



Pet and Well-Being: A Study among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Young adulthood can be considered the healthiest time of life and young adults are generally in good health, subject neither to disease nor the problems of senescence. Strength and physical performance reach their peak from 18–39 years of age. In general, adolescence is a complex period characterized by substantial cognitive and emotional changes grounded in the unfolding development of the brain, as well as behavioral changes associated with basic psychosocial developmental tasks. Pets can be a positive influence to young adults in the midst of series of changes in their life. The objectives of the present study are to understand how psychological well-being and loneliness differ between young adults with and without pets and to understand the relationship between psychological well-being and loneliness. The sample (N = 60) consist of 30 young adults with pets and 30 young adults without pets from Kerela. Assessment of psychological well-being and loneliness was done using ryff's psychological well-being scales (pwb) 42 item version by Carol D. Ryff and Loneliness scale by Russell et al. A comprehensive statistical analysis of the study was done using SPSS. Descriptive methods such as mean, standard deviation and t-test were used to determine the significant difference the variables psychological well-being and loneliness between the groups. The result shows that there is no significant difference in terms of psychological well-being and loneliness in young adults with and without pets. Individuals without pets tends to show higher levels of mean value in psychological well-being compared to young adults with pets. Individuals without pets tends to show higher levels of mean value in loneliness compared to young adults without pets. The psychological well-being and loneliness of the sample group could be influenced by socio-demographic factors and other subjective factors.

Keywords: Young Adults, Pets, Psychological well-being, Loneliness

1. Introduction

Young or prime adulthood can be considered the healthiest time of life and young adults are generally in good health, subject neither to disease nor the problems of senescence. Strength and physical performance reach their peak from 18–39 years of age. According to Erik Erikson, in the wake of the adolescent emphasis upon identity formation, 'the young adult, emerging from the search for and insistence on identity, is eager and willing to fuse their identity with that of others. He [or she] is ready for intimacy, that is, the capacity to commit... to concrete affiliations and partnerships. To do so means the ability to face the fear of ego loss in situations which call for self-abandon: in the solidarity of close affiliations, in orgasms and sexual unions, in close friendships and in physical combat.

Biologically and psychologically, young adulthood is fundamentally a period of maturation and change, although the degree of change may seem less striking than the changes that occurred during childhood and adolescence. As just one example, the physical changes of the transition from childhood into adolescence are transformative, with bodies growing in dramatic bursts and taking on secondary sex characteristics as puberty unfolds. As young people move from adolescence into adulthood, physical changes continue to occur, but they are more gradual. Individuals begin the steady weight gain that will characterize adulthood, but these changes are not as discontinuous as they are at the beginning of adolescence (Cole, 2003; Zagorsky and Smith, 2011). In some ways, the tendency for the developmental change that happens during young adulthood to be gradual instead of dramatic may have led to the devaluation of young adulthood as a critical developmental period, but that developmental change should be not be underestimated. It is integral to transforming children and adolescents into adults. The psychological and brain development that occurs during young adulthood illustrates this point.

Psychological well-being consists of positive relationships with others, personal mastery, autonomy, a feeling of purpose and meaning in life, and personal

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growth and development. Psychological well-being is attained by achieving a state of balance affected by both challenging and rewarding life events. At the most basic level, psychological wellbeing (PWB) is quite similar to other terms that refer to positive mental states, such as happiness or satisfaction, and in many ways it is not necessary, or helpful to worry about fine distinctions between such terms. If I say that I'm happy, or very satisfied with my life you can be pretty sure that my psychological wellbeing is quite high. Psychological wellbeing has two important facets. The first of these refers to the extent to which people experience positive emotions and feelings of happiness. Sometimes this aspect of psychological wellbeing is referred to as subjective wellbeing (Diener, 2000). Subjective wellbeing is a necessary part of overall psychological wellbeing but on its own it is not enough.

Loneliness, distressing experience that occurs when a person's social relationships are perceived by that person to be less in quantity, and especially in quality, than desired. The experience of loneliness is highly subjective; an individual can be alone without feeling lonely and can feel lonely even when with other people. Psychologists generally consider loneliness to be a stable trait, meaning that individuals have different set-points for feeling loneliness, and they fluctuate around these set-points depending on the circumstances in their lives. Individuals' levels of loneliness typically remain more or less constant during adulthood until 75 to 80 years of age, when they increase somewhat. Prolonged loneliness is associated with depression, poor social support, neuroticism, and introversion. Studies have shown that loneliness puts people at risk for physical disease and that it may contribute to a shortened life span.

Although loneliness has always been part of human existence, it has a relatively short history as a subject of psychological investigation. As developed by the psychiatrist John Bowlby during the second half of the 20th century, attachment theory emphasizes the importance of a strong emotional bond between the infant and the caregiver; it stands as a forerunner to contemporary theories of loneliness. From that perspective, loneliness occurs when children with insecure attachment patterns behave in ways that result in their being rejected by their peers. Those rejections hinder their development of social skills and increase their distrust of other people, thereby fostering ongoing loneliness.

More than one in three young adults aged 18 to 25 reported problematic levels of loneliness, according to a new report from Swinburne University and VicHealth. Michelle Lim Senior Lecturer and Clinical Psychologist, Swinburne University of Technology surveyed 1,520 Victorians aged 12 to 25, and examined their experience of loneliness. Symptoms of depression and social anxiety were observed. Overall, one in four young people (aged 12 to 25) reported feeling lonely for three or more days within the last week. Among 18 to 25 year old, one in three (35%) reported feeling lonely three or more times a week. We also found that higher levels of loneliness increase a young adult's risk of developing depression by 12% and social anxiety by 10%. Adolescents aged 12 to 17 reported better outcomes, with one in seven (13%) feeling lonely three or more times a week. Participants in this age group were also less likely to report symptoms of depression and social anxiety than the 18 to 25 year old. Young adulthood can be a lonely time. Anyone can experience loneliness and at any point in life but it's often triggered by significant life events – both positive (such as new parenthood or a new job) and negative (bereavement, separation or health problems). Young adults are managing new challenges such as moving away from home and starting university.

Having a pet has been claimed to have beneficial health effects (Rijken & Beek, 2011) and evidence shows indoor pets such as dogs can affect people in a positive way. Pets, especially dogs and cats, can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, ease loneliness, encourage exercise and playfulness, and even improve your cardiovascular health. Perhaps most importantly, though, a pet can add real joy and unconditional love to your life. While people with pets often experience the greatest health benefits, a pet doesn't necessarily have to be a dog or a cat. Even watching fish in an aquarium can help reduce muscle tension and lower pulse rate.

Studies have shown that: Pet owners are less likely to suffer from depression than those without pets. People with pets have lower blood pressure in stressful situations than those without pets. One study even found that when people with borderline hypertension adopted dogs from a shelter, their blood pressure declined significantly within five months. Playing with a dog or cat can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine, which calm and relax. Pet owners have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels (indicators of heart disease) than those without pets. Heart attack patients with pets survive longer than those without.

Pet owners over age 65 make 30 percent fewer visits to their doctors than those without pets. One of the reasons for these therapeutic effects is that pets fulfill the basic human need for touch. Even hardened criminals in prison show long-term changes in their behavior after interacting with pets, many of them experiencing mutual affection for the first time. Stroking, hugging, or otherwise touching a loving animal can rapidly calm and soothe you when you're stressed or anxious. The companionship of a pet can also ease loneliness, and most dogs are a great stimulus for healthy exercise, which can substantially boost your mood and ease depression. Although many studies do talk about the relevance of having pets for a better living, there is a gap in research connecting psychological well-being and loneliness among young adults with and without pets. The present study focuses on understanding the impact of owning pets on psychological well-being and loneliness of young adults.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

A sample (N = 60) consist of 30 young adults with pets and 30 young adults without pets from Kerala was taken using the convenience sampling technique. The participant's ages ranged from 18 to 25. Google forms were used to conduct the online survey. Before giving out the questionnaire,

participant's agreement was obtained. On how to react to each statement, they were given instructions. Using SPSS- 28.0.1.1, the gathered data was examined. To ascertain the difference between the two variables, t-test statistical analysis was utilised.

2.2. Psychological Well-Being

Developed by psychologist Carol D. Ryff, the 42 -item Psychological Wellbeing (PWB) Scale measures six aspects of wellbeing and happiness: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self -acceptance (Ryff et al., 2007; adapted from Ryff, 1989). Researchers have used both the 42 -item PWB Scale and a shortened 18-item version (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) with American adults of all ages, including those from lower-income backgrounds (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Curhan et al., 2014). The 18 -item scale has also been used with Latinx college students (Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, & Villegas, 2009), African- Americans living in New York, and Mexican-Americans living in Chicago (Ryff, Keyes, & Hughes, 2003).

2.3. Loneliness Scale

Developed by psychologist Daniel Russell (1996), the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) is a 20-item measure that assesses how often a person feels disconnected from others. Researchers have used this measure with many different groups, including homeless youth (Kidd, 2007), teen mothers (Barth, Schinke, & Maxwell, 1983), and Latino immigrants living on a low income (DeLiema, Gassoumis, Homier, & Wilber, 2012).

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Psychological Well-Being and loneliness of young adults with and without pets

	t-value	sig
Psychological Well-Being	1.491	0.266
Loneliness	1.799	0.232

To check whether there is a significant difference between young adults without pets and with pets for psychological well-being, t - test was employed. The t - value of psychological well-being is 1.491 and significant difference obtained is 0.266 which is not significant at 0.05 level. The result shows that there is no significant difference between young adults without pets and with pets for psychological well-being. Therefore the hypothesis is rejected , however it is useful for academic purposes. On analysing mean score, young adults without pets seem to have a slight high psychological well-being (64.2333) compared to young adults with pets (58.9000). The hypothesis stated that there will be a significant difference between psychological well-being in young adults with and without pets , but the results obtained shows the opposite. This result could have been caused by socio-demographic differences between the individual subjects, demographic and social factors can influence the mental health and psychological well-being of the individual subjectively. Psychological well-being can be influenced by many other variables, so absence of these variables even after owning a pet can lead to instability of psychological well-being.

Marcuset al. (2012) found that there were benefits within participants' mood from therapy dog visits. In their study, participants were a large sample of mixed chronic pain patients that either spent clinic-waiting time with a therapy dog, or waited in the outpatient waiting area before their appointments. Those who spent time with a therapy dog saw changes in positive feelings, including high self-perceptions of calm, pleasantness, and cheerfulness.

Jessica Saunders, Layla Parast, Susan H. Babey, and Jeremy V. Miles studied the differences between pet and non-pet owners in California (2003). The sample included 42,044 adults for whom Individual characteristics and self-reported cat and dog ownership were available. Of these, 26.2% of respondents owned a dog, 21.5% owned a cat, and 8.5% owned both a dog and cat (these categories overlap). Forty-nine percent of respondents were male; 26.0% were Hispanic, 51.6% were White, 11.7% were Asian, 6.3% were Black, 4.4% were another race; 61.9% were married; and the average respondent age was 44.4. The average household size was 3.3 with a minimum household size of 1 and maximum of 18, 55.9% of respondents owned a home, 66% lived in a house, 56.6% worked full time and 32.2% of respondents had a full-time employed spouse. About one quarter of the sample reported living with a dog, one quarter reported living with a cat, and 8.5% lived with both a dog and a cat. Pet owners differed from non-pet owners across many socio-demographic variables, and these socio-demographic variables either are related to, or can impact, health and other outcomes. Overall, pet owners are more likely to be: single females or married, younger, White, live in more rural areas, live in homes, and belong to households where everyone is employed full time

Additionally, dog owners are more likely to be home owners and have a higher household annual income; and dog and cat owners are more likely to own

their own home and have larger households (but there is no relationship to annual household income). In terms of health differences which should not be considered to be outcomes or predictors of ownership because our study is purely correlational pet owners were more likely to have asthma, and dog owners were more likely to have higher BMIs; but otherwise, there were no differences between pet and non-pet owners in general health and BMI.

To check whether there is any significant difference between young adults without pets and with pets for loneliness, t- test was employed. The t - value for loneliness is 1.799 and significant difference obtained is .232 which is not significant at 0.05 level. The result shows that there is no significant difference between young adults without pets and with pets for loneliness. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected. On analysing mean score, young adults without pets have a slightly higher level of loneliness (44.1333) compared to young adults with pets (37.6667). The hypothesis stated that there will be a significant difference in loneliness among young adults with and without pets. The results of the study showed that there is no significant difference in loneliness between the two groups. Such results could have been obtained due to subjective factors of the sample population and moreover the sample strength is really small compared to the population, under such circumstances the degree of association between pet ownership and loneliness may vary.

A survey conducted by the mental health foundation at UK in 2019 of more than 2,000 UK adults found that: nearly nine in ten (88%) Britons aged from 18 to 24 said they experience loneliness to some degree with a quarter (24%) suffering often and 7% saying they are lonely all of the time. In comparison, 70% of those aged over 55 also say they can be lonely to some extent, however, only 7% are lonely often and just 2% say they are lonely all the time. Similarly, results of a survey circulated in 2018 found that: 40% of respondents aged 16 -24 reported feeling lonely often or very often, while only 29% of people aged 65 -74 and 27% of people aged over 75 said the same.

A research study on the relationship between ownership of pets and loneliness, carried out by Jitka Pikhartova, Ann Bowling and Christina Victor in 2014. The data was collected from 5,210 men and women, cross-sectional and longitudinal regression analysis was used to assess the bi- directional relationship between loneliness and pet ownership among adults. In 2001 (wave 0) 41% of participants were pet owners compared with 30% in 2010 (Wave 5). The association between pet ownership and loneliness is stronger in women than men, and in both directions (i.e. pet ownership predicting loneliness and loneliness predicting pet ownership) and of the similar magnitude (OR 1.2-1.4). Age, social relationships, demographic factors and health behaviour variables have only a minimal influence upon the association between loneliness and pet ownership. The results of our longitudinal analysis showed that women who reported being lonely always in Waves 0 to 5 were more likely to have a pet in Wave 5. Reported loneliness is dependent on socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, household income, household living arrangements and health status. Taking those factors into account, owning a pet significantly influences later reporting of loneliness in women in our longitudinal analysis. In the reverse direction, reported loneliness influences pet ownership in later waves. In both directions, the relatively strong gender interaction suggests the association is limited to women with effects for men minimal or non-existent.

A survey by the Human-Animal Bond Research Institute found that 80 percent of pet owners said their pets made them feel less lonely. Researchers at Ohio State University found that avoiding loneliness was the most common reason people gave for living with a companion animal. Further, a lot of studies have found that pets can facilitate social interactions with people, for example, through dog-walking.²¹ Studies published between 1986 and 2019 that compared levels of loneliness in pet and non-pet owners. Eleven of the studies focused on older people, and three of them looked at pets and loneliness in children or teens. Two studies looked at dog owners only, one included only cat owners, and eight of them reported the results for both people living with dogs and/or cats. Fortunately, in 2015 Andrew Gilbey and Kawtar Tani of Massey University in New Zealand published an exhaustive examination of 13 studies comparing loneliness in pet and non-pet owners published between 1986 and January 2014.

The findings reveal that owning a pet does not directly influence the psychological well-being of a person, the degree of psychological well-being varies due to several demographic factors. But the chances of improved psychological well-being by owning a pet cannot be denied. The sample group without pets does show a higher level of loneliness so that may suggest that owning a pet does reduce the level of loneliness. More efforts should be brought into the matter of improvement in psychological well-being and issues of loneliness in young adults. Especially in such a traumatic situation because of an ongoing pandemic.

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