

An Expression of Pain or An Expression of Love?: An Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors of Grief on Medium Digital Platform

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to identify the types of conceptual metaphors that appear in grief narratives on the Medium.com platform and to explain how these metaphors represent the grief experiences of the authors.

Methodology: This qualitative study deploys content analysis. The data consist of all sentences containing metaphorical expressions about grief collected through documentation. Ten narratives on the theme of grief published on the Medium.com platform were selected as the source of data. The data were analysed using Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) by the Pragglejaz Group (2007).

Results: The results show two types of metaphor in stories i.e., ontological metaphors, which are more dominant, and structural metaphors. Moreover, the metaphor embraces various representations such as grief as a burden, ocean, physical strength, wild animal, or self-disintegration. Structural metaphors also appear, especially those that describe grief as physical pain and an expression of love. Overall, metaphors function as cognitive tools that help writers organize, understand, and express complex experiences of grief that are difficult to describe literally.

Applications/Originality/Value: This study contributes to the development of metaphor studies in emotional discourse. Further research is recommended to expand the data corpus, compare across cultures or languages, and explore the use of metaphors in the context of grief therapy.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor, Grief, Medium, digital platform

Introduction Section

Digital reading platforms are interesting sites to investigate how people use language to express representation of the world. According to Syahria et al. (2025) digital reading platforms make reading and writing more approachable and humanistic by allowing users to express their own experiences, feelings, and thoughts. In other words, digital reading platform such as Wattpad, Blogs, or Medium is not only a place to read other people's writing, but also a place for user to engage, share stories, and interact in a more personal way. In today's digital age, many individuals choose these digital platforms to share their life experiences, personal reflections, and emotional narratives. Digital spaces provide a broader form of participation, allowing users to build social relationships through writing, respond to one another, and form interpretive communities. In this context, the practice of writing is not only intended to convey information, but also to construct identity, manage emotions, and seek connection with other readers. Medium, a narrative-based digital platform that allows users to write personal and reflective essays, has become one of the most relevant spaces for observing how language used in the digital platform. Because the characteristics of Medium as a repository for long, personal, introspective, and literary writings. Unlike short social media such as Twitter or Instagram, writing on Medium provides a strong emotional closeness because writers have the freedom to describe their inner conditions, life journeys, internal conflicts, or healing processes with depth of reflection and high linguistic creativity, including the use of metaphorical expression. This shows that digital platforms play an important role as a medium for people to share their voices, articulate their experiences and build meaning in the middle of continuously expanding digital interactions.

As a medium that can be used to express emotions and personal experiences, like the physical books whose language represent human ideas and perceptions of their world (Masykuroh & Fatimah, 2019; Oriza & Masykuroh, 2017), digital reading platform contains various expression including metaphorical expression, determined by the context of language use. This interpretation is in line with research by Widiastri and Nur (2020), which demonstrates that metaphors are used in digital discourse to translate abstract concepts into more tangible representations. Haryanto et al. (2023) added, digital platforms allow users to creatively convey their thoughts and feelings using metaphors, making online interactions more than just literal communication. Thus, metaphors in digital platforms not only serve as aesthetic elements, but also as cognitive tools for articulating complex internal experiences. Fainsilber and Ortony (1987) stated that metaphors can help bridge the gap which between internal experiences and their verbal representations. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (1995), a metaphor is "an expression, often found in literature, that describes a person or object by referring to something

that is considered to have similar characteristics to that person or object.” This is not to say that this is the only perspective on metaphors, but it is the most common concept among academics and the general public. This traditional concept can be explained briefly by highlighting its five most common characteristics. First, metaphors are linguistic phenomena and word properties. Second, they are used for artistic and rhetorical purposes, as in Shakespeare’s “All the world’s a stage.” Third, they are based on similarities identified and compared between two entities. Fourth, metaphors are deliberate and conscious uses of words; to do them well, you need special skills. Only great people or those who speak fluently, such as Shakespeare and Churchill, can enjoy it. Fifth, many people believe that metaphors are a style of language that we can avoid; they are used for specific effects and are not an unavoidable part of everyday communication, especially people’s thoughts and reasoning (Kövecses, 2002, p. vii-viii). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) challenged the old way viewed metaphors. They claimed that metaphors penetrate both the way humans speak and the way humans think every day. They show that, first, metaphors are actually part of the way we think, not just a play on words. Second, metaphors help us understand ideas or concepts more clearly, not just for the sake of linguistic beauty. Third, metaphors do not always arise because there is a similarity between two things. Fourth, metaphors arise and are used naturally in everyday life, not just by people with special talents. Fifth, metaphors are not merely embellishments of words, but are an important part of the human thought and reasoning process (Kövecses, 2002, p. viii). Metaphors can be found in visual media including comics, dance, music, and architecture (Forceville, 2008). Sign language, text, and speech all contain metaphors (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In this context, metaphors represent a basic aspect of human thought, comprehension, and reasoning rather than just a figure of speech. Metaphors are an integral element of the human cognitive experience, influencing our language and thought processes throughout daily life.

One of the metaphors frequently used is conceptual metaphor. The Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) states that the human mind works through a process of mapping from a concrete source domain to an abstract target domain. The source domain is the conceptual domain that we use to comprehend other conceptual domains using metaphorical expressions; the target domain is the conceptual domain that is understood in the same way (Kövecses, 2002, p. 4). In conceptual metaphors, the Source Domain (SD) is a simpler, more concrete, and more familiar domain of experience that is utilized to make sense of more complicated or abstract concept. SD acts as a “bridge” to explain concepts that are challenging to comprehend directly because it typically originates from physical and sensory experiences. The domain we attempt to comprehend by using the source domain is known as the target domain. As previously stated, abstract notions represent the target domain. Emotions, thoughts, morality, desires, economics, politics, society, communication, relationships, time, life, death, and other topics are some of the target domains. The emotional domain is one of the most well-known target domains. The main purpose of conceptual metaphors is to help people to comprehend emotional concepts, such as anger, fear, love, joy, sorrow, guilt, grief, pride, and so forth. As an example, the metaphor Life is a journey demonstrates how the idea of a journey may be used to understand life. This mapping aligns a journey as the source domain and life as the target domain. People who live their lives are viewed as wanderers or travellers, their life aims as destinations or travel objectives, their life decisions as routes they have selected, and any challenges or obstacles they face are compared to roadblocks or difficulties.

Conceptual metaphors divided into three primary categories: orientational, ontological, and structural metaphors. Structural metaphors are a type of metaphor that allows one abstract concept to be understood through another, more concrete conceptual structure. In this metaphor, there is a systematic mapping between the source domain and the target domain, so that abstract concepts acquire meaning through a familiar framework of experience. The example most often used by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) is the metaphor “Argument is a war”. Through this metaphor, the activity of debating is understood through the concept of warfare, as reflected in expressions such as defend your point, attack argument, or win a debate. Thus, structural metaphors help build an organized system of thought towards the target concept based on parallel source conceptual structure. Ontological metaphors describe how people interpret abstract experiences, such feelings, concepts, or mental processes, by considering them like real creatures, or containers. This conceptualization process allows intangibles to be viewed as possessable, measurable, and controllable objects. While the phrase “He fell into a depression” depicts a psychological state as a space that may be entered, the phrase “I’m filled with anger,” for instance, interprets emotion as something that can “fill” a person. Personification and container metaphors are the two primary categories of ontological metaphors that fall under this framework. Personification treats abstract entities or inanimate objects as if they possess human characteristics and actions, as in the example “My mind isn’t operating today,” which treats the mind as if it were a machine that can function or break down. Through ontological metaphors, humans can map complex inner experiences into a more concrete and rationalizable framework (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Unlike the previous two types, orientational metaphors do not establish a relationship between two different concepts, but rather provide a spatial orientation structure for abstract concepts. This type of metaphor is rooted in the human body’s natural experience of recognizing directions such as up-down, inside-outside, or front-back. For example, in the metaphors, “Happy is up” and “Sad is down,” emotional concepts are mapped through body position: when happy, the body tend to be upright and the head is raised, while when sad, the body is bowed and weakened. Thus, spatial orientation becomes the basis for emotional meaning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In addition, orientational metaphors also show the connection between culture and physical experience. In some cultures, the future is perceived as “in front”, while in the other cultures it is “behind.” Therefore, this type of metaphors shows how bodily and cultural perceptions shape the conceptual structure of humans in understanding the world. Overall, these three types of metaphors confirm that the way humans understand

reality is greatly influenced by conceptual mapping between the concrete and abstract realms. Through this mapping, metaphorical language functions not only as a tool for linguistic expression, but also as a window into the cognitive structures humans use to interpret everyday experiences.

The phenomena of metaphorical language in digital reading platform are interesting to explore because readers and writers often discuss emotional themes such as loss, love, identity, or trauma. Metaphors allow them to communicate abstract ideas in a more concrete and understandable way. This also opens up the opportunities for analysis of how emotions are constructed and perceived in the digital environment. Moreover, the use of metaphorical language will provide a narrative and symbolic structure to emotional experiences that are difficult to express literally, thus functioning in the process of emotion framing, which is the framing of emotions through language and conceptual symbolism. Empirical research shows that metaphorical language has a stronger emotional impact than literal language. Mohammad, Shutova, and Turney (2016, p. 31) assert that "metaphorical language tends to have a stronger emotional impact than literal language." This means that metaphors not only beautify linguistic expression, but also deepen emotional resonance in communication. Through metaphors, one can convey complex, abstract, or even ambiguous feelings in a more vivid, tangible, and mutually understandable way. Thus, it can be concluded that metaphors play a central role in constructing, conveying, and understanding emotions. They are not only linguistic tools, but also cognitive representations that help humans manage and articulate their emotional experiences, especially in the context of intense and hard to describe emotions.

This research investigates how metaphor is used in presenting the topic of grief in digital reading platform. Grief is selected as the focus of the research since grief is a universal emotion, but to expressing it is difficult for many people. According to studies, some people prefer to keep quiet or express themselves nonverbally because they believe that words will never fully capture the intensity of their sadness (Hooghe et al., 2018; Labov, 2018; Corless et al., 2014). In this situation, remaining silent does not automatically imply denial; it can also be a means of controlling intense feelings, protecting one's privacy, or expressing variations in how people deal with loss, even among those who have gone through comparable experiences. People often choose different ways of expression when faced with these language and societal constraints. Metaphors are a valuable tool for conveying the depth and complexity of grief when words are no longer adequate. According to Bristowe et al. (2024) and Guité-Verret et al. (2021), metaphors like "shock waves," "monsters," or "chasms" are frequently employed to describe grieving experiences that are hard to describe in words. People can translate abstract emotional experiences into concrete forms that are simpler to comprehend and communicate with others by using metaphors. These days, digital networks are just as vital for express grief as metaphors. Gamba (2018) and Moules et al. (2024) demonstrate how social media and online communities can offer a secure environment for grieving in ways that defy conventional thinking. Through writing, photos, or symbolic symbols that represent their emotional journey, people can communicate grief in more intimate, imaginative, and complex ways thanks to digital media. In this regard, digital media serves as a contemporary kind of public mourning, offering a space for grief as well as fostering an empathetic virtual community.

There have been previous studies exploring metaphor in digital text in various context, particularly in relation to emotional, psychological, and illness experiences. Coll-Florit et al. (2021) examined metaphors of depression in personal blogs and found that writers often used body and space metaphors to describe their psychological conditions that were difficult to express literally. Similar research conducted by Abu Rumman et al. (2025) on Arabic-language blogs also shows how metaphors help speakers describe emotional distress, although the patterns of metaphors that emerge are influenced by cultural and linguistic contexts. Both studies focus on the online disclosure of mental health, but differ in cultural background and the types of metaphors that are dominant. In the context of illness narratives, several studies provide a broader picture of the function of metaphors. Littlemore and Turner (2020) examined metaphors in the experience of pregnancy loss and found that metaphors play an important role in revealing trauma, identity disorders, and the process of emotional recovery. Hommerberg et al. (2020), through a study of cancer blogs in Sweden, showed that patients often use metaphors journey, battle, and space to negotiate hope and uncertainty. Zhang and Wu (2023) examined the narratives of cancer survivors on Chinese platforms and revealed how the use of metaphors is influenced by social norms related to resilience and healing.

Meanwhile, research by Almegewly and Alsoraihi (2022) on breast cancer survivors shows how metaphors shape perceptions of vulnerability and strength. In general, these studies share a common focus on the role of metaphors as a means of conceptualizing illness, but differ in terms of the type of illness, the culture of the speakers, and the metaphorical systems analysed. Other studies expand the understanding of metaphors in personal digital narratives. Castaño (2023) examined metaphors in narratives about dementia and showed how metaphors help patients and caregivers express changes in identity and cognitive function. Atanasova (2018) focused her research on journey metaphors in blogs related to obesity, showing how metaphor choices reflect personal agency and social stigma. Additionally, Huma and Shah (2025) examine metaphors used to frame collective grief in socio-political discourse and assert that figurative language shapes how societies understand shared tragedies. To extent the study of metaphors in personal discourse, Gloria Mambelli's (2023) research shows how happiness and sadness are conceptualized through metaphors in 18th and 19th century English letters. It confirming the role of metaphors in shaping emotional representations even in non-literary texts. In the context of mental health, Sari and Nirmala (2022) identified various metaphorical mapping in mental health issues on social media, confirming the metaphors represent the embodied experiences of speakers. Meanwhile, Guité-Verret et al. (2021) reveal

three main metaphors used by caregiver families to express grief during COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the social disconnection and emotional intensity of the experience. On the other hand, Kvaale et al. (2024) shows that blogs by female survivors of colorectal and gynecologically to describe the fear, anger, and threat of death they feel, while Gibbs and franks (2002) emphasize the connection between embodied metaphors and the experiences of female cancer survivors in understanding their physical and emotional changes. On the theoretical sides, Gibbs (2020) reviews the cognitive mechanisms behind the use of metaphors in the process of illness and healing processes, emphasizing their function in emotional regulation. Overall. Previous studies show how a consistent pattern, metaphors serve as cognitive, emotional, and communicative tools to represent complex experiences.

This research similarly focuses on the use of metaphors to express deep emotional experiences; however, it differs by examining grief narratives, a domain that remains underexplored compared to illness and depression related metaphors. While previous studies have analysed metaphors in specific cultural contexts (e.g., Catalan, Chinese, Arabic blogs), clinical settings, or interpersonal interviews, the present study investigates metaphor use on Medium, a global English-language digital platform that accommodates diverse writers and cultural backgrounds. By analysing how writers metaphorically construct and interpret personal loss, this study contributes to expanding the understanding of conceptual metaphors beyond medical or socio-political discourse. It offers new insights into the types, dominance, and functions of metaphors in the online representation of grief, highlighting how individuals employ figurative language as cognitive and emotional strategies to process and communicate their experiences of loss in a public digital space.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a content analysis approach. This approach was selected because it gives researchers the opportunity to go deeper into the meaning of text-based data, providing a comprehensive understanding of phenomena in their context. Yin (2015) states that qualitative research has the benefit of allowing you to conduct in-depth investigation on a variety of subjects. All sentences containing metaphorical expressions of grief serve as the research's data, collected through documentation. Ten stories about grief with a reading duration of 2-4 minutes that were posted in October 2025 to the Medium.com website (<https://share.google/UmyOha5jLrM0x6bph>) served as the study's data sources. The data in this study were managed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994). This model consists of four main components, namely data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. These four components are interactive and repeatable throughout the research process. The data were organized using code on the order of the stories time of publishing (D1-D10). The data were analysed using Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) by the Pragglejaz Group (2007). During this stage, each metaphorical expression of grief identified through the MIP was assigned an expression code (e.g., M1, M2, M3) following the initial data code (e.g., D1, D2). This coding system (e.g., D1M1, D1M2) allowing for clear traceability between each metaphor and its original text. Next, each expression was then analysed to determine its source domain, target domain, and conceptual metaphor based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). The identified metaphors then were categorized into three types of metaphors according to Lakoff and Johnson (ontological, structural, orientational) (1980). To ensure data validity, this study used researcher’s triangulation or the expert judgment method. According to Nurrohmah et al. (2018), the expert's participation is crucial in adding, clarifying, and/or changing the pertinent details. To ensure that metaphor interpretation was performed appropriately and was accountable.

Findings and Discussion

In ten Medium’s stories related to grief, there are Fifty-six metaphorical expressions of grief found by the researcher. The data encoded using the symbols D (data) and M (Metaphor).

Table 1. Metaphorical Expression Found in Medium Stories.

Code	Metaphorical Expression	Type
D1M1	“.. and gently held my grief during times when it sloshed over the edges of my tiny little boat”	Ontological Metaphor
D1M2	“She’s really good at holding grief with others”	Ontological Metaphor
D2M1	“Grief is what unite us all”	Ontological Metaphor
D2M2	“There is a strange kind of beauty that reveals itself”	Structural Metaphor
D2M3	“Gentle laughter that slips through tears”	Structural metaphor

D2M4	"In mourning, we see love laid bare"	Structural Metaphor
D3M1	"Grief can knock you off your feet on your way to dinner."	Ontological Metaphor
D3M2	"I returned home with something else entirely: a tiny, lingering ache."	Structural Metaphor
D3M3	"We both knew someone we loved dearly... Just two people trying to carry the weight of the same absence."	Ontological Metaphor
D3M4	"Grief allows you to become human."	Structural Metaphor
D4M1	"Grief doesn't let you rest"	Ontological Metaphor
D4M2	"I felt stuck — numb, like a stale piece of bread"	Structural Metaphor
D4M3	"Standing in the same cold, quiet place"	Ontological Metaphor
D4M4	"Tiny threads connecting me to something beyond"	Ontological Metaphor
D4M5	"The stale bread feeling lifted"	Ontological Metaphor
D4M6	"It transforms it (grief) into connection, into love"	Structural Metaphor
D5M1	"...and suddenly my throat tightens, my eyes sting, and I am pulled back into that ache."	Structural Metaphor
D5M2	"Grief, I've learned, is not tidy."	Ontological Metaphor
D5M3	"It's sitting with the ache and admitting"	Ontological Metaphor
D6M1	"Grief is a theology no one teaches but everyone learns"	Ontological Metaphor
D6M2	"It begins quietly, in the moment the divine stops feeling divine — when the God you once served becomes a stranger wearing your memories of Him."	Structural Metaphor
D6M3	"as if grief had redrawn the map of my faith and left me stranded on the shore."	Ontological Metaphor
D6M4	"But grief is not a visitor; it is an ocean. You don't wait for it to pass. You learn to breathe underwater."	Ontological Metaphor
D6M5	"But silence was His only language. The kind of silence that hums behind your ribs, heavy and ancient, as though the world itself has forgotten how to answer."	Structural Metaphor
D6M6	"Grief, in its strange way, has become a sacred teacher."	Ontological Metaphor
D7M1	"I feel like half of my soul has drifted away with those who left me."	Structural Metaphor
D7M2	"No one told me how to survive with my soul incomplete."	Structural + Ontological Metaphor
D7M3	"All I found was a creeping void."	Ontological Metaphor
D7M4	"Grief never left me."	Ontological Metaphor
D7M5	"It flows through my veins."	Ontological metaphor
D7M6	"It takes root to keep me standing tall."	Ontological Metaphor
D7M7	"My chest feels tight."	Ontological Metaphor
D7M8	"That is how grief lives with me."	Ontological Metaphor
D7M9	"It becomes a slow-acting killer."	Ontological Metaphor
D7M10	"Making me feel half dead just to survive."	Structural Metaphor

D7M11	"It manages to create a new personality within me."	Structural Metaphor
D7M12	"It teaches me to accept everything without rejecting the feeling of loss."	Ontological Metaphor
D8M1	"There is a moment in every daughter's life when the father becomes myth."	Ontological Metaphor
D8M2	"a daughter before a nation yet profoundly alone in her grief."	Ontological Metaphor
D8M3	"when that orbit collapses into an absence so vast..."	Structural + Ontological Metaphor
D8M4	"A house ... will now gape in eternal yearning..."	Ontological Metaphor
D8M5	"Raila's laughter was the sound of someone trying to find oxygen in a vacuum."	Ontological Metaphor
D8M6	"You can see in her eyes that she has lost a father and inherited a republic of memory."	Ontological Metaphor
D8M7	"That is the secret of grief. It truly does not bury; it cultivates."	Structural Metaphor
D9M1	"I still find traces of him in the quiet parts of my days"	Ontological Metaphor
D9M2	"Grief no longer roars the way it used to"	Ontological Metaphor
D9M3	"I used to carry grief like a weight"	Ontological Metaphor
D9M4	"it hums softly now, like a familiar tune that never quite fades"	Structural Metaphor
D9M5	"It endures, it returns even not as a memory, but as the quiet pulse of who I've become."	Structural Metaphor
D10M1	"The air heavy with names"	Ontological Metaphor
D10M2	"I let them come. I let them sit with me while I drink my coffee, while I button my shirt, while I walk through another day..."	Ontological Metaphor
D10M3	"... pretending I am not haunted."	Ontological Metaphor
D10M4	"Grief is not loud, at least not on most days."	Structural Metaphor
	"Background noise that hums"	
D10M5	"Lives in you like a dull ache in the bone"	Structural Metaphor

Based on the table, there are fifty-six metaphorical expressions found in ten stories under the topic of grief posted on Medium. These metaphors consist of two types of conceptual metaphor, namely ontological metaphor with thirty-six number of occurrences (64.3%) and eighteen structural metaphors (32.1%) and two expressions (3.6%) that incorporate features both types.

Types of Conceptual Metaphor

In this part, the researcher analyses the types of conceptual metaphors found in ten different stories about grief on Medium. Based on the data, there were two out of three types of conceptual metaphor used by the Medium's authors, namely: Ontological metaphor with thirty-seven data and structural metaphor with seventeen data. The researcher also found two metaphorical expressions that classified as containing both types.

Ontological Metaphor

Ontological metaphors explain how individuals understand abstract concepts by viewing them as real creatures. There were thirty-six ontological metaphors found in this study, which were the most dominant type. The dominance of ontological metaphors occurred because grief is a very abstract concept, so authors tended to concrete or personify it so that the experience of loss could be understood more clearly. By positioning grief as a physical entity or living being, authors could

describe the intensity, pressure, and invasive nature of the experience of grief. The researcher analysed five data from thirty-six ontological types that have been found: D1M2, D3M2, D5M4, D9M2, D10M2.

Data 1

Conceptual metaphor: GRIEF IS A BURDEN

“She’s really good at holding grief with others” (D1M2)

Source Domain: Grief

Target Domain: Burden

Based in Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), the literal meaning of this expression refers to physically grasping and holding grief, like holding an object in one’s hand. In the given context, however, the expression conveys a different meaning. It suggests that the subject possesses the emotional capacity to support others who are experiencing grief and loss. Rather than literally holding grief, she depicted as someone who can help others carry or cope with their emotional burden.

Representation of grief:

Here, grief is represented as a burden that can be “held” or “supported”. Through the metaphor of holding grief, grief is described not as an abstract emotion, but as something that has weight and requires strength to carry. This representation shows that the grief experienced by the author is so heavy that it cannot be carried alone, they need someone else who is able to help “hold” some of the burden. Thus, grief is understood as an emotionally exhausting experience, but also can be lightened through the presence and support from others. When grief is described as if it can be held and shared, the author is giving concrete form to something abstract and this is the essence of ontological metaphor. This metaphor helps readers imagine grief as a burden that can be truly felt, so that its emotional meaning becomes stronger and easier to understand.

Data 2

Conceptual metaphor: GRIEF IS PHYSICAL FORCE

“Grief can knock you off your feet on your way to dinner.” (D3M1)

Source Domain: Grief

Target Domain: Physical force

Based on Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), the literal meaning from expression “Grief can knock you off your feet on your way to dinner” refers to someone was knocked or tripped on the way to dinner. But, in the context of the story, it means that grief can come suddenly, without warning, and cause a person to lose their emotional balance in the most ordinary moments, like on their way to dinner.

Representation of grief: Grief is represented as a physical force that can suddenly “knock someone down.” Through this metaphor, grief is described not just as a feeling of lost or sadness, but as something that comes suddenly, shakes one stability, and interrupts daily activities like dinner. This representation emphasizes that grief can appear without warning, strike emotionally, and cause someone to lose control as if they had actually stumbled upon a real force. In this way, the experience of grief is described as something powerful, shocking, and cannot be avoided. This metaphor is an ontological metaphor because grief is treated as physical entity that has the ability to perform concrete actions. In literal sense, only physical objects or forces that can cause someone to fall. However, in the context of this story, it is the emotion of grief itself that “knocks” someone down. By giving physical characteristics to an abstract concept such as grief, the author makes the emotional experience feel more real and imaginable. Like a physical event that actually happened.

Data 3

Conceptual metaphor: GRIEF IS AN OCEAN

“But grief is not a visitor; it is an ocean. You don’t wait for it to pass. You learn to breathe underwater.” (D6M4)

Source Domain: Grief

Target Domain: Ocean

Based on Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), the literal meaning means that they have to face the sea and to survive, they have to learn how to breath underwater. In the contextual sense, it refers to the characteristics of grief, grief is not temporary, it surrounds and must be adapted, not avoided.

Representation of grief: In the sentence “grief is not a visitor; it is an ocean,” grief is represented as a wide, deep ocean that completely surround a person. Through this metaphor, grief is described not as something that comes and goes, but as an emotional condition that wraps around, overwhelms, and must be faced every day. The phrase “you learn to breath underwater” emphasizes that a person cannot wait for grief to disappear, they must learn to live with it, adapting to a massive and constant sense of loss. This representation shows that grief in this story is understood as a total experience that changes the way a person views life, faith, and themselves, just as the ocean changes anyone who enters it. This metaphor is an ontological metaphor because grief is treated as physical object or space, in this case, the ocean, that has tangible characteristic: it is vast, deep, and capable of drowning. Literally, only the ocean that requires someone to “learn to breath underwater.” However, in the context of the story, it is not the sea that is “lived in” but grief. A person who is grieving must learn to live with the suffocating feeling, difficulty breathing, and burning sensation when water enters the lungs. They will also feel exhausted and confused, like someone who is drowning in the sea. By giving a physical form and concrete space to an abstract concept such as grief, the author makes the emotional experience feel more real, can be visualized, and is easy for readers to imagine. This is the main characteristic of ontological metaphors: they give form to abstract ideas so that readers can understand their intensity more concretely.

Data 4

Conceptual metaphor: GRIEF IS A WILD ANIMAL

“Grief no longer roars the way it used to” (D9M2)

Source Domain: Grief

Target Domain: Wild animal

Based on Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), the literal meaning of the expression describes that in the past, grief roared loudly and was noisy. In its contextual use, however, the expression shifts to imply that the intensity of grief decreases over time.

Representation of grief: The author represented grief as a wild animal that once roared loudly, symbolizing the early stages of grief that are so intense, frightening, and difficult to control. Like a wild animal that roars when threatened, angry, or wanting to show its dominance, grief in the early stages of loss also feels loud, overwhelming, and disturbs a person's emotional balance. Wild animals tend to be unpredictable and can attack at any time, and this characteristic is projected onto grief to describe how grief can appear suddenly and disrupt life. However, in the text, grief is described as “no longer roars,” indicating that its emotional intensity has changed. Grief has become calmer, gentler, and no longer dominates the author's life as it once did. This change confirms that grief has not disappeared, but has transformed into a quieter part of the process of self-acceptance. This expression is an ontological metaphor because grief is treated as a living being that has physical behaviour, which is roaring, even though grief literally cannot perform such an action. By giving the abstract concept of grief, the characteristics and actions of a wild animal, the author makes the experience of grief more concrete, easier to visualize, and feel real in the reading process.

Data 5

Conceptual metaphor: GRIEF IS A VISITOR/COMPANION

“I let them come. I let them sit with me while I drink my coffee, while I button my shirt, while I walk through another day...” (D10M2)

Source Domain: Grief

Target Domain: Visitor/companion

Based on the application of Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), the expression literally means she allowed people to come sit with her while she went about her activities. But, in the surrounding context, it was grief, grief was like companion for her, the always followed her in her daily routines.

Representation of grief: In this story, grief is represented as a visitor or companion who sits, accompanies, and is present in the middle of daily activities. Through this metaphor, grief is described as something that stays with the character, following them as they drink coffee, gets dressed, or goes about their day. This representation shows that grief does not come dramatically, but is present in a subtle and familiar way, like a guest who never really leaves. Grief becomes part of the routine and silence of daily life, showing that loss is not a temporary moment, but something that coexists with the character over time. This metaphor is an ontological metaphor because grief is treated like a real creature or figure that can come, sit, and accompany someone. Literally, only humans or visitors can “sit together” while someone is doing an activity. However, in the context of the story, this action is applied to grief that an abstract concept. By giving grief, the characteristics and behaviour of a visitor, the author makes the emotional experience feel more concrete and visualizable, so that readers understand that grief becomes a permanent “presence” in the character's life.

Structural Metaphor

In this metaphor, the abstract concept is given meaning by a well-known framework. The researcher found eighteen data of structural metaphor that are used by Medium's authors, three of which are analyzed in this study as representative examples.

Data 6

Conceptual metaphor: GRIEF IS A PHYSICAL PAIN

“...and suddenly my throat tightens, my eyes sting, and I am pulled back into that ache.” (D5M1)

Source Domain: Grief

Target Domain: Physical pain

Based on Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), the literal meaning refers to the physical reaction when someone wants to cry because they are reminded of something sad. In the context, though, the meaning shifts to express that grief does not disappear completely. Even though the person does not think about his father every day, small moments can trigger intense emotions and make him feel the lost as if it had just happened.

Representation of grief: Grief is represented as physical pain that arises suddenly and attacks the body. This metaphor illustrates that grief is not only an emotional experience, but also something that is felt physically, such as a tight throat, sore eyes, and a body that seems to be pulled back to old wounds. This representation shows that grief can return at any time, triggered by small memories, and when it appears, it feels as strong as when the loss first occurred. By describing grief as an “ache” that pulls the body back, the author emphasizes that grief leaves a lasting mark and can hurt deeply even as time passes. This metaphor is a structural metaphor because grief is understood through the structure or concept of another experience, namely physical pain. In its literal meaning, pain is a physical sensation, but in the context of the story,

that sensation is used to explain an abstract emotional experience. By mapping the structure of “physical pain” onto the experience of “grief,” the author provides a way for readers to understand the intensity of grief through a concept that is already familiar in physical terms. Unlike ontological metaphors, which give grief the form of an object or creature, this structural metaphor emphasizes the systematic relationship between two concepts, that grief works like pain: it comes suddenly, weighs on the body, and reminds a person of old wounds.

Data 7

Conceptual metaphor: GRIEF IS REVELATION OF LOVE

“In mourning, we see love laid bare” (D2M4)

Source Domain: Grief

Target Domain: Revelation of love

Based on Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), the literal interpretation points to something exposed or stripped of covering. Contextually, the phrase instead indicates that through grief, it reveals pure, honest emotions of love.

Representation of grief: The metaphor “In mourning, we see love laid bare” represents grief as a process of revealing the most honest love. In this context, grief is understood as a moment when love that was not always visible, whether due to busyness, emotional distance, or daily habits, is revealed without cover. Grief opens up space for a person to feel and show love as it is: through stories, tears, shared memories, and the longing that arises when someone is gone. Thus, grief is not only about loss, but also about revealing the depth of love that may have been hidden while a person was still alive. This metaphor is a structural metaphor because it maps the concept of grief through the structure of the concept of “revelation,” which is the process of uncovering something that was previously hidden. Instead of giving grief a physical form or characteristics like a living being, this metaphor describes grief through the act of revelation: love that is usually hidden or vague becomes clear because of the presence of grief. In this way, the metaphor shows that mourning is when love appears most pure and transparent.

Data 8

Conceptual metaphor: GRIEF IS DECAY

“I felt stuck — numb, like a stale piece of bread” (D4M2)

Source Domain: Grief

Target Domain: Food spoilage

According to Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), the literal meaning of the phrase refers to the stages of bread spoilage, in which the bread becomes stale, hard, and lifeless over time. Contextually, the expression communicates what the author feels due to grief, the author feels lifeless, emotionally hardened, and unable to move on.

Representation of grief: The metaphor in this story represents grief as a process of decay. In this metaphor, feelings of grief are described through the characteristics of stale bread: hard, dry, no longer soft, and lacking the life it once had. Bread that is decaying does not change suddenly, but undergoes a slow process until it eventually becomes something that can no longer be enjoyed. Similarly, grief in this context is not only painful, but also makes a person feel numb, emotionally rigid, and as if unable to move or grow. The feelings of being stuck and numb are likened to a “petrified” state, like bread that has lost its warmth and flexibility. This metaphor is a structural metaphor because the concept of grief is explained through the working structure of food spoilage, namely the process of change from something that is alive, warm, and valuable to something that is hard, lifeless, and stagnant. Here, grief is not only given a simple quality, but is explained through a series of characteristics and mechanisms of “decay”: loss of freshness (loss of emotional energy), hardening (numbness), and getting stuck (inability to move forward). By mapping the structure of the decay process onto emotional experience, this metaphor helps to show how grief can make a person feel dry, empty, and no longer feel the vitality of life.

Ontological + Structural Metaphor

There are two data points found by researchers, D8M3 and D7M2, which have two types of metaphors at once, namely ontological and structural, so that the two overlap. This occurs because a single metaphorical expression can function on two levels of meaning: on the one hand, the metaphor gives grief a concrete form or entity so that it can be treated as something that is present, experienced, or faced (ontological); but at the same time, the metaphor also maps the structure, process, or workings of another domain to explain how grief operates or affects a person (structural). In other words, the metaphors in the two data sets not only describe grief as “something,” but also explain “how grief works,” thus fulfilling the characteristics of both types of metaphors at the same time.

Data 9

Conceptual metaphor: GRIEF IS THE COLLAPSE OF THE ORBIT

“when that orbit collapses into an absence so vast...” (D8M3)

Source Domain: Grief

Target Domain: Planetary orbit collapse

Based on Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), the expression's literal sense refers to planetary orbit collapse. However, within its context, it points to the condition of the author, which when her father dies, she loses her emotional centre of her life.

Representation of grief: Grief is represented as the collapse of an orbit, that is, the emotional center of gravity that has maintained balance in a child's life. Just as a planetary orbit depends on its center of gravity, the father-child relationship is described as something stable, orderly, and guiding. When the father dies, that "orbit" collapses, causing the child's emotional world to lose its direction, balance, and the center that had given it meaning. With this metaphor, grief is understood as an experience of loss that destroys the stable structure of life, creating a vast emptiness that cannot be immediately filled by anything. This metaphor is a structural metaphor because it borrows the working structure of an orbit, a scientific concept with a specific system, rules, and dynamics, to explain how grief works: that the loss of an important figure can shake a person's emotional system completely. At the same time, this expression is also an ontological metaphor, because grief is treated as something that has a form and mechanism, namely an "orbit" that can collapse. By giving grief a concrete form, readers can imagine the feeling of loss as a real event that can be felt, experienced, and seen in its impact. Thus, this metaphor works on two levels simultaneously: it gives form to grief (ontological), while also describing the process and structure of loss (structural).

Data 10

Conceptual metaphor: GRIEF IS INCOMPLETENESS

"No one told me how to survive with my soul incomplete." (D7M2)

Source Domain: Grief

Target Domain: Incomplete soul

According to Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) analysis, the literal meaning of the expression refers to trying to live with a missing part of the soul, in its contextual use, however, the expression conveys the struggle of living while feeling emotionally broken.

Representation of grief: Grief is represented as an incompleteness of the soul, as if a part of oneself is lost along with a loved one. This metaphor illustrates that loss is not only an emotional event, but also a change in identity, grief makes the speaker feel that they are no longer whole, that an important part of their soul has been torn away and cannot be replaced. In this way, grief is understood as an internal condition that continuously affects how a person feels, thinks, and lives their daily life. This metaphor is a structural metaphor because it borrows the structure of the concept of wholeness/incompleteness to explain how grief works. There is a structure of a "complete soul" and a "partially lost soul," so that the emotional experience of loss is explained through a framework that has clear parts and relationships. This structure helps to show that grief disrupts the balance and function of the self as a whole. At the same time, this metaphor also belongs to the ontological metaphor category because grief is treated as an entity that can "take" a part of a person's soul, making it incomplete. By giving it a concrete form such as a "missing part," abstract emotions become easier to understand and feel as if they truly have a form. Thus, this metaphor works on two levels: it gives form to grief (ontological), while also explaining the structure of damage and imbalance that grief creates within a person (structural).

Discussion

The result of this research, in line previous research, demonstrate that metaphors serve as the primary tools for understanding and describing experiences of grief. However, each source presents a different dimension of grief, depending on the social and cultural context, as well as the form of grief experienced. Previous researches on pregnancy loss (Littlemore & Turner, 2020) and Covid-19 mourning (Guité-Verret et al., 2021) have shown that metaphors emerge from fragmented feelings of loss that lack defined cultural scripts. Cut-offs, blockages, and shockwaves, are metaphors used to depict COVID-19 related grief that is socially and ritually separated. Meanwhile, metaphors like emptiness, brokenness, and symbolic reconstruction highlight women's struggles to fill the absence of identity and form symbolic ties with their lost child. In contrast, grief stories on the Medium platform use a far broader, more personal, and richer set of metaphors. Medium authors use metaphor not only to explain their emotion, but also create their identity, spirituality, and self-transformation. The metaphor that emerge include grief as a burden, liquid, disease, wild animal, empty house, ghost, teacher, theology, voice, planet that has lost its orbit, and even an ocean. This makes the representation of grief on Medium more complex. In previous studies focusing on depression and caregiving, the dominant metaphors were generally more conventional, such as burden, darkness, decline, or pressure, in line with some of these findings, such as grief as a burden, grief is darkness, and grief is physical pain. This study goes beyond these patterns, presenting more subtle and existential metaphors, such as grief as a trace, heartbeat, cartographer, or republic of memory, which rarely appear in previous studies.

The most significant difference in the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) framework lies in the types of metaphors that emerge. Two previous studies by Huma and Shah (2025) and Abu Rumman et al. (2025) found all three types of conceptual metaphors: structural, ontological, and orientational. Orientational metaphors such as up-down, dark-light, or falling/descending appear quite often in political, media, or clinical psychology contexts because emotional changes are often understood as changes in direction for example, "falling into depression" or "rising from sadness." However, in this research, Medium authors almost completely used ontological metaphors and structural metaphors. As a result, orientational metaphors were almost absent from the stories of grief on Medium. From Conceptual Metaphor Theory

perspective, this difference is plausible. The style and purpose of a text determine the dominant type of metaphor. Formal texts and media tend to use orientational metaphors because they are more direct and easier to understand, while personal and creative writing, such as on Medium, emphasizes structural and ontological metaphors that are narrative, imaginative, and emotional in style.

Conclusion

This study identified types of conceptual metaphors in grief narratives, explained the metaphorical expressions used, and revealed how these metaphors represent the experience of grief in Medium, a digital reading platform. The results show that the authors use a variety of ontological and structural metaphors to interpret loss, such as grief as a burden, ocean, wild animal, physical force, openness of love, and even the incompleteness of the soul. In general, ontological metaphors are more dominant because grief is often treated as a concrete entity that can be carried, burdensome, accompanying, or eroding, while structural metaphors help to reveal patterns of how grief works, for example as physical pain or an expression of love. These findings imply that metaphors function not only as a figure of speech, but as a cognitive tool to understand, organize, and express grief that is difficult to explain literally. Therefore, further research can expand the data from other digital platforms, compare different cultures or languages, or analyse the function of grief metaphors in the context of therapeutic communication so that the understanding of the language of grief becomes richer and more applicable.

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