to pet farewell ceremonies and memorial services has become widely accessible, and social media may serve as the primary channel through which pet owners first encounter the concept of pet funerals. However, while previous research has examined how social media provides a space for expressing grief over pet loss, relatively low attention has been paid to how exposure to such content shapes audiences' perceptions and consumption needs. To address this gap, this study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: How does exposure to pet funeral-related content on social media influence pet owners' awareness and attitudes toward pet funeral services?

RQ2: How does social media content about pet funerals influence pet owners' consumption intentions and behaviors regarding pet funeral services?

To answer these questions, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with six pet owners who had been exposed to content related to pet funerals on social media. Thematic analysis is used to identify the key patterns in their responses. The structure of the remaining part of this article is as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on disenfranchised grief and digital pet mourning; Section 3 describes the method; Section 4 presents the research results; Section 5 discusses the results related to the existing theories; Section 6 summarizes the limitations and future development directions

2. Literature review

The literature review aims to examine existing research in two areas: first, how existing scholarship understands the social meaning of pet funerals; second, how scholars have analyzed the relationship between media and pet funerals.

2.1. Grief theory

Existing research has explored the cultural meaning of pet funerals from a sociological perspective. J K Doka [3] introduces the concept of "disenfranchised grief," which refers to grief that cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported. He argues that every society has unwritten "grieving rules" that specify who may grieve, for whom, and in what way. The death of a pet is a typical example of disenfranchised grief. Although much research showed the strong emotional bonds between humans beings and their pets, such loss is often minimized by others, who may say "just get another one." The lack of social recognition means pet owners may experience greater emotional difficulty. Doka's work helps explain why pet funeral services have only recently begun to gain attention, they represent an effort to make a grief that was previously unrecognised to be accepted.

2.2. Digital mourning

Nowadays, communication scholars have turned their attention to how social media shape pet mourning practices. Brubaker et al. [4] conducted a mixed-method study combining survey and analysis of Facebook posts, indicating that people who shared their pet loss experiences online not only seek emotional support, but also have to cope with privacy risks and the fear of being judged. The research shows that social media provides a new space for pet mourning, but this expression also has some challenges. For example, users fear that their disclosures will be met with dismissal rather than support, which is a phenomenon closely related to Doka's [3] concept of disenfranchised grief.

2.3. Media commercialisation and platform logic

More recently, Tumidei [5] examined how the technical features of Instagram shape the way people mourn their pets. She found that while the platform allows for emotional expression, it also incorporates grief into the logic of commercialization. These studies [4, 5] reveal the dual role of media in pet funeral: it serves as both an emotional outlet and a commercial space. Together, these

studies [3-5] provide a foundation for understanding the relationship between media and pet funerals.

2.4. Research gaps

However, existing research has primarily focused on expressions of grief within digital platforms, while relatively less attention has been paid to how exposure to media content shapes audiences' perceptions and demand for pet funeral services. For instance, when someone who has never heard of pet funerals encounters a short video or a social media post about it, how does their perception change? Existing research has not fully addressed this question. From another perspective, as the traditional way of directly burying the corpse has a lot of environmental and health-related issue, cremation is increasingly adopted as a socially accepted option. Whether the media can bring effective exposure and promotion to the pet funeral industry is also worthy of further investigation.

In summary, existing research reveal pet funerals as a response to "disenfranchised grief" from a sociological perspective. Communication studies further show how social media platforms have become new spaces for expressing this sadness. Together, these studies suggest that pet funerals are not just a service but also an emotional practice that people must learn. However, how media like TikTok form people's attitudes toward pet funerals—that is, the mechanism through which media content influences public perceptions and needs—remains under explored. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how media shape pet owners' attitudes and needs.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative method including a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview is aimed to deeply investigate pet owners' experience of watching pet funeral related social media content, such as videos or the content posted by the pet owner mourning their pet, exploring how these content shapes or changes pet owners' cognition and attitude toward pet funeral services and even lead to them to become potential consumers in the market, practice this sense of ritual with sustainability.

3.1. Participants

Participants for the semi-structured interview includes both male and female who are current or past pet owners and have been exposed to pet funeral related content on social media platform like RedNote and TikTok. Considering young age group lack of purchasing power and elderly generally have a lower level of exposure to social media , 6 participants with age from 17-40 are recruited by both offline publicity in a high school in Beijing and online platform as access for a larger zone.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The semi-structured interview lasted 20-30 minutes contains questions from three section: experience about pet funeral related content on social media, attitude and awareness, requirement and budget. Content of the interview are transcribed for thematic analysis [6], which is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) by coding qualitative data.

3.3. Ethical consideration

All participants participated in the survey voluntarily and were free to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

4. Result

Thematic analysis of six interviews revealed five key themes regarding how social media content shapes pet owners' attitudes toward pet funeral services.

4.1. Experience with social media content

Five participants had encountered pet funeral content online, most often through first-person videos of pet undertakers. Their first contact channels varied: TikTok (P1, P5), RedNote (P4), Taobao (P3), and friends (P2). Three experienced passive exposure via platform recommendations. P1 said: "My cat is healthy so I don't tend to think much about its death. I just came across the videos." P2 noted: "I don't dare to search actively, I'm afraid of seeing those heavy content." However, certain situations triggered active searching—P3 explored pet funeral services after searching for pet urns on Taobao, and P5 searched out of curiosity. All participants reported feeling sad while watching pet funeral videos.

4.2. Attitude and perception

Attitudes formed through various pathways. P1 and P5 consistently held positive views, rooted in the belief that "pets are family members." P2's attitude shifted after personal loss: "Before experiencing it, I didn't fully understand. But after experiencing it, I agree with it." P3 showed cognitive expansion, moving from viewing pet funerals as "only for high income people" to recognizing it as a growing industry. P4 held rational skepticism: "At first, I thought it was a personal choice... Later, some funeral parlours were in a grey area." Commercialization was a recurring concern. P1 criticized it: "This industry should not be commercialized... it breaks this beautiful feeling." P4 raised ethical concerns about privacy exposure in first-person videos. In contrast, P3 reported not noticing commercial aspects, as her emotions take priority.

4.3. Needs and budget

All participants expressed willingness to use pet funeral services. P1, P2, P3, and P5 were insensitive to prices due to their love for their pets. P3 said: "I have no children. They are my children. I earn money to spend on my pets." P4 was more rational: "Pet funeral services should be regarded as impulsive consumption, but they are reasonable." Participants who had experienced pet loss reported higher spending: P2 spent approximately 3,000 yuan on her cat's funeral, while P3 referenced costs of approximately 2,500 yuan based on her U.S. experience.

4.4. Media influence

Social media content plays diverse roles in shaping participants' attitudes and needs. For P1 and P5, the primary influence was on price perception through the comment sections under the first perspective video. P1 noted that "comments under the video influenced my understanding of industry pricing" while P5 said something similar. For P2 and P3, combining their real experience of

pet loss, media content provided information and directly guided service choices. P2 stated: "I'm very grateful for such videos, which have given me a deeper understanding of this industry". P3 said: "When seeing institutions that dare to expose their service content, one will think they have done a good job and choose them." P4 presented a more ambivalent view, stating that while videos helped her imagine the experience, they also "gave me some negative impressions" providing concern about privacy. P5 demonstrated critical awareness, acknowledging that "what the business shows you is what they want you to see."

5. Discussion

This study explored how social media related content shapes pet owners' attitude and needs about pet funeral services. Through the analysis of the 6 interviews, it reveals that the influence of social media is not uniform, it plays multiple roles, including providing initial exposure, shaping price perception, leading consumption choices, and also generating distrust sometimes. This complexity challenges the initial hypothesis that social media simply change attitudes. Instead, social media content exposure interacts with personal experience and pre-existing beliefs to form perception, which means the same content can affect different individuals differently.

Regarding research question 1 (how social media shapes attitudes), there are three main findings. First, participants' attitudes were formed through diverse pathways: some held supportive views based on their belief that "pets are family members" (P1, P5), while others developed or shifted their attitudes after losing a pet (P2) or through cognitive expansion over time (P3). Second, commercialization emerged as a recurring concern: participants criticised it as exploitative (P1), raised privacy and ethical issues (P4), or suggested it might extend grief (P5), though others (P3) reported not noticing commercial aspects due to emotional engagement. Third, all participants expressed that people without pets fail to understand their grief, directly echoing Doka's [3] concept of disenfranchised grief, indicating that pet loss remains a socially unrecognized form of grief in Chinese society.

Regarding research question 2 (how social media affects needs and budget), there are two main findings. First, participants who had experienced pet loss reported significantly higher actual spending or willingness to pay (P2: 3,000 yuan; P3: 2,500 yuan) compared to those without real experience. Second, the primary influence of social media on budget was through comment sections under first-person videos: P1 and P5 both reported that price discussions in comments shaped their understanding of the industry pricing.

The study has several limitations. The small sample size (n=6) and convenience sampling limit generalisability. Most participants came from similar age groups and urban backgrounds, so findings may not reflect the views of elderly or rural pet owners. Future research could use quantitative surveys to test the findings in larger samples, including respondents with no prior exposure to pet funeral content as a control group.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the study examined how social media content shapes pet owners' attitudes and needs regarding pet funeral services in China. Through the semi-structured interviews with six pet owners, the study found that media influence is not a simple, one-directional process. Rather, social media plays multiple roles, including first exposure, price perception formation, decision-making guidance, and the generation of distrust. The findings also revealed that attitudes toward pet funerals are formed through diverse pathways: some participants held supportive views rooted in their belief that

"pets are family members," while others developed or shifted their attitude after personal loss or through cognitive expansion over time. In conclusion, while media content can shape awareness and influence consumer choices, its effect is mediated by personal experience, values, and critical awareness. This kind of disenfranchised grief needs more social recognition, and those pet funeral related contents play important roles to raise public awareness. As the pet funeral industry continues to grow in China, understanding the interplay between media, personal experience, and consumer attitudes will be increasingly important.

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