

Scotland's Rural College

## Characterising the data in online companion-dog obituaries to assess their usefulness as a source of information about human-animal bonds

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1 **Characterising the data in online companion-dog obituaries**  
2 **to assess their usefulness as source of information about**  
3 **human-animal bonds.**

4

5 Abstract

6 Online pet obituary sites host hundreds of obituaries regarding the passing of  
7 companion animals. Often composed by the owner or primary caretaker of the animal,  
8 they are a potential source of data about human-animal bonds where there were strong  
9 positive human emotions surrounding the animal at point of death. The aim of the  
10 present study was to characterise online pet obituaries and to evaluate their usefulness  
11 as a source of information on the human animal bond. 130 full obituaries of dogs were  
12 studied. Where the role of the writer could be identified, the majority of obituary  
13 writers identified themselves as a female parental figure to the dog (34.6%); however  
14 obituaries were also written by male parental figures (7.7%) and children (5.4%).  
15 Most obituaries (60.0%) fell within the 100-400 word length range. Obituaries were  
16 seen to express several key concepts. For instance, dogs were described as ‘child-  
17 like’, ‘part of the family’, showing ‘sympathy’ and/or “gratitude” to the owner, and  
18 having a ‘sense of humor”. For their part, writers expressed ‘guilt’ over the dog’s  
19 death, discussed a concept of the ‘afterlife’ and noted an ‘instant connection’ between  
20 themselves and the dog. A high proportion of the obituaries discussed the afterlife  
21 (51%) and indicated that the dog was considered part of the family (49%). There were  
22 some significant associations between concept usage within obituaries. Dogs that  
23 were described as ‘childlike’ were more often perceived to be in an ‘afterlife’ and to  
24 have had an ‘instant connection’ with obituary writers (P<0.001 Chi<sup>2</sup>=38.08). We

25 conclude that online pet obituaries can be a valuable source of information on human

26 feelings surrounding a companion animal death.

27

28 **Keywords:** companion animals, dogs, euthanasia, human animal bond

29 **Introduction**

30 The bond that humans have with their companion animals can be very strong, with  
31 families in Western cultures incorporating companion animals into the family unit and  
32 regarding their presence with great significance (Maharaj and Haney 2015, Risley-  
33 Curtis 2010). One of the possible negative outcomes of this bond is the grief that can  
34 accompany companion animal death. For some individuals, this has been reported as  
35 being analogous to the loss of a human companion (Gage and Holcomb 1991, Archer  
36 1997). The stronger the bond between owner and companion animal, the more likely  
37 it is that the owner has a higher a 'death depression' with both the intensity and  
38 number of grief-related symptoms increasing upon the death of a pet (Planchon et al  
39 2002). A study of British pet owners found that 74% of those surveyed reported  
40 strong feelings of grief up to a year after a pet's death (Archer and Winchester 1994).  
41 Veterinarians rate delivering the news of an unexpected death of a companion animal  
42 as a highly stressful experience, both for themselves and for their clients (Ptacek,  
43 Leonard and McKee 2004, DeNayer 2007). Due to the nature of the companion-  
44 animal bond and a possible lack of recognition of the importance of a companion  
45 animal to the family unit, owners often struggle to interpret and express their grief  
46 (Adams Bonnett & Meek 1999). They report struggling with emotions of guilt,  
47 sadness and grief and their personal, cultural and religious beliefs can make the loss  
48 harder to process. The adverse effects of separation between pet and owner can also  
49 impact animal welfare. A review of animal welfare after veterinary treatment  
50 (Christiansen and Forkman 2007) has called for more tool sets to help understand the  
51 nature of the relationship between human and companion animal. Therefore in this  
52 study we set out to investigate a possible novel source of information on the human –  
53 companion animal bond.

54

55 In sociology, human obituaries are studied to understand collective memory and  
56 public attitudes towards individuals and categories of people, e.g. gender (Fowler  
57 2005). For example, a comparison of obituaries for male and female leaders revealed  
58 a shift in tone for female leaders. In 1974 they were frequently described as kind and  
59 caring, whereas in 1998 they were more likely to be reported as professional and  
60 committed, reflecting an overall change in how women are perceived in society  
61 (Rodler, Kirchler and Hölzl 2002). By analogy, obituaries for pets may be considered  
62 a source of information about people's attitudes to companion animals, but so far few  
63 attempts have been made to quantify the kind of data that may exist, or how useful  
64 these data may be in understanding the human-animal bond.

65

66 The memorialisation of animals after death is a well established phenomenon, with  
67 companion animals being remembered through statues, graves and in verse (Toms  
68 2006). Companion animals are often remembered for qualities that people ascribed to  
69 them. Greyfriar's Bobby, the Cairn Terrier commemorated in statue form in  
70 Edinburgh, is remembered for his loyalty to his dead owner, beside whose grave he  
71 remained for years. On the other hand, ex Flight Sergeant Lewis, an RAF mascot  
72 goat, was buried with full military honours in memory of his bravery during World  
73 War Two (Toms 2006). In modern settings remarkable companion animals may  
74 occasionally receive printed obituaries. Alex the parrot, trained by animal  
75 psychologist Irene Pepperberg, was known for his extensive vocabulary and  
76 arithmetic skills. It is interesting to note that The Economist, which runs one obituary  
77 per issue, devoted theirs on the week of the 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2007 to Alex the parrot.  
78 In that same week Dame Anita Roddick, the founder of the Body Shop and an ethical

79 entrepreneur, also died. She did not receive an obituary in the Economist. (The  
80 Economist 2007).

81

82 Despite these notable exceptions, printed obituaries of animals are rare. Gravestones  
83 and other memorials are expensive and are a form of remembrance limited to those  
84 with adequate financial resources. The invention of the internet has given pet owners  
85 a public space where they can memorialise their dead pets. Owners can post pictures  
86 and a self-written obituary of their companion animal for friends, family and the  
87 general public to see. Since online obituaries are not subject to editorial decision  
88 about occurrence and content, they will not tell us about how society in general values  
89 companion animals. They do, however, reflect the attitudes of the writer, be that the  
90 owner or someone else, to the animal. For the subset of cases where the relationship  
91 between pet and owner was strong enough for the owner to write an obituary, these  
92 obituaries may be a useful data source for research on attitudes to companion animals  
93 and address several of the questions raised by Adams, Bonnett and Meek (1999) about  
94 how owners reconcile emotions of guilt with cultural and religious beliefs. The broad  
95 spectrum of internet usage online means that online obituaries for companion animals  
96 potentially represent a rich source of information about the feelings and attitudes of  
97 the individuals who composed them. Online sources of data are becoming a useful  
98 component of animal welfare research (Nelson and Fijn 2013) and the documentation  
99 of the 'non-human other' in online environments can be an indicator of the  
100 importance attached to the other in human society (Fijn 2007). With this background,  
101 the broad aim of this study was to explore and assess the kinds of information  
102 contained in online obituaries, focussing on dogs acting in the role of a companion  
103 animal. Such obituaries potentially have value as a source of both general information

104 on the relationships between humans and their companion animals and specific  
105 information that might aid in the development of bereavement counselling procedures.  
106 Our aim was to collect information on the availability and content of internet sites for  
107 pet obituaries, to review the kind of information presented in them and to make a  
108 preliminary characterisation of the concepts expressed in them.  
109

110 **Methods**

111 As this was an unexplored resource with no information on timescale of uploads, type of  
112 dogs featured, types of owners featured, etc. the first task was to obtain an understanding  
113 of how pet obituaries were found online and if a general format existed. Grieving owners  
114 as prospective obituary writers could be directed to obituaries by surrounding literature,  
115 by veterinarians, or by searching the internet for information on pet loss. To establish  
116 their informative value on the human-animal bond we aimed to characterise the types of  
117 obituary and potential data types held within the text.

118

119 *Obituary sourcing and recruitment of obituaries:* In 2009 the search engine Google  
120 was used to locate internet obituary sites using key words ‘pet obituaries’ and ‘dog  
121 obituaries’. Obituaries were selected from two online websites that cater to all types  
122 of dog, namely Heavenly Paws.Com (<http://www.heavenlypaws.com>) and Immortal  
123 Pets.Com (<http://www.immortalpets.com>). To be included in the concept study, the  
124 obituary had to mention how the animal was obtained and how it died (See Table 1  
125 for list of concepts.). Obituaries that contained no text or only quotations (e.g.. verse)  
126 were not used. 130 obituaries were included in the study. For each obituary that met  
127 the criteria for selection we recorded the number of words in the obituary, role and  
128 gender of the obituary writer, and concepts present (see below).

129

130 *Identification and validation of concepts:* We expected that, as with human  
131 obituaries, companion animal obituaries would express a number of concepts that  
132 reflected the human-animal bond and that these would be useful information that  
133 could be sourced from the obituaries. Concepts such as ‘part of the family’, ‘owner  
134 guilt’, ‘dog was child-like’, etc. were identified through study of the literature,  
135 preliminary observations of the obituary, and in discussion with ethologists and



136 sociologists. The concepts of interest and their rationale for inclusion are given in  
137 **Table 1**. The concepts initially identified by the authors are described in the results  
138 section. Upon exploring the obituaries, the number of concepts expressed within the  
139 text was counted. The reliability and robustness of these concepts was tested by  
140 recruiting ten participants from students on a Zoology course at the University of  
141 Glasgow. Two validation studies were performed, both with naïve subjects. The  
142 authors' selected thirty phrases deemed by the authors to contain the six concepts that  
143 required validation. Participants were given no definitions of the concepts beforehand,  
144 but were simply asked to indicate which concept best applied to each phrase. Six of  
145 the participants were asked to select just one concept for each phrase, while four were  
146 allowed to choose more than one concept for each phrase. We would expect to see  
147 concepts randomly distributed among the phrases if the concepts were not robust.  $\text{Chi}^2$   
148 tests were used to examine agreement in assignment of concepts to phrases and  
149 associations between concepts within obituaries.

150 *Table 1 approximately here*

151

152 **Results**

153 *Availability of internet obituary sites:* Our Google search returned 7 obituary  
154 websites on the first page, all active and with no breed restrictions. ImmortalPets.Com  
155 offered the cheapest and most comprehensive service. This included a customisable  
156 template page, space for several photographs and a guest book for other people who  
157 had known the animal to sign. When the owner was unable to pay for hosting, a  
158 private sponsor could step in to keep the obituary in place, accompanied by a plea for  
159 dog shelters to be supported.

160

161 *General characteristics of the obituaries:* The majority of online obituaries feature  
162 the deceased dog's name and photograph. Some were very brief and often included  
163 little more than a poem. For the purpose of this study, full obituaries must feature  
164 some original writing, but could also include a quotation. Of the 130 full obituaries  
165 used in the study, all featured at least one photograph of the pet. In 83 obituaries (64%  
166 of total) the obituary writer's role and gender could be identified. The majority of  
167 obituary writers (n=45, 54% of obituaries with writers of known gender) identified  
168 themselves as a female parental figure to the dog concerned, with other obituaries  
169 written by whole families (n=11, 9%), male parental figures (n=10, 8%), child owners  
170 (n=7, 6%), couples (n=5, 4%) and unspecified parental figures (n=3, 2%) where  
171 gender was not known but the dog was referred to as a child. Obituaries varied in  
172 length from <100 to 2,100 with most (n=78, 60%) falling within the 100-400 words  
173 range.

174

175 *Concepts expressed:* **Table 1** describes the concepts identified in the obituaries. Some  
176 of these concepts were easy to identify in terms of specific key words, such as

177 'afterlife'. Others were based on a more subjective assessment of obituary texts and  
178 these were subjected to the validation tests.

179

180 **Validation of concepts.** Results of the two concept validation studies showed good,  
181 statistically significant agreement between subjects and authors for both tests (Single  
182 concept test  $X^2=134.86$ ,  $P<0.001$ , Multiple Concept Test  $X^2=97.29$ ,  $P<0.001$ ).. **Table**  
183 **2** looks at the single concept test for the percentage of answers that were concordant  
184 with the author's view. Guilt, Sense of Humor and Instant Connection were all very  
185 easily identified. Gratitude and Sympathy were not. However, when looking at the  
186 answers, Part of the Family, Gratitude and Sympathy were commonly offered  
187 alternatives for each other. In the multi concept test, (**Table 2**) concordance was  
188 higher for all three of these concepts due to the respondents being able to select the  
189 alternatives, although gratitude remained the concept with lowest concordance (see  
190 discussion).

191

192 Afterlife Concept

193 The most popular concept expressed in the obituaries ( $n=66$ , 51% of total) was that  
194 the dog was in an afterlife of some type, and perhaps reflects the struggle some  
195 owners have reconciling their emotional grief and cultural beliefs. An obituary was  
196 noted as expressing this concept whenever keywords such as 'heaven', 'spirit' or  
197 'rainbow bridge' were mentioned. This concept was often used by the obituary writer  
198 to mitigate any loneliness the dog might be perceived to be feeling post death, such as  
199 within the obituary of Babe Siller:

200           *"As Babe transitions, she will once again chase her squirrels and play fetch*  
201           *the stick with Vernon, who is waiting for her after all these many years. I know*

202           *she will be cared for and loved by those who have crossed over before hand.*”

203           Obituary for Babe Siller, accessed 01/06/2008

204   The idea of reuniting with previously lost pets and family members may be strongly  
205   encouraged by the ‘Rainbow Bridge’ poem (<https://rainbowsbridge.com/Poem.htm>),  
206   the text of which describes how a deceased companion animal waits ‘just this side of  
207   heaven’ and has access to ‘plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are  
208   warm and comfortable’. A curious aspect of the specific Rainbow Bridge mythology  
209   is the explicit instruction that this afterlife is not perfect until the pet is rejoined by the  
210   owner ‘*The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing; they each miss*  
211   *someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.*’ Ergo true eternal happiness  
212   is not reached until they are reunited with their owner. Likely unintentionally, this has  
213   some curious parallels with the now out-of-favour theory of the Limbo of the Infants,  
214   where unbaptized infants in the Catholic faith are kept apart from God but not  
215   explicitly in hell after their death (Smith 1997). No obituary that used the Rainbow  
216   Bridge mythology questioned the ethics of this, or, in the case of adopted animals,  
217   entertained doubt as to who the true owner of the pet was. The Afterlife concept was  
218   frequently seen alongside obituaries also expressing the child-like concept ( $X^2=11.62$ ,  
219    $P<0.001$ ), the part of the family concept ( $X^2=5.46$ ,  $P<0.001$ ), and the sympathy  
220   concept ( $X^2=3.29$ ,  $P<0.05$ )

221

222   Part of the Family Concept

223   The second most popularly expressed concept within the obituaries was that the pet  
224   was part of the family. 49% of the obituaries expressed phrases such as “*you were not*  
225   *just a pet, you were much more than that, you were family*” and “*I have 3 [sic]*  
226   *daughters that called Duke their brother, when I would say your sister is coming [sic]*”

227 *he would go crazy because he knew one of the girls were on their way coming to the*  
228 *house*". The part of the family concept was unlikely to appear in obituaries that also  
229 featured the owner's guilt surrounding the pet's death ( $X^2=3.36$ ,  $P<0.05$ ), possibly  
230 reflecting the difficulty of the euthanasia choice while simultaneously identifying  
231 animals as belonging to the family unit.

232

### 233 Child-Like Concept

234 The child-like concept was considered distinct from 'part of the family' when it  
235 explicitly put the dog in the child role to the obituary writer, and this concept was  
236 expressed in 46% of the obituaries. Considering surrounding literature investigating  
237 the human-animal bond this relationship style may be an important predictor for the  
238 degree of grief that the human experiences. The child-like concept was negatively  
239 associated with obituaries that expressed the sense of humour ( $X^2=5.03$ ,  $P<0.05$ ) and  
240 gratitude concepts ( $X^2=6.54$ ,  $P<0.01$ ) and occurred often with the instant connection  
241 concept ( $X^2=3.38$ ,  $P<0.05$ )

242

243

### 244 Instant Connection Concept

245 31% of obituaries expressed the 'instant connection' concept where the owner talked  
246 about 'love at first sight' when meeting the dog. This is similar again to the afterlife  
247 concept with an expression of fate or design being associated with the owner's  
248 relationship to the dog.

249

250

### 251 Sympathy Concept

252 The sympathy concept was noted in 29% of the obituaries when the obituary writer  
253 valued the dog's ability to bring the owner comfort in difficult times. Phrases such as  
254 '*When my ex left me she was there to put her head on my chest and look up at me as if*  
255 *to say "I'm here, and I love you".*' And "*During times I was so ill I didn't know if I*  
256 *could go on any more he would be there for me , loving me and showing me that I had*  
257 *better not leave him!*" Curiously, sympathy was less likely to be associated with  
258 concepts that also expressed owner guilt ( $X^2=3.36$ ,  $P<0.05$ ). While it is one of the  
259 least common concepts that arose in the obituaries, it is interesting that a number of  
260 obituaries overtly discussed the benefits of the companion animal bond, often in the  
261 context of what the owner would miss after the dog's death.

262

#### 263 Guilt Concept

264 The concept of the owner's guilt, while only explicitly expressed in 13% of the  
265 obituaries, was striking when noted. Phrases such as "*I have no idea what happened*  
266 *that day as I wasn't here. I think I could have saved you from that car.*" And "*I am so*  
267 *sorry you were in so much pain in the end. You can rest peacefully now.*" Guilt may  
268 also have been expressed, although was not counted as such, when the owner detailed  
269 the clinical observations leading up to the euthanasia of a dog, as if justifying the  
270 decision. This emphasises the difficult nature of the euthanasia choice, which has long  
271 been acknowledged by veterinarians.

272

#### 273 Sense of Humour and Gratitude Concepts

274 The final two concepts were different, as they were formed prior to the full analysis of  
275 obituaries. These were considered to be two common anthropomorphic concepts that  
276 occur within successful and unsuccessful human-animal bonds. For example, a lack of

277 gratitude has been cited as a reason for dog relinquishments (Scarlett et al. 1999).  
278 Sense of humour was noted in 11% of obituaries as “*We'll always remember the many*  
279 *great times, the funny quirks he had*” and “*She's so funny too. Like one time she*  
280 *"farted" while walking up the steps, she turned around looked at us, started to walk*  
281 *back up and farted again! Then she must've got embaressed and ran up the steps with*  
282 *out stopping, farting the whole way. Haha!*” Gratitude was noted in 9% of obituaries  
283 with phrases such as “*You'd let out woof just to tell us you were happy and this was*  
284 *now your home.*” And “*Many good times and some bad, you never judged us, you*  
285 *didn't care you were always thankful for the wonderful parents you had.*”

286

287

288

289

290

291 **Discussion**

292

293 Given the rapidly changing nature of the internet and its usage (Zickuhr 2010), it is  
294 reasonable to ask why it is important to capture the historical information sources  
295 such as online obituaries. Arguably, this service may now be performed via social  
296 media accounts given the rise in social media usage in all demographics and user  
297 willingness to engage with these communities (Morris Teevan and Panovich 2010). In  
298 some respects, academics may always be playing catch up when dealing with non-  
299 synchronous message boards such as YouTube and social media (Cheng Dale & Liu,  
300 2008). Therefore this study should principally serve as a proof of concept, that grief  
301 felt by many companion animal owners after the death of a companion animal can be  
302 expressed in online environments. Furthermore, the expression of this grief relates  
303 meaningfully to concepts that occur within the literature surrounding the human-  
304 animal bond.

305

306 The main aim of this study was to explore on-line pet obituaries as a source of  
307 information on the attitudes of owners to dogs as companion animals that might  
308 usefully supplement existing sources. We have identified several sources of data  
309 within online obituaries and conducted a preliminary exploration of the attitudes  
310 expressed in companion animal obituaries. Among the identified sources of data were:  
311 the length of text in the obituary, as a possible indicator of time spent, the inclusion of  
312 a photograph, as an indicator of breed and physical characteristics of the pet, and the  
313 concepts expressed in the text of the obituary itself. This suggests that, with some  
314 caveats, online companion animal obituaries could be a useful source of information  
315 on the human-animal bond.

316



317 With the advent of the internet, people are increasingly documenting their interactions  
318 with animals, both domestic and wild. Nelson and Fijn (2013) suggested a  
319 methodology for crowd sourcing videos of spontaneous play behaviour from video  
320 archive sites such as YouTube. Like us, they utilised concepts from sociology to  
321 assess the utility of the video resource. So-called ‘crowd sourcing’ of data on human-  
322 animal interactions is a largely untapped potential resource in the field (Nelson &  
323 Fijn, 2013). In the present case, although each pet obituary is particular to a specific  
324 dog and a specific owner, our results indicate that there are generalisations to be made  
325 about the sub-set of owners who choose to express grief at bereavement in this way.  
326 We cannot, as yet, generalize from the attitudes expressed here to the pet owning  
327 population as a whole; however we would argue that the opinions and feelings  
328 expressed by owners on the internet, for example in social media accounts, is a  
329 potentially untapped data resource.

330

331 Obituaries can be characterised by the grief and loss felt by the owner after the death  
332 of a pet. In all the obituaries seen in the course of the study, no obituary expressed joy  
333 that a pet had died (although some appreciated a relief from suffering) or was in any  
334 way cruel or disparaging of a bereaved owner’s feeling. Many obituaries featured  
335 comments from people who also knew the animal. The positive impression that these  
336 obituaries deliver suggests that they are typically written by people who have formed  
337 strong bonds with their companion animals and as such give us a source of  
338 information focussed on this population. It may be that obituary writers are seeking to  
339 maintain the strong bond they felt with the animal through its commemoration, and  
340 being individually written, these online obituaries do not serve the societal purpose  
341 that we would find in traditional human obituaries, e.g. reinforcing gender conformity

342 (Rodler, Kirchler and Holzl 2002). Desmond (2011) related the controversies around  
343 presenting animal obituaries in previously human-dominated environments, and  
344 where there are no great deeds to commemorate, writers of online animal obituaries  
345 may feel safer in this sympathy-orientated space.

346

347 We believe there is also an animal welfare aspect to consider. As many studies focus  
348 on relationship breakdown between owner and companion animal, a study of  
349 obituaries might provide a useful comparison for the positive attitudes to the human-  
350 animal bond; it may also inform services such as grief counselling associated with the  
351 death of a pet (e.g., The Argus Institute, Veterinary Teaching Hospital, Colorado State  
352 University.) and veterinarians who specialize in euthanasia. The heavy usage of the  
353 'Afterlife' concept within the text of the obituaries supports the findings of studies  
354 which acknowledge considerable grief over the loss of a pet (Gage and Holcomb  
355 1991, Archer and Winchester 1994).

356

### 357 *Concepts as a tool for understanding obituaries*

358 Quantitative obituary analysis such as this has been used before to establish society's  
359 view of the deceased and identify trends which are important, (Fowler and Bielsa  
360 2007). The concepts can be used to examine attitudes expressed in the online  
361 obituaries. Our validation test showed they were robust in our sample group, although  
362 identification of phrases defined by the authors as ascribing gratitude to the dog  
363 concerned was problematic. This may be because there is an awareness among the  
364 general pet owning population that gratitude is an inappropriate anthropomorphisation  
365 of the pet, although this was not the only anthropomorphic styled concept. The role of  
366 anthropomorphism should be more greatly considered in future studies.. Likewise the

367 concept of a dog having a ‘sense of humor’ may highlight the prevalence of  
368 anthropomorphising companion animals and how this affects the human-animal bond  
369 (Serpell 2003, Bradshaw and Casey 2007). For future studies, it may well be  
370 necessary to adapt the concepts identified here for the purposes of the investigations  
371 underway. Concepts such as ‘Child Like’ bear particular relevance to the human-  
372 animal bond, as dogs are capable of forming attachments to humans in a similar  
373 fashion to a toddler’s bond with its parent (Topál et al 1998). There are also links  
374 between pet owning and the development of empathy (Ascione and Webber 1996,  
375 Nibert 1994) and so expressions of empathy within the obituaries could be a useful  
376 indicator of how this develops.

377

378 *Future use of online companion animal obituary studies.*

379

380 Future studies in the human-companion animal field should not ignore online  
381 obituaries as a source of information. There are important limitations, such as the  
382 financial costs and access to internet, both of which are somewhat mitigated through  
383 the use of social media sites which are often accessed via mobile devices in  
384 developing countries and across a wide range of demographics (Zickhur 2010). In  
385 order to understand what generalisations can be made from this population we need to  
386 know more about what kind of owners write obituaries. Contacting obituary writers  
387 for more information about social status, income, education, family settings and  
388 history would allow us to understand who is likely to write obituaries. If it proves that  
389 no particular subset of pet owners writes obituaries then we would be more confident  
390 in extending the applications of this study to companion animal studies in general. It  
391 should also be noted that there is often a financial cost to using an online obituary  
392 service and this may eliminate a subsection of the population from utilising the

393 obituary resources after a pet's death. Studies like this one, coupled with further  
394 qualitative interviews with the obituary writers, would be the best way of proceeding  
395 with the use of pet obituaries as a window into bonds between people and their  
396 animals. Obituary study is an inexpensive and easy method of assessing owner  
397 attitudes but studies should bear in mind that the obituary is a snapshot in time of the  
398 owner's attitudes at a point after the animal's death. Such attitudes are dynamic and  
399 some obituaries acknowledge this by referencing changing feelings throughout time.

400

401 In conclusion, online companion animal obituaries are a free, readily available source  
402 of data on the human-animal bond where a positive bond has resulted in grief over the  
403 loss of the pet. They may be a useful tool for further assessment of the human-animal  
404 bond.

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1 **Table 1** Summary of concepts observed in obituaries and rationale for  
 2 including them in study.

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
<b>Concepts regarding owner-pet relationship</b>	
Child-Like (Dog is child-like to owner)	This aspect of a companion animal is commonly referred to in the literature on human-companion animal relationships (Gage and Holcomb 1991, Neidhart and Boyd 2002)
Instant Connection (Upon first meeting there was an instant connection between dog and owner)	A concept reflected in statements such as “love at first sight.”
Part of the family (Dog is a part of the owner’s family)	Again, this is a common variable used in studies looking at reasons why owners keep or give up their pets (Beck and Katcher 1996, Archer 1997)
<b>Concepts regarding pet’s actions</b>	
Sympathy (Dog was a source of sympathy or empathy to owner)	This is seen as an important element in the bond between companion animals and owners (Allen et al 1991, Serpell 2003)
Sense of humor (Dog thought of as funny)	An anthropomorphic term that was clearly expressed in a number of the obituaries.
Gratitude (Dog was thought of as displaying gratitude)	Inappropriate expectations of gratitude are thought to be a reason for breakdown of adoptions of rescue dogs, sometimes seen in unexpected pet aggression (Scarlett et al 1999).
<b>Concepts relating to owner’s feelings</b>	
Guilt (Owner felt guilty about dog’s death)	Owners often report or display a sense of guilt after deciding on euthanasia for a companion animal (Frommer and Arluke 1999)
Afterlife (Owner believes or hopes dog is in an afterlife)	A concept clearly expressed in many obituaries, including reference to the “rainbow bridge”

3



4 **Table 2** Percentage of answers in single concept test & multiple concept test  
5 that agreed with authors' definition of concepts, broken down by concept.

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**Percentage Concordant Answers in Single Concept Test**

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Guilt	96%
Instant Connection	92%
Sense of humour	90%
Part of the Family	70%
Sympathy	67%
Gratitude	53%

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**Percentage Concordant Answers in Multiple Concept Test**

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Guilt	100%
Instant Connection	100%
Sense of humour	100%
Part of the Family	92%
Sympathy	95%
Gratitude	55%

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