

Life Satisfaction, Self-Esteem, Psychological Well-Being of Pet Owners and Non-Pet Owners: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: *With the COVID-19 pandemic, all families stayed in quarantine all across the globe. With having to quarantine for longer days, the mental health of many deteriorated with the loss of loved ones. It was seen as a compensation of social interactions, there was a rise in rate of adoptions of pets pan-India. The objective of the present study was to compare the life satisfaction, self-esteem, psychological well-being of pet owners and non-pet owners residing in India. The survey included a demographic and pet questionnaire, and three self-report measures. Qualitative responses on how does a pet have an impact on the owner were also reported, to study themes of subjective well-being. The study comprised of 226 Indian participants of which 113 were pet owners and 113 were non-pet owners. Independent samples t-test was used to analyse data and report results for research questions. Findings in the study do not show a significant difference in the life satisfaction, self-esteem and psychological well-being of pet owners and non-pet owners. However, qualitative themes suggested that pets acted as stress busters and a distraction, and had an indirect influence in physical health. Pets helped their owners maintain a routine in the lockdown. Viewing pets as family members helped the family environment. The current study contributes to bridging a gap in Indian literature in relation to pet ownership, and its complex nature and influence on human well-being. To build a more empirical base, there is still a need for further investigation of pet ownership and psychological variables within an Indian population to gain a better understanding.*

Keywords: pet ownership; self-esteem; life satisfaction; psychological well-being; COVID-19

1. Introduction

Indian families are known for being lively, warm and welcoming. With the Covid-19 Pandemic, people all across the world had to stay in quarantine with their families. The mental health of students, parents, health care professionals, wage workers got affected because of uncertainty and the loss of loved ones. However, a wagging tail always seems to cheer them up. It was during the Pandemic that people appreciated the companionship of a furry friend.

Post March 2020, the adoptions and sale of puppies have been driven by the children and teenagers (Mitra, 2021) who keep company without judgement. Workplaces, schools, areas of play remained shut for longer periods of time, furthermore the companionship of pets kept the families busy and made all children responsible. Psychiatrist Jai Ranjan Ram said under the present circumstances, this was the best way to lighten up the mood (Mitra, 2021). The population of pet dogs in India amounted for around 19.5 million in the year 2018 and is forecasted to reach over 31 million by the end of year 2023 (Statista, 2021) The population of pet cats in India amounted to nearly two million in the year 2018 and the population was forecast to reach approximately two and a half million by the end of year 2023 (Statista, 2021).

This sudden rise of adopting pets and cohabiting in weary times of the Pandemic, called on to the researchers to discover the reason of this phenomenon. Positive interaction with pets, like petting a dog boosts serotonin and dopamine which help in alleviating stress and anxiety. Pets have been found to satisfy the social needs of the people that care for them by acting as friends, providing unconditional love and acceptance. (Hill et. al, 2008)

In recent years, positive psychology has worked towards highlighting human abilities. Positive psychology highlights the need to evaluate positive aspects of mental health (Wright, 2018). "This science is currently known as having done comprehensive studies for well-being and happiness in different educational, hygienic, therapeutic and academic realms (Linley PA, 2004)."

The pandemic encouraged pet owners to develop a strong attachment towards their companion and believe that pets are a member of the family. Pets can provide many psychological and physical benefits for their owners (McConnell et. al., 2011). From a physical perspective, pet owners compared to non-owners were found to show significantly reduced risk factors for cardiovascular disease (Anderson et. al., 1992). Supposed psychological benefits of owning a pet included better well-being, it is proposed that pet owners suffer fewer episodes of depression (Francis et. al., 1985), experience more happiness (Lago, et. al., 1983), and enjoy life more (Francis et. al., 1985). Pets play a large role in redeeming feelings of love and need, potentially restoring levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction. In parts of the world where society is modernized and somewhat individualized, pets can be a source of comfort to those who are alienated (Levinson, 1978). The mere presence of a pet can reduce psychological feelings of unhappiness such as depression (Folse et. al., 1994). This evidence suggests that the ownership of pets can be greatly beneficial to one's physical and psychological health.

Life satisfaction is the degree to which a person positively evaluates the overall quality of his/her life as a whole. In other words, how much the person likes the life he/she leads (Veenhoven, 1996). Life satisfaction refers to how people

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perceive their lives, involving both their cognitive and affective dimensions (Diener & Chan, 2011). With the lockdown and lack of social interaction, people had a significant impact on their relationships and mental health. Social development of young population was linked to positive development with human-animal interaction (Mueller, 2014). Companion animals like dogs and cats contribute towards improving cardiovascular health and lower blood pressure. Animal companionship is commonly linked to lower death rates and better long-term health (Raghunath, et al., 2017).

Self-esteem is one's positive or negative attitude toward oneself and one's evaluation of one's own thoughts and feelings overall in relation to oneself (Rosenberg, 1965a). Self-esteem can be described as an overall sense of self-worth and personal value seen on a continuum varying from low, medium to high. It has been indicated by multiple researches that pet ownership has positive effects on one's emotional well-being. Bergesen (2015) investigated the effect of a pet-child bond on the self-esteem of primary school children. Findings demonstrated animal contact significantly improved participant's self-esteem. Cheong put forward Serpell (1990) noting that pet owners, when compared with non-pet owners, had fewer minor health problems and higher self-esteem. (Cheong et. al., 2005).

Psychological well-being is a complex term and is studied extensively to understand underlying aspects of behaviour. Psychological well-being can be defined as one's level of psychological happiness/health, encompassing life satisfaction, and feelings of accomplishment (Ryff, 1989). Pets present new opportunities for social interactions and purpose in life. With the Pandemic, opportunities for such interactions came to a stop. However, having a pet reduced feelings of loneliness and had a positive impact on the owner's mental well-being. (Powell, et al., 2019). Companion animals like dogs and cats contribute towards the long-term psychological well-being of their owners. Researchers have also reported that psychological benefits accrue from living with animals. These include studies showing that pet owners have higher self-esteem, more positive moods, more ambition, greater life satisfaction, and lower levels of loneliness (El-Alayli et. al., 2006)

2. Literature Survey

2.1 Life Satisfaction and Pet Ownership

Singh et. al. (2016) conducted a comparative study on the role of dogs in life satisfaction and stress reduction with the objective to compare the stress levels and life satisfaction between dog owners and non-dog owners. A sample size of 100 between the ages of 20 to 30 years was bifurcated into 50 dog owners and 50 non dog owners. Along with random stratified sampling, qualitative data collection via semi structured interview was conducted. Satisfaction with life scale by Diener (1985) was used to measure life satisfaction in participants from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The results showed high life satisfaction in participants having dogs as compared to participants not having dogs.

Curl et. al. (2020) conducted a study on neighborhood engagement, dogs, and life satisfaction in older adulthood using data from the Health and Retirement Study (N=476) to examine the relationships between dog ownership, dog walking, and the emotional bond with a dog to neighborhood engagement and life satisfaction among those over age 50. Findings indicated that spending time with dogs resulted in frequent social interactions which had a positive association with life satisfaction.

Liupakorn (2019) conducted a study on the relationship between dog ownership and physical activity, happiness and life satisfaction on 208 adult participants residing in United States. A quantitative research design was used to examine if dog ownership contributed to levels of physical activity, happiness and life satisfaction compared to non-dog owners. Attachment styles were examined as an intervening variable. Data was analyzed using an independent samples t-test and Mann-Whitney U Test. Results showed that dog ownership was related to higher levels of happiness and physical activity.

2.2 Self-Esteem and Pet Ownership

McConnell et. al. (2011) conducted a correlational study on friends with benefits: on the positive consequences of pet ownership. Studies found that in a community, pet owners had greater self-esteem and greater conscientiousness. Pet owners were high on psychological well-being as pets complemented their social lives. Third study was in a controlled environment, where the demonstration displayed the ability of pets to reduce negativity caused by social rejection. Pets hence, provide positive psychological benefits.

Schulz et. al (2020) saw differences in self-esteem between cat owners, dog owners and Individuals without pets while administering a sample of 5495 individuals to the Rosenberg self-esteem scale. Multiple linear regression showed that dog owners reported higher self-esteem compared to individuals without pets. Male dog owners reported higher self-esteem compared to men without pets, while female cat owners reported low self-esteem compared to women without pets.

Mhaistir (2013) conducted a study on influence of pet ownership on self-esteem, life satisfaction and loneliness among over 65s in Ireland on 147 participants by the means of self-esteem, life satisfaction and loneliness scales. Upon conducting t-test, there was no significant difference in life satisfaction and self-esteem.

2.3 Psychological Well-Being and Pet Ownership

Raghunath et. al. (2017) conducted a comparative study of pet owners and non-pet owners to find out the difference between their physical, mental, and social well-being among a sample of 60 pet owners and 60 non-pet owners from Indore city. The objective of this cross-sectional study was to study the effects of keeping pets on the physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being of participants. None of the pet owners had low self-esteem. 43.33% of non-pet owners were found to have moderate anxiety levels while only 13.33% of owners had moderate anxiety; 86.66% of pet

owners were found to have no depression; in contrast, 40% of non-owners had severe depression. Only 46.66% of pet owners were found to be lonely as compared to 80% of non-pet owners. The result of the study shows that pet owners are mentally more happy, less anxious, less depressed.

Chaudhary and Srivastava (2017) conducted a study on effect of pet ownership on happiness, psychological well-being in pet owners and non-pet owners on 100 participants. The Ryff scale of psychological well-being and subjective happiness scale was administered on the participants. The data was analyzed by employing mean, SD and t- tests which resulted in significant difference in the levels of psychological well-being experienced by pet owners.

Bao & Schreer (2016) conducted a study on pets and happiness: examining the association between pet ownership and wellbeing in 263 American adults using Amazon Mechanical Turk. Results indicate that pet owners were more satisfied with their lives than non-owners.

From previous literature surveys, it is observed that there is a significant difference in life satisfaction, self-esteem and life satisfaction among pet and non-pet owners. This complex relationship has not been studied a lot among Indian population. During the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health was negatively affected and it can be hypothesized that pets may act as a buffer for social interactions, and have been proven to have a positive impact in the geriatric and children population. This study looks at sample of 15 to 45 years of participants, living in India, and will add to Indian literature.

Objectives

This study aims to compare pet owners and non-pet owners on their life satisfaction, self-esteem and psychological well-being.

- 1) To compare the levels of life satisfaction among pet owners and non-pet owners
- 2) To compare the levels of self-esteem among pet owners and non-pet owners
- 3) To compare the levels of psychological well-being among pet owners and non-pet owners

Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: There will be a significant difference in the level of life satisfaction between pet owners and non-pet owners

Hypothesis 2: There will be a significant difference in the level of self-esteem between pet owners and non-pet owners

Hypothesis 3: There will be a significant difference in the level of psychological well-being between pet owners and non-pet owners

3. Methods

Methodology involves an elaborated explanation of the research process used to address the research questions including the research design, participants, questionnaires, data collection, and statistical analyses used.

3.1 Sample

The target population comprised of Indian citizens. These respondents were also required to have access to Instagram, Twitter or WhatsApp either via mobile phone, computer or tablet. The exclusionary criterion in this study included people who were younger than 16 years of age and did not reside in India. The reason for this exclusionary criterion was to adequately address the research question which required the researcher to study pet and non-pet owners living in India. The sampling procedure used in the present study was convenience sampling because the sample collected was dependent on people's willingness to complete the survey. A total of 230 responses were collected for this study, of which 4 were excluded because they were incomplete or had not met the inclusionary criteria. The mean age of the respondents was 22 years ($SD = 5.49$), ranging from 16 to 45. The demographical information of the study's participants is present in Table 3.1 and the pet ownership information is presented in Table 3.2.

Table 3.1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (N = 226)

Variable		f	%
Gender	Female	132	58
	Male	94	42
Age	Young Adults	211	93
	Middle Adults	15	7
Marital Status	Single	209	92
	Married	17	8
	Divorced / Widowed	0	0
Educational Level	Undergraduate	158	70
	Graduate	43	19
	Post-Graduate	25	11
Socio-Economic Level	Lower	2	1
	Middle	101	45
	Upper Middle	113	50
	Upper	10	4

Note: f = frequency

As seen from Table 3.1, the sample consisted mostly female (58%), single (92%) respondents. Compared to the female participants, male respondents (42%) were less. Most of the respondents in the study, are young adults (93%), aged 16 to 30 while, middle adults (7%), aged 31 to 45, in the study. Few respondents reported being married (8%) and no respondent reported to be divorced / widowed. Majority of the respondents were at an Undergraduate (70%) educational level whereas, rest reported Graduate (19%) level and or post-Graduate (11%) level. Socio-economic levels were reported as lower class (1%), middle class (45%), upper middle class (50%) and upper class (4%).

Table 3.2: Pet Ownership Information of the Respondents (N=113)

Variable		f	%
Pet Ownership Status	Yes	113	50
	No	113	50
Type of Pet	Cat	38	17
	Dog	71	31
	Both ¹	2	1
	Other ²	2	1

Note: f = frequency; 1 = Cat and Dog; 2 = Parrot, Rabbit

Overall, from Table 3.2, the sample consisted of pet owners (50%) and non-pet owners (50%). Pet owners reported the pet that they are most attached to i. e., a cat (17%) and a dog (31%).

3.2. Tools Used

The respondents were given the survey in English. The online survey created, comprised of a demographical questionnaire, a pet questionnaire and three standardized self-report measures, namely – Satisfaction with Life Satisfaction (SWLS), Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (RSE), and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being (PWB).

3.2.1. Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire was developed by the researcher. It collected data on the respondents' age, gender, race, marital status, education, socio-economic status, and occupation.

3.2.2. Pet Questionnaire

Pet owners were then required to respond to the following-pet ownership status, type of pet, whether their pet a therapy animal, duration of the pet's residence, hours spent interacting with the pet and lastly, a voluntary question was posed to establish a qualitative understanding of the impact of the pet on the respondent.

3.2.3. Satisfaction with Life Scale

Life satisfaction is an overall assessment of one's feelings, attitudes, behaviors by one's own from positive to negative (Diener et. al., 1985). Life Satisfaction was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) to assess subjective well-being (Diener et. al., 1985). This scale offers robust psychometric properties, including high internal consistency (reported coefficient alphas have ranged from 0.79 through 0.89) and test-retest reliability scores that suggest moderate temporal stability while being subject to change over time (Pavot & Diener, 2008).

3.2.4. Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale

Self-esteem is one's positive or negative attitude toward oneself and one's evaluation of one's own thoughts and feelings overall in relation to oneself (Rosenberg, 1965a). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg 1965) was used to measure self-esteem in this study. This 10-item scale measures self-worth by assessing both positive and negative feelings about the self. Items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale format, ranging from strongly agree=3 to strongly disagree=0. Participants rated ten statements regarding general feelings about themselves using the scale. The self-esteem scores range from 0-30 with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem. The Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was reported at a high $\alpha=.894$, hence this scale gives a high level of reliability.

3.2.5. Ryff's Psychological Well-Being

Psychological well-being (PWB) is defined as one's level of psychological happiness/health, encompassing life satisfaction, and feelings of accomplishment (Ryff, 1989). To measure psychological well-being, Carol Ryff's Psychological Well-Being scale of 42 items was assessed. Ryff included subscales such as Autonomy, Environmental

Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life and Self-Acceptance with scoring on a 7-point Likert scale. The answers were rated from 1 = strongly agree; 2 = somewhat agree; 3 = a little agree; 4 = neither agree or disagree; 5 = a little disagree; 6 = somewhat disagree; 7 = strongly disagree. Out of 42 items, 21 items are reverse scored. It was reported by Ryff that the six scales exhibit internal consistency (α) ranging from 0.93 to 0.86. Further, test-retest reliability over six weeks showed scores of 0.88 to 0.81. These scores suggest that the questionnaire is reliable. (Ryff C., 1989)

3.3. Procedure

The survey was created using Google forms, and it allows the user to create, distribute and collect data from a sample of a population and is extremely user friendly to handle. This makes the survey accessible to those who only have internet access on their cellular telephones or tablets. Data was collected using online means and further was exported for statistical analysis.

The respondents were made fully aware of the purpose of the research and were in no way coerced. The participants were also explicitly informed that they were in no way obligated to participate in the study by completing the survey and that they could change their mind at any point during the survey. Due to the survey being anonymous, the researcher was unable to retract a particular participant's questionnaires once it had been completed. The names of the participants were not collected in the survey and the researcher respected the anonymity of the participants by keeping all the collected data on a password-protected computer and this for a period of six months.

3.3.2. Survey Distribution

The survey was distributed by means of social media – Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter. The google form link was sent to friends, family, acquaintances, NGOs dealing with pets. The respondents first completed a consent form. If they accepted, only then the survey questions would be visible. Each respondent had to complete the survey in English, and included 6 sections:

- Study details and digital consent form
- Demographic questionnaire
- Pet questionnaire
- Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)
- Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale (RSE)
- Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB)
- Qualitative answers about the human-pet bond were optional for pet owners to answer in the pet questionnaire section.

3.4. Statistical Analysis

At the end of the data collection period, the data was exported into MS Excel for analysis. The descriptive statistics for the demographic and pet ownership questionnaires were first calculated.

An independent samples t-test was used to investigate whether there was a significant difference in life satisfaction, self-esteem and psychological well-being between pet

owners and non-pet owners. Four independent samples t-test were conducted to examine the difference between the life satisfaction, self-esteem and psychological well-being and demographic variables such as age, gender, marital status, and type of pet.

Qualitative question, 'How has your pet made an impact in your life?' was asked in the pet questionnaire situations and was voluntary for pet owners to answer. Overall themes, adjectives and general understanding from all answers about human-animal bond will be gathered by the researcher.

4. Results

4.1. Comparison of Life Satisfaction, Self-Esteem and Psychological Well-Being between Pet owners and non-Pet owners

An independent samples t-test was used to investigate the difference between life satisfaction, self-esteem and psychological well-being between pet owner and non-pet owners. An alpha level of .05 was used for statistical analysis. The means and standard deviations scores are presented in 4.1.

Table 4.1: Descriptive Statistics for Life Satisfaction, Self-Esteem, Psychological Well-Being among Pet Owners and Non-Pet Owners

Variable	Group	Mean	SD	t	df
Life Satisfaction	Pet Owners	23.77	6.74	-1.31	224
	Non-Pet owners	22.69	5.60		
Self-Esteem	Pet Owners	28.58	4.76	-1.47	224
	Non-Pet owners	27.65	4.65		
Psychological Well-Being	Pet Owners	207.95	35.77	-0.32	224
	Non-Pet owners	206.51	30.89		

Hypothesis 1: There will be a significant difference in life satisfaction between pet owners and non-pet owners. Results indicate no significant difference in life satisfaction among pet owners ($M = 23.77$, $SD = 6.74$) and non-pet owners ($M = 22.69$, $SD = 5.60$), $t = -1.31$, $p = .10$.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a significant difference in self-esteem between pet owners and non-pet owners.

There was no significant difference for self-esteem, $t = -1.47$, $p = .07$, despite pet owners ($M = 28.58$, $SD = 4.76$) attaining higher scores than non-pet owners ($M = 27.65$, $SD = 4.65$).

Hypothesis 3: There will be a significant difference in psychological well-being between pet owners and non-pet owners.

Pet owners ($M = 207.95$, $SD = 35.77$) compared to the non-pet owners ($M = 206.51$, $SD = 30.89$) demonstrated no significant differences on psychological well-being, $t = -0.32$, $p = .37$.

4.2 Qualitative Responses

A voluntary question was asked to pet owners, "How has your pet made an impact in your life?". This question had no right or wrong answers, and was entirely subjective in nature. The themes, and adjectives used in the answers

provided more insight to the human-animal interaction during COVID-19 lockdowns and in daily life.

"It's like my cat has healing powers. It's very very calming to just be next to her. She's like a stress ball made of fur!"

Multiple participants believe their pets have helped them reduce their anxiety and help in being mindful. Companion pets have known to be 'stress busters' due to their infectious energy. Similarly, a participant said that, *"Having my dog made me pass a very bad stage in life. Being around her makes me feel stress free and takes my anxiety away"*. One also said, *"Whenever I'm feeling anxious or stressed, he boosts up my mood. He's family! He follows me around the house, makes me feel loved, when I'm feeling low."*

Dogs require more physical activity as compared to cats in a household. Taking dogs on a walk or playing with them can help the pet owners unwind and increase their physical activity, and having an indirect influence on their bodily health along with mental health. A participant shared, *"I'm much more active due to my dog. My daily routine is more scheduled. The happiness content has increased not just for me but also my entire family. Having a pet has significantly decreased my anxiety. Because of my dog I now talk to strangers who want to meet the dog and that's helped me become more vocal and less shy. Other than that, my health and my productivity level has increased"*. The opportunities for social interactions increase as pet owner's step outside and interact with other individuals. *"The pet has increased my involvement in things other than work and has increased satisfaction of spare time utilization."* Moreover, a pet owner added, *"His play sessions with his friends help me to relax and reflect on everything that is happening, it also makes me socialize with other pet parents"*. Pet owners noted taking time out from work, and some added that spending time with their pets served as a distraction, *"She adds ton of energy and distraction in my day-to-day life"*.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, pet owners added their pets in their list of a survival kit, *"Couldn't have survived lockdown without my cats!"*, noted a pet owner. A new pet owner said, *"We got her a couple of months before the pandemic and during lockdown when everything was gloomy and sad, she was the one who lit up our boring lives. The love she gives us all is unconditional."* Some pet owners stated that their pets helped them through emotional distress, *"During quarantine I was on the verge of depression and with him my anxiety and stress and gotten better"*. *"They've brought our family closer and given me something to look forward to. They've helped me maintain a routine in this pandemic situation"*, said one pet owner and highlighting the role of a pet in maintaining a routine.

Pet owners regardless of the type of a pet, consider their pets to be a part of their family and observe an impact on all members of the family. *"My pet came into my life when I was trying to figure out myself. Having him around has impacted my relationship with my family in a good way and it has also improved my perception and understanding towards myself"*. A similar role was observed, *"My pet has made quite an impact in my life as I get to spend time with him, usually before lockdown started us as a family only"*

used to sit on dinners due to physical schools and studies etc. with my pet being at home, we play with him go out with him and enjoy with him". Pet owners noted that family members spent time together and one participant mentioned, "She (cat) has a super impact on dad, all his stress goes away when he meets maau in the evening. "

Individuals who seek emotional support of a companion animal during a physical or emotional distress, experience closeness to the pets. "I have certain incurable invisible diseases, whenever my knee dislocates or have an asthma attack or have a big eczema flare up, I seek comfort in them. Hugging them makes me feel better. Was suicidal at one point and having anxiety and depression even now just looking at them makes me elevate my mood. " One added, "Having my dog made me pass a very bad stage in life. Being around her makes me feel stress free and takes my anxiety away. "

Overall, having a companion animal teaches their owners a few qualities and inspire them to be better humans. "My pet cats, for me, are not just "pets", they're family. Since they've been such a big part of my life since I was a child, they have been instrumental in constructing my identity itself. I now run a foundation for cats with my father and that has largely impacted not just my daily experience but also my life, in general. " The emotional influence a cat had was shared, "Spending time with my cats makes me feel better when I am feeling low. I hope that every person should have a pet so that they learn about how amazing it is to have someone to love and have them love you back". A participant said "She's given me a sense of grounding and calm that I can't believe I missed out on for so many years", and an owner said, "My pet has made me happier and so much more patient ever since I adopted him. He's a ball of rambunctious joy. " Not only do pets teach humane qualities through their wagging tails and energy, they also "Made me more sensitive and caring towards other animals too. A dog always teaches you how to be loyal!" added a pet owner.

5. Discussion

5.1. Comparison of Life Satisfaction, Self-Esteem and Psychological Well-Being between Pet owners and non-Pet owners

The current study found no significant difference in life satisfaction, self-esteem and psychological well-being between pet owners and non-pet owners (see Table 4.1). We would look at further discussion on each hypothesis and possible explanation in the current study and cited literature available.

5.1.1 Comparison of Life Satisfaction between Pet owners and non-Pet owners

The present study was conducted with an Indian sample of 226 participants. There was no significant difference in life satisfaction among pet owners and non-pet owners.

The results of the study are in line with the studies conducted by Wright S (2018), Mhaistir (2013) and Connaughton (2016). The above studies had majority of female participants, similar to the current study (Female

participants = 132). Mhaistir (2013) conducted his study among older adults over 65s, whereas in the current study, the age limit for inclusion of participants was 50 years of age. Results were reported with no significant differences in life satisfaction and self-esteem of older adults. Researchers noted that pet owners experienced lower levels of loneliness than non-pet owners. It was noted that dogs increased sociability of older adults and can fill a void as a source of conversation, hence it was assumed that pet owners living alone would have higher life satisfaction.

The current study contradicts the findings of Singh et. al. (2016) among Indian population of 50 pet owners and 50 non-pet owners with unmarried females dominating the sample. The age of participants varied from 20 to 30 years and the results depicts a high life satisfaction in participants with dogs. Researchers noted that dogs helped their owners during adverse life events and improved well-being in the youth population. Liupakorn (2019) also reported higher levels of happiness in pet owners along with physical health benefits of owning a pet.

The current study was open for responses in June 2021, shortly before the COVID-19 restrictions in India were being lifted. The second wave of COVID-19 had the highest death toll in India and was emotionally distressing. This period also saw the adoption of more pets, hence the excitement of a new addition in the family would have reported higher levels of satisfaction. It may also be possible that everyone had adapted to staying indoors and resuming study/work online with the new norms and having a pet before the pandemic would have led them to adapting to the pet. A routine would have been established with pets since a significant amount of time had passed after the first wave lockdown. Hence, the scores for life satisfaction were not significant enough.

5.1.2. Comparison of Self-Esteem between Pet owners and non-Pet owners

The present study reported no significant differences in self-esteem between pet and non-pet owners.

The current study's results match those of Connaughton (2016) and Cheong et. al. (2005) showing no significant differences in the self-esteem of pet owners and non-pet owners. Both the studies had more female participation than male. The former reported no significant difference in self-esteem and noted that pets could potentially be beneficial to those facing life stressors. Cheong's results are similar to Connaughton's results (2016). Cheong et. al. (2005) conducted their study with 200 pet owners and non-pet owners among Malaysian sample. It was seen that the results were statistically inconclusive as the results were not statistically significant. Researchers emphasized on the importance of pets and their benefits on mental, physical health of the owner.

Contradictory to the findings of the above studies, Schneider and Harley (2016) and Bierer (2000) found higher score for self-esteem and a significant difference among pet owners and non-pet owners on self-esteem. Bierer (2000) had a sample from elementary schools, which was different from the present study. 126 students participated and the results

reported significantly higher self-esteem and empathy scores in dog owners than non-dog owners. Factors like marital status of parents, sibling status and mother's work status were also examined. Lookabaugh (1998) also conducted a study similar to Bierer among a children population of 436 children. It was reported that children's attachment to a companion animal is positively related to their sense of self-esteem. The behaviours of pets, such as tail wagging, barking, initiation to be petted, sparked responsiveness and made children want to be closer to their pets.

A possible explanation for results to be non-significant could be the association of self with activities one engages in, in-person had reduced significantly during COVID-19. A noteworthy point would be, the death toll around the Globe and loved ones of family may have been affected by the virus. An overall distressing situation may have had an impact on the baseline of self-esteem of participants.

5.1.3. Comparison of Psychological Well-Being between Pet owners and non-Pet owners

There is no significant difference in the psychological well-being among pet owners and non-pet owners.

Contrary to the results of the current study, study by Raghunath et. al. (2017) on a sample of 120 Indian participants showed high self-esteem in pet owners, 13.33% of pet owners had moderate anxiety, 86.66% of pet owners were found to have no depression. The results inferred that pet owners were more happy, less anxious and less depressed. In line with an Indian sample, Chaudhary and Srivastava (2017) found a significant difference in the levels of psychological well-being experienced by pet owners. It was inferred that people who had regular interactions with pets reported more happiness in their lives than people who did not.

During COVID-19, Xin X (2021) explored the subjective well-being of pet ownership among 756 participants. The researchers noted a shift in pet owner's behaviour towards their pets, for instance, extended time spent conversing with their pets, increased frequency and time to embrace their pets, also allowed their pets to stay in their bedroom or even sleep on the bed. Pet owners relieve that psychological pressure through behavioral changes towards their pets in early stage. Synchronous with the study, Hawkins and Brodie (2020) conducted their study during COVID-19 lockdown among a British population over three different periods. It was found that having a pet whom one is highly attached to, may have caused hardships in the beginning of the pandemic had a negative influence on mental health, but over time it has proven to be beneficial for reducing anxiety and negative emotions as restrictions began to lift.

As restrictions started to ease, the influence of pets on the psychological well-being would have changed. Once pet owners started going outdoors, their subjective approach towards their pets became more positive hence, the mean scores of psychological well-being of pet owners were higher than that of non-pet owners. Cavanaugh et. al. (2008) found that well-being appeared to be greater in close, longer duration of human-animal interactions. These findings support the qualitative themes in the study. Participants found their pets to be a 'stress-buster' and a close bond with

the pets helped some develop skills to navigate human relationships. One theme in the qualitative answers points towards considering pets as family members and having a definite impact on the family as a unit. El-Alayli et. al. (2006) inferred from the study that the well-being of an individual is likely to be associated with the extent to which they perceive their pet as a family member.

6. Conclusion

There is a lot of evidence that supports the notion of pets having a significant impact on the physical, mental health and social aspects of human beings. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the experience of having a pet and their direct influence was an intriguing relationship. There is limited research on an Indian population with respect to pets and their owner's well-being.

- 1) The current study aimed to compare the life satisfaction, self-esteem and psychological well-being of pet owners and non-pet owners among an Indian population.
- 2) Additional exploratory analyses were conducted to determine if life satisfaction, self-esteem and psychological well-being differed according to age, gender, marital status, and type of pet.
- 3) The main study sample consisted of 226 Indians in the age range of 15 to 50 years. The participants were mostly single (92%), female (58%) and were a young adult population (93%).
- 4) The results reported for the main study no significant difference in the life satisfaction, self-esteem and psychological well-being of pet owners and non-pet owners.
- 5) Through the qualitative responses, few themes were recognized: adapting to the pet, pets acting as stress busters and a distraction, indirect influence in physical health, maintenance of routine in the lockdown and viewing pets and family members.
- 6) Participants emphasized on the emotional support they received from their pets during distressing times and paid attention to the qualities that their pets had taught them.
- 7) The contribution of pets though statistically was not significant, it was qualitatively significant and will help gauge further human-animal relationships.

7. Future Scope

- 1) Future studies should consider a diverse sample of economic strata, occupation specific groups and age groups.
- 2) More inclusion of married participants in further studies will provide more insight on the influence of marital status and pet ownership.
- 3) Inclusion of multiple pets might explain the relationships with pets in detail
- 4) Collecting data from the participants in person would eliminate technical challenges.
- 5) The use of stratified sampling would lead to a more representative sample.
- 6) Qualitative responses should be collected along with quantitative results to understand the subjective perspective of the participants.

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Author Profile



A pet lover and an avid psychology enthusiast, **Mrinmayi Gudi**, is a student in Pune, India. A curious and observant person in nature, this study is inspired by lived experience of a 6-year-old Mudhol hound named Max Gudi. To stay on top of recent fields, I read and follow upcoming therapists on Instagram and read about new therapy techniques. Trauma informed therapy along with CBT and mindfulness have captured my interest in the pandemic. I look forward to learning about animal assisted therapy and therapeutic nuances of clinical psychology. In aspect of research, I would love to work on more topics with respect to Indian and South-Asian populations in the future and bring about more awareness about mental health.