



Sociological Perspectives on Service Interaction in Culturally Sensitive Bereavement Contexts: The Role of Emotion in Behavioural Meaning-Making

Wai Sin Yoong¹, Wong Chee Hoo¹, Mei Sze Low², Jeffery Vui Shing Ho³,
Ying Tuan Lo⁴, Christian Wiradendi Wolor^{5*}

¹ Faculty of Business and Communication, INTI International University.

² Department of Hospitality and Information Technology, Sunway College Johor Bahru

³ Department of Business and Financial Programmes, Sunway College Johor Bahru

⁴ XJTU Entrepreneur College (Taicang), Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

^{5*} Faculty of Economics, Universitas Negeri Jakarta.

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Abstract

This paper explores service interaction in the culturally sensitive bereavement situations using a sociological lens, which focusing on the role of emotion in behavioural meaning-making. This study will adopt Nirvana Johor, Malaysia as a case study context to examine the relations among engagement, emotional experience, and behavioural intention in a taboo service environment. Although the research has been done before on the dynamics revolving around hedonic situations, little attention is paid on high-involvement bereavement services. This conceptual paper proposes a sociologically grounded framework to understand behavioural meaning-making in bereavement service interaction focusing on sociological, service-dominant logic, relationship marketing, and experience economy. In this case, the interpretivist qualitative methodology will be used to comprehend how emotional and cultural factors influence meaning construction. It further outlines potential qualitative directions for future empirical research in culturally sensitive service environments. This research will add to the sociological and social psychological literature, by taking the discourse of emotion, engagement and consumer culture to bereavement services in Malaysia.

Keywords: consumer behaviour, social psychology, behavioural analysis, emotional experience, service engagement, high-involvement services, bereavement rituals

Introduction

Bereavement services are among the most emotionally-focused, culturally-related, and socially-relevant service contexts, although little has been done in academic research on such interactions in the Malaysian context. In comparison to other industries like hospitality, tourism, and retail that have been well-researched in the context of consumer experience and social interactions but the area of funeral planning is frequently treated as something unsought and culturally taboo (Jiao & Hussin, 2020). The bereavement services form an important location of human interaction socially whereby the meeting of cultural norms, emotional expression, and social structure form an intersection which forms a meaning making of behaviour. The effects of cultural beliefs, emotional vulnerability and symbolic meaning on individual behaviour in this regard is not just a result of rational evaluation of attributes (or rates of exchange); it is the richly sociocultural process in which individuals negotiate grief, and identity in historically framed social worlds.

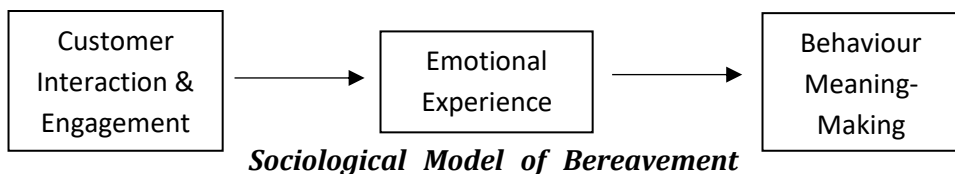
Sociology theories of interactionism are applicable to the comprehension of these processes. Interactionism assumes that social behaviour is an interactive outcome of both individuals and their social conditions, with the meaning being co constructed through continuous interpersonal interactions, as opposed to being the unilateral result of individual cognition (Husin et al., 2021). In this context, emotions are not solitary psychological conditions but are necessarily relational and arise as a result of social interaction and guided by common cultural norms and expectations. This is consistent with sociological studies which considers emotions as part of social life and human behaviours, and which determines how people perceive and react to their social world (Bevilacqua, 2023).

The Chinese cultural traditions and taboos dominate in pre need or funeral planning attitudes in Malaysia. A significant portion of this group considers funeral planning to be unlucky, which means that there is not much awareness and pre planning activities (Junxuan et al., 2024). Service exchange where affective reassurance, dignified service, and social confirmation are given to consumers takes the center stage not only in consumer satisfaction but also in rebuilding of social patterns broken by loss in such cultural settings. Ritualised experience such as the coffin laying ceremony at Nirvana Johor provides great empirical data to analyse the relationship between emotional stimuli and social interaction and how they influence the sense of their social worlds and position themselves in relation to mortality. These emotional experiences reveal how behaviour in the context of bereavement services is not necessarily cognitively governed, but is brought forth through cultural scripts, interpersonal relations and emotive social meanings.

The available literature highlights the significance of a sociological approach to bereavement as opposed to the economic or psychological consequences. To take an example, micro sociological approaches to bereavement emphasize the social process of adjusting to loss as the reconstruction of social identities and

renegotiating social space in relationships disrupted by the loss of loved ones (Maciejewski et al., 2022). These frameworks go beyond the individual experience of grief to look at it as a social phenomenon that is framed by patterns of interaction, social roles and cultural conventions. It is an important understanding in a bereavement service setting, where it is essential to make meaning that is linked with cultural norms regarding death, filial piety and collectivity.

In spite of the social relevance of these processes, there is little research done on bereavement services in Malaysia in terms of sociology and interactionism. Cost preferences or religious tendencies, as desirable, neglect the role of social interaction and emotion in the creation of meaning, behaviours of engagement, and attitudes that help people interpret their place in the family and cultural system (Khang & Seman, 2025). Furthermore, mainstream models of consumer behaviour seldom take into consideration the existence of taboo, high involvement conditions which lead to a radically different re-packaged approach that people take to service environments. This is a lapse in the comprehension of the social processes of engagement and emotional experience of bereavement services. In order to fill this gap, this paper aims to investigate the sociological aspects of service interaction within a culturally sensitive bereavement setting with regard to how meaning is constructed by individuals through their emotion and social interaction. Along with the sociological approach based on interactionism and service dominant logic, the paper investigates the convergence of emotional experience and social interaction as the socially mediated meaning making in the service context of bereavement services, which has added to interdisciplinary literature on human behaviour, culture, and social interaction in services.



Service Interaction

This proposed research propositions that the level of contact with the service personnel of Nirvana is positively related to the richness and intensity of the social interaction and behavioural sense of self in the contexts of bereavement (RP1), the intensity of positive emotional responses to the contacts with the service personnel and involvement in the coffin-laying rituals positively influences how individuals interpret their social norms, cultural scripts and their role in the relations in the bereavement environment (RP2), and that the interaction between customer engagement and the emotional experience plays a major role in human behaviour, social interpretation and meaning-making (RP3).

Literature Review

Bereavement as a Sociocultural and Interactional Context

Bereavement is not simply a psychological event or personal experience but a major sociocultural phenomenon with instilled systems of shared significance, common conventions, and socially organized activities. In all societies, the process of death is controlled by a set of cultural expectations that dictate the proper expression of emotions, participation in rituals, as well as the roles and responsibilities of bereavement, therefore, bereavement is a social process and not a personal one. The topic of death is delicate and a taboo in most cultural settings, and Malaysia is not an exception since people dislike talking about preparing for death, funeral arrangements, and mortality (Jiao & Hussin, 2020; Junxuan et al., 2024). These types of taboos do not remove interaction with death related services but instead, they influence the way people approach such services giving them symbolic, emotional and moral meaning.

Social system of emotion can also be found in bereavement contexts. The reaction that is emotional to death like grief, anxiety, reverence or even avoidance that are not experienced alone but are mediated through cultural norms that stipulate how one is supposed to feel, express and control their feelings in front of others. These emotions are organized and deciphered using rituals and service interactions. As an example, engaging in symbolic activities like coffin-laying rituals exposes them to embodied and emotionally charged experiences that may trigger a contemplation about death, role in family and sense of existence. Such experiences do not only cause an emotion, but place this emotion in the context of common cultural accounts, enabling people to make their feelings open to social exegesis and not individual responses.

Such service spaces as Nirvana Johor are therefore interactional spaces where people interact with service staff, family members and ritual components in culturally-codified contexts. Such spaces can be likened to what sociologists' term as interactional arenas where behaviour can be formed due to constant interaction between people and their social environment (Husin et al., 2021). Meaning is constantly negotiable in such arenas: the participants make sense of the physical setting, of symbolic artefacts, and of communicative actions of the staff members to find out what is going on and what their roles in the situation are. The service experience is turned into a place of interpretation, as people interpret unfamiliar or emotionally intense experiences with the help of being guided through that interaction.

This is an interactional quality of bereavement services that is particularly important in the pre-need planning context. In comparison with post-loss arrangements, which are undertaken in immediate situations, an individual carries out pre-need participation by predicting future death, something, which may conflict with the cultural taboos and personal coping tactics of an individual. The process of

dealing with pre-need rituals involves people having to face symbolic representations of death yet, it remains a part of the daily social life. This involvement may generate the tension between the norms of cultural avoidance and new conceptualizations of responsibility, preparedness, and responsible care. The interactions in service, therefore, mediate between these experiences by putting them to the context of respect, dignity, and social legitimacy, as well as aiding individuals in resolving the conflict between the discomfort of the self and the demands of society.

In addition, one can view bereavement services as places in which social relationships are reinstated and redefined. Sociological treatments of the grief state underline that the loss interferes with social roles and relationships and people need to rebuild their positions in social networks of relatives and community (Maciejewski et al., 2022). Pre-need involvement takes this process futuristically, whereby people are advised to envision relational shifts and commitments in the future. Involvement in funeral planning can therefore be seen as an act of social positioning, as people will bargain on issues of being a child, parents, or community member as regards to expected death. Such behaviours in this sense as readiness to participate in rituals or take pre-planning that is hence linked to the ways in which people comprehend social responsibility and social relations are concerned.

Bereavement is a sociocultural and interaction context whereby behaviour, emotion, and meaning are inextricably connected. The spaces of service environments in this field are organized as spaces of social interaction, where people perceive culturally sensitive experiences based on their involvement in rituals, symbols, and other players. The perception of bereavement services in this way offers the requisite basis upon which both the role of emotional experience and social involvement can be analysed in terms of its role in meaning-making in behaviour, and thus the phenomenon is very much placed within the framework of sociology and social psychology instead of merely within the context of marketing or managerial analysis.

Symbolic Interactionism and Behavioural Meaning-Making

Symbolic interactionism offers a sociological background on how humans create meaning, interpret social situations, and use meanings to change experience into behaviour. Symbolic interactionism assumes the human action is influenced by meaning that emerges in social interaction and the ongoing interpretation as opposed to thinking of behaviour as either the direct result of internal attitudes or external stimuli alone (Husin et al., 2021). This point of view is especially applicable in culturally sensitive bereavement situations, where members must deal with emotionally coloured symbols, rituals, and interpersonal experiences that must be interpreted in the framework of common cultural understanding.

Ali et al. (2022) opines that the fundamental assumption behind symbolic interactionism is that people behave with reference to objects, events, and situations in response to the meanings that they have on individuals. The meanings are not predetermined attributes of the objects but created within society as we interact with other people. Moreover, meanings are not passively received; they are constantly adjusted in the process of interpretation when people cogitate about and bargain their experiences. Such aspects like coffins, memorial spaces, ritual activities, and practices of a particular ceremony serve as symbols in bereavement services. The meaning that is attached to them culturally but does not lie in their physical form but in the activated, reinforced, or reformulated meanings that occur as they are interacted with by service personnel and other participants.

The height of the symbolic interactionism is the role of the self as social construction (Irimiea, 2018). The subjects also form their identity based on reflected appraisals and the way they think other people view them and their roles in social relationships. Contexts of bereavement trigger role-specific meanings, the meaning of being a good child, a good parent, or a good family member. Pre-need planning can be viewed as a form of caring and initiative-taking thinking, which is a part of a self-concept of responsibility and moral duty. These interpretations are strengthened by interaction with the service providers who tend to position planning as an act of love or readiness, and individuals tend to incorporate the behaviour into their self-understanding. Thus, this behaviour indicates not just decision-making, but identity work, through which people align their actions with socially desirable roles.

The meaning-making is particularly acute in areas which are taboo or emotional. In the absence of personal scripts that people must understand the death-related experience, people depend on social cues and common definitions. Service environments offer ordered situations which assist in stabilizing meanings via ritual formality, symbolic artefacts and directed interaction. These aspects lessen ambiguity by giving culturally familiar frames upon which the participants may make sense of their experiences. As an example, ritual sequencing, the use of respectful language, and symbolic gestures promote an understanding that the environment is one of dignity and reverence to facilitate interpretations that can be beneficial to the culture as opposed to causing fear and superstition.

Furthermore, symbolic interactionism emphasizes the fact that meanings are dynamic and can be changed (Irimiea, 2018). Engaging in rituals with emotional immersion may change the preliminary assumptions which result in the members of such rituals re-evaluating death, planning or responsibility in a new manner. Coffin-laying experience is not always going to be comfortable, but with the help of an explanation and the involvement of every person, it could transform into a symbol of acceptance, reflection, or spiritual readiness. Changes in behaviour i.e., more openness to planning. Therefore, it is better to think in terms of changing

meanings that are created during interactional experiences instead of just being rationally reassessed.

The interpretation of bereavement service behaviour by means of symbolic interactionism transforms the phenomenon into a transactional action and the development of a process of interpretation within a social context. Interaction with service staff, ritualistic activity and symbolic spaces underlie the process upon which people develop meanings that dictate their behaviour (Mihajlović, 2017). In this meaning-making, behavioural meaning-making is the resultant interaction between people and their social cultural environment, where emotion, symbolism and relations cues meet. This view is consistent with the fact that the study focuses on the relationship between emotional experience and social interaction that culminates in the formation of behaviour in culturally sensitive bereavement situations. The analysis of behavioural analysis by relying on symbolic interactionism brings the analysis of service interaction within the wider sociological perspectives of meaning construction, identity, and social action. This conceptual prism gives credence to the idea that engagement towards bereavement services is manifested in negotiated understandings of culture, emotion, and relational obligation, which offers a consistent means of studying the way interaction and emotion combine to construct the meaning of behaviour.

Sociology of Emotion in Culturally Sensitive Services

Emotion is at the centre of the sociological interpretations of human behaviour, especially those in a context of vulnerability, symbolism, and cultural sensitivity. In contrast to perspectives on emotions as inner psychological processes, the sociology of emotion considers the feelings as a socially organized, culturally controlled, and interactionally constructed phenomenon (Bevilacqua, 2023). Emotions are also realized in relational context and are constituted by common norms and function as a device by which individuals make sense of social situations and guide their behaviour. This point of view is particularly relevant in the realms of bereavement services when communication is based on the domain of mortality, loss, and existential reflection highly anchored in cultural sense.

According to sociological approaches, the society sets expectations on how people ought to feel, the degree of the feeling, and the expression of emotions in specific situations (Cavaliere and Almeida, 2018). These emotion regulations will dictate how one displays his or her feelings, as the cries of sorrow, worship, trepidation, or restraint should correspond to cultural norms of proper behaviour. The cultural context of most Malaysian communities' approaches death seriousness and ritual respect, whereas the open communication about the funeral planning can be limited by the beliefs of inauspiciousness or spiritual disruption (Jiao & Hussin, 2020; Junxuan et al., 2024). People who come to the settings of bereavement services thereby manoeuvre an emotional terrain that is highly charged with cultural taboos and expectations. They do not react emotionally as the results of a spontaneous

response but of a response that is refracted by the collective knowledge of how person should feel and behave in the face of death.

In this case, service settings are instrumental in planning emotional experience (Kandampelly et al., 2023). The atmosphere of emotionality is created through the combination of the funeral service setting, ritual space, and symbolic artefacts, play a role in defining the understanding of their feelings by those involved. Space arrangement, ritual actions and communicative styles of the service staff convey the message that one is dealing with a dignified, thoughtful, and respectful environment. These signals assist in converting the potentially distressing experiences into socially significant experiences, which give interpretative frames to be used in responding to feelings. Instead of letting it be released, these environments direct the emotion into culturally intelligible forms, whereby individuals can make meaning of their feelings with their regard to collective values and norms.

The social aspect of emotion is also demonstrated by interaction with the service personnel (Van Kleef & Côté 2022). Employees at bereavement services are often involved in some kind of emotional labour, where they must deal with their individual manifestations of emotions and create an atmosphere of composure, sympathy, and comfort. Their attitude conveys the right emotional colours and assists in controlling the experiences of participants. Service personnel serve as the emotional intermediaries who, through the verbal guidance, the compassionate gestures, and rituals, help people interpret and hold their emotions in check. Such interactional control does not dictate emotion but creates social cues that assist people in getting their inner lives consistent with acceptable culturally approved expression.

Durnová (2022) notes that emotion in such situations is also a source of cognition and interpretation. Emotions like anxiety, seriousness or comfort generate the messages in which people judge the significance of the circumstance. The feeling of reassurance during a ritual can be viewed as the assurance that the involvement is respectful and there is a social approval, and discomfort can be the expression of the conflict between individual convictions and cultural scriptures. Feeling experience hence plays a part in the way human beings frame the situation, which associates the state of feelings with social attribution. The behaviours in terms of being willing to indulge in rituals or being open to pre-need planning are behavioural orientations affected in which the emotional signals are perceived to fit into larger cultural events.

This dynamic is enhanced by culturally sensitive services since emotions have a close connection with collective identity and moral order. This is because bereavement practices tend to convey values that touch on filial piety, ancestral respect, and continuity of social. Ball et al. (2021) posit that the emotions linked to these practices strengthen ties to both family and community by making the individual feelings projected to the community. The collective emotional alignment

that is promoted by ritual participation enables people to feel their reactions as belonging to a bigger social pattern as opposed to isolated responses. This emotionality creates the impression that the participation has social legitimacy and moral meaning.

Furthermore, the sociology of emotion acknowledges that the emotional experience is dynamic and can change by means of interaction (Zhang et al., 2024). First fear linked to facing the symbols of death can be turned into acceptance or reflection as people engage in the ritual process and supportive communication. These transformations demonstrate that emotion is not fixed and that it grows as a result of social interaction. With change in emotional meanings, so can the way people interpret bereavement practices which affects their orientations in behaviour. Emotional experience hence serves as an intermediary process between interaction and meaning making and action.

The conception of emotion as socially organized and interactionally constructed reposition emotion in the service contexts. Instead of being marginal to a decision-making, emotion is part of the ways in which people create the meaning of their experiences. Emotional experience, in bereavement services, links personal reflection to cultural norms to help people in making sense of their role's responsibilities and relationships as the face of mortality sets in. This view contributes to the emotional experience as the central aspect of the behavioural meaning-making to the study and has shown that behaviour in culturally sensitive services is based on socially mediated emotional processes.

By locating emotional experience in a sociological perspective, the paper transcends individualistic descriptions and the emphasis on the way the feelings are rooted in the framework of interaction, culture, and common meaning. This method offers a vital intermediary between social interaction and behaviour that then demonstrates how the dynamics of emotion in service encounters determine how people make sense of and react to the practices of bereavement. By showing the complex associations between emotions, attention, and memory and the variation of marketing by neuromarketing and traditional methods, Song et al. (2025) demonstrated the intricate relationships between emotions, attention, and memory and how neuromarketing and conventional techniques change marketing by providing marketers with new tools and strategies to improve outcomes.

Service Interaction and Social Engagement

Service interaction is one of the primary locations of social exchange whereby individuals make sense of situations, bargain roles and establish shared meanings by means of communication and relational cues. Interaction does not simply mean the flow of information in sociological terms but is a dynamic process that generates and maintains social reality. In culturally sensitive service contexts like those in bereavement, interaction becomes even more important since the participants in the situation engage in it with an emotional and symbolically layered state of

vulnerability and lack of clarity in manifesting how to behave. In this case, people depend on interpersonal clues and relationship principles to categorise the scenario, as well as guide their actions (Husin et al., 2021).

In this regard, social engagement may be perceived as the extent to which individuals are relationally engaged in such processes of interaction. Instead of understanding engagement as a managerial fact or propeller of commercial performance, sociological perspective views engagement as a participation in social form of participation within interaction. It is a manifestation of how people pay attention, react and spend their emotional and mental capital in interaction with others in organized social set-ups. The concept of engagement, therefore, is an indicator of how deeply an individual engages in processes of creating meaning that are conducted through interactions (Park, 2022).

The bereavement services offer a unique environment to analyse social engagement since the engagement by participants may be in the presence of cultural taboos and emotionally laden symbols. People can be exposed to such environments with either uncertainty or apprehension or limited background experience and interaction with service personnel is a valuable resource that can be used to interpret the experience. Verbal explanations, attentive listening and ritual direction assist the service staff in ensuring that participants know the objective, order, and symbolism of the activities. Such communicative practices help in the minimization of ambiguity and formulate common definitions of the situation so that the people involved could shift to passive presence to active involvement.

Another concept that sheds some light on the interactional framing of engagement is the role negotiation. The bereavement settings mobilize culturally specific roles, which are associated with family responsibility, filial duty, and respect towards the deceased. Nevertheless, people might be confused on how to implement these roles especially in pre-need situations whereby death has not taken place. Engagement with service workers offers evidence to illuminate anticipations, as the participants make sense of the alignment between planning, ritual involvement, or symbolic action and a socially approved position.

Besides, service interaction usually deals with emotional experience. These affective aspects of interaction are indicative of the fact that the experience is recognized as sensitive and meaningful. Emotional appeals between employees and participants promote a feeling of understanding (Ball et al., 2021), which enhances relational connections and increases engagement. Engagement is, thus, a cognitive attention and emotional linkage, and an expression of a holistic involvement to the interactional setting.

Engagement also helps into translation of abstract cultural values into lived experience in culturally sensitive services. The principles of respect toward the ancestors, dignity during death, and family commitment are realized in real activities with the help of interaction. Through involvement in dialogue, ritualistic

practices and adherence to ceremony, participants shift between having abstract knowledge about these values and fully indulging in them. Cultural meanings are accessible through the interaction, which is the means of interaction. An increase in the degree of social engagement implies that people are not just spectators but are using the meanings to part of the situation into their comprehension.

Notably, engagement is not fixed but it changes in the process of interaction. A hesitance would be replaced by the involvement under a trust and the realization of meanings. Each interaction brings to a continuous process of interpretation whereby the participants re-evaluate their emotions, discuss their convictions, and their willingness to engage. The aspect of engagement therefore operates as a process, as well as the result of the interaction and as such, it is an expression of the dynamic nature of the interaction between individuals and their social surroundings.

The sociological perspective of understanding service interaction and engagement has highlighted that behaviour in bereavement services is the result of relationally situated participation and not the result of individual decisions. It is in the process of interaction that the meanings are negotiated, the emotions are controlled, and the role is explained. Social engagement is the extent to which people get engaged in these processes and interpersonal exchange is interconnected with the construction of meaning at large. It is this view that justifies the focus of the study on engagement as a socially situated phenomenon that in combination with an emotion experience determines the meaning-making of behaviour in culturally sensitive bereavement situations.

Ritual, Symbolism, and the Integration of Emotion, Interaction, and Meaning in Behaviour

The ritual forms of bereavement are rooted in the structures of social interaction, it presents the emotional expression and generates the shared meanings. Sociologically, rituals are not formalities intended to be observed but to conduct social performances whereby communities project their values, strengthen their identities, and manage their emotional experiences. In culturally sensitive settings, the rituals of death are symbolic models that enable people to make sense of existential insecurity, relationship movement and deontological obligation. We can then think of bereavement service environments as ritualized spaces of convergent emotion, interaction, and symbolism which help determine behavioural meaning-making.

Symbolism is the way rituals work. Culturally encoded meanings that transcend their material manifestations are objects, gestures, spatial arrangements, and sequences of actions (Mahmuluddin, 2024). Coffins, memorial halls, ceremonial offerings, and ritual clothing, among other artefacts, in the context of funeral, are working as signs of respect, transition, continuity and remembrance. Their meaning is communally construed as a part of cultural traditions which enable the players to

signal their behaviours to belong to a bigger moral and social structure. Involvement in activities like coffin-laying rituals therefore entails involvement in symbolic systems that relate personal experience to familial and cultural discourses of death, family, and spiritual continuity.

Wen et al. (2022) argue that symbolic participation is an emotional one. Rituals provide organized spaces through which people express their feelings, and at the same time govern the way such feelings are felt and exhibited. The sociological approaches emphasize that rituals create what could be referred to as collective affective states due to the collective participation as a result of synchronized participation, attention, and shared symbols. In bereavement environments, serious moods, harmonious behaviour and proper communication, emotional congruency is created amongst bereavement members.

Identity work is also facilitated in the ritual context. The involvement in bereavement practices puts individuals in the socially determined position: responsible family members, responsible children, and respectful members of the community (Näppä & Björkman-Randström, 2020). These roles are not abstract, but they are played in the form of rituals behaviour in specified places, in accordance with ceremonial instructions, or symbolic actions. By doing so, people establish their adherence to the social values and required relationship commitments. This process is strengthened through emotional engagement such that it makes participation look real and purposeful and not just procedural.

Notably, the involvement of rituals may alter the previous meanings. The primary unpleasantness that accompanies the challenge of dealing with symbols of death can be replaced by acceptance or contemplative insight as people get lost in the systematic communication and collective emotional conditions. The behavioural orientations like openness to pre-need planning or willingness to discuss end-of-life arrangements can be said therefore as being the results of transformed meanings and not necessarily the result of rational consideration. Integration of emotion, interaction and symbolism depict the fact that behaviour in bereavement situations is the result of socially mediated process. Affective information about the meaning of the situation is given by emotional experience; interaction offers an interpretation and relational assurance; ritual symbolism puts these experiences in the context of common cultural accounts. The behaviour is an indication of how people combine them to create the situation and their part in it.

In this sense, the behavioural reactions in culturally sensitive services cannot be whittled down to utilitarian choice making. They are socially placed activities based on construed meanings, emotionally confirmed experiences, and relationally constructed senses. The readiness to respond to rituals, to entertain pre-need plans, or to take part in symbolic actions are indications of how much people have taken emotional experience and social interaction into consistent interpretations of responsibility, dignity, and care in relation. This integrative model is in line with the

conceptual model of the study that argues that social engagement and emotional experience together contribute to behavioural meaning-making in bereavement service interactions. Ritual settings offer the geographical context within which these processes are manifested and are connected to individual affect, interpersonal interaction, and a cultural metaphor. This conceptualisation of behaviour places the phenomenon squarely in the realms of sociological and social psychological understanding, and it is the collective meanings and dynamics of interaction that make people act in sensitive service environments.

Methodology

As this paper develops a conceptual framework, future empirical research will adopt a qualitative interpretivist approach to examine the proposed relationships within culturally sensitive bereavement services. Considering the symbolic, emotional, and culturally ingrained aspects of the funeral planning process, qualitative methods help the researcher to capture the lived experiences of the participants, their social roles and the meaning-making process of emotions, as opposed to the testing of pre-sacred hypotheses. The view held by interpretivism is that the definition of reality is socially constructed and context specific and as such, it would be the right approach to explore how cultural taboos, emotional reactions and interpersonal relationships influence behaviour in bereavement situations.

To emulate this philosophy, future research may take the perspective of a qualitative exploratory design, which fits the field of study that lacks a well-developed theory or one that is intricate (Paudel, 2024). The cultural symbolism and social norms of the rituals like the coffin-laying ceremony are deeply entrenched and need open-ended questioning to get the slightest details (Lim, 2024). Inductive analysis enables the themes to develop naturally out of the stories given by participants, which can provide information about the social interaction, emotional processes, and the meaning-making mediated by culture (Mulisa, 2022).

Future studies may adopt the single-case study based on Nirvana Johor. Case studies give researchers an opportunity to explore phenomena in a real-life situation, particularly in cases where cultural, emotional, and social dynamics are confounded (Dźwigoł, 2023). Nirvana Johor offers a culturally diverse setting that offers well-organized rituals, servicescapes, and emotional experiences, which makes it an ideal study environment in learning about social interaction and behavioural meaning-making. This one-case method enables a thorough examination of the interpretation of cultural norms used by the participants, the process of managing social roles, and the development of emotional-social sense-making (Råbu & Binder, 2024; Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024).

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews will be the main method of data collection, and the field notes will be used as supplements. This practice is structured and flexible when the participants are given the opportunity to narrate the social interactions and emotional experiences as well as meaning-making process using

their own words. The interviews of 45-60 minutes will be held in English or Mandarin, transcribed word-to-word and analysed to provide in-depth and context-specific data.

The purposive sampling will be based on Malaysian adults aged 18-40 years with experience in pre-need planning and coffin-laying experiences in Nirvana Johor to ensure that they experience the environment of the service (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The ultimate sample size will be informed by data saturation, which is estimated to be 10-15 participants (Bekele & Ago, 2022; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The thematic analysis adhering to the framework by Braun and Clarke will be used with the help of NVivo software to increase rigor, traceability, and systematic coding (Ahmed et al., 2025). The entire research procedures will be guided by ethical standards, such as informed consent, emotional care, and confidentiality, cultural respect.

Conclusion

In this conceptual paper, bereavement service interaction is restructured as a sociocultural and interactional process instead of a transactional or management process. It is based on symbolic interactionism, sociology of emotion, and ritual theory and places bereavement services within the context of structured social space where individuals create meaning through interaction in forms of emotional arousal and interactively guided by symbols. In culturally sensitive situations, like Malaysia, there are taboos, relational pressures, and moral duties, to families, identity, and shared values, which need to be negotiated in interaction with funeral and pre-need services. The behaviour of such settings can thus not be understood as a mere result of rational assessment, but as a socially placed reaction that is created through interpretive processes.

The combination of emotional experience, service interaction and ritual symbolism is an element that gives one a framework in how people make sense of practices surrounding mortality. The process of emotion is socially organized and cultural inclined; communication with service staff provides interpretive hints and relationship confirmation; involvement in ritual imparts experience into a system of shared symbols. A combination of these dimensions leads to behavioural meaning-making in which behaviours communicate perceived conceptions of dignity, responsibility, and social roles. Being a conceptual paper, the study contributes to interdisciplinary discourse between sociology, social psychology, and service studies by bringing the topic of emotion and engagement to bereavement settings. It suggests a sociologically informed model, which places emphasis on co-construction of meaning based on emotion and interaction, and it provides a framework upon which empirical studies to be conducted in the future on culturally sensitive services and the social process of human behaviour in situations of existential meaning.

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