

Left Behind Together: Malaysian Muslim Siblings' Bereavement During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on global mental health, with adolescents who experienced bereavement facing unique challenges. This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of two Malaysian siblings who lost their mother to COVID-19, focusing on their unique grieving processes and coping mechanisms. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the research reveals the complex emotional landscape faced by bereaved adolescents, including feelings of isolation, helplessness, and disrupted family dynamics due to pandemic restrictions. The findings highlight the significant impact of cultural norms and the loss of traditional mourning rituals, as well as the siblings' resilience and adaptability in seeking support through religious practices and honouring their mother's legacy. The study underscores the need for culturally sensitive, age-appropriate mental health interventions to support adolescents navigating grief during unprecedented times and provides valuable insights for developing effective bereavement support and policies.

Keywords: Adolescent, COVID-19, Grief & Loss, Bereavement, Qualitative

Implication and Contribution

This study highlights the unique grief and bereavement challenges faced by a pair of Muslim adolescents during the pandemic, particularly the disruption of traditional grieving ritual and limited access to social support systems. These findings underscore the critical need for culturally sensitive mental health intervention that addresses their emotional, psychological and social needs. Such interventions are essential for providing effective bereavement support and guiding the development of informed mental health policies.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching effects on global health, extending beyond physical illness to significantly disrupt mental well-being and social structures (Hakulinen et al., 2024; Haleem et al., 2020; Miyah et al., 2022). Adolescents represent a particularly vulnerable group, as the pandemic has intensified mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression and stress, largely due to prolonged quarantine measures and social isolation (Abu Bakar & Amran, 2020; Bell et al., 2023; Fegert et al., 2020). The developmental stage of adolescence complicates the grieving process, often resulting in more intense and complex emotional responses compared to adults (Alvis et al., 2022; Guzzo et al., 2023).

In the Malaysian context, cultural norms and religious beliefs are central to the grieving process. Family-centric values and traditional rituals, such as *tahlil* (communal recitation of Al Quran for the deceased) among Muslim and funeral rites, provide essential emotional support and a sense of closure (Akanni, 2016; Khawaja & Khawaja, 2019; Salleh & Ramli, 2021). However, pandemic-related restrictions have disrupted these practices, limiting adolescents' access to communal and religious coping mechanisms (Adiukwu et al., 2022; Erbicer et al., 2023). While some adolescents have demonstrated resilience by adapting to virtual forms of support, they continue to face a complex emotional landscape marked by multiple, simultaneous losses and disrupted milestones (Chachar et al., 2021).

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has exerted a profound influence on adolescent mental health, particularly in the context of bereavement. Disruptions to traditional mourning rituals due to social distancing and restrictions have introduced unique challenges for adolescents navigating grief (Arora & Bhatia, 2024; Mitima et al., 2022). Unlike adults, adolescents are in a critical phase of identity development, making them especially vulnerable to the psychological impacts of loss. Research indicates that adaptive coping strategies, including cognitive reframing and spiritual engagement, are associated with greater resilience, while secure attachments to caregivers serve as protective factors (Chaaya et al., 2025; Dolcos et al., 2021). Gender norms further modulate grief expression, with males more likely to suppress emotions and females more inclined to express them openly (Walter & Bailey, 2020). The pandemic's disruption of mourning practices has linked to increased risks of complicated grief, depression and suicidality among adolescents (Ahmadi et al., 2024).

The shift to digital platforms for grief support, while necessary, has proven less effective than traditional in-person interactions (Adiukwu et al., 2022; Garagiola et al., 2022). Cultural norms surrounding death and mourning have been challenged, resulting in elevated rates of anxiety and depression (Santos et al., 2021). Religious and spiritual practices, as well as technological solutions, have emerged as critical resources for maintaining social bonds and conducting rituals (Adiukwu et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2022; Walter & Bailey, 2020). Social support networks and positive coping mechanisms, such as memory work and religious observance, remain essential for fostering resilience (Cao et al., 2024).

Past literature has emphasized the importance of understanding adolescents' experiences of loss during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide effective support and foster resilience (Garagiola et al., 2022). Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by exploring

adolescent bereavement within the cultural context of a Malay Muslim family. However, there remains limited empirical attention to how these dynamics operate within Malay Muslim families, where rites such as *tahlil*, Islamically grounded beliefs (*qada' and qadar*) and gendered role expectations are central to bereavement processes. This gap motivates the present study's focus on adolescent bereavement in a Malay Muslim family.

Framed by Worden's Tasks of Mourning and the Continuing Bonds perspective, this study recognizes that accepting the loss, adjusting to life without the deceased, and maintaining ongoing connections are processes played through communal rituals, religious frameworks and family role structures. When ritual access is constrained by public-health measures, adolescents' progression through mourning tasks can be interrupted or prolonged, increasing risk for complicated grief (Adiukwu et al., 2022; Eisma & Tamminga, 2022; Mitima et al., 2022; Klass et al., 1996; Worden, 2009). In the Malay Muslim context, practices such as *tahlil* and faith-based beliefs (*qada' and qadar*), together with culturally prescribed gender-role reassignments, shape meaning-making and adjustment after loss (Khawaja & Khawaja, 2019; Salleh & Ramli, 2021). Comparable sister-as-mother role reassignments have been observed in other Asian settings (Feng et al., 2024).

By addressing this gap, the present study examines how ritual access, religious meaning-making and sibling role dynamics helps adolescent bereavement and coping in a Malay Muslim family during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

This qualitative study, approved by the Institutional Ethics Board, explored the lived experiences of sibling bereavement following the loss of their mother during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022). Ethical considerations were carefully observed, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and providing access to mental health support as needed. Using purposive sampling, two siblings—a 22-year-old woman and her 21-year-old brother were recruited. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with each participant, conducted both face-to-face and online. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted a total of four times, focusing on grief reactions, coping strategies and the impact of the pandemic on their daily lives and family dynamics. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, which involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the final report. Themes were identified, reviewed, reflected upon and refined among the researchers to ensure accuracy and relevance. This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the emotional, cultural and practical challenges faced by the siblings along with the familial and support systems that shaped their bereavement process. This qualitative study delves into the lived experiences of a sister and brother as they grieve the loss of their mother during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Result

Table 1

Demography of Participants

Pseudonym	Age at Bereavement	Gender	Years Since Bereavement	Cause of Death	Relationship to the deceased
Bella	18	Female	4	COVID-19	Mother
Carter	17	Male	4	COVID-19	Mother

This study presents a case study focusing on two Malaysian siblings, a 22-year-old female and her 21-year-old brother, from a family of six. The study explores their experiences following the sudden death of their mother from COVID-19 within a single week. Three siblings from this family met the selection criteria. Two agreed and volunteered to participate in the research, while the third declined due to the sensitivity of the topic.

Bereavement Process

Two Weeks Before the Loss

The study reveals that both siblings experienced the devastating loss of their mother during the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought significant emotional and psychological challenges. The pandemic instilled a fear of losing their mother, which was heightened by her unexpected COVID diagnosis. This fear was compounded by the movement control order (MCO) restrictions, which left them feeling helpless and unable to care for her as they wished. Bella shared, *"I can't describe the feeling. I was overwhelmed with sadness and feared losing my mother... even wished to take her place."* Carter echoed his sister's emotions, recalling how he had prayed earnestly to the Almighty, saying, *"Please, don't take my mother. I can't live without her!"*

As the situation of the mother worsened, the siblings began to feel uncertain about the future without their mother. She worried about how her siblings would manage, as their mother was the family's primary provider and source of emotional support. The brother, too, was consumed by fear, wondering who would take care of the family if their mother was gone. Carter expressed his concerns: *"If Mom's gone, who will care for us, feed us, or guide us?"* Bella added *"I knew my mother carried a heavy burden...we needed her so much."* Carter added, *"How can I live without my mother... without her support?"*

Despite their fears, both siblings remained hopeful for their mother's recovery, especially after hearing from the doctor about her potential discharge from the hospital. However, they felt powerless against the relentless threat of the COVID-19 virus. Bella recalled, *"Mom was finally coming home... but I forgot her heart was still weak from COVID."* Carter shared his shock when he initially felt relieved by his mother's hopeful condition, saying, *'Thank God, Mom was safe,' but was heartbroken when he later received a call, 'then a call came... she was gone'.*

Following their mother's passing, the sister, as the only woman in the family, expressed feeling burdened. She explained that she had to assume all her mother's previous responsibilities, including managing the household finances, as she was the only one

employed during the pandemic. This transition brought significant challenges and a sense of overwhelming responsibility. Bella explained, *"Yes, mom handled everything. As the only woman at home, I do it all—chores, cooking, even managing expenses."*

In the First Three Months After Loss

The news of their mother's passing came as a profound shock, leaving both siblings in a state of disbelief and emotional paralysis. Their grief manifested in diverse ways—tears, numbness and an overwhelming sense of emptiness. Bella shared, *"I didn't cry at first—I was numb. Then I broke down, crying for days. After Mom was gone, I felt empty."* Carter described his experience, *"I stared at the mirror, numb and blank, for 30 minutes... just emptiness."*

The loss profoundly impacted both siblings, as they shared a close bond with their mother. Bella reflected, *"Mom loved TV, and we loved joining her—chatting, discussing, just being close. On her days off, we'd go grocery shopping together."* Similarly, Carter shared, *"I always helped Mom buy supplies for her business."* These memories highlight the deep connection they had with their mother and the central role she played in their lives. Bella also shared, *"If someone could choose my life, I'd let them. That's why Mom influenced me so much."* This statement reflects the profound impact their mother had on shaping their decisions and guiding their lives, even after her passing.

The experience of unfinished business, as shared by Bella and Carter, reflects the deep emotional struggle of not being able to fully process or find closure in their grief. For Bella, the inability to physically be with her mother during her final moments created a profound sense of incompleteness. She shared, *"After Mom was hospitalized, I only saw her through video calls."* Her reliance on video calls as the only means of communication left her feeling disconnected and powerless. The absence of a final goodbye, a moment to hold her mother's hand or offer comfort, left her with lingering emotions of regret and unresolved pain. This sense of unfinished business weighed heavily on her, as she was unable to fulfil the natural human need for presence and connection during a loved one's passing.

Carter's experience of unfinished business, on the other hand, manifested in his refusal to fully say goodbye to his mother. While he expressed acceptance of her passing, his words, *"I will never say goodbye to my mother,"* reveal an emotional resistance to letting go completely. This reflects a deep attachment and a struggle to reconcile the suddenness of her death with the reality of her absence. He believed that saying goodbye to his mother would mean severing their connection entirely, even in the afterlife, as it would signify that there was no longer any attachment to his deceased mother, further highlighting his reluctance. Carter held onto the hope of reuniting with his mother after death, which made the idea of a final goodbye unbearable. The lack of traditional rituals or opportunities to process his grief in a meaningful way left him holding onto his mother in a symbolic sense, as if preserving her memory was his way of addressing the void left by the inability to say a proper farewell.

Both Bella and Carter's experiences highlight how the pandemic's restrictions disrupted the natural grieving process, leaving them with unresolved emotions and a lingering sense of inability to fulfil their roles as a son and daughter in accordance with Muslim ritual. Their stories illustrate the emotional toll of being unable to provide or receive closure, a fundamental aspect of coping with loss.

Bella and Carter faced profound emotional and behavioural changes as they struggled to cope with the loss of their mother. Bella turned to smoking, alcohol, and late-night outings to numb her sadness and escape the overwhelming void left by her mother's absence. She shared, *"I started smoking, staying out late, and drinking."* These actions, like drinking alcohol (prohibited in Islam) and late-night outings (frowned upon for Malay women), reveal her deep pain and desperate attempt to cope with her immense loss.

Both siblings also experienced significant physical changes, particularly weight loss, as their grief took a toll on their well-being. Bella noted, *"I lost weight after Mom passed."* Carter shared the drastic impact on his own health, saying, *"I lost weight after Mom died, dropping from 109kg to 53kg over three years."* This physical manifestation of their grief underscores the depth of their emotional pain and the challenges they faced in adjusting to life without their mother, especially since losing their mother means no longer having the person who cooked for them and cared for them in nearly every aspect of their daily lives.

Their mother had been the core of their family, providing emotional, physical and financial support with unconditional love. Her passing left a void that neither sibling could fill, forcing them to navigate a new reality of self-reliance. The loss of her nurturing presence meant they had to learn to care for themselves, including managing household responsibilities such as cooking and cleaning. Beyond the practical challenges, her absence also disrupted the family dynamic. As the bond that held the siblings together, her death led to poor communication and a breakdown in their relationship. Bella expressed her feelings of isolation, saying, *"My family didn't support me, and they didn't understand what I was going through."* Similarly, Carter reflected on the loss of their mother's role as the family's unifying force, stating, *"At that time, our communication as siblings was not good. She was our connector, the one who brought us together."*

The loss of their mother not only left them grieving but also struggling to adapt to a life where they had to take on roles and responsibilities for which they were unprepared. Her absence was deeply felt, not just as a parent but as the emotional and practical foundation of their family. As individuals, the siblings began to heal by accepting the loss through the concept of *qada' and qadar* (fate and destiny), a core belief in Islam that everything happens according to Allah's plan and for a reason. Only after embracing this belief were they able to gradually accept their mother's passing together and find ways to heal as a family, though the journey to this point was not without challenges. After their mother's passing, Bella and Carter found themselves navigating new roles within the family, shaped by both cultural norms and gender expectations. Bella, as the sister, felt an unspoken obligation to take on household responsibilities, such as cooking and cleaning, tasks traditionally associated with women in their cultural context. She viewed this as a way to honour her mother's memory and continue her legacy of care within the family. Bella shared, *"I felt like I had to take over what Mom used to do. It's my way of showing her that I appreciate everything she did for us."* Carter, on the other hand, struggled with the expectation to become more independent and self-reliant. As the second youngest in the family, he felt pressure to embody strength and resilience, even as he grappled with his own grief. He began to take on tasks his mother had taught him, such as managing finances and basic life skills as ways to honour her teachings and prove his capability. Carter reflected, *"I started learning to take care of myself, like Mom always wanted me to. It's my way of showing her that I listened and that I'm trying to be the*

person she wanted me to be." Continuing to fulfil their roles as a filial daughter and son was in line with what their mother had expected, serving as a sign of ongoing emotional bonding.

The discovery of their mother's will on her mobile phone became a turning point in their relationship, especially as her message reminded them of the importance of *rukun* (maintaining harmony and unity among siblings). The heartfelt message, which encouraged them to live in harmony and support one another, reminded them of their mother's wishes and inspired them to rebuild their bond. This shared commitment to honouring their mother's advice helped them overcome the initial breakdown in communication and work together to navigate their grief. By embracing their mother's teachings and finding strength in their respective roles, their journey reflects the intersection of cultural norms, religion expectation and familial love in shaping their response to loss and their path toward reconciliation.

Carter shared that he finds comfort through religious practices, as well as by listening to music and singing, which help him to calm his mind: *"I calm myself through prayer. Besides that, I use my phone, listen to music, and I like to sing."* For Bella, continuing to care for her family is a way to connect and honouring her mother: *"I consider everything I do now as a form of charity from my mother."* She further explained her motivation to keep giving and supporting her family: *"Even now, I do a lot for my family, for my father and my brothers. If what I do isn't enough, it doesn't matter, because that's what Mom did."*

Over Two Years Since the Loss

They accepted their mother passing as part of God's will (every soul will taste death. Then to Us will you be returned). However, true acceptance only came when they discovered a heartfelt message left by their mother on her phone, in which she advised her children to always remain "united." Meanwhile, both siblings continue to practice what their mother taught them, hoping that these good deeds will bring rewards to their late mother, in accordance with Islamic teachings about the blessings earned by a righteous child who prays and acts for their parents.

Bereavement for Bella was not just an emotional journey, but a process of stepping into her mother's role at home. Each responsibility she took on by caring for her father and brothers made her more aware of her mother's sacrifices and sparked feelings of regret for past misunderstandings. As she shared, *"Even now, I take on so much for my family, just like my late mother did—for my father, my younger brother, and my elder brother."* Reflecting on her new responsibilities, she admitted, *"I even felt regretful and thought to myself, 'Is this the burden Mom carried all this time? Being a mother is so exhausting. I regret not listening to her and always arguing with her.'" Through these acts, Bella not only mourned but also found a way to honour her mother, turning her grief into a quiet continuation of her mother's love and care.*

Meanwhile, Carter expressed that learning to manage himself and practicing the basic life skills his mother had taught him was his way of honouring her. He viewed these efforts as a form of appreciation and love for the mother who had cared for him throughout her life. He reflected, *"Whenever I want to do something, I remember what Mom has taught me."* Through these actions, both siblings found ways to keep their mother's teachings alive, using them as a source of strength and guidance in their journey forward.

Carter also finds meaning in being present for others during times of loss, as a way to process his own unresolved feelings from his mother's passing: *"I make sure to attend every funeral now, because I didn't get to experience that with my mother. It's my way of remembering her, since I couldn't do it for her, so I do it for people I know."* These acts help him find peace within himself, allowing him to heal from what he was unable to experience with her. He added *"I used to feel like things were left unfinished. When a friend passed away and I was able to help with the burial, it helped me let go of what was unresolved from my mother's death."* This reflects Worden's Tasks of Mourning, which highlight the need to find closure and adjust to life after loss. Carter's actions also align with the Continuing Bonds theory, as he maintains a connection with his mother while gradually moving forward.

Through these actions and reflections, the siblings are slowly rebuilding their lives, drawing strength from their mother's legacy and from each other. Their journey demonstrates how grief, shaped by cultural, familial and religious expectations, can evolve into a source of resilience and connection, allowing them to honour their mother while finding their own paths forward.

Discussion

The bereavement process experienced by Bella and Carter highlights the complex interplay of emotional, cultural and religious factors that shape individual and family responses to loss. Recent research affirms that coping with bereavement is a dynamic and multifaceted process. Boever et al., (2024), emphasizes that effective coping involves accepting the death, looking to the future, avoiding distressing thoughts and maintaining a continuing bond with the deceased. This was evident as both siblings navigated intense emotions—such as shock, numbness, and regret—while simultaneously stepping into new family roles, particularly in the early months after their mother's passing (Boever et al., 2024).

The initial period before and after the loss was marked by anticipatory grief and heightened anxiety, which were further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and movement restrictions. These circumstances often led to feelings of isolation and unfinished business, as supported by recent studies showing that restricted mourning and disrupted grief rituals during the pandemic have contributed to more severe and prolonged grief symptoms (Chaaya et al., 2025; Mitima et al., 2022). Bella and Carter's inability to be physically present with their mother during her final moments, combined with the absence of traditional mourning rituals, led to feelings of incompleteness and complicated grief. Both were deeply affected physically and emotionally and subsequently began adopting unhealthy coping mechanisms to deal with their loss.

Their experiences also underscore the importance of meaning-making and maintaining bonds with the deceased, which are now recognized as central to healthy adjustment in contemporary bereavement research. The act of taking on their mother's roles and responsibilities, as well as Carter's efforts to honour her teachings, reflect the ongoing connection that supports healing and adaptation (Boever et al., 2006). This aligns with the continuing bonds perspective, which has been further validated in recent studies as a key aspect of coping.

Cultural and gendered expectations also played a significant role in shaping Bella's bereavement journey. The expectation for daughters or sisters to assume caregiving roles after the loss of a mother is well-documented in various cultural contexts, often resulting in a "double burden" for women (Chatterjee, 2024; Feng et al., 2024; Seedat & Rondon, 2021). Bella's experience of stepping into her mother's role, managing household responsibilities, and supporting her family reflects these broader social dynamics.

The loss of a parent can also disrupt family dynamics and sibling relationships. Towers (Towers, 2025) notes that sibling bereavement often leaves a significant void in the family, requiring siblings to renegotiate roles and relationships in the absence of a unifying parental figure. This was evident in Bella and Carter's initial struggles with communication and their eventual efforts to rebuild their bond.

Religious beliefs and spiritual coping mechanisms were crucial in the siblings' adjustment. The acceptance of their mother's death as part of God's will (*qada' and qadar*) provided a spiritual framework for understanding and integrating the loss. Islamic coping mechanisms, such as prayer and faith in divine destiny, have shown to foster resilience and facilitate the grieving process (Cinaroglu, 2024). The discovery of their mother's final message, urging unity, became a turning point that helped the siblings rebuild their relationship and find collective strength.

In summary, Bella and Carter's bereavement journey illustrates the dynamic and culturally embedded nature of grief, shaped by personal, familial and spiritual dimensions. Their experiences affirm the value of maintaining bonds with the deceased, adapting to new roles and drawing on cultural and religious resources to navigate the challenges of loss in today's context.

This study therefore highlights the need for culturally sensitive supports that combine community and religious resources with clinical and educational services. Practical steps include faith-aware assessment tools and culturally validated measures (Boever et al., 2024), collaboration with religious leaders to adapt ritual affordances such as guided virtual *tahlil* (Cinaroglu, 2024; Khawaja & Khawaja, 2019; Salleh & Ramli, 2021), and developmentally appropriate telehealth or school-based bereavement modules alongside clinician training in Islamic coping frameworks and gender-sensitive bereavement work (Cao et al., 2024; Fegert et al., 2020; Garagiola et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2022).

Limitation

The focus on Malay culture and Islam limits broader applicability. While cultural and religious influences were explored, other factors like socioeconomic status and access to mental health resources may have received less attention. These limitations necessitate cautious interpretation and further exploration using diverse methodologies.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, related to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this manuscript.

Theoretical and Conceptual Contribution

This study advances grief and adolescent development theory by showing how culturally grounded grieving practices and communal rituals function as key mechanisms for meaning-making, identity formation and emotional regulation among Muslim adolescents. Pandemic restrictions disrupted these mechanisms, producing more prolonged and complicated patterns of grief and refining existing bereavement models. Contextually, the study fills an empirical gap by documenting the pandemic experiences of Muslim youth, an under-researched group. Practically, it recommends culturally sensitive mental health interventions such as faith-aware assessment tools, collaboration with religious leaders, and adapted telehealth or school-based supports. Finally, the findings set an agenda for future research to assess culturally tailored interventions that could reduce adverse mental health outcomes in similar crises.

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