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**Autoethnography of Human-Animal Interaction
and Mental Wellness**

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22 June 2024

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AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTION AND MENTAL WELLNESS

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Acceptance Page:

This paper prepared by **BALDERAMA, RENZ D.** with the title: **“AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTION AND MENTAL WELLNESS”** is hereby accepted by the Faculty of Information and Communication Studies, U.P. Open University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Program.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Renz D. Balderama finished his Bachelor's Degree in Computer Studies majoring in Computer Science from Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Maynila, the same University where he got his graduate Diploma in Information and Communications Technology. By profession, he works as a Software Engineer and is currently employed in a major company that produces mobile devices and appliances.

Despite not belonging to the core Communications field, Renz chose to take his Master's in Development Communication due to a simple Google search of what Development Communication – providing information and overall use of human communication for the improvement of society and individual lives.

He aims one day to help communities through volunteering as a psychologist, but right now, he is focused on assisting Animal Welfare Organizations in the Philippines through donations and information dissemination through social media.

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To my friends and everyone who has faith in me in achieving yet another significant event in my life, as my parents say in Bicolano, *Dios Mabalos!* or *May God return you the favor!*

DEDICATION PAGE

I was born to a family that despite belonging to the poorest of the poor, were gifted with brilliant minds and dedication to strive and succeed in anything we do. My parents, Nora and Orle, as they always say, "*Kailangan ninyong mag-aral ng mabuti, at wala kaming maipamamana sa inyo, diyan lang kayo makaka-angat sa buhay*", have always been my guide on braving the trials of my academic expedition. Their wisdom, and stories of sacrifices, direct me as I continue to pursue and achieve my dreams;

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To the Balderama family, with two or four feet, this work is lovingly dedicated;

To our loved ones who passed untimely, I pray with everyone on their eternal repose;

And to God, and all His glory.

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ABSTRACT

While there have been existing studies that suggest Human-Animal Interaction helps improvement of people's physical and mental health (Wauthier, et al. 2022; Poresky & Hendirix, 1990; Barlow, et al., 2012; Thayer & Stevens, 2022; Hoy-Gerlach, et al., 2022; Winsor, et al., 2022; Robino, et al., 2022; Wagner & Pina E Cunha, 2021), most of them were done clinically. This study discusses the lived experience of a Filipino individual who underwent anxiety and depression to understand how nonverbal communication, through Human-Animal Interaction became a means to alleviate his mental health issues. This research uses autoethnography as a study, while the researcher draws on personal experience, all recorded and written as *Vignettes*, and analyzed using the Immersion-Reflection-Modeling (IRM) model to expound points.

Of note, this study includes hypersensitive or psychologically triggering and disturbing information as part of its narrative to understand the connection between Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) and its benefits on the mental wellness of humans.

Keywords: Nonverbal Communication, Communication, Human-Animal Interaction, Anxiety Disorder, Depression, Mental Health, Therapy, Communication Therapy

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Would it be too honest if I said that at some point, I wish I did not wake up? Just so all of my problems would go away, and battling the voices in my head would finally end. Is it too extreme to write a paper about this? I know this topic is sensitive and could trigger someone else. I hope not, but I sincerely hope this helps people out there.

Not once has it ever occurred to me that I would be in such a negative headspace, that submitting to my dissolution could be an option to find peace – you may ask anyone in my circle, but this is out of character for me. I am one of those people you can easily get along with, someone who loves to laugh and make others laugh. I have always seen myself as a positive person, or at least I try to encourage positivity despite facing different difficulties. I believe that I exhibit a strong will as I have been tested by life experiences, mostly due to my upbringing. As a person from a family belonging to the lowest bracket of socioeconomic standing, I value even the smallest things in life. Given that we had nothing before, everything for me is precious and appreciated. Thus, I enjoy most things, and because of this, I find contentment and am happy overall. But happiness and stability are something that you constantly chase in life, and it's not always as peaceful as a walk in the park on a Sunday afternoon. Time and again, it will force you to step into the ring, ready your fists, and take and throw jabs – the only thing is, there's no bell to signal that the fight has started, you will just know it when you get hit by the blow. That said, no one expected to get hit by a grievous event – the spread of a deadly virus that became a global pandemic and its effect on the health of many people. It all started then, how I, as someone with

a positive outlook in life, changed into someone who wishes his eternal repose, and how I was able to surpass that state through communication with my pets, which I consider an unconventional contributor.

Theoretical Lens

This study theorizes human-animal communication as a therapeutic approach to mental wellness through human-animal interactions. This study draws inspiration from the process of exchanging of messages and meanings between humans and animals through nonverbal communication, referencing Kincaid and Schramm's definition of communication, as cited by Flor and Ongkiko, that not all communication has to be human communication, and that not all communication takes place in words, as animals perform communication with other animals and/or people (Flor & Ongkiko, 1998).

This study is also guided by Birdwhistell's Theory of Kinesics, or the study of communicating with the use of body movements, gestures, expressions, and their interpretations - to which expressive actions can be translated into thoughts, feelings, moods, intentions, attitudes, and may be used to supplement or be used as an alternative for verbal communication (Padula, 2012). Alongside it, are other traditions of Craig's Communication Theory such as *socio-psychological*, *phenomenological*, and *semiotic*. These traditions further assist in understanding the realization of the process of human-animal communication on its benefits in promoting mental health, through autoethnography as this study's methodology.

This study also draws from the underpinnings of the three aspects of nonverbal behavior discussed by Ekman and Friesen: Use, Origin, Coding, and its five categories, Emblem, Illustrators, Affect displays, Regulators, and Adaptors (Ekman &

Friesen, 1969; Padula, 2012). It is crucial to understand the behaviors of nonverbal communication between my pets, who, in nature, in a way are non-oral, as they can still produce sounds like whimpering and barking, and I, as an oral able or someone who can talk. *Usage* focuses on occurrences of the event; *Origin* determines which actions are being done such as body movement or facial expressions; and *Coding* which provides meaning to the action/s done. While the categories are as follows:

- Emblem is described as nonverbal actions having meaning/s that are already known in a culture or can be translated directly into words (e.g. OK sign);
- Illustrators are gestures that accompany verbal messages (e.g. telling where an object is while pointing to the exact location);
- Affect Displays are both verbal and non-verbal displays of emotions. This includes facial expressions, tone, and volume of voice, or even crying;
- Regulators are non-verbal actions that regulate interaction (e.g. nodding when someone is speaking); and
- Adaptors are body movements that affect behavior and help reduce stress and anxiety.

Lastly, this study emphasizes the use of Communication as Therapy. In which communication is applied in the field of medicine to help surmount the emotional and psychological distress of patients through the exchange of messages, either verbal or nonverbal (Gupta & Sharma, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus, or COVID-19, a global pandemic (Cucinotta et al, 2020). COVID-19 is a virus that weakens people's respiratory system. People who are infected by the virus experience respiratory illnesses, while those with preexisting conditions like diabetes, or respiratory problems, are more likely to develop serious illnesses. However, regardless if a person has existing health issues or not, it can lead to a certain death when left untreated (WHO, 2020). Following WHO's declaration, the Philippine government implemented the strict community quarantine in the same month, as an approach to curbing the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the country (Official Gazette, 2020). The quarantine, together with other various factors, created an unforeseen challenge – mental health issues.

Waking up every day is a challenge. My will to function is almost non-existent, and the news has been deeply depressing. My eating habits staggered, either there are days that I do not want to eat, or there are days that I end up eating unhealthy food. My sleeping pattern turned from bad to worse, and no matter how I tried to relax, my brain decided to not cooperate. There's also the fear of safety and survival of my family in Cavite, where I live; in Manila, where my mother and some of my siblings are renting an apartment; and abroad, where my sister lives. I recognized that there was something wrong with me from my unhealthy eating habits to my inability to sleep well, and feeling of being scared and sad all the time. *“Am I depressed? I do not know but do depressed people ask questions if they are depressed? I also do not know. What do I do then?”*. So I started to look for the answers from the internet, the most utilized tool in sourcing information, especially when stuck at a homestay setup and nowhere to go.

I found out that I have been manifesting symptoms of depression, such as changes in appetite, the feeling of being very tired and low in energy disrupted sleep, poor concentration (NHS, n.d. & WHO, 2023), and later, the symptoms became worst as I started thinking of ending myself. As a Catholic, I do not technically know if the thought of suicide is a sin, but the thought of “ending myself is the ultimate sin” was dominating my consciousness at that time. Nonetheless, I was tired of the problems, the fear, the death of people - people I know, their loved ones, people I do not know, and that fighting problems yet you cannot do anything, is futile.

However, upon my research, I discovered that due to the pandemic, there was a significant growth in the population suffering from mental health issues. In 2021, the number of Filipino youth attempting suicide grew to 1.5 million, a 7.5 percent increase from 2013 (YAFSS, 2021). In the same year, the National Center for Mental Health received 11,017 calls regarding asking for mental health assistance; 1,282 of which were suicide-related calls (Inquirer, 2022). I was not alone. Other people are feeling the same way as I did, those like me, those who need help.

One of the applied treatments for people with mental health issues is therapeutic communication, or communicating between the providers or doctors with their patients, but one of the concerns is that providers only have limited time to address the emotional concerns of patients (Gupta & Sharma, 2023). In my case, the most available setup for this would be me sharing with my family. Unfortunately, the concept of having a discussion regarding my personal issues, especially something grave, is not an option. There are things I fear to share, as I may be classified as weak, as senseless, as a failure, including this time, that I badly need help is one of them. Of note, it seems the same difficulty is also a concern with other people, as there are 1.5 million Filipino youth with ideation of committing suicide; six out of 10 did not ask for

help or reach out to anyone about it, while the others seek help from their close friends (25 percent), parents/guardians (7 percent) and other relatives (5 percent) (University of the Philippines Population Institute, 2022).

The Research Questions

With what I have shared, it is apparent that this study was conceived due to the need for self-help, or finding ways to find mental stability. There is so much I want to tackle in this study, scientific included, that may come across as too “ambitious”, especially for a Master’s student whose work mostly focuses on developing software systems. But it is crucial to delve into and examine the idea of nonverbal communication as a therapy process for people with mental illnesses through human-animal interaction, something that I am unfamiliar with, yet, something that may help someone’s life through hindering of progression of negative emotions and psychological distress.

To understand it better, I listed down my queries which this study will aim to answer:

1. What are the steps or actions in the processes of human-animal interaction?
2. How do I view my interactions with my pets?
3. What are the factors involved in human-animal interaction before its effects happen?

Objectives of the Study

This study focuses on understanding the process of communication and interactions between humans and animals. Then see how they relate to the effects on human well-being. Therefore the main objective of this study is to determine the steps

and factors involved in human-animal interaction through my experiences with my interactions with my pets in triggering situations:

1. Examine my interactions with my pets as I adapt to mental health issues.

Significance of the Study

With the increasing number of Filipino population having mental health concerns (WHO, 2021), it is important that this issue must be addressed and prevented. Currently, there are ways to address the issues, such as medical interventions like psychotherapy, but there are still challenges at hand such as its accessibility due to the cost of its services (Finder, 2022), or the lack of professionals in the field of psychology and psychiatry (WHO, 2019).

Through this study, I aim to contribute to raising awareness as well as spreading information on the use of nonverbal communication as therapy through human-animal interaction, an accessible way for everyone to nurse their mental health and lessen the mental health struggles within the population, which will ultimately help with lessening of increasing population with mental health issues. Further, this study could also be a foundation for governing bodies to fortify laws that protect animals, such as RA 10631 (An Act Amending Certain Sections of Republic Act No. 8485, Otherwise Known As “The Animal Welfare Act of 1998”), and RA 7277 (An Act Providing For The Rehabilitation, Self-Development, And Self-Reliance Of Disabled Person And Their Integration Into The Mainstream Of Society And For Other Purposes) for persons with disabilities, who, in some cases, require help from animal assistants like therapy dogs.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

As an autoethnographic study, this research focuses on determining how humans and animals communicate and how it benefits human mental wellness, data being derived from my own experience as an individual while going through depression and anxiety, as well as my interactions with my pet dogs. This study contains my personal information, including sensitive materials and events to understand what I am theorizing in this study.

This study will not include the measurement of levels of stress hormones like cortisol, nor will it include the measurement of happiness hormones such as oxytocin, serotonin, dopamine, and endorphins.

Operational Definition of Terminologies

Listed here are terminologies used in this study to further understand the relationship between Human-Animal Interaction and Mental Wellness.

- **Adaptors** – One of the nonverbal behavior categories that is described as body movements that affect behavior and help reduce stress and anxiety.
- **Affect** – Is described as impact or influence or the ability to influence someone's thinking or reaction.
- **Affect Displays** – One of the nonverbal behavior categories representing verbal and non-verbal displays of emotions including facial expressions, voice tone, voice volume, as well as crying.
- **Affect Labeling** - The process of putting feelings into words.

- **Anxiety Disorder** – Experience of intense and excessive fear and worry. It increases the risk of depression and behaviors of suicidal thoughts.
- **Depression** - This is described as the manifestation of sadness, loss of interest or pleasure, low self-worth, guilt, disturbance in sleep, lack of appetite, and tiredness.
- **Emblem** – One of the nonverbal behavior categories described as nonverbal actions with meaning/s that are already known in a culture or can be translated directly into words.
- **Emotional Contagion** – The occurrence wherein someone’s emotions and behaviors lead to the display of similar emotions and behaviors of others.
- **Human-Animal Interaction** – It is the relationship and interactions of humans and animals, including communication between them.
- **Illustrators** – One of the nonverbal behavior categories described as gestures accompanying verbal messages.
- **Regulators** – One of the nonverbal behavior categories described as non-verbal actions that regulate interaction.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

When asked by our professor in Communication Research and Evaluation “How do you find writing your Review of Related Literature?”, I answered with, “It is like building a puzzle, gathering pieces, and connecting them to build a bigger picture”. A tedious, yet fulfilling task as it guides you to your goal, which is to put a piece of yourself in that puzzle. It is a substantial part of the study as you share information you gathered so it guides your readers.

The Growing Mental Health Issue Crisis

Mental health is an integral part of a human’s overall well-being. Sadly, it is also one of the major concerns of the Philippines. The World Health Organization (WHO) has acknowledged the importance of mental health as a significant factor in attaining an individual’s potential and has an indirect impact on society’s economic stability (WHO, 2019).

Even before the start of the global pandemic, there have been a large number of cases regarding mental health issues in the Philippines, with 3.3 million clinically diagnosed reported cases of depression, and 3 million reported cases of clinically diagnosed anxiety disorders (WHO, 2021). The lack of medical professionals who focus on psychiatric medicine is also a problem. Healthcare professionals with specialization in mental health fields are very low in number in the country, with the ratio being 0.5 percent per 100,000 people (WHO, 2019). Additionally, medical services for psychiatric care are costly, resulting in the inability of the public to access its services. In De La Salle University Medical Center in Dasmariñas, Cavite, a single

session with a psychiatrist costs PHP 2,500.00 (M. V. Briguera, M.D.'s office, personal communication, February 23, 2023). It is also the same cost if one requests an examination conducted by a registered psychologist (A-max Psychological Services, personal communication, February 23, 2023).

According to the UNDP (2021) report, the most common mental health issues in the country are depression and anxiety disorders. Depression is described as the manifestation of sadness, loss of interest or pleasure, low self-worth, guilt, disturbance in sleep, lack of appetite, and tiredness. Anxiety disorder, described as the feeling of excessive or intense manifestation of fear and worry, have cases that reached 3 million cases or 3.1 percent of the population in 2017. Like any other mental health condition, if ignored, it can lead to suicide (WHO, 2019). Per recorded estimation of incidents of suicide in the Philippines between 1984 to 2005, from 0.23 percent to 3.59 percent per 100,000 is the increase for the male population who committed suicide, while 0.12 percent to 1.09 percent per 100,000 for women.

Many factors contribute to the decline of mental health such as social and economic elements like income, employment status, educational achievement, and others. Relatively, the presence of mental health in the population directly affects the economic standing of the country due to less productive capacity; some identified examples are premature mortality and reduced productivity at the workplace (World Health Organization, 2021).

When the coronavirus or COVID-19 started spreading in the Philippines in 2020, the economy took a big hit as different sectors, including businesses, were forced to close down. Families struggled due to a lack of finances coming in as there were “no work no pay policies” implemented especially by small businesses which took a big hit during the pandemic, while others lost their jobs.

Pastor (2020), conducted a study to check the sentiments of the masses on the implementation of the extreme community quarantine, specifically in Luzon by checking the trend of tweets of its users from the social media platform *Twitter*. Based on the results, as the lockdown continued, negative emotions continued to rise weekly. In the first week, 76.81 percent of the tweets manifested negative sentiments, followed by 84.71 percent in the second week then 83.42 percent in the third. The data gathered from this study reflected a steady rise as the lockdown continued. Most of the users also expressed their sentiments with indications of mental health conditions like anxiety disorder, depression, and symptoms like anger, while scores of life satisfaction and positive outcomes decreased. Some tweets also suggest that some students expressed their worry about continuing schooling due to the pandemic. The study conducted by Tee, et al. (2020) showed that a combined percentage of 16.9 percent of the respondents in the study demonstrated moderate depressive symptoms and severe to extremely severe depressive symptoms, based on the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales (DASS-21). It also showed that the younger group with ages between 12 to 21 years, single, and with no children have significantly higher stress, anxiety, and depression, while those who have higher education (Master/Doctorate), have child/ren with age 16 or above have lower stress measures. Additionally, aging adults are also no exception for mental health illnesses. Depression, stress, and anxiety are common to the elders as well, and in extreme cases, it leads to suicide (Fiske, et al, 2009).

Communication as Therapy

There are plenty of definitions of what communication is, Black and Bryant (1992) defined it as the process by which people share meanings (Flor & Ongkiko,

1998, p.46), but Tanya Peterson, MS, NCC, a board-certified counselor, argued that communication is more profound than just exchange of thoughts and meanings. It is a skill and a tool that connects people and plays a vital role in achieving life satisfaction and well-being, and it is the art of connecting (Peterson, n.d.). As we communicate, we share information on things, ourselves, our successes and failures, our dreams and problems, and we extend ourselves to others.

The practice of using communication as therapy is mainly applied in psychotherapy, psychiatry, sociology, medicine, rehabilitation, and nursing literature (Gupta & Sharma, 2023). Communication Therapy is personal, and by personal, it varies from patient to patient as our characteristics vary. In Gupta and Sharma's study, they summarized the techniques such as:

- Genuine therapeutic relationship – presentation of one's self as a genuine person to build a trusting relationship with a patient
- Respect privacy and minimize interruptions – protection of patient's privacy to demonstrate respect
- Active listening techniques
- Non-verbal and verbal cues to continue the conversation
- Open-ended questioning and reflection
- Nonverbal communication through facial expressions and gestures

One of the studies that focused on the application of communication therapy in nursing discussed that therapeutic communication techniques provide support and information to patients (Mersha, et al, 2023). They apply various techniques to achieve their objectives, these include:

- Silence

- Accepting
- Providing recognition
- Offering self
- Active listening
- Seeking clarification
- Making observations
- Encouraging perceptions
- Summarizing and Reflecting
- Confronting and voicing doubts
- Offering hope and humor

Between the applications of communication therapy in Nursing and Psychotherapy, there are common factors listed such as *active listening, summarizing and reflecting*, and non-verbal techniques. Therapeutic Communication is argued to be one of the pillars of quality nursing as it improves the outcomes of the patients (Mersha, et al, 2023).

Communication skills are one of the critical variables affecting an adult's mental health (Ghazavi et al., 2016). Poor communication skills can trigger mental health issues like stress and anxiety, and promote social isolation and loneliness (Dysktra, 2009). Elders who experience continuous communication with people and family around them, experience less stress under pressing circumstances (Hirokawa, et al, 2008), and have higher mental well-being (Aschbrenner, et al, 2011).

Ghazavi et al., (2016) study on the effects of Family-Oriented communication skills training programs on depression, anxiety, and stress in the elderly resulted in to decrease in mean depression score from 10.56, to 2.75 (Zahra et al., 2021), through

a randomized clinical trial, using DASS21 (Depress Anxiety and Stress Scale). This shows that family-centered communication skills training is effective in decreasing mental health issues in the elderly.

Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) on People with Mental Health Issues

Existing studies state that human-animal interaction (HAI) has an influence on human development and has positive effects on both the physical and mental health of people (Wauthier, et al. 2022; Poresky & Hendrix, 1990; Barlow, et al., 2012; Thayer & Stevens, 2022; Hoy-Gerlach, et al., 2022; Winsor, et al., 2022; Robino, et al., 2022; Wagner & Pina E Cunha, 2021). Some identified benefits are improved socio-emotional development, self-esteem, and reduced anxiety, however, Poresky and Hendrix (1990) added that it is uncertain whether development is because of the presence of pets or a person's relationship with pets or referred to as “pet ownership”.

In some applications, animals are used as part of therapies for unfortunate events. Robino, et al. (2022) study used animals as part of their crisis response called Animal-Assisted Crisis Response (AACR). AACR is a form of intervention that utilizes the human-animal bond as therapy or animal-assisted activity (AAA). Trained Animal-handler teams utilize the application of AAAs to provide comfort after a mass traumatic event. Registered therapy animals and their handlers are trained and educated to respond to emotionally sensitive environments. In this case, therapy animals, specifically dogs, were deployed for the survivors of the mass shooting in February 2018 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Physiological stress aspects were measured through blood pressure, saliva, and heart rate. To tackle the psychological aspect, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) to measure the respondents' perception of baseline stress, interviews on their reflection on the tragedy through the Impact of

Events Scale-Revised (IES-R) is applied. The Center for the Study of Animal Wellness Pet Bonding Scale (CSAWPBS) measures participants' perception of their bond after their exposure to the therapy animal.

The study revealed that incorporating AACR as another method to aid those who have experienced traumatic experiences and therefore conclude it is beneficial and has long-lasting effects. Cortisol levels (stress hormones) of the participants were significantly lower post-exposure to therapy animals especially to those who have physical interactions with the dogs. The decrease in cortisol levels of the participants directly suggests that the stress levels of the students also decreased.

Many private organizations also applied HAI in their workplace. Based on the multiple case studies of Wagner & Pina E Cunha (2021), Google, Apple, and Amazon have set their offices as a "pet-friendly" workplace by including pet-friendly policies as these organizations believe in the benefits in their work environment. To lessen work stress, and promote well-being, organizations have allowed employees to bring their dogs as they believe that presence and interactions with dogs influence employees. One of the primary problems in a work setup is burnout which is related to work dissatisfaction and higher stress levels. It is also one of the primary reasons for the increase in the number of resignations in a company. Applications of HAI-related programs are being used by different organizations to reduce stress and retain employees. Pina E Cunha & Wagner (2021) cited different studies that interactions with animals through therapies, particularly with dogs, benefit people, children, adults, or even those of older ages. Employees who bring their dogs to work have less stress than employees who leave their dogs at home or dog-care facilities. Further, the implementation of pet-friendly policies is considered to be a "work-life balance" attribute to a company. Companies with pet-friendly policies or allowed to bring their

dogs to work have lower turnover intention rates and employees who bring their dogs to work have higher productivity scores.

Having dogs in the office boosts social interaction as well. Interacting with dogs promotes a positive social environment. Open communication, trust, and colleague relationships are some of the factors a company values, and since dogs have positive impacts on human interaction, this could be extended to the workplace. A workplace that allows dogs to report a high impact on the animals in stress reduction and a positive environment. These results affect all employees, giving everyone a mental break from workloads. Dogs also improve communication between employees, management, and even clients - this is due to breaking barriers of communication by talking about a topic non-related to work, and thus, introducing a social integration between people.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Autoethnography

I was one of the students who was “lost” when we started our “research journey”, mainly because in college, we are only taught the common types of research methodologies. Autoethnography was once brushed off as a topic by our DEVC 204, or Communication Research and Evaluation professor, Dr. Benjamina Flor, in her online class discussion, but I did not ponder on it any further, until it was discussed by my adviser, Dr. Alexander Flor, early in the process. He suggested that it is one of the fitting methodologies for my topic. He also added that it would possibly be a grueling and difficult undertaking as it will discuss triggering events that may affect my mental health as I recall my lived experiences and the interactions between my pets and me on those occasions, then analyze and relate them through “communication lens” or communication perspective. My first task was to further read materials on autoethnography and how it was written, although, my adviser already told me that there’s no specific structure when writing an autoethnographic study.

Despite defining specific objectives in this paper, my ultimate goal is to help others like me through this study. Although it is challenging to write down incidents that are undesirable for me, writing down an autoethnographic study will help me understand the process of HAI and its relationship to human mental wellness. Further, Chang (2008) listed that the benefits of autoethnography are (1) it offers a research method friendly to researchers and readers; (2) it enhances cultural understanding of self and others; and (3) it has a potential to transform self and others to motivate the work toward cross-cultural coalition building (p. 52).

Bruner, as cited by González-Monteagudo (2011) (p. 298), explains the importance of the creation of *possible worlds* through the process of imagination and the creation of alternatives as *subjunctivization*:

“Stories are about problems, dilemmas, contradictions, and imbalances. They connect the past, the present, and the future, and they link past experiences with what may be yet to come. This capacity of narratives for imagining and constructing other worlds, and for trying to make them a reality, is an essential feature of the human capacity to transform ourselves as well as our social contexts.”

In this research, my experiences and personal observations as someone who underwent depression and anxiety will be its basis. Self-reflection on recorded events as a method will also be a crucial part of this study. My understanding of the events and how my interactions with my pets and finding their meaning as part of the semiotic process is the essence of this study.

Elements of Methodology

Immersion-Reflection-Modelling

Rosete (2019) used Immersion-Reflection Modelling (IRM) “in-text” in her study *Communicative View of Displacement* as the process of finding meaning in an “organizational event such as displacement, turning otherwise unfortunate or negatively taken circumstance into something useful” (p. 150) as to finding her voice and her identity in her organization.

In her study, she emphasized the use of “text” as a way to express herself and her experience, making it her way to “enact” her lived experience for her readers. One of the first activities I was asked by my adviser before starting an autoethnography was to write down in a journal all the events that I could recall that are relative to this study. Which I did, in a notebook, with two ladies wearing Filipiniana on the cover. At first, I thought of it as just a prerequisite before a study, but as he warned that it may trigger me mentally, it is true that when I started writing, it gave me the idea and the power of journaling, or writing, in extension – in a way, you are retelling your stories and sharing your secrets. In the process, I am reliving (immersion) my memories, analyzing what has happened (reflection), and understanding the event/s (modeling), that affect me.

Data Collection and Data Set

This study’s main source of data is my personal experiences and recollections written as *vignettes*, which are described as short stories that are commonly used in qualitative research about a hypothetical person on sensitive topics in the developed world (Gourlay et al., 2014), alongside conversations or images are used in writing the narratives. These vignettes may include hypersensitive or psychologically triggering events, their details, and other information that are crucial in the narrative to understand how my negativity grew and my mental health declined. These vignettes and immersions also include stories involving my interactions with my pets and how I respond to them as part of the process of Human-Animal Interaction.

Research Context

The context of this study focuses on my life while going through depression as a series of unfortunate incidents occur, and how I surmounted the condition with the help of my pets through daily interactions. This study will center its events from the start of the declaration of the strict community quarantine due to the global pandemic, March 2020 (Official Gazette, 2020) to the year 2022.

Participants

As this study narrates my experience, the main participant in this research would be myself as the receiver of “help” from my pet dogs, as other main participants in this study, whom I interact with, both, my dogs and I will be the main subject of this study. Other contributors in this study would be my immediate family who are also included in the narratives and have been present as I experience mental health illnesses like depression and anxiety, as well as my friends and previous co-workers who will be included in the *vignettes*.

Approach to Analysis

Reflections through IRM analysis by producing (1) vignettes as narratives of the experiences of the subject; (2) list of both oral (verbal) such as whimpering and barking, and non-oral (nonverbal) actions from my pets; (3) *immersion* events that are chronologically listed leading from my negative headspace to depression to not wanting to live, and interactions between myself and my pets on those events; (4) *reflections* on the events and interactions between myself and my pets; and (5) *modeling* discussions that attempt to relate the interactions to my mental health for the better understanding of the process. From my reflections, the identification of

keywords or the same thoughts will be applied in this study. This is to highlight the pattern or my understanding of the event.

Additionally, we relate the events to the Nonverbal behavior categories as discussed by Ekman and Friesen (1969). In doing so, we identify the actions and events to their proper category.

Chapter IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cooper and Lilyea (2022) described autoethnography as “a unique qualitative methodology that draws upon several qualitative traditions, including narrative research, autobiography, ethnography, and arts-based research” (p. 197). As Chang (2008) cited Ellis and Bochner, “vary emphasis on their research process (Graphy), on culture (Ethno), and on self (Auto)”, adding that “ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretative orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation”.

Through vignettes, immersion in the events, and reflections, we concentrate on understanding experiences through my lived experiences, the molding of my meaning, and the effects of my perception of nursing back mental stability. The narratives in this study occurred in the middle of the global pandemic, starting from September 2020, when the first vignette took place, to the year 2022.

As mentioned at the start of this study and methodology, these stories include hypersensitive details on delicate events that I have experienced. Thus, these stories may set off anyone who may also be experiencing emotional and mental issues. However, these narratives are crucial to understanding the relationship of nonverbal communication through Human-Animal Interaction, to human mental wellness.

As the subject of this research, it is also fundamental to discuss that I have inhibitions with sharing my problems and difficulties in life which I believe contributed to the progression of my negative mindset due to fear of being classified as weak, useless, and just being ignored. Although I have the assumption that I will be judged by people in general, I believe that the opposite is true for my pet dogs.

Vignette One

Hazards of the Trade

As one of the supervisors in the organization, I was appointed as a Mental Health Officer. We had training and meetings regarding mental health as there was reported news already of the increasing number of employees getting anxiety due to safety and job security, caused by the global pandemic. “Bhe (an endearment between my close friends in the office and I) naiiyak ako, positive ako sa COVID” (I want to cry, I tested positive for COVID-19), a message sent to me by my friend and officemate. “Hala mag quarantine ka na tapos yung mga gamit mo ilayo mo na, may mga kasama ka ba dyan sa inyo?” (Quarantine yourself and separate your things from others, do you have someone staying with you at home?), as I asked with these things in mind, (1) Is someone going to take care of her?; (2) I hope she does not spread the virus to her family; and (3) It is stressing me out to know another person who caught the virus. “Wag kang ma-stress”, (Do not stress out), I said, but to myself, I know I am. Then I tried to help by talking to her.

Immersion to Vignette One

As one of the appointed Mental Health Officers in the company, our main assignment is to talk to people who are exhibiting signs of anxiety and depression. We try to help them with their problems by listening to their voice and observing their actions like facial expressions, hand movements, breathing, and attitudes. We look for

signs in our conversations through online calls especially if they are showcasing symptoms or signs of severe distress that may lead to endangering themselves or others, such as suicide or hurting someone else. In such cases, we report back to our mental health medical professionals about the danger that the person could be in. Despite the task being a responsibility that comes with the position of a Mental Health Officer, deep in my bones, I knew that I have this moral obligation to do what I consider to be right. However, listening to other people's problems and distress took a toll on me. Although I came across as strong on the outside, I knew I had a breaking point just like tempered glass breaking when it constantly gets hit.

This particular incident is when I first started to see how my pet Chip reacts to my mood. Listening to the problems of my peers became heavy for me. Somehow their problems remain in my mind. My friend, whom I am talking to via chat sends messages that projects fear. She fears spreading the virus to her family as she said she's with her sister and her baby. I understand her concern. This was the time during the pandemic when the effects of COVID-19 could be felt deeply across the population. The daily increase in COVID-19 patients affected everyone. People stranded in Manila and could not go back to their provinces, and hospitals not being able to admit people due to lack of beds and staff. These negative scenarios were the contents of the news we hear daily. There's nothing we can do and the vaccine against the virus has not been discovered yet. It would no sense for a person to deny that they were in fear of what was happening. Yet, there I was, trying to comfort my friend as her messages hit me with the reality and the possibility of what could happen. I used the advice I would give to anyone to my friend, I said "Take a deep breath, it helps with everything", but I know that I also needed that advice as I was beginning to feel agitated. The conversation ended shortly after and I went back to work. I was worried

for my friend. I heard similar stories from the news as well and I found myself worried that she could get worse.

Chip was with me in my room that day, she mostly stays with my brother because of the air conditioner in our house, but she was playing with her chew toy in my room at the time. She came near me and did something she always does when asking for an apology, pawing, or what I consider as “kalabit” or “suyo”. I looked at her and said “Wait lang”, annoyed as I still have work tasks left to do. She then started pawing at me aggressively, which she did not used to do. It was painful as her paws scratched my skin. I looked down, and her eyes seemed to be different, it was more wide and her mouth was open, like waiting for something. I paid attention to her then lifted and carried her like a baby. In my mind, my immediate thought was she was worried about me. I said “Okay lang po ako”, kissed her, went out of the room while carrying her to get her a treat, and played with her for a little while. Then not long after, I went back to work after we played.

Reflection

Humans have different ways of calling attention. For us Filipinos, we sometimes use “pssst” to call someone, an informal but effective method for asking anyone to notice us. But pets, in my observation, specifically dogs, show it in two obvious ways, first is barking, while the second is pawing. In my experience with Chip, she normally does the latter as an expression of regret – a pattern of hers that I observed when she is being reprimanded for something she did that my family considers a bad habit. However, she did not do anything this time, she was just by my foot, resting, so there was no need for her to apologize. Further, her aggressive behavior when pawing suggests urgency. I have been talking a lot with my peers since the rise of covid cases

during the pandemic, and I know for a fact that their problems have started to affect me. Sometimes, I even stop myself from replying to everyone as it gets heavy for me most days, and per my day-to-day experience, I become easily annoyed even with the smallest things because of it.

My chat with my friend added to my worries, and Chip responded to what I had been displaying that afternoon. Chip acted by suddenly pawing aggressively. We have been together for four years then, so she knows my habits, expressions, and tone. Her way of calling for attention, and her expressive eyes, were indications on my end that she was worried; which stopped me from my work and allowed me to take a breather and rest. That break gave me time to relax and temporarily forget my problems.

Meaning Gained from Vig 1: Pets can read the mood of people through their actions, and react accordingly. In this case, her reaction on my face as well as the tone of annoyance in my voice when I asked her to wait, triggered her aggressive pawing, panting, and big-eyed facial expression which I found as her display of worry. On my end, her display of worry, persuaded me to stop what I was doing which gave me time to rest.

Vignette Two

Everyone goes digital and we go restless

It was 6:30 in the evening, and as scheduled, we were having a management meeting. Our manager has just announced that we will be adding another client. The first thing that came to mind is that we lack manpower already, why are

they adding another client? “Sir, kulang na po tayo ng tao, yung mga under ko po e dalawang projects na hawak, ako po tatlo na” (Sir, we already lack manpower. Those under my team already has two projects, while I am handling three). “Nakapag promise na kasi si Boss kay [politiko] e, i-manage na lang natn yung oras ng mga tao” (Our boss has already promised to [someone] regarding the development of the project, let’s just manage our team’s schedule). An answer that is expected and disappointing. I get that we handle government office systems and that they are needed, especially during the pandemic, but where do we get the time to deliver them?

Immersion to Vignette Two

The stay-at-home lifestyle has become the normative way of living. This change has been demanded by the need for self-safety against the deadly virus COVID-19 and its rapid spreading. As an effect, industries have adapted in order to continue their business operations. While other businesses were forcefully closed, many, have implemented working remotely, specifically in their own homes, commonly referred to as *work-from-home* setup (WFH). Additionally, since no one is allowed to go outside, many businesses explored digitalization or the use of technology.

Despite that the addition of another client is good news for us, as this provides an indication of our job security while many people are losing jobs as the country is going through a financial crisis, the demand for us to work more than our capacity is becoming more challenging. One of the changes of working from home is the availability of people. In the office setup, a timebox is set for a day’s work - that is,

officially, we are required to work for eight (8) hours. Upon implementation of the WFH setup, however, rules were bent. I work every day more than the required time. The same scenario happens daily - waking early, working tirelessly, listening to complaints of workmates that I cannot even do anything about, and sometimes, missing meals as I am required to attend meetings, while other times, I just forget to eat. I know that there's an option to stop working, however, I fear that with the economy declining due to the closing of businesses, and hearing news from friends, news, and social media regarding the mass lay-off of some companies, I fear that if I did not do well, I am next. I cannot afford to lose a job, especially in these trying times when everyone gets sick, and many people losing their jobs, so I spent too much time working.

I started to miss meals as there was so much work to do that I kept ignoring my father and my siblings when they asked me to dine with them. I rarely go out of my room, and sometimes even forget to take a shower. There are days that I do not talk to anyone in our house, except for Chip who comes and goes into my room and barks at me randomly as well as tries to play with me to no avail. Every work day is always busy and full of concerns, to the point that I snapped when my father asked me to have lunch with them and my sister commented: "*Wag mo nang tawagin yan, papagalitan ka rin nyan*" (*Do not bother calling him [for lunch], he will just scold you too*). I told my father to stop bothering me in a belligerent tone, and he got mad as I was disrespectful. We got into an argument. My sister shouted that I should stop answering back.

Chip started barking and stood between me and my sister as we too shouted at each other. My father stopped us, and asked me what my problem was, then left my room with my sister. Chip, still in the room, is still barking at me even after our fight. I told her to stop but she kept on barking. Chip's incessant barking led me to reflect on

what I did and said, followed by thinking of what my father said. That led me to ask myself “*What was I really doing?*” I scratched Chip’s head and she stopped barking. She then licked my hand as her way of giving me a kiss. I said sorry to Chip, walked outside, and apologized to my sister. Despite being slightly awkward, I tried to join them for lunch and dinner.

Reflection

Working from home sadly has many unseen problems, one of which is the stress that should have only been felt in the office, is now felt within our home. A place that is supposed to be where I feel relaxed and at rest has now become an extension of the strain brought on by work. Coupled with problems at home, I have started to feel stressed and uncomfortable even inside my room. The challenges and problems that I am facing have influenced my behavior toward everything and everyone around me.

The fight with my father and my sister has become eye-opening to me regarding my actions. I was never that close to my father and my sister, so any problems that do not concern them really, I do not share it with them. It’s the opposite with Chip, however. They see me work and their idea of it is just “I am working”, but Chip visits me every day in my room, and I believe that she can sense there is something wrong with me. When my sister and I were shouting at each other, she stood up in between us like how humans put themselves in the middle of a fight to stop what was happening and started barking. That was her reaction to our fight. Despite being ignored, that’s her way of communicating with us, to try and stop us. Even after the fight, she stayed with me in my room, constantly barking at me, which I perceived as a lecture on what I did, something like my mother always did, something a family would do. Really, her actions made me realize that what I was doing was wrong. This has led me to think

about what I am becoming – I am projecting my anger onto my family, and later, pursuing reparations with my sister, such as joining them for lunch and dinner whenever I can.

Meaning Gained from Vig 2: Pets have an idea of conflicts.
Chip's reaction to our fight was placing herself in the middle of my sister and me. Her barking suggests that she is trying to stop the commotion, and her incessant barking towards me even after our fight, communicates that she is upset. I see this as her way to protect us from harm - to protect her family, and her actions have encouraged me to apologize to my sister and try to resolve conflicts between us. Additionally, it helped me try and go back to my original routine again by joining my family in eating meals together, which, promotes normalization as our brain feels calmer on familiar events and stops me from neglecting basic necessities like sustenance and its timely intake.

Vignette Three

"History repeats itself"

You can never unhear your mother when she cries. I remember waking up in the middle of the night when she learned that her mother, my grandmother, had just died. I remember that cry, I have heard it before. It was seared into my brain. Hearing her voice breaks me every time I think about it. Due to this very unfortunate event, I heard the same painful cry again, only this

time from my brother. Like mother like son, they say - his cry mimics my Mom's and you can feel the pain every time he opens his mouth. He just confronted my father who has been allegedly involved with infidelity again. This has happened before when we were kids.

I understand my brother's pain. This confrontation came with a hefty baggage. I have it too, we all do. The first time it happened for a confrontation of the same issue, it started only as an argument, then it escalated, and then violence was involved. My father tried to touch my brother's arm as he continued crying - he backed away as his face displayed fear. I know we were thinking the same thing, that night, and then I heard him ask my father if he was going to do what he did back then. Chip started barking as my brother shouted at my father, affected by the commotion, she stood up but I grabbed her away.

Immersion to Vignette Three

My brain instantly looked for my sister in the midst of the commotion. I gave her Chip and I asked her to go to her room, as I went to my father and brother. Why? Because I am afraid that the same thing will happen again, and I do not want anyone to get hurt again. My father was still trying to talk to my brother, but I told my brother to go to my sister's room instead, and he followed. My father also crying, just went to his room as we all went our separate ways.

My mother was staying in Manila at the time of the incident, she is a Barangay Secretary, and she assisted the government by giving relief goods to the people in

need, but due to the pandemic policies in place, her work restricted her from traveling freely from Manila, which then limited her visits here in Cavite where my father, siblings and I live. Despite that, this is no excuse for my father to get involved with other people again.

I went to my sister's room, she was also crying. I did not cry, I was feeling more mad than sad, but ultimately, I was preparing myself in case anything happened, at least this time I was not helpless and could fight back now if things happened as they did before - yes, my mind went there. Chip is barking and yelping. I was concerned for my siblings. It's hard seeing them like this, I am still thinking of my brother's face and what he said to my father earlier, but Chip's crying caught my attention, she is crying with us, with them, and she is also concerned with my siblings.

When my siblings stopped weeping, Chip just rested near my brother. He was caressing Chip's head and Chip licked his hand, their way of kissing. My brother calmed down as he continued touching Chip's head. I was pleased to see him interacting with Chip and was relieved that he had calmed down already.

We finally went out of the room. Chip immediately ran to my parent's room, but it was locked from the inside. She barked and pawed the door as if telling my father to open it. I did not care, I was still angry so I just told Chip to go away instead, but I knew that she was also concerned about him. My mother went home the day after, but this time, the confrontation was calmer. And on events where voices were raised, Chip was there trying to climb on any of us – a thing she does when someone is angry. It took weeks before everything became less awkward and the tension over what happened is gone, but Chip still visits my father every day in his room.

Reflection

This particular vignette shows Chip's interaction not only with me but also with my family. Even so, her actions affected me. As my brother yells at my father, Chip has started barking and standing up as if trying to stop what was happening. I discussed this in one of my second Vignettes that animals have an awareness of conflict. This time, she demonstrated it again as she attempted to stop the fight.

While in the room, as I heard her crying too, it gave me a sense of "togetherness" as she cried with my siblings. I find her crying as a sign that she joins us in our sorrow, giving me the feeling that what we feel is valid. Additionally, her kisses with my brother and overall presence made the atmosphere calmer, and when we opened the door, the way she ran to my father's room and pawed as a sign that she wanted to enter – suggests she cared for all of us. Pets are extensions of our family, and Chip displayed that she cares for her family and that I am grateful and appreciative that I know that she cares for us.

Meaning Gained from Vig 3: Through our pet's actions, it is established that she cares not only for me but also for my family members. Pets provide comfort to people hurting through crying, licking, or providing kisses, as well as their presence provides calmness. Additionally, checking in on my family displays that pets want to ensure the well-being of people. My take on these actions is that of someone hurting and worried about my family, my pet's actions provide security that she will be there for us, to help us.

Vignette Four

“Reunion”

“We are one with the family of BS Computer Science Class 2011 alumnus [redacted], who passed away this week. Our sincerest condolences go to his bereaved loved ones.”

- *University of Santo Tomas, October 14, 2021*

It was 6:51 in the evening of October 14, 2021, when one of my friends and past workmate, unexpectedly, sent me a message that just said “OMG” (Oh my God), alongside a link that was directed to the University of Santo Tomas’ or UST’s Facebook post, telling that one of our previous colleague and friend, has passed away. I replied “Omg, hala, kausap lang namin sya nung nakaraan” (OMG, we [our other workmates and I] were just talking to him not long ago”, followed by cursing due to the news - which I genuinely want to write in this paper just to express what I still feel about it, but may make this distasteful and inappropriate.

Our last interaction with him was when he was onboard his flight going back to the Philippines, coming from Singapore where he worked. When we asked him if we were going to plan for a reunion, he said that he would not be able to attend, due to his medical condition – which was the reason why he was going back. He explained his alarming situation, to which we all reacted with concern, but he reverted back saying that he was okay and

that going home was better, jokingly adding “kaysa ma-deads” (rather than dying [with his condition]). He even asked our previous manager for a job here in the Philippines, to which our manager replied, “Just send me your CV”. He added that he’s going to do a quarantine first for the next 10 days at a hotel provided by the government, then 4 days in their own house (a practice everyone needs to follow when they enter the country at that time). We all wished him a safe flight and a fast recovery so we could all have a reunion sooner. The next day, I sent a message to the group chat asking how is he doing, just to check if he was alright as I knew he was in quarantine and may be lonely – he did not answer, and the replies I got were only from our friends. This was August of that year, but like any group chat, it became silent days after as everyone became occupied by different things. Two months later, I got the news. I sent the post to our group chat. Everyone was shocked and could not believe what we just learned. Everything feels deeply sullen.

When we planned a reunion, we had no idea that the only one we would have was on a Zoom call for his wake.

Immersion to Vignette Four

How do you start writing about something that you know still upsets you to this day? That thinking of it is just pure discomfort? I remember the time I had a hard time breathing, the same feeling as I am writing this. Everything felt heavy, I could not stop myself from biting my nails, frail and shaky.

I have known my friend from my very first job. I stayed there for two years. For some people, it may be just a short time, but I have come to value the people I met there and remember fondly how they accepted me. Even after I resign from the company, I join them at parties, reunions, travels, and even special occasions like weddings. I learned before that one of my friend's father died due to COVID. I was sad to hear it, and I was worried for my friend, but losing someone firsthand is different – the pain is different. Although my friend and I were not related by any means, the agony still stung terribly.

Learning about my friend's death took a toll on me. Most nights, I find myself still awake and having a hard time sleeping. I have been crying for days that it was hard to hide it from my family. Whenever they ask me what happened, I just do not answer. I normally do not go out of my room and end up ignoring my hunger. I kept thinking of my friend's passing, and the memories I had with him, his smile, his laugh, the way he mocks our friends, he was a good guy, and now he was gone.

While I was alone and mourning, Chip was with me every day. She usually lies down in the corner of my room, but that changed when I was wasting away. She has started to lie and rest near my feet whenever I am working, below my table, and when I am in bed, she jumps and rests beside me. Sometimes I scratch her head and she will just look at me, and then I start crying again. She paws and barks at me from time to time. Despite my siblings or my father asking what was happening to me, I could not share everything. But somehow I can do it with Chip, maybe because I know that I will not be judged. I do not know, but with Chip, I can cry when I want to. Sometimes I even tell Chip stories of my friend, and she looks at me like she is listening. It took me weeks to be able to break this pattern, and Chip has never left me while I was

grieving for my friend. It was never easy to lose someone who's become a part of your life, but Chip's company and presence helped me as I went through difficult times.

Reflection

Chip's has been very helpful while I went through grieving. Her presence gave me a sense of comfort. It also helped that she was showing me care, as her usual ways of just being in the same room were changed to resting beside or near me. These actions made me feel that I was not alone despite feeling that I was. As someone who had training in mental health care, or at least how to deal with it, one of the things I learned is that when someone is feeling depressed, one of the things we can do to help is provide company. It establishes a sense of empathy, it gives someone the impression you join them in your challenges. For me, Chip has expressed them through her actions, and her pawing when I am crying, or just sitting silently tells me that she is there with me.

To many people, including myself, talking is easy, but sharing is different, especially on sensitive topics like feelings, it is definitely a challenge as it reveals you, opens you up, and allows people to judge you. So sharing my struggles in general, in this case, grief over someone I value, is not just a challenge, but is problematic for me. Even sharing with my family is hard as I do not want to feel like I am a burden by sharing what I am going through with them. However, I do not have this concern with Chip, maybe because the idea that she does not speak, or her accompanying me on days that I feel stressed, insinuates that she will be there with me. Talking to her, about what I was feeling, or stories about my friend, gave me a way to communicate what I felt, and what I was going through, and her, responding by just looking at me, and

sometimes licking me for a kiss, which was her way of acknowledging my emotions and comforting me.

Meaning Gained from Vig 4: Familiarity plays a role in human-animal interaction. The pet's presence throughout the grieving process provides comfort. The process of sharing my problems and feelings with an animal has helped me alleviate my feelings of sadness and depression.

Vignette Five

Desaparecidos

It was all over the news, that e-sabong, or online sabong (cockfight), had taken over social media platforms due to its controversies, as Sabungeros or players were tagged as missing. They have recorded 34 missing persons in March, who were presumed dead. Their families begged for help from the masses, the National Police, and the Office of the President, just to find their missing loved ones, even offering money to those who have information just to get them back.

“Pinapahinto yung operation ng e-sabong app”, said my coworker. I did not even bother to ask why. It was a chaotic time already. I know from the news that it is bound to happen. As someone who has contributed to the development of the web application used for the game, I cannot help but feel guilty to see what has happened to Sabungeros and the people involved in

the e-sabong game. I know I did not do anything but something I had part with has caused something so horrendous. I kept thinking of the families pleading to see their loved ones.

When May came around, news broke that someone who used to work in the company that operates the application and has a franchise in its operation was gunned down. My immediate thought was that they were killing people who were connected to it, followed by the safety of my family. I sent a message to our group chat that day to never tell anyone that I was one of the programmers who worked on that application.

Immersion to Vignette Five

Desaparecidos is the term used for victims of kidnappings who were never found. I first heard back in High School in a theatrical play, never realizing that I would use it to categorize people. Guilt has been eating me since hearing the news. Seeing interviews with the family members of the missing people hurt so much. I know I did not do anything, but I was still part of the operations that helped develop the program of the application that they were using - that led to them missing. It is terrifying to learn that some of my codes were used to build a system; a system that became a reason for people's unfortunate events.

My mind went directly to the idea that these people may have been slayed already by the criminals behind it, and now, they started to hunt those who are related to the operation. I got more paranoid and started thinking "What if they hurt my family?" I do not know how these people's minds work. But if they are susceptible to kidnapping people, they are capable of doing that to us too, or to anyone for that matter.

I started to get more anxious, to the point that when someone knocked on our gate, I got jumpy, even if it was just getting food deliveries, I volunteered to get them so if they were looking for me, it would only be me who would be involved. When one of my siblings tried to answer them, I even got mad. I am doing it so no one except me gets harmed. It's better that they only harm me than my family. I explained it to my family and despite giving me their reassurance that I should not worry, I still fear for the worst. These arguments between me and someone who wants to get the gate triggered Chip's change of giving attention when someone's at the gate, which later became her habit. Back then, when someone knocked or called for any of us while at home, Chip just ignored it. But as I reacted which led to a fight with my family, Chip changed and she started persistently barking. When someone is at the gate, even before they knock or call for a name, her immediate reaction is to go in front of our door and bark insistently, and whenever I shoo her away, she just ignores me. She even goes outside with me. Even when I am in my room and someone's at the gate, she goes to my room, barks to call for me, and then runs outside of the room. Sometimes when I look at her, she is just at my door staring at me, barking to inform me that someone is outside. Despite the fact that she accompanies me as I go towards the gate, I still feel terrified. Yet, she assures me that I am not alone and that she is there to protect me, and it helped me worry less and less.

Reflection

As my anxiety has sternly grown over the fear of the safety of my family more than myself, I become more alert and terrified when someone knocks on our gate. Paranoia is dangerous, the relentless worry has affected my rationality. But then, Chip illustrated the extension of courage through her actions. Despite being triggered by

fights between my family members, Chip started to aggressively bark at anyone in front of the house alerting us of the potential danger on the other side, and her accompanying me outside to check for said dangers assures me that I am safe. Her actions indicate that she wants to protect us, and as someone feeling anxious for the safety of my family, security is the primary thing that I need. This action has become a habit of hers, even up to now, and her religious commitment to continue these actions has given me a feeling of security.

Meaning Gained from Vig 5: Pets can sense danger in their environment. Through my display of fear, she picked up my actions and developed a way to tell us that she would protect us. In this case, our pet provided us with a warning to strangers near our house. Further, attending or accompanying me, or any of us provides a feeling of security. Overall, these actions imply protection.

Vignette Six

Cola the fighter

I woke up smelling a very intense scent of iron in the air. A weird fact about me is that I have a strong sense of smell, maybe to compensate for my weak hearing. With this weird gift, I knew what it was – blood, lots of blood. I got up on high alert as I knew Cola, our puppy that we got (so Chip will have a playmate) had been ill for days now. Both of his cheeks are swollen due to complications from a blood parasite. I saw puddles of blood on

the floor and his mouth. I ran to my sister's room and woke her up, "Ang daming dugo ni Cola" (Cola is bleeding a lot). I saw my sister's eyes widen as she got up quickly. We both checked Cola while repeating the words "Hala" and with a trembling voice. I fear that he's bleeding through his mouth, as his mouth is red too - that is never a good sign. We thoroughly checked him and saw that the blood was only from his swollen cheeks, it burst already. Without showering, we drove to the nearest open veterinary clinic that morning. It was 16km away from our house - far, but I was more concerned with Cola, heavily bleeding, and my sister filled with worry in her eyes.

Immersion to Vignette Six

We learned from the veterinary doctor that Cola has not been recovering and is actually getting worse. He went through surgeries to stitch his cheeks, but his condition got worse due to lack of vaccination as he was just a puppy. I can see my sister stressing, while I, on the other hand, have felt even more depressed seeing my sister in this state.

As profile pictures of people on social media turned black day by day, one after another, representing the loss of a loved one, and for the unfortunate many, more. With the news in mind, together with the news of the increase of people who tested positive with COVID-19 and the increasing number of mortalities in the Philippines, dark thoughts already dominated my mind. Then when Cola's health declined, I felt defeated.

Cola was placed in my room so he would not be bothered by Chip as he is trying to recover. As the day passed, I would try to play with Cola just to check his energy. But one day he barked at me and looked at me with a smile, or what I consider as a smile. My thought was Cola is amazing, with that gauze mostly covering his head and thin body, he can still smile, but why can't I? I stopped working and played with him a little.

The day after was one of the worst days I have ever gone through in my life. Cola was lying still on the floor, I called for him but he was not responding. My mind says he is dead but I went to check on him. He was breathing. I called my sister. She saw Cola and asked what happened, I replied by saying, "*Hindi ko alam pero mamamatay na 'yan*" (*I do not know but I think he's going to die*). As soon as I said it, my sister started crying and I got pissed at myself for thinking of the worst thing already, I could not help myself, I am unstable. I told her to get my keys so we could rush Cola to an animal hospital near us. The veterinary doctor said he has *Parvovirus* or parvo, a virus that deteriorates the immune system of a dog, and that Cola has only a 10% chance of survival as he does not have his vaccines yet. My breathing got heavy, to the point that even the vet doctor insisted that I should sit because I looked pale. I said earlier that he is dying, but with confirmation from the doctor, it hits differently – bad timing to have *Dilang Anghel*. In my mind, it's happening because I jinxed it, I spoke too soon.

Another death? Really? This is what's happening now? I just lost my friend, and now Cola, who is a family member is next? I feel crushed. My sister had begun crying again, while I was standing there feeling numb. The doctor said that Cola needs to be admitted and that the costs of it would be expensive – *cost, money, where do I get money? His previous medications and surgeries have already cost me Php 80,000.00*

pesos. I do not have money anymore, what do I do? As if on cue, Cola started howling on his pen, I asked the doctor if my sister and I could go to him. We saw him just lying down with an IV fluid injected already in his paw, limp as a vegetable. We left the animal hospital and I did not talk to my sister on the drive home.

I feel helpless. I have been feeling defeated with one too many problems in mind, now there's a huge chance that Cola could die. Before Cola got sick, I seldom talked to anyone from our family, and my eating habits became staggered, but after the terrible news, I did not have the appetite to eat. I only went out to get water, sometimes wondering if I dared to end myself, then thinking that killing myself would be a sin, but there were times however that I looked at our knife while I was in the kitchen. What would happen if I was gone? I do not know what to do, I do not know why these things are happening, I could not do anything about the people I knew who were dying, my friend was dying, and now Cola dying. I was hopeless.

The first night after leaving Cola at the vet, I could not sleep as in my mind I had been thinking about a lot of things, including my demise. Lucky are those who die in their sleep. We heard from the vet the next day that Cola was building up strength but was still frail. The day after that, we went to visit him. He started barking as he saw us. I tried to stop myself from crying but as soon as Cola started whimpering and yelping like he was crying, I just lost it. Tears started streaming down my face. He is crying like he is trying to tell us to take him home. That afternoon, the hospital sent us a video through *Messenger* that Cola was still crying. Seeing that and thinking I wanted him to go home just crushed me, and I started crying again. They advised us that he could go home now as he is stable, but still needs to be monitored and have follow-up checkups to follow, and was told to bring him back if needed. I took the courage to ask

for money from my family. My siblings and my mother gave me money to pay for the bill and we took Cola home with us.

Whenever we call Cola to drink his medicine or eat, he is energetic and does not even refuse to take his medicine. As we nursed Cola back to health, my thought was how this dog was such a fighter. He's fighting for his life, while I am wasting mine. That day, I told myself to stop being stupid and be like Cola, and be a fighter. As we all took care of Cola and saw him get to his normal, playful self, day after day, I started opening up to my siblings again, including what I was feeling and the pressing matters I was facing. Despite that sometimes it is awkward, to know that I was being heard was very helpful, and I am thankful for it, although I did not add that I was having suicidal thoughts, that is something I wanted to keep to myself. Still, I know that I escaped a dark place, and I know that I do not need to hide things from people I love, all thanks to Cola's display of his will to live.

Reflection

The hard truth of life is that most times, you only learn something so imperative when you get a beating. It is unfair, yes, but it molds you to have a clear mind and be resilient. With everything happening, plus the loss of a loved-one, and Cola almost dying, I almost gave up on life. From disassociating from my family, ignoring my body's basic needs, to having ideation of suicide, it is somehow a wonder that I am still here writing this. All of this was due to the help of my pets.

Cola's display of his will to live is what changed me the most. The smile he gave me when he was very sick is still the picture I imagine and think of whenever I look at him or I have a problem. His crying from the animal hospital indicating that he wants to go home and his eagerness to be healthy through not refusing his meals, nor his

medicine, made me realize at the time that no matter what you're going up against, you just fight the problems thrown your way and not let go. Caring for Cola's daily needs, as I team up with my siblings, opened up the opportunity to be closer to them, leading me to open up about my problems and eventually feel their support.

***Meaning Gained from Vig 6:** Caring for pets provides the opportunity for people to bond with them. These relationships became an opportunity for me to discuss my problems, which ultimately led to the feeling of being supported as I battled through the problems I faced. Finally, pet's actions, specifically Cola's display of fighting for his life convinced me to fight for mine as someone already in the state of having ideation of suicide.*

Relating Narratives to Theories

In Medicine, one of the uses of communication as therapy is to provide support to patients, specifically, to aid with the management of emotional and psychological distress while under care (Gupta & Sharma, 2023). While in therapeutic communication, roles as patients and providers (doctors, nurses, or psychologists) exist, we can still associate the same practice with Human-Animal Interaction, where I play as the recipient of health care, and my pets fill the role of provider. In the same process, interactions are done by medical professionals with their patients to build relationships. These relationships promote mental stability which aids with their health progression. While humans communicate verbally, the same context is happening with Humans and Animals, only through nonverbally means.

Nonverbal, as a part of the communication spectrum, has its definitions and interpretations. Birdwhistell believed that kinesics or body movements have a behavioral relatedness between individuals, and assumed that such behaviors are socially learned and communicative (Jolly, 2000). Chip's support on different occasions could be an example of behaviors being socially learned and communicative. From my experience with her, while I was grieving as she continued going to my room and resting beside me, is communicative as it gives the sentiment that she is there with me. Whenever someone was at the gate, from ignoring people initially to Chip's changing reaction to barking in front of the door and going outside with any of us, proves that movements or behaviors are socially learned.

As Birdwhistell started studies on Kinesics, Ekman and Friesen supplemented it by categorizing nonverbal behaviors. Despite Ekman and Friesen defining the use of nonverbal behavior categories on humans, I do believe that it can also be used in this situation, where some of the participants of the communication process are my pet dogs, as Adaptors, a category that describes body movements as having the capabilities to affect behaviors by reducing stress and anxiety, can also target self, objects, and others. As we define them, we understand their functions in the communicative process.

Table 1. *Nonverbal Behavior Categories on Vignette One*

Emblem	- Giving a kiss to Chip
Illustrator	- Giving a kiss to Chip after telling her "Okay lang ako" - My facial expression when I said "Wait lang" to Chip with annoyance
Affect Display	- I told "wait lang" to Chip with annoyance - Chip's aggressive pawing, being open-mouthed directly looking at me - Giving Chip a kiss - Telling "Okay lang ako" to Chip

Regulator	- Chip's eye contact as she is aggressively pawing
Adaptor	- Chip's pawing as she responded on my display of agitation - I carried Chip out of the room - Playing with Chip

Table 2. Nonverbal Behavior Categories on Vignette Two

Emblem	- Chip standing between my sister and I as we fight (<i>pumagitna</i>) - Barking - Chip licking my hand after I scratch her head
Illustrator	- My facial expression when I told Chip to leave me alone
Affect Display	- Scratching Chip's head - Chip licking my hand after I scratched her head - Telling Chip to stop as she continuously barks at me after our fight - Apologizing to Chip after the fight
Regulator	- Chip's incessant barking acted as a continuation of the interactions
Adaptor	- Chip's presence as she visits me in my room - I scratched Chip's head - Chip licking my hand after I scratch her head - Chip standing between my sister and I as we fight (<i>pumagitna</i>) - Chip's incessant barking as it made me reflect on what I did

Table 3. Nonverbal Behavior Categories on Vignette Three

Emblem	- Chip Standing between my brother and my father during the confrontation (<i>pumagitna</i>) - Chip Barking during the confrontation - Chip crying with my siblings through yelping
Illustrator	
Affect Display	- Chip crying with my siblings - Chip resting beside my brother - Chip visiting my father in his room and pawing the door (as if she was knocking) - Chip licking my brother's hand - My siblings crying

Regulator	- My brother touching Chip's head
Adaptor	- Chip visiting my father in his room and pawing the door (as if knocking) - Chip crying with my siblings through yelping - Chip resting beside my brother - My brother touched Chip's head - Chip licked my brother's hand

Table 4. Nonverbal Behavior Categories on Vignette Four

Emblem	- Chip's barking (indicating that she's present in the room) - Chip licking me (her way of kissing)
Illustrator	
Affect Display	- My crying - Chip's pawing whenever I cry - My telling of stories about my friend to Chip - Chip licking me (her way of kissing)
Regulator	- Chip looking at me while I am telling stories about my friend
Adaptor	- Chip's presence - Chip resting at my feet when I am working - Chip resting beside me and her change of pattern from being inside the room to resting near me - Chip's pawing - Chip licking me (her way of kissing)

Table 5. Nonverbal Behavior Categories on Vignette Five

Emblem	- Chip barking while she's at the door of my room to tell me someone's outside
Illustrator	- When I sway as I shoo her away
Affect Display	- Volunteering to get deliveries at the gate or checking the person - Chip barking whenever someone's at the gate - Whenever I shoo her away
Regulator	

Adaptor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Chip going in front of the door and barking whenever someone's at the gate - Chip accompanies anyone who goes outside to get to the gate
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Table 6. Nonverbal Behavior Categories on Vignette Six

Emblem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cola's energy and non-refusal of taking and drinking his medicine
Illustrator	
Affect Display	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cola smiling at me - Cola howling while he's in a cage in the animal hospital - Asking the doctor if we can go near Cola - Looking at the knife while in the kitchen (having ideation of suicide) - Cola barking at us as we visited him in the animal hospital - Cola whimpering and yelping when we visited him at the animal hospital - My crying hearing Cola yelping
Regulator	
Adaptor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cola smiling at me - Cola whimpering and yelping when we visited him at the animal hospital - Cola's energy and non-refusal of taking and drinking his medicine - Taking care of Cola with my family - Talking to my family as we take care of Cola

Categorizing specific actions from the events that I have experienced helps with understanding the communicative process. However, giving meaning to them is a crucial part of this process. Craig's communication tradition, specifically phenomenological says that the process of communication is perceived by people differently, while socio-psychological view it as interpersonal interaction. In these events where participants of the communication process involve animals, which are non-oral in nature, the intrapersonal connection is imperative in the process. We may have different ways to view it (phenomenological tradition), but inner experience, self-

thinking and observation, and internal discourse start the healing process. The interactions are just there unless you provide value to those interactions, and then illuminate the process to help you heal over time.

Sensemaking

Pets' Support on Human Distress through Human-Animal Interaction

Custance and Mayer (2012) argued that pets, specifically domestic dogs, have the ability to sense the distress of humans and have empathic capabilities shared through their actions. As a person feeling stressed, depressed, and having anxiety over these taxing and miserable events, support is one of the primary care that I would have asked for and needed from others. It is ironic however that as someone who provides help to others going through mental distress, through communicating with them, I did not see or even realize that I too, needed it. But is there really a need for me to make this a study?

Growing up in a large family, my siblings were always part of the honor roll and were representatives of schools to compete in national-level competitions. All my life I have always experienced being compared to my siblings, by my teachers who were their teachers, and by my parents, everyone compared me to them. Every move you make is being compared with your siblings. This pattern has molded me to think that "I am not good enough", and that no matter what I do, my siblings are better than me. This led me to have that feeling that sharing personal details about my life with my family is a bad idea, in their mind, I am already the weakest link, so why should I give them more reasons to think less of me? It is why I always had this wall up and refused to share things with them, and with others, on any deep thoughts that I had, such as my problems. But in this case, where these difficulties were overwhelming me, just like

clockwork, my mind did not even consider the option to ask for help from others, but my pets compensated for my lack of courage as they are the ones who gave me support.

These dogs have shown empathy through our interactions. Through their actions, and how they communicate, they are exhibiting their support. But is it really important for people like me who have a hard time sharing with people? Yes. Because through my dogs, I have the freedom to communicate what I am feeling, and to disclose my problems, all without the fear of being classified as weak, inept, and possibly useless.

There are people who experience the same thing as me, because sharing is never easy, and yet as we share, we extend ourselves to others. In a study conducted by Kysnes, et al. (2022), on the association of sharing difficult events on social media with mental wellness, 96.7% of the 2,116 respondents of the research answered that it is not *easier to talk about difficulties in real life afterward (after the event happened)*, while 98.5% answered that they did not receive support from those they shared their problems afterward. Additionally, per this study, sharing difficulties through social media has higher well-being. While this research is about communicating problems on a social networking platform, it is related to my experience, as self-disclosure and interaction with my pets became a medium for me to lessen emotional instability and promotion of mental health.

Finding Meaning on Emotional Contagion through Human-Animal Interaction

Emotional Contagion is the occurrence wherein someone's emotions and behaviors lead to the manifestation of similar emotions and behaviors to others. Custance and Mayer (2012), defined it as the process wherein the perception of

another's emotional state triggers a similar emotional response to the observer, and is part of the range of empathy.

An example of this behavior is when my pet yelps as if crying with my siblings after the confrontation with my father. For me, this is not just a my-pet-is-crying-because-were-crying scenario, it is a display of affection, of support. An interaction, despite sadly coming from a negative event, provides assistance and the feeling of being comforted, sending the idea that we are seen, we are heard, we are not alone, and that what we are feeling is valid.

I find meaning through my interactions with my pets. May it be from dramatic events as joining us with crying, a representation of their empathy through their own way, to just staying with me in silence as I isolate myself from anything. They convey relief, comfort, and help, to someone emotionally and mentally stable, to someone like me.

Building Social Relationship and Normalization through Human-Animal Interaction

Health should be one's foremost in our mind, in our list of priorities. I even heard someone say on the television, "If you do not have health, you do not have anything". Yet, I ignore it, like how I ignore many things. The events that led me to experience anxiety and depression have been eye-opening in my realization of the importance of surrounding people and family. Despite not being close with my family back then, it was still my "normal" or I am used to that setup, and for me, it still represents safety - seeing them and talking to them. Then again, as I isolated myself from them, it started to break that feeling of safety and progressed to the feeling of being alone instead. This is why my interactions with my pets became a crucial factor for me to regain those

senses. Because despite being indirect, it provided an opportunity for me to rebuild and strengthen the bonds between myself and my family, and even foster the feeling of just being “safe” to feeling loved.

Social relationships are important to our health. Human-Animal Interactions provide social support to people (Aschbrenner, et al, 2011; Gee, et al., 2017). For me, it is not just playing that I do with my dogs whenever I throw a ball, or when I run with them outside. These instances are occasions that lead to the development of a bond between me and them. This bond became a relationship that represents a family. For others who are emotionally challenged, this plays a huge role. There are people who find it difficult to talk about problems and challenges with their families (Kysnes, et al., 2012). But for me, pets provide that sense of family, but without the fear of receiving prejudice, of inadequacy.

Opening up to them and being vulnerable became a stepping stone to opening up to my siblings later. As I gave time to play with my dogs, and then later took care of Cola, this became an opportunity for me to also create a bond with my family. As I became closer to them, the hesitation to ask for help also became less and less. Through interactions with my pets, not only did I find that “normal” routine for me, but it also developed my relationship with my family.

How Crucial is Human-Animal Interaction in the Promotion of Mental Wellness?

The ability to be happy despite challenges is one of the attributes the Filipino people are known for. In fact, the Philippines ranked 60th among 146 countries on the 2019-2021 Ranking of Happiness report, while 2nd in Southeast Asia (World Happiness Report, 2022). Despite having a relatively high standing on the said report, the Philippines still has ranked 1st among Southeast Asian countries on stress levels

and has high records on other measures like worry (ranked 7th), anger (ranked 3rd), and sadness (ranked 2nd) (Gallup, 2022). Additionally, based on the Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study or YAFSS (2021), led by the University of the Philippines Population Institute and the Department of Health, almost 1 out of 5 young Filipinos aged between 15 and 24 years old have idealization of committing suicide. However, only 4 out of 10 of them reached out for help on the concerns to their close relatives or friends. It is ironic for a country to be second in a happiness ranking, yet we also ranked high on stress levels metrics. It only shows that we are constantly battling mental health concerns.

The mental health issues crisis are hidden battles that have been highlighted as the global pandemic happened. The increase in the number of cases due to the global pandemic also showed additional problems such as the lack of medical professionals practicing psychology and psychiatry, and its costly services. These are additional reasons why I also pursued this study. As a person from a very poor family, even getting food is already a problem, more so expensive medical care. Even now that I have a stable job, having a monthly salary, I still find the costs of these medical services high. In my view, I see interactions with animals as a way to combat this problem.

In a culture that has family-oriented values, it is not shocking that a large number of our households have pets (Inquirer, 2023), and we extend our sense of familiarity to them by treating them as our own family. This treatment is a vital part of the utilization of Human-Animal Interaction in building a therapeutic relationship. Daily, we have access to this kind of care. As we take care of them, they also take care of us through our interactions with our pets. By interacting with them, we enter a process that is therapeutic in nature. We digest these interactions, exchange of information,

understanding, and emotional expressions, and they contribute to our therapeutic outcome. The communicative process between animals and humans emphasizes the role of effective communication in furthering healing and personal growth as we understand ourselves through intrapersonal connection, to interpersonal connection, then opening the possibility of building social relationships with others.

As someone representing the population who finds it tough to share problems and challenges with friends, more so with family, I find deeper meaning in my connection with my pets through our interactions, through my experience. Nonverbal communication, through Human-Animal Interaction, in conjunction with healthcare accessibility problems, the communicative process between me and my pets became a crucial part of my development and progression of health and from my perspective, it can be an option for medical interventions when it comes to promoting mental wellness.

Let me end this chapter with a Latin phrase, *Ignis Aurum Probat*, which directly translates to “Fire Tests Gold”, simply put, it means that misfortunes strengthen people. We learn from facing adversities in life, and they toughen us with time. But as gold becomes compacted, it needs the help of its environment, like wind or weather to be dense and unyielding. We, too as people, need support from our environment to become resilient. I hope that those who experience difficulties in life will also have the support that will help them get back up as I did, and for those who do not have the courage to voice out their problems, find a way to do so.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION

At the start of this research, I initially listed down the questions I aim to answer to understand further the connection between the improvement of mental health or the prevention of treatable mental health issues and nonverbal communication through Human-Animal Interaction (HAI), which are:

1. What are the steps or actions in the processes of human-animal interaction?
2. How do I view my interactions with my pets?
3. What are the factors involved in human-animal interaction before its effects happen?

We Filipinos are said to be resilient as we continue facing disasters and problems in life. The recent global pandemic has been one of our biggest challenges to date as it carried numerous problematic consequences: losing jobs - our means to be able to afford what we need in life, like decent food and medicine; fostering worries and fears, as we are inundated with broadcasts of uninterrupted increase of people infected by the virus, and the daily mortality rate of the country; and worst, deafen by the cries of people who lost their loved ones, and for unfortunate many, including myself, we join them. However resilient we may be, the harsh reality still finds ways for us to bend our knees.

In this study, I recorded my personal experience as triggers that led me to the ideation of suicide. However, as I received help through the form of communication, I was able to escape such a dark mindset and decided that to help others like me, I selected this study.

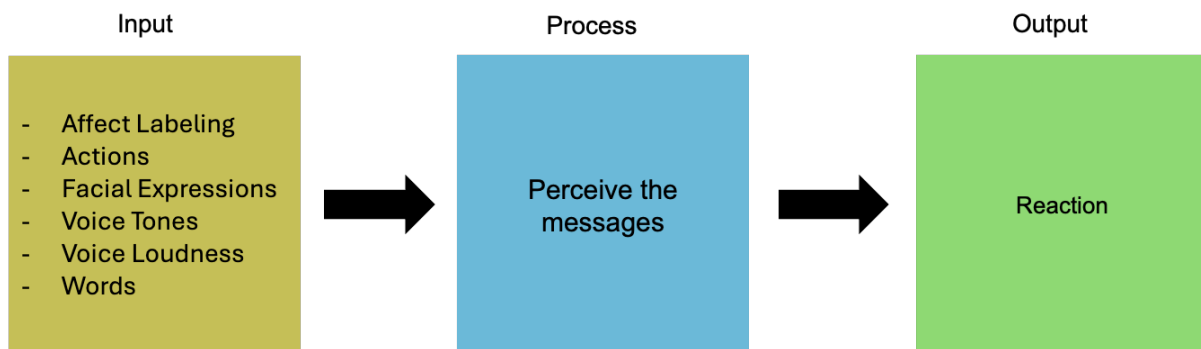
Following *Immersion-Reflection Modelling (IRM)* (Rosete, 2019), through autoethnography as a method, I was able to provide instances of those situations that progressed the decline of my mental health, to the point of thinking of self-dissolution, all recorded through *vignettes and immersions*. Also, through my sharing, I discussed my pet's contribution to nurturing back my mental health through our interactions and how I perceive them, recorded through *reflections and modeling*.

Process of Human-Animal Interaction

The interaction between animals and humans could be explained through the Interaction Model of Communication - a two-way process that involves participants who play both roles as senders and receivers of messages in either physical or psychological aspects and perceive meaning (Schramm, 1997). The participants exchange messages and each message is being perceived by both sides. In this case, the human and animal play the roles of both senders and receivers, wherein the human sends a message, either through vocal or sound, or body language. These messages are received by the animals which they respond to, which could be in the form of actions or sounds.

For me, it is not just talking to my pets, I am extending myself to another living being, I am opening up and being vulnerable by providing them with information about myself, and by providing context on what is happening. Kircaknski et al. (2012), study called the process of verbalization of emotional experience or putting feelings into words as *affect labeling*. If I am going to apply it in the process of producing information in computer science or *IPO Model*:

Figure 1. *Relating the Process of Human-Animal Interaction to the IPO Model*



In this manner, affect labeling, my actions, facial expressions, voice tones, and loudness, would be the input. The process will include my dogs hearing my voice or the words I tell, seeing my actions and expressions, and processing them based on their perception. Then the output would be their reaction. The same method applies to me, starting from how my pets react (through barking, or physical actions), to how I process their reactions and give them meaning, then the output would be the feeling I get, and how I respond or its effect on me.

Animals have a different way of communicating with humans. In the provided *vignettes*, we get to see these actions:

- Whimpering
- Yelping
- Barking (when we fight and when someone is at the gate)
- Standing up between us when we fight
- Pawing
- Aggressive pawing
- Licking
- Resting near the human body
- Staring

- Smiling or facial expressions
- Howling
- Tail wagging

The actions are displayed on different events, but all are triggered due to human actions, emotional display, body movements, facial expressions, and voice tones and intensity. Each action represents a meaning that they want to communicate to us, these are then interpreted by Humans.

Ong (1999), discussed that orality, or oral people (those who have the ability to speak), consider words to have power, and that sound itself could have less expression without the use of power. But in the case wherein animals play a role in the process of conversation and communicate nonverbally, we humans, give them the “power” of words through our symbolic meanings, through our interpretations.

Interpretation of Interactions between Animals and Humans

Constructivism plays a significant factor in this study together with Semiotics. As animals, specifically in this case, dogs, are non-oral species, their way of communication is nonverbal. Despite producing sounds, barking, whining, whimpering, and yelping, are considered non-verbal actions, as it is defined as “the aspect of communication that is not expressed in words” (Hess, 2016). The process of Semiotics enters as we read these actions and provide meaning to them. These meanings are our interpretations of what they are trying to convey. From these meanings, we build our construct or our reality.

In Bruner’s view of *subjunctivization* (González-Monteagudo, 2011), there is an importance on the ability of humans to construct our own reality as it can transform

themselves and their social contexts. In this case, where I have experienced depression and anxiety disorders, these constructs, or my whole perception of my pets interacting with me, helped me to become better, and it saved my life. Communication, through these interactions, further helped me as I have been experiencing disassociation from family. Social relationships, both quantity, and quality affect mental health, health behavior, physical health, and mortality risk (Umberson & Montez, 2010), whereas Cellozi et al. (2022) argued that intra- or inter-specific communication, plays a fundamental role in social relationships and functions to localize and identify individuals (on a relationship paradigm), establishes or strengthens social status.

It may vary from person to person, but from this study, we can say that communication or interactions between my pets and me became a mode for me to regain mental health. Amoah et al. argued that:

“Therapeutic communication has the potency of increasing patients’ knowledge and understanding, enhancing trust and self-health skills, increasing adherence, providing comfort and facilitating the management of emotions key to patients’ health and well-being”.

Through this study, the interactions between my pets showcased that communication as therapy can also be done non-verbally. I listed below my perception of my dogs’ actions:

Table 7. *My perceptions of my pets’ actions*

Human Perception	Animal Action
Provides sense of comfort	Aggressive pawing
	Pawing

	Licking
	Resting near the human body
	Smiling or facial expressions
	Tail wagging
Provides sense of protection	Barking (when we fight and when someone is at the gate)
	Standing up between us when we fight
Provides sense of support	Whimpering
	Yelping
	Staring
Provides sense of trust	Howling (as the dog is asking for my help)

These constructs that I built are my perception and understanding of my pets' engagement to myself. It is the subtext of their actions. Subsequently, in my mind, it is a pure connection, embodying warmth, friendship, family, and compassion. Instead of me taking care of them, they are the ones who took care of me. In a conventional setup, it should be the other way around. I believe Bruner's claim that our ability to construct reality is important as it can be transformative because I experienced it. My view of the interactions between my pets and myself is substantial and has played a crucial role in tending to my mental health issues.

Human-Animal Interaction Affection

Robino et al., (2022) study on the use of animal-assisted crisis response to shooting survivors, showed that even with less time, positive effects can be induced by the presence of animals like a decrease in cortisol levels or the stress hormones. In this study, we aim to check the factors involved in Human-Animal interaction before the effects happen. Here are the attributes that I consider as factors engaged in the process:

Familiarity or relationship between humans and animals

Familiarity or relationship is one of the major contributors that I see in the process. I treat my pets as extensions of my family, thus affinity is also attached to them. The sentiments I have towards them strengthen the feeling of being loved and supported as they act towards my problems.

Time

Despite the result of Robino et al. (2022), study, wherein there is a time limit of exactly 45 minutes, which has already resulted in a positive outcome on the mental health of the shooting survivors, time is also crucial in the improvement of mental health of people. This study's timeline is set on the "peak" of the global pandemic. As the problematic years continued, it opened opportunities for problems, which affected my mental health. The exposure with my pets is not limited to a timebox as (1) I live with them, and (2) we were on a strict quarantine, which makes going out limited. This setup made it more plausible for interactions to happen. Additionally, in this study, I do not claim that I am fully "healed" from my mental health issues through just one interaction, but through a series of communicating, playing, and the presence of my pets with me.

Perception

We all differ in terms of thinking, how I perceive things is different from others. Still, the perception or how we think translates and conceives our thoughts based on our pets' actions will be the basis for the effects. An example from *vignette #3*, seeing Chip as she cries with my siblings gives me comfort and a sense of assurance that the people I love are also being loved and cared for by my pet. Despite the action not being directed to me, it still affects me as I positively perceive this kind of interaction.

We all have different ways or extensions of finding comfort or solutions to our problems. I found mine from interactions with my pets, and it helped me be relieved off of negative headspace. It highlighted the function of self-reflection, and the support of surrounding relationships I have, with people, with animals, and its importance.

Impacts happen after our perception - after we process or apply our understanding to the pets' actions. In my experience, the "healing" or the improvement of my mental stability happens through time, as I have prolonged and continuous exposures, and interactions with my pets. There might be cases too wherein effects happen instantly, such as the instant feeling you are being supported, or feeling that sense of company. Relating from my previous example when Chip's barking as I was working resulted in me giving her attention, and then time to play with her, that time became a time of rest for me – a rest on problematizing work, and building up more stress. Afterward, it made me realize that my pet has helped lower the tension that I was currently feeling and made me feel glad. So there are also fragments that affect that happens even in a short amount of time.

Overall, the attainment of its effects is based on how we perceive the interactions between ourselves and our pets. I interpreted our interactions as an extension of help so I could escape the state that I was in. I interpreted them as an opportunity for me to get back up again.

As I started writing the terrible events I have gone through, I developed more understanding of how the process of nonverbal communication, through my interactions with my pets, had helped me to be here, writing this thesis, not just for myself, but for others who are also looking for answers, or help. As our kind professor, Dr. Benjamina Flor always says, "It is our job to communicate information, to share information, so they can be utilized and help others". This study is my way as a *Development Communication* student, to now help others by providing information that they may need.

Chapter VI

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As stated by the Social Weather Stations (SWS), 64% of Filipino households have pets at home (Inquirer, 2023). While this number is relatively high, there is still a large number of Filipinos with depression and a huge mortality rate due to suicide (Maravilla & Tan, 2021). While this research does not imply generalization of results and the same outcomes to others with treatable mental health illnesses, it could still be a starting point for conversations on the possibility or exploration of human-animal interaction as a way to help lessen, manage, or prevent progression of treatable mental health issues.

Further, it could help strengthen laws that protect animals like RA 10631 (An Act Amending Certain Sections of Republic Act No. 8485, Otherwise Known As “The Animal Welfare Act of 1998”), and RA 7277 (An Act Providing For The Rehabilitation, Self-Development, And Self-Reliance Of Disabled Person And Their Integration Into The Mainstream Of Society And For Other Purposes) for people with disabilities. It is important that we acknowledge the opportunity of this study, or any study relating to the positive help of animal interaction to us humans, as (1) it’s our moral obligation to provide protection to animals, and (2) it could lead to the betterment of our lives.

RECOMMENDATION

This study is focused on recording my experience as someone who underwent depression and anxiety and the use of nonverbal communication as a therapy to help lessen its progression through interactions with my pets. However, I consider myself as someone who only has treatable mental illnesses like depression and anxiety

disorders. For future researchers, exploration of the same subject could be done to people with Severe Mental Illnesses, or people with developmental disorders such as people with Autism, as we aim for everyone to have a better life and reach our full potential.

As of writing, Cola is now two (2) years old and is now a father of 3 puppies with Chip. They are named Cotton and Chewy, who turned one (1) this May, and Chocnut, who passed away after birth. These animals, an extension of my family, are a reminder that no matter what life throws at you, you just have to fight. Leading my family and me to help other animals through donations and sharing of information to help save animals - to quote my sister, "God gave them to us for a purpose, and we are capable of helping them, so let's help them too".

As for those who are losing hope in life, may you find peace and strength from those who surround you, and know that you are not alone in your battles.

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