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# Organizing Emotions throughout Disenfranchised Grief: Virtual Support Group Sensemaking through Emotion Discourses

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**Abstract:** Online support groups provide members a space to express emotions and gain emotional support, contributing to individual and organizational sustainability. Communication in these virtual spaces organizes and is simultaneously organized by member interactions and emotion expressions. To better understand how communication contributes to emotion, organizing, and meaning making, this study draws on Weick's communication sensemaking theory and uses qualitative netnographic methods to analyze interactions in an online pet loss support group. Following pet loss, many American caregivers share their grief over the loss of a pet through online support groups, which help bereaved individuals acquire support, make sense of their experiences, and support similar others. Importantly, existing research indicates that virtual support groups provide members a safe space to engage their emotions. However, competing communication discourses uphold restrictive emotion rules across organized settings and can challenge how individuals perform their emotions. This study uses qualitative netnographic data gathered over 5 months from 106 participants, to better understand how virtual support group members used communication to understand, resist, reify, and reimagine emotions. We found that organizational members grappled with their grief at work and at home, often regulating their negative emotions in pursuit of advancing their workplace productivity and deferring to others' expectations. Furthermore, although grieving members used communication processes to legitimize the virtual support group as an organizational safe space for displaying authentic emotions, site members controlled their emotions and reinforced managerialist discourses in their communication, demonstrating that emotion discourses are far-reaching and can contribute to or distract from sustainable healing practices. We offer implications regarding how online experiences complicate emotion rules, how safe spaces reinforce professionalism and managerialism, and how organized spaces can promote sustainable practices to support members.

**Keywords:** sensemaking; emotions; disenfranchised grief; virtual support group; netnography; discourses; corporate colonization; managerialism



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## 1. Introduction

> Sutton: I'm really not doing well at all. I'm drowning myself with work, but having panic attacks and overwhelming grief every second of the day. I still can't believe he's gone . . . I'll keep working until I can't anymore. No one at work has any idea that I'm still grieving. They just think I'm a rock star at work . . .

The death of a loved one can result in deep emotional pain that is not captured in organizational policies or societal mourning expectations. Although grief can feel isolating, almost all individuals experience loss and grief at some point. Grief is an emotional response to a loss [1] that varies significantly from person to person, but the average grief recovery period is 1–2 years [2]. Americans perpetuate cultural scripts about coping

with loss and grief, such as expecting bereaved individuals to resume work while still experiencing grief [3], which can suppress grief processes and disrupt sustainable practices.

On average, Western organizations' bereavement policies for "loved ones" allow for 2–3 days off following the death of an immediate family member [3–5]. However, American workplaces grant little to no leave time or support for losses that are not well understood, such as the death of a pet, ex-partner, mentor, or fetus [3,6]. Grieving workers in general can feel unsupported by work [3,7], struggle with managing their emotions at work [8], and experience stressors upon returning to work [9]; however, workers who experience a loss that is not sanctioned by workplace policies can experience especially negative effects [10]. Losses that are not recognized as legitimate reasons for grieving are referred to as "disenfranchised" [10]. Considering the initial quote from an individual who lost their companion animal, grief was isolating, heart-shattering, and overwhelming, yet not acknowledged by their workplace or relationships. Almost 70% of Americans care for companion animals [11] and are likely to experience some form of disenfranchised loss, emphasizing the importance of understanding such losses across contexts [7,12,13].

Loss is often coupled with intense emotions, which complicate how grieving individuals make sense of their emotions alongside competing discourses that privilege rational behavior over strong emotional displays; doing so requires grieving individuals to organize and grapple with these discourses to create meaning through communication. Specifically, disenfranchised grieving individuals often feel grief-stricken yet emotionally and geographically isolated from others who understand their experience and emotions, including family, friends, and coworkers [13–15]. Because of these feelings, disenfranchised grieving individuals benefit from seeking care and expressing authentic emotions in virtual support spaces with similar others [16]. As individuals manage their emotions in different spaces (e.g., among family/friends, at work, and in virtual support groups), they use communication to organize meanings and understand their grief process, felt emotions, and communication expectations. Therefore, in this study, we analyze how communication and emotions organize and are organized by online group member interactions in the context of an online pet loss support group. In doing so, we offer theoretical implications for understanding sensemaking theory and emotional communication, as well as practical and sustainable recommendations for virtual care organizations and workplaces.

## 2. Literature Review

Troth and colleagues argued that motivations and strategies for emotion regulation are best understood through multilevel approaches [17]. Therefore, to understand how disenfranchised bereavement emotions are experienced and negotiated, we first review the macro-, meso-, and micro-discourses that shape emotions in general and grief in particular. Then, we present disenfranchised loss as a unique phenomenon that necessitates the bereaved to make sense of their emotions in different contexts, including at work and in virtual spaces. Lastly, we present Weick's sensemaking theory [18] as a pertinent theory to further knowledge about how individuals come to understand their loss as disenfranchised, process their emotions, and enact their emotions across spaces.

### *2.1. Research on How Communication Organizes Emotions and Grief*

Emotions are shaped by—and shape—macro- [19–22], meso- [23–25], and micro-discourses [26,27]. Whereas macro-discourses refer to "enduring systems of thought" [28] (p. 46), meso-discourses describe texts that are shaped at the institutional or organizational level, and micro-discourses describe talk that reifies and shapes discourses at other levels. Macro-discourses (e.g., societal expectations to maximize corporate gains [19]) shape meso-discourses (e.g., organizational policies, rules, and norms) and micro-enactments (e.g., everyday talk privileging rationality [29] and leader support [30]). In turn, micro- and meso-discourses shape assumptions about "which emotions [to] have, when [to] have them, and how [to] experience and express these emotions" in a given context [31] (p. 275). Thus, discourses shape one another [28,32] and are integral to processing and displaying emotions [33].

Organizational and societal discourses privilege neutral or positive emotional expressions, creating emotion display rules for Western individuals and emphasizing the interdependence among macro-, meso-, and micro-discourses [33,34]. Regarding bereavement emotions, meso- (e.g., bereavement policies) and macro-discourses (e.g., dominant assumptions about grief) organize bereaved individuals' micro-communication (e.g., expressed emotions) and understanding that they should "stifle their grief" and focus on work [7,35]. Navigating emotions following a disenfranchised loss requires grieving individuals to negotiate and process complex emotional rules.

In general, grief is a social and interpersonal emotion often involving intense feelings and emotion displays [36]. At the societal level, US individuals expect that losing a loved person will be followed by various emotion rules and scripts, such as displaying grief by "falling apart" [37] (p. 48), reconstructing oneself [38], and taking time away from organizational roles and other responsibilities [5]. Simultaneously, however, bereaved individuals often feel that they need to go back to work [3] and, in some cases, suffer in silence [7]. Although all bereaved emotional displays are negotiated alongside discourses that sanction private and professional emotions, feeling a need to return to normal is further complicated when disenfranchised bereaved individuals are often constrained regarding "who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom [they] should grieve" [39] (p. 9).

Disenfranchised grief follows losses that cannot be socially sanctioned or publicly mourned [40,41]. Numerous factors may foreground disenfranchised grief [10]. Guided by past experiences with societal discourses, the disenfranchised grievers may perceive that society does not recognize their relationship with the deceased (e.g., relationships with an ex or mentor), their loss (e.g., pet loss), their grief (e.g., grieving longer than expected), their companion's identity (e.g., incarcerated individuals), or their companion's death event (e.g., losing someone to suicide or HIV/AIDS). This research takes up the experiences of bereaved animal caretakers, who are often expected to quickly resolve their grief after losing their animal or heal by replacing their animal companion [42]. These individuals often perform considerable work negotiating grief and emotional displays alongside competing macro- and meso-colonizing discourses that privilege rationality [20], managerialism [29], and normative grief [16].

Disenfranchised grief has been explored in clinical contexts [41,43], and it is well documented that Western society does not sanction disenfranchised loss [10,40,44]. Furthermore, Tietsort and colleagues recently illuminated the experiences of sufferers and expressing emotions to leaders at work, emphasizing the need for additional research into how disenfranchised grief layers onto organizational experiences and limits sustainable practices [7]. Therefore, it remains pertinent to explore how cultural contexts shape disenfranchised emotional communication to better understand the implications of emotion rules across societal, organizational, and interactional levels, as well as generate sustainable practices for organizing emotions following pet loss. Thus, one goal of this study is to understand how disenfranchised bereaved individuals grapple with societal and organizational discourses as they manage emotional communication in their personal and professional lives.

### *2.2. Research on Processing and Enacting Disenfranchised Grief in Virtual Support Groups*

Given that Western society and workplaces do not sanction disenfranchised grief [10], and that emotions are often negotiated within managerial and rational boundaries [29], disenfranchised bereaved individuals often turn to virtual communities that are dedicated to emotional expression and healing, such as virtual grief support groups [16,45]. Virtual support spaces have been celebrated for their ability to engender validation, integration, and healing among disenfranchised bereaved individuals [13,44]. Individuals grieving the loss of their companion animal report valuing virtual support groups because individuals often feel unable to express their emotions to their friends, family, and coworkers [16]. However, cultural scripts for emotion rules reach far beyond corporate organizational boundaries [19]. For example, personal homes and community life adhere to managerial discourses that privilege rationality (i.e., corporate colonization [19]), meaning it takes

considerable effort to normalize disenfranchised emotion displays and create safe spaces to engage with authentic emotions [20].

Virtual support communities for disenfranchised bereaved individuals are dedicated to authentic emotional expression and, therefore, are potential sites for resisting colonizing emotion discourses (e.g., professionalism and managerialism) that grievers encounter in their offline lives. As such, virtual support communities are a unique context for exploring the reach of macro-discourses, the capacity for resisting colonizing discourses, and sustainable practices for helping disenfranchised grievers process and express their emotions across contexts. Denker and Dougherty [20] called for such "safe spaces" that are free of managed emotion performances to break the cycle of privileging rationality. However, there is much to be learned about how safe spaces are constituted, as well as how members discursively resist (or reappropriate) disenfranchising discourses. Therefore, this research explores how virtual support groups dedicated to emotional expression are organized alongside or against macro-discourses to contribute to understanding the structuration of emotions outside of work and the home.

### *2.3. Sensemaking Theory and Emotions*

Weick's sensemaking theory calls scholars to attend to the spaces in between experiencing a critical moment or change (i.e., disenfranchised loss), communicating about their experience to process (dis)similarities between the critical moment and their past experiences, and understanding paths forward [18]. After experiencing an equivocal moment, such as a pet loss, bereaved individuals likely recollect their past experiences with societal discourses that privilege rationality over emotionality [7]. Then, the bereaved use communication to process their past experiences with grief, interpersonal interactions, and organizational policies to understand (1) the feelings they have, (2) the emotions they should display, and (3) when and where they can display emotions [19]. For disenfranchised grievers, much of this sensemaking can be seen through communication interactions in virtual support groups.

Disenfranchised bereaved individuals who seek virtual support likely occupy equivocal spaces that necessitate levels of sensemaking [18]. The disenfranchised bereaved population not only makes sense of their emotions in day-to-day personal and professional interactions but also must make sense of the virtual space's emotion rules. Importantly, sensemaking enactments within and outside of virtual spaces must be negotiated against dominant societal discourses and familiar enactments [18]. On the one hand, virtual sites and members might resist societal discourses that privilege rationality [19] and managerialism [29] as they engage in authentic emotional expression in the support group. On the other hand, it is also possible that group members regulate their emotions—and others' emotions—to align with and perpetuate emotional discourses that are ingrained in their daily emotion enactments.

In sum, although research indicates that individuals make sense of their emotion displays alongside numerous macro-, meso-, and micro-discourses, our research takes up the co-constitutive relationships among colonizing discourses, emotion displays, and disenfranchised emotion rules to understand how disenfranchised grievers process and enact emotions across contexts. Furthermore, we explore the extent to which emotion discourses pervade virtual spaces dedicated to authentic emotion displays to extend understanding of sensemaking, disenfranchised emotions, and colonizing discourses outside of workplaces and homes. In doing so, we illuminate practical and sustainable practices for organizations and disenfranchised grievers alike as they collectively grapple with healing and renouncing disenfranchising discourses. To this end, our research question is as follows: What discourses do disenfranchised bereaved individuals draw on as they enact emotions and constitute emotion rules for disenfranchised grieving within and outside of a virtual support group?

## 3. Method

Our attention to sensemaking communication, virtual organizing, and disenfranchised emotions necessitated a qualitative research program to understand how individuals communicatively grappled with their emotions and understandings of their experiences within a virtual support group. To this end, we collected emergent online data to explore how emotions were dynamically structured among virtual community members over time. Specifically, we used netnographic fieldwork to understand the embodied practices—which drew from and sometimes resisted broader emotion discourses—that constituted the virtual space and its emotion rules [46,47]. Netnographic observations and related data points (e.g., site transcripts, analytic memos, and data mapping) were germane to answering our research question. We review our data collection and analysis processes in this section.

### *3.1. Data Collection Site and Population*

Data collection involved netnographic observations of a virtual support group for individuals grappling with disenfranchised emotions, which we refer to as Pawsitive Outlook. Pawsitive Outlook is a pseudonym for a virtual organization that hosted grief support groups, resources, and a hotline for individuals grieving pet loss. The virtual synchronous, anonymous, and text-based support group was particularly suitable for exploring emergent and communicatively constituted emotion rules that guided disenfranchised emotion displays in and outside of the virtual community. After locating the Pawsitive Outlook support group, we obtained Institutional Review Board approval before engaging in netnographic observations.

The support group met for 1 h three times a week. Virtual chat members used the hour to share stories and current emotions, make sense of their experiences within and outside of the chat, and support others. The first author conducted netnographic observations for 5 months as a complete observer, encountering 106 total site members, most of whom were bereaved site visitors ($N$ = 98) compared to site facilitators ($N$ = 8). Although many site visitors frequented the support group, others attended just once. Visits ranged from once to 33 times ($M$ = 3.82, $SD$ = 6.30), and the tenuous membership helped us understand how members were socialized into the group and the discourses that guided the group's unspoken emotion rules. Throughout this manuscript, we include pseudonyms for each participant to protect site members; however, we use participants' exact quotations, including disfluencies and punctuation errors, to accurately represent their communication and demonstrate participants' sensemaking in relation to our interpretations.

### *3.2. Data and Analysis Procedures*

Netnographic observations and field notes resulted in 1221 pages of data. NVivo software was used for data analysis. Primary coding [48] involved open coding each communication event (e.g., posts, pictures, and emoticons), yielding 50 densely populated codes (e.g., macro-discourse, site norm, and suppressing emotions). Code saturation, when the data did not generate new codes [49], occurred after coding half of the data (2.5 months of interactions). However, we continued primary-cycle coding in pursuit of meaning saturation to better understand the conceptual dimensions of codes and how the codes were (dis)similar to one another [49]. Then, we engaged in secondary and constant comparative coding [48,50,51] to understand overlaps or distinctions among the codes, collapsing primary cycle codes into broader categories. At this point, initial conceptual categories formed repeated patterns, such as positioning companion animal loss as different, grappling with grief expectations, performing emotions in diverse contexts, and resisting managerial discourses. We inductively grouped these categories together to form the themes presented in our findings.

Throughout data collection and analysis, the first author also wrote analytic memos [50,52] which helped illuminate emergent themes, connections among codes, and relationships between the data and existing literature. Pen-and-paper concept maps were used to visualize relationships among initial categories [48]. The illustrations helped

demonstrate how individuals grappled with various discourses as they made sense of their experiences with emotions throughout disenfranchised grief.

Once our initial analyses and themes were written, we data-conferenced [53] with colleagues who were familiar with emotion and organizational communication research yet unfamiliar with our data, which helped make sense of our thematic trajectory. Data conference colleagues confirmed that the themes were theoretically sound, resonant, and rich [54]. Below, we explore three themes related to bereaved caregivers' disenfranchised grief and emotions across different spaces, including in their personal lives, their workplaces, and the virtual space.

## 4. Results: Making Sense of Disenfranchised Emotion Displays across Contexts

Our research question asked the following: What discourses do disenfranchised bereaved individuals draw on as they enact emotions and constitute emotion rules for disenfranchised grieving within and outside of a virtual support group? In this section, we present themes organized around the discourses members drew from to make sense of their feelings and shape their emotion displays (1) in their personal lives, (2) at work, and (3) within the virtual support group. Then, in our discussion, we connect these themes and participant experiences to the extant literature and provide practical guidance for various organizations.

### *4.1. Processing Animal Companion Loss: "Get Another Dog"*

Virtual group members commonly discussed societal discourses that disenfranchised their emotions by making them feel as if the prolonged and intense grief they experienced should be reserved for other relationship types, such as family members and close friends. Already struggling to engage in daily interactions personally and at work, these disenfranchising discourses threatened individuals' feelings and emotion displays, necessitating the group to grapple with sustainable responses and ways to navigate relationships that complicated their emotion rules. For instance, Olivia shared how her occupational experience constrained her understanding of grief and related emotion rules.

> Olivia: I am a retired hospice nurse and have seen many deaths but I have never had a grief like this. He was my best friend and constant companion.
>
> Kris: Losing a pet has affected me as much as losing human. The loss of a companion animal is especially tough because they give us unconditional love. We as humans place conditions on our personal relationships.
>
> Oliver: I was thinking the same thing last night, I have lost many relationships but none have hit me like loosing Miller.
>
> Emily: As always, its just nice to have a forum to cry and share about it with you guys without hearing.. "Its been a year & a half.. " BLAH BLAH BLAH.
>
> Jennifer: when I told my doctor that I was worried about my mental health after Bailey passes, he just said "get another dog" and Bailey is still here!
>
> Kris: "Get another dog" I hate that. As if it's like replacing an old worn pair of shoes or something. Ppl don't get it. as if I'm supposed to sprout a new heart or something.

Olivia's disclosure emphasized the tensions between her anticipated and experienced grief, which she considered alongside broader discourses about loss and related emotions. Olivia was conditioned through her experience as a hospice nurse and familiarity with human loss to expect how grief and emotion displays should feel and look in particular ways. However, losing her pet disrupted expectations based on past experiences, prompting her to contend with her "different" grief, emotions, and loss.

Olivia's disclosure led the group to commiserate about discourses that shaped their disenfranchised experience and controlled their emotion displays outside of the group. The chat members agreed that their grief and feelings were communicatively positioned as

deviant, which was shaped by others around them, chat members' past experiences and expectations of grief, and the intense emotions chat members encountered after their loss. Whereas Olivia noted that she did not expect her grief, other chat members positioned their animal companion losses as potentially more difficult than losing another human (e.g., "The loss of a companion animal is especially tough because they give us unconditional love") against discourses that disenfranchised their emotions (e.g., "'It's been a year and a half...' BLAH BLAH BLAH", "'get another dog'"). In doing so, the bereaved caregivers described tensions they experienced between understanding and interpreting the emotion rules they encountered in their personal interactions. Chat members overwhelmingly described their personal emotion rules as being guided by others who expected them to suppress their authentic feelings (e.g., "as if I'm supposed to sprout a new heart or something").

As the group grappled with their "especially tough" grief, they also regularly identified how others responded to different loss types as experiences that shaped members' interpretations of their emotion rules and how others perceived their emotion displays. In doing so, members' interpretations of others' discourses about grief in general and responses to animal companion grief in particular constructed their emotions as irrational and counterproductive to moving forward. Kirsty and Emily, for example, shared how their grief over their pets was overshadowed and complicated, yet warranted, by the proximal loss of a family member.

> Kirsty: . . . My cousins have all been texting about our grandmother and I feel like Ron got lost in the shuffle and it upsets me because I am struggling to mourn my best friend and everyone else is focused on their own pain instead.
>
> Emily: Kirsty, I totally identify with that. Its almost like now.. My grief is valid. It was valid with Storm! Like now it makes sense that I'm so upset & posting all this grief stuff and crying etc.. Now I get to have a memorial..
>
> Dani: Our pets can be a more devastating loss than some people in our lives. Unless you are a pet lover, you don't get that.
>
> Peyton: sometimes we have well meaning friends who say "oh, don't cry" . . . well, for me it is harder to hold back tears than it is to let them flow.
>
> Jan: The further out, the more you have to fake your pain to others. That's why I love this group!

Emily and Kirsty's compounded losses made space for the group to discuss how their friends and family members attempted to subjugate emotion displays following companion losses. Commiserating about how their friends and family managed members' emotion displays (e.g., "Unless you are a pet lover, you don't get that.", "'oh, don't cry . . . '") illuminated the discourses group members encountered in their daily life that disenfranchised their feelings and shaped their emotion displays (e.g., "the further out, the more you have to fake your pain to others"). Friends and family members' communication organized grief over companion animals as different and "invalid", suggesting to the bereaved members that they should approach their loss from a rational standpoint and "hold back their tears" to navigate their loss in a more productive, efficient manner. Those experiencing a proximal loss of a human companion and their companion animal, however, encountered a duality of (1) frustration for their companion animal's loss being overlooked and minimized, and (2) relief of being able to publicly express their authentic grief over their pet because it was warranted by losing a human companion. Because of this and other instances of people minimizing their loss, the support group spent considerable effort making sense of and coordinating sustainable responses to interpretations of emotion rules for disenfranchised grief.

### *4.2. Performing Emotions in the Workplace: "People at Work Don't Value Pets"*

Virtual group members also contended with workplace emotion rules and other employees' expectations. Generally, members agreed there was an unspoken expectation

to manage emotions to perform their work efficiently and sustain organizational practices. Emotion management decisions were guided by numerous discourses, such as assumptions that others at work would not understand their disenfranchised grief, workplace policies that did not acknowledge their losses, and broader discourses that implicitly suggested they should "be strong to get through meetings".

A day after losing her cat, Audrey joined the chat and shared how she was feeling "crushed", yet concerned about returning to work. As other members chimed in to care for Audrey and share their grief strategies at work, they shed light on how their interpretations of others' discourses and their emotion enactments at work were mutually shaping.

> Audrey: I'm in HR and its not a very forgiving time to take off. Even when I said I needed off on Friday, the reaction was that my cat was nothing in the face of a global crisis. I understand that but I feel like my world is crashing down.
>
> Dani: That is what irks me-when people act like your pet dying is no big deal. Well, it is a big deal.
>
> Jude: It does seem like people at work don't value pets.
>
> Lynn: thats why this group is good, others are feeling or have felt the same pain you are going through. This room understands.
>
> Audrey: Some people think an animal is less and disposable. My cat is my family. I am very glad people here understand.

Audrey's experience grappling with returning to work and setting aside her grief was guided by company and coworker messages she received (e.g., "the reaction was that my cat was nothing in the face of a global crisis", "people act like your pet dying is no big deal", "some people think an animal is less and disposable"). Other chat members described similar tensions between the emotions they experienced and the emotions their colleagues expected, guided by messages that minimized their pain and the intense grief they experienced (e.g., "It does seem like people at work don't value pets"). Workplace interactions discursively constructed pet loss as "less than", "nothing", and "no big deal" in comparison to other types of loss, thereby perpetuating rationality and efficiency, as well as privileging commerce over emotions that were treated as unproductive and unwarranted.

Relatedly, chat members discussed workplace policies that contributed to their emotion suppression, which further illuminated the relationship between macro- and meso-discourses that constituted their emotion displays.

> Emily: [My company] said "It only applies to Family" . . . Luckily, my job considered Storm family and gave me the bereavement days off for her.
>
> Sam: My company doesn't have good bereavement policies in place for humans- certainly not animals. Again, I have alerted my company of a family member impending passing and I will use PTO. They don't need details . . .

Workplace policies that delegitimized their disenfranchised grief drew on other micro- and macro-discourses of what constituted "appropriate" emotion expression for loss. The group commiserated about bereavement policies that applied, at best, to human companions (e.g., "[My company] said 'It only applies to Family'", "My company doesn't have good bereavement policies in place for humans – certainly not animals."). Some members were able to negotiate leave despite a lack of formalized workplace support (e.g., "Luckily, my job considered Storm family and gave me the bereavement days off for her"). Others had to develop creative strategies for navigating leave (e.g., "I have alerted my company of a family member impending passing and I will use PTO"). Often, members perceived that others saw their loss and grief as illegitimate and, consequently, demonstrated how the bereaved privileged rationality over felt emotions by planning ahead to engage in grief while not interfering with commerce.

In another instance, the chat members grappled with performing their grief within other organizational roles, such as at school. Doing so demonstrated that they perceived their emotions were subject to corporate and managerial expectations outside of work.

> Emily: In my book it says.. "People will tell you to be strong. Ignore them. You are allowed to fall apart, feel bad, and struggle because when you need to be strong again, you will. For now, cry. Be angry, Go ahead and fall apart because thats how you become whole again".
>
> Alina: so true. I think the worst part is most people don't understand it made it harder to go through classes. and i cried through a company meeting.
>
> Peyton: Alina, sometimes we have to be strong to get through class or a meeting . . . later we can let out our emotions.
>
> Emily: Alina, sometimes we just have to allow ourselves to not be at our best.

Following Emily's advocating for authentic emotional expression and resistance to societal discourses that suppress emotion displays, Alina disclosed having trouble navigating grief alongside work and school roles. Alina's struggle was met with competing discourses. Whereas Emily resisted societal grief assumptions that privilege rationality over emotionality (e.g., "People will tell you to be strong. Ignore them."), Peyton perpetuated and privileged suppressing emotion displays in public spaces (e.g., " . . . sometimes we have to be strong to get through class or a meeting . . . later we can let out our emotions."), thereby reifying managerial and rational discourses. Rationality underpinned Peyton's supportive recommendation, suggesting that it is sometimes best to silo disenfranchised emotions to safe spaces, such as the chat.

Furthermore, whereas some members were able to sidestep emotion rules at work (e.g., framing animal companions as family, utilizing PTO) and in their personal lives (e.g., experiencing the loss of family members and companion animals around the same time), most agreed that they felt they had to consistently suppress their emotions outside of the support group (e.g., "a lot of friends & family dont know how to hold space. My family did that too.. Thats why we have to share with our other grief friends"). As such, the group agreed that the virtual chat was a space in which they did not have to "fake" their grief, discursively creating Pawsitive Outlook as a vital safe space for expressing their authentic emotions. However, as evidenced by Peyton's reification of managerialist discourses in the chat, discursively creating and maintaining a virtual safe space took considerable effort.

### *4.3. Emotional Rules Witin the Virtual Space: "Sorry, I'm of No Help to Anyone"*

Generally, themes of communicating grief were about emotion displays occurring outside of the chat group, such as questioning grief performances at work, in other organized spaces, and around friends and family. However, members also contended with performing grief in the chat, which discursively constructed emotion rules and socialized members to emotional expression within the chat.

> Jessie: It really stinks to have to go through this alone . . . I'm a complete train wreck with no light at the end of the tunnel . . . just when you think you have gotten past the hurdle, you sink back down . . . I don't know how much more I can take of this . . . I'm afraid I'm going back into hermit mode . . . Sorry Everyone . . . I just cannot do this. I'm too depressed and don't want to bring the room down with me . . . Stay Safe!!
>
> Ken: Stay strong Jessie.
>
> Lynn: Take car, Jessie. Come back again, it helps to know you're not alone. fyi: it's not bringing the room down, it is what the room is for.

Jessie disclosed intense feelings from two recent losses and the COVID-19 pandemic before expressing concern about isolation. Although the group rallied around Jessie and members disclosed parts of their experiences to support Jessie, Jessie abruptly left

the chat, citing concern about bringing "the room down". In doing so, Jessie signaled and reified unspoken limits to displaying emotions in the chat, which were constituted through rationality and efficiency. Despite others noting Jessie would not "bring the room down" and that expressing authentic emotions is "what the room is for", Jessie's exit and emotion suppression implied the belief that emotions constrained others' healing (i.e., the "commerce" of the virtual care organization). Thus, Jessie's assumption emphasized the reach of managerial discourses that privilege organizational prosperity. Rationality constrained the group's objectives of celebrating and expressing their authentic emotions. Moreover, the competing objective of healing relegated some overt and overly negative emotion displays as unwelcome or harmful to healing. Jessie's concern suggested that some group members perceived limits to sharing emotion displays even among similar individuals, which was shaped by enduring managerial discourses and desires to get back to a healthy state.

Others reified the idea that Pawsitive Outlook's objectives were to support members in their pursuit of healing, noting that these processes were constrained by overt emotions.

> Sutton: Hello everyone. I feel the same as always. Sad, Guilty, Regrets, wanting a do over . . . I haven't learned anything. I'm a mess. I consume myself with work. There are times I do get so engrossed in work that I am not thinking about Riley being dead and if all the flashbacks of his last day. On the other hand, I hate work bc it took me away from Riley when he was here. Sorry, I'm of no help to anyone.
>
> Lennox: Sutton you are always a help when you are HERE for us.
>
> LaurieK: Sutton it's OK to be a mess. I was a mess for a very very long time . . .
>
> Rory: Sutton, YOU are of help to me . . . I couldn't work. I couldn't shower. nothing. I was such a mess. still am in a lot of ways. Please if you have to cry cry. Don't hide it. Don't prevent it. I went to the beach and screamed and cried and screamed and cried. and Sutton . . . your words and being here help others. trust me on that.
>
> LaurieK: Being honest about your feelings helps yourself as well as others.
>
> Rory: yes, there are others that don't write and just read. then someone see they feel just as you do Sutton and they start to feel comfortable and will chat. YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE to us!

Sutton shamed and sanctioned emotions and lack of progress (e.g., "I haven't learned anything", "Sorry, I am of no help to anyone."), framing feelings and emotion displays as unproductive and unhelpful to the group. However, the group members actively worked to uplift Sutton as a productive group member (e.g., "you are always a help when you are HERE for us", "YOU are of help to me", "YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE to us!"), celebrate emotionality (e.g., "It's OK to be a mess", "Grieving the loss of our loved one takes a long time"), and described how Sutton's participation might help others resist the assumptions that underpin their emotion suppression (e.g., "Being honest about your feelings helps yourself as well as others", "there are others that don't write and just read. then someone see they feel just as you do Sutton and they start to feel comfortable and will chat."). Thus, whereas Sutton suggested that emotions and prolonged displays of suffering constrained group members' progress, others resisted societal discourses and privileged authentic emotions over perceived sustainable healing practices by communicating that all feelings and emotions are acceptable, normal, and even advantageous.

Taken as a whole, members' struggles with their disenfranchised emotions, as well as the group's attempts to normalize and communicate support for authentic emotional expression, were situated around prevailing assumptions about grief, emotions, and healing. Although the chat was discursively constituted as a supportive environment and safe to share emotions, members sometimes communicated concerns about sharing overt, irrational, and unproductive emotions. In doing so, the group contended with tensions between being a safe space for *emotional expression* versus being a safe space for *healing*.

Whereas the former foregrounded authentic emotional expression as the primary organizational objective, the latter implied that emotion management (e.g., rationality and efficiency) was necessary to support healing. Through communication on the virtual site, members regularly struggled with reifying disenfranchising discourses in the chat. The group grappled with this tension at times by acknowledging and resisting the disenfranchising discourses, and communicatively reinterpreting authentic emotions as rational and beneficial to getting back to a healthy state.

## 5. Discussion

Scholars have explored how emotions are co-constructed through communication and established structures in corporate environments (e.g., [7,26,27,30,55]), as well as how organizations colonize behavior in the home (e.g., [20,55,56]). Exploring how emotions are performed, constitutive of, and sanctioned in other organizational structures and personal experiences is germane to understanding the far-reaching implications of corporate colonization and macro emotion discourses [19]. Furthermore, it is well accepted that sensemaking and emotions are mutually shaping [55,57,58]. This study extends this research by emphasizing that sensemaking shapes disenfranchised loss emotion rules in different organized spaces, evidencing the utility of sensemaking as a tool to understand and constitute emotion rules. Thus, rather than theorizing about emotions as a component of sensemaking processes [58], our findings emphasize how individuals make sense of intense emotions alongside various discourses across contexts, especially when the sensemaker is experiencing a disenfranchised event. In doing so, we offer theoretical implications about (1) the relationship between identities and emotions across contexts, and (2) how emotion discourses are negotiated in spaces that celebrate the emotionality of life [20].

When individuals experience equivocality (i.e., not knowing which emotions to express, in what places, or when) they are triggered to use communication to construct meaning and organize their interpretations of plausible actions [18]. To do so, individuals draw on familiar discourses (e.g., professionalism, managerialism, and individual experiences) to understand their interpretations and enactments following a triggering event in personal [20] and professional contexts [26]. Emotional displays are further shaped and complicated by class, gender [23], and race [59,60]. Although anonymity masked gender and race within the virtual support group, bereaved site members commiserated about another identity marker that constrained their emotional displays within their workplaces: disenfranchised loss. This study demonstrates that personal experiences (i.e., disenfranchising pet loss), aside from and in addition to demographic identity markers, necessitate individuals to grapple with emotional display expectations they have not previously encountered. Disenfranchised loss can layer onto *any body* [10,12,13], emphasizing that potentially transitory disenfranchised experiences—in concert with other discourses and personal experiences—shape sensemaking about emotion displays and preclude individuals from expressing their emotions to their leaders [7], others within the organization (i.e., colleagues), and people outside of work (e.g., friends and family).

Additionally, our findings highlight how safe spaces are constituted by resisting, perpetuating, and reshaping numerous (disenfranchising) organizational discourses. Members' disenfranchised experiences (e.g., emotional suppression among family and friends and lack of formal workplace bereavement policies) discursively constituted the virtual support group as a safe space for collective sensemaking about members' (disenfranchised) emotion displays [58]. Members' communication demonstrated how they actively grappled with, resisted, and reified colonizing discourses (i.e., managerialism, professionalism [19,29]) as they participated in a virtual safe space for celebrating the emotionality of life [20].

The virtual support space's emotion rules were often situated in tension between being a safe space for celebrating the emotionality of life versus being a space for engaging in rational and efficient healing, calling attention to the relationship between the commerce of the support group and members' emotion rules. Generally, members created a shared understanding about when they should express, mask, or alter their negative emotions, and

the chat was frequently celebrated as a safe space for authentic emotion displays. However, in some cases, Pawsitive Outlook chat members censored their emotions by leaving the chat when they perceived they were overly, inappropriately, or irrationally emotional. This self-censoring demonstrated that, like organizational employees, chat members were disciplined to "think and act rationally to maximize their gains" [61] (p. 10). In the virtual care organization, healing was often likened to corporate objectives, causing members to frame their negative emotions as irrational and unhelpful; the emotions constrained other members' healing. Much like organizing home life to privilege rationality [20] or work to "efficiently and economically produce goods and services" [61] (p. 10), suppressing negative emotions within the chat at times resulted in self-censorship that prioritized the virtual support group's pursuit of sustainable healing.

Denker and Dougherty argued that, without safe spaces to act out or acknowledge the emotionality of life, individuals may become trapped in roles that normalize rationality [20]. However, our analysis demonstrates that, even in discursively constructed safe spaces, individuals grappled with managerialism, rationality, and far-reaching emotion rules that reduce or disrupt sustainable authentic emotional expression. Furthermore, anonymous spaces in which individuals should, in theory, be able to authentically express their emotions without concern for other-imposed repercussions, are riddled with competing emotion discourses. Given that individuals draw on past experiences and "faith" in a known world as they make sense of new experiences [18] (p. 37), it was difficult for members to resist the colonizing and managerial discourses in pursuit of maintaining a safe space for displaying their authentic emotions. The communication that constitutes safe spaces [20] is organized by discourses that privilege rationality over emotionality [29], meaning that even support group members struggle to resist discourses that disenfranchised their grief as they contend with rational means for processing their loss. We provide practical recommendations that account for tensions between expressing authentic emotions and supporting rational healing in organized contexts in the following section.

## 6. Practical Implications

Scholars have illuminated a need for more procedural support for bereaved and suffering workers in general [5,7]. As evidenced in this study, the sentiment persists among disenfranchised grief populations who tend to suffer in silence at work and in personal relationships, as well as regulate their emotions in safe spaces. Therefore, we provide recommendations for supporting disenfranchised bereaved organizational members in professional and virtual support spaces.

First, our data provide an empirical report of members struggling to manage their organizational roles alongside disenfranchised losses and emotions, in general. To support organizational members, as well as protect organizational interests, organizations should consider the benefits of formally sanctioning disenfranchised losses. For one, providing leave and encouraging organizational members to utilize leave for disenfranchised experiences might communicate a supportive organizational identity and promote sustainable practices over time. Having time away to cope with a loss and feeling supported by an organization would likely increase wellbeing, decrease the likelihood of burnout, and increase productivity [3,7,62]. By offering and encouraging the use of formalized and inclusive bereavement policies, organizations can begin pushing back on macrolevel discourses that invalidate disenfranchised emotions.

Second, our data point to a need for organizations to consider the relationship between workers and their companion animals, specifically. Approximately 68 million US households care for one or more companion animal [63,64], yet organizations rarely sanction pet loss [7,60], emphasizing that organizations need to consider how to celebrate animal companionship and support pet loss. Organizations with pet-friendly policies report greater loyalty, and having pets at work improves morale [65], indicating that meso- and micro-discourses might signal to animal caretakers that their experiences, losses, and emotions are valid. Organizations and members might shift their cultural narrative and en-

franchise companion animal care and loss by allowing pets in dedicated parts of the office, scheduling animal therapy days, arranging volunteer opportunities, offering pet insurance, and providing bereavement leave [66]. Importantly, organizations should balance policies and policy use alongside other competing needs, such as how allowing animals at work might harm employees with allergies.

Lastly, our study points to the need for virtual safe spaces to account for and interrogate colonizing discourses that are woven into the fabric of society [19,20]. Aakhus and Rumsey noted that virtual support groups should explicitly communicate with members about their roles, who their community is, and what their goals are [67]. Thus, we recommend that virtual support groups embed emotion information in the site material (e.g., ground rules) and share with members that the space is dedicated to authentic emotions and expression (e.g., We are often taught from a young age to suppress our emotions in interpersonal interactions, at work and school, and sometimes even at home. We want this space to celebrate your true emotional experiences that might be suppressed in other spaces.). Because colonizing discourses are inescapable, facilitators should reach out to members who sanction their emotions (e.g., leaving the chat), encourage authentic emotions within the chat whenever possible, and note that authentic emotional expression is one path toward healing and making sense of disenfranchised grief.

## 7. Future Research and Limitations

Reinforcing recent calls [7], our data point to a need for additional research into how intersecting discourses discipline emotional expression among disenfranchised groups. For instance, future research could attend to emotion displays and rules that are communicatively constituted following the loss of a mentor or marginalized friend [10] to understand how emotions and disenfranchising loss layer onto bodies—marginalized and otherwise—to generate insights as to how organizations might support authentic emotional expression or resist dominant emotion rules that perpetuate gendered, racialized, and disenfranchised emotion double-binds. Such research should aim to decrease organizational and patriarchal perspectives that are privileged [29] and highlight the possibilities for "a more diverse lifeworld . . . with space created for emotions" [20] (p. 257).

Furthermore, future research should explore relationships between organizing emotions in support spaces and emotional labor. Although emotional labor describes performing emotions for the benefit of commerce [68], our data demonstrated that, at times, site members discursively likened healing to corporate profits. As site members measured the success of the virtual care organization in terms of effective and efficient healing, they controlled their emotions in the pursuit of fulfilling organizational interests. Although it is beyond the scope of the current study, our data point to possible theoretical extensions of emotional labor. Specifically, future research should inquire into how participants' perceptions of the commerce of an organization and safe space shape the extent to which they engage in emotional labor or express their authentic emotions.

Lastly, scholars should examine disenfranchised emotion experiences across organizational contexts. Our study was designed to explore the communicative constitutions of a virtual support space and disenfranchised emotion rules across contexts, and netnography was well suited for achieving our study objectives. However, our data cannot illuminate individuals' interpretations of participant experiences. To this end, it is pertinent for future research to utilize qualitative interviews to understand individuals' interpretations of the communication they enact (e.g., expressing and suppressing emotions), cues they select (e.g., various personal experiences and discourses), and how the information they retained shapes their understanding of and enactments in future events. Tietsort and colleagues provided a noteworthy start to illuminating participants' interpretations of suffering and cultivating compassion at work [7]. Additional research can follow their research and this study by exploring participants' interpretations of disenfranchised loss and virtual organizing, specifically.

## 8. Conclusions

Although previous research has demonstrated that emotion rules guide communication in organizations, there is much to be learned about how emotions are experienced alongside disenfranchised loss and within virtual support groups. Our study demonstrated how societal emotion rules were communicatively experienced by individuals navigating a disenfranchised loss, which we argue is another personal experience that prompts sensemaking about emotion displays within workplace environments and various interpersonal interactions. Our findings also highlighted the far reach of overarching societal discourses. Although virtual organizations are discursively constituted against overarching emotion rules, members nevertheless censored their own emotions and abided by norms that sanctioned their emotions outside of the chat. To this end, we provided practical and theoretical implications to demonstrate how communication can be leveraged to create safe(r) spaces and support those experiencing disenfranchised loss.

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