

A Qualitative Exploration of Pet Ownership and its Perceived Impact on Mental Health and Cultural Perspectives among Young Adults in Sri Lanka

R. Jessica Rodrigo^{1*}, Nilusha Goonethilleke¹

¹*School of Psychology, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT), Malabe, 10115, Sri Lanka*

Corresponding author*: hs22172464@my.sliit.lk

Abstract

Pets have the capacity to offer unconditional love and support through companionship, positively influencing emotional, mental, and social wellbeing. Guided by the Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) framework, this qualitative study explored the views on pet ownership and mental health among young adults in Sri Lanka. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven pet owners aged 20 to 22. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. Four key themes emerged: (1) Psychological impact and emotional support, (2) Responsibility and daily structure, (3) Cultural and societal contexts, and (4) Fostering social connections. The findings highlight the meaningful contributions of pet ownership to reduced stress and anxiety, increased empathy, improved emotional regulation, and a sense of routine and responsibility, with cultural and familial factors shaping experiences. Pets occasionally served as social facilitators. Overall, findings suggest that pet ownership may offer valuable support for young adults' mental health and wellbeing in the Sri Lankan context.

Keywords: Human-Animal Interaction (HAI), pet ownership, mental health, young adults, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and stress are increasingly prevalent among young adults globally and are especially prominent among Sri Lankan undergraduates. Kaushani and Weeratunga (2023) reported that 53.7% of undergraduate's experiences stress, 41.8% anxiety, and 63.8% reported depressive symptoms. These high rates may be linked to recent national crises, including the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2022 economic crisis, which have significantly affected youth mental health (Shoib et al., 2022). Given this context, exploring alternative ways to support youth mental health is crucial. One emerging area of interest is the role of pet ownership. Many studies suggest that pets can offer various psychological, emotional, and physical benefits, including alleviating symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as promoting physical activity and reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease (Hussein et al., 2021; Friedman & Krause-Parello, 2018). Building on the biopsychosocial model of health, the Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) framework explains how meaningful interactions between humans and companion animals can impact the biological, psychological,

and social aspects of wellbeing. Companion animals provide social support, reduce stress and loneliness, and encourage physical activity. Understanding these interactions helps clarify how animals contribute to overall health and wellbeing (Friedman & Krause-Parello, 2018). Animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) have shown promising benefits in addressing mental health challenges, though some risks such as allergies and infections must be considered (Friedman & Krause-Parello, 2018). Nonetheless, simple hygiene protocols can help mitigate these concerns (Bert et al., 2016). In Sri Lanka, pet ownership appears relatively common in rural areas. Rathish et al. (2022) found that 57% of households in rural Anuradhapura owned pets; dogs were primarily kept for security, and cats for companionship. Furthermore, interacting with dogs was linked to reduced stress and improved wellbeing (Rathish et al., 2022). Despite existing findings, qualitative research on how young adults in Sri Lanka view pet ownership in relation to mental health remains limited. This study seeks to address this gap. The objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the views of pet ownership and how they may influence individuals' mental health.
2. To recognise specific factors in pet ownership that contributes to mental wellbeing.
3. To identify cultural and societal factors and their perspectives on pet ownership and mental health in the context of Sri Lanka.

Materials and methods

Study design

A qualitative approach was adopted, guided by the Human-animal interaction (HAI) framework. Semi-structured interviews elicited rich, open-ended responses of participants thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret patterns related to pet ownership and mental health.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit seven participants (four females and three males) between the ages of 18 and 25, all of whom resided in the Western Province of Sri Lanka and owned one or more pets. All participants reported experiences related to anxiety, depression, or stress and were willing to take part in the study. According to Guest et al. (2006), sample size in qualitative research depends on participant homogeneity, the research objectives, and interview structure. In this study, data saturation was reached after seven participants using a semi-structured interview guide, as no new themes emerged.

Data collection

Participants were recruited through a poster shared via social media platforms. Interested individuals contacted the researcher to schedule an interview at a convenient time and location. Five interviews were conducted in person, while two were conducted online via Zoom and Google Meet. Before each interview, participants received a participant information sheet, signed a consent form, and completed a brief demographic form. Verbal consent was also obtained after the researcher reiterated the study's aim. Interviews lasted approximately 20 to 60 minutes. Once the interview ended, participants were debriefed, thanked, and given the opportunity to ask questions. A debriefing sheet was provided which included contact information of the researcher and mental health support services. The interview guide was developed based on the study's objectives and adapted from Rathish et al. (2022). It included five sections:

general views on pet ownership, pets and mental health, daily interactions and emotional support, social and lifestyle impacts, and reflections on pet ownership, culture, and mental health. The guide was reviewed by the research supervisor and adjusted accordingly prior to data collection.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process to identify patterns in the data. Initially, interviews were transcribed using TurboScribe (2025) and manually corrected for accuracy. The researcher reviewed transcripts alongside audio recordings to gain familiarity with the data. Next, initial codes were systematically generated using ATLAS.ti (2024) and refined manually for clarity. These codes were organised into potential themes by identifying patterns across participants responses. Themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and relevance to the study's objectives. Each theme was then clearly defined and named, with subthemes developed where appropriate to capture nuanced aspects of the data. Finally, the refined themes and subthemes were used to structure the final report.

Ethical consideration

The study was granted ethical approval from the Sri Lankan Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT) Ethics Review Committee (ERC). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, their right to withdraw, confidentiality and autonomy were assured. Pseudonyms were used, and identifying information was removed from transcripts. Data were securely stored in password-protected folders accessible only to the researcher. A debrief sheet with mental health support contacts was provided. Reflexivity was maintained by acknowledging researcher biases and prioritizing participants' perspectives to ensure credible and accurate interpretations (Jamieson et al., 2023)

Results and discussion

The participants ranged in ages from 20 to 22 years. One participant owned only a dog, two owned only cats, and four owned both dogs and cats. The duration of pet ownership ranged from less than one year to more than three years. Thematic analysis identified four fundamental themes, offering insights into the psychological, social, and cultural aspects of pet ownership (see Figure 1).

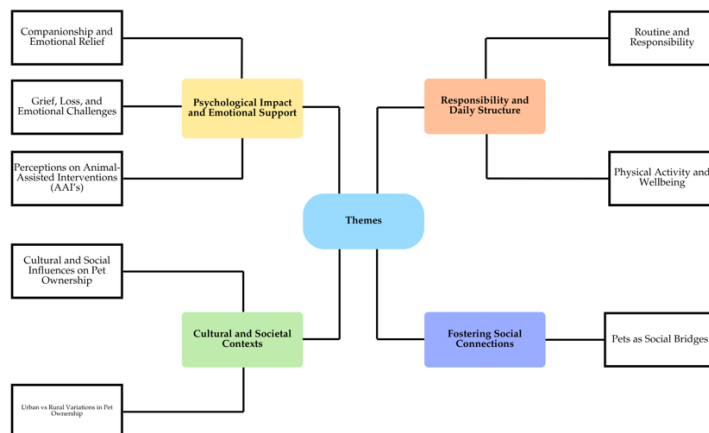


Figure 1: Thematic map illustrating themes and subthemes.

Theme 1: Psychological impact and emotional support

Companionship and emotional relief

Participants described pets as emotionally supportive companions that mitigated feelings of loneliness and psychological distress. Interactions such as petting and playing were perceived to alleviate symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, particularly during challenging periods such as exams. This aligns with findings by Rathish et al. (2022), who reported that pet interaction reduced stress and improved overall wellbeing. Similarly, Friedman & Krause-Parello (2018) reviewed studies showing that pets can reduce loneliness, depressive symptoms and decrease physiological stress levels in individuals facing stressful situations. Some pets were described as emotionally intuitive, with participants believing pets could sense and respond to their distress. Additionally, pet ownership was linked to enhanced emotional intelligence, empathy, and personal development.

Grief, loss, and emotional challenges

While pet companionship was regarded as largely positive, many participants highlighted the emotional distress associated with pet illness, loss, and disappearance. Some expressed ongoing grief and reluctance to own pets again due to the pain of such a loss. These experiences underscored the depth of emotional attachment and the psychological toll of pet-related grief. This aligns with Friedman & Krause-Parello (2018), who discusses how the profound loss of a companion animal can contribute to depression and negatively impact overall health. Moreover, a few participants also noted that incidents like indoor littering led to tensions and strained relationship with their family members, particularly with their mothers.

Perceptions on animal-assisted interventions (AAIs)

Participants recognised the potential of AAIs in therapeutic settings, despite their limited implementation in Sri Lanka. This indicates a growing interest in integrating non-traditional mental health interventions. Existing research findings of AAIs shows promising effects in addressing mental health challenges (Friedman & Krause-Parello, 2018). However, some participants highlighted individual differences, such as allergies and pet preferences, which could affect the intervention's effectiveness and, in some cases result in adverse effects. These risks can be mitigated through simple hygiene protocols (Bert et al., 2016), suggesting that proper management is fundamental for AAIs to be a viable complementary mental health intervention.

Theme 2: Responsibility and daily structure

Routine and responsibility

Participants acknowledged both the benefits and challenges associated with the responsibilities of pet ownership. Caring for pets sometimes restricted travel; practical demands varied by the type and size of the pet, with cats perceived as easier to travel with than dogs. Many participants emphasised the importance of routine care activities, including feeding, walking, maintaining pet hygiene, and monitoring health, such as tick prevention. Participants also noted that pet care fosters responsibility, particularly among children. While many found these duties manageable, some highlighted financial burdens, such as veterinary costs, and described strategies to ensure pet safety amid financial or household constraints.

These concerns around expenses and travel restrictions, particularly with dog ownership, align with previous findings by Rathish et al. (2022).

Physical activity and wellbeing

Participants shared mixed views on the physical impact of pet ownership. Some highlighted benefits, such as increased physical activity through walking and playing with their pet dogs. This aligns with Friedman & Krause-Parello (2018), who discussed that owning a dog gives an individual a reason to exercise, thus enhancing cardiovascular health. However, participants also described challenges, including injuries and allergies, particularly to cat fur, which were linked to respiratory issues and disrupted sleep. One participant reported being bitten while treating their dog's wound. These accounts illustrate that pet ownership can promote but also pose risks to one's physical wellbeing. While Rathish et al. (2022) concluded that owning a pet dog did not pose major health concerns, Friedman & Krause-Parello (2018) acknowledged that risks to physical health can arise, underscoring the importance of balanced management (Bert et al., 2016).

Theme 3: Cultural and societal contexts

Cultural and social influences on pet ownership

Participants' experiences of pet ownership were strongly shaped by cultural, familial, and social factors. Family members such as parents, siblings, and grandparents played a crucial role in influencing the decision to acquire pets, with some describing it as a collective family choice. However, disagreements around pet hygiene and living arrangements, included tensions over indoor littering or expectations to keep dogs outside, reflected cultural norms and occasionally strained household relationships. Local context also shaped pet acquisition, with some participants describing how rescuing strays was easier due to the lack of formal registration, while others mentioned adoption through animal welfare organisations. The social value attributed to pets varied by breed and perceived role, with some pets been regarded as family members and others primarily for security reasons. Street dogs were regarded as less favourable than pedigrees, which aligns with Rathish et al. (2022) findings regarding the distinct roles assigned to different types of pets. Social media was acknowledged as a source of education and support in pet care. Religious and cultural beliefs further influenced pet ownership, encompassing superstitions, such as black cats being considered unlucky or association with the evil eye, as well as dietary restrictions and prohibitions in certain faiths, including Islam's discouragement of dog ownership.

Urban Vs rural variations in pet ownership

Participants highlighted contextual differences in pet ownership between urban and rural areas. Urban settings often prioritised pedigree breeds for aesthetic value, while rural areas favoured adopting strays, with pets expected to serve functional roles. Despite these contrasts, pets were regarded with affection in both contexts. One participant noted that rural pets frequently roamed freely or were caged due to infrastructure limitations, whereas urban pets remained within enclosed spaces. Feeding routines, access to veterinary care and exposure to strays varied, with urban areas offering better facilities. One participant reported higher perceived rates of pet abuse in urban areas like Colombo, whereas rural pet owners showed more affection but sometimes struggled with proper care due to financial constraints. These accounts reflect how contextual setting and resources shape pet care practices and perceptions.

Theme 4: Fostering social connections

Pets as social bridges

Participants reported that pet ownership facilitated social interactions by serving as natural conversation starters with friends, neighbour, significant others, and strangers. Several participants noted that walking their pets encouraged engagement with others, sometimes providing brief moments of emotional relief for such individuals. Wood et al. (2015) suggests that companion animals facilitated social interactions and fosters the development of friendships in community settings, providing pet owners with both emotional and practical support. However, this effect was not universal, as a few participants reported no significant impact on their social lives.

Conclusion

This study highlights the multifaceted role of pet ownership in the emotional, psychological, and social lives of young adult in Sri Lanka. Pets were widely viewed as sources of companionship, comfort, and emotional support, while encouraging empathy, routine, and responsibility. Participants also noted challenges such as illness, loss, and financial strain, demonstrating the depth of their emotional bonds. While some experienced physical benefits like increased activity, others reported issues such as allergies and injuries. Cultural and societal influences such as family influence, religious beliefs, and urban-rural differences shaped participants attitudes and experiences towards pet care. Attitudes regarding AAI were cautiously optimistic, though cultural, individual, and practical barriers remain. Pets also served as social facilitators; however, this was not widespread. Given the limited research on this topic area in Sri Lanka, the study provides valuable, culturally grounded insights into how pet ownership may support mental wellbeing. It suggests that pets could serve as a relevant, non-clinical form of emotional support and lays the foundation for future research. The findings can inform mental health awareness campaigns, community-based initiatives, and support the integration of AAI, with broader studies recommended to explore these dynamics across diverse contexts.

Acknowledgment

The authors sincerely thank the participants for generously sharing their time and experiences which made this study possible. Further, this study is self-funded and authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH. (2024). *Atlas.ti* (Version 25.0.1) [Computer software]. Scientific Software Development GmbH.
- Bert, F., Gualano, M. R., Camussi, E., Pieve, G., Voglino, G., & Siliquini, R. (2016). Animal assisted intervention: A systematic review of benefits and risks. *European Journal of Integrative Medicine*, 8(5), 695–706. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eujim.2016.05.005>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Friedman, E., & Krause-Parello, C. A. (2018). Companion animals and human health: Benefits, challenges, and the road ahead for human-animal interaction. *Revue scientifique et technique (International Office of Epizootics)*, 37(1), 71–82. <https://doi.org/10.20506/rst.37.1.2741>
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *field methods*, 18(1), 59-82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Hussein, S. M., Soliman, W. S., & Khalida, A. A. (2021). Benefits of pets' ownership, a review based on health perspectives. *Journal of Internal Medicine and Emergency Research*, 2(1), 1–9.
- Jamieson, M. K., Govaart, G. H., & Pownall, M. (2023). Reflexivity in quantitative research: A rationale and beginner's guide. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 17(4), e12735. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12735>
- Kaushani, T. H. M., & Weeratunga, E. B. (2023). Psychological disturbances encountered by selected undergraduates studying at the University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka during the Covid-19 pandemic: A cross-sectional study. *Scientific reports*, 13(1), 20559. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-47950-8>
- Rathish, D., Rajapakse, J., & Weerakoon, K. (2022). "In times of stress, it is good to be with them": Experience of dog owners from a rural district of Sri Lanka. *BMC public health*, 22(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-14863-6>
- Rathish, D., Rajapakse, J., & Weerakoon, K. (2022). Household preferences for pet keeping: Findings from a rural district of Sri Lanka. *PLoS ONE*, 17(11). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0277108>
- Shoib, S., Chandradasa, M., Rathnayake, L., Usmani, S., & Saeed, F. (2022). Children, Adolescent, and Youth Mental Health in Sri Lanka in the Context of Recent Violence, COVID-19, and Economic Crisis: A Call for Action. *The Lancet regional health - Southeast Asia*, 2, 100021. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansea.2022.100021>
- TurboScribe.ai. (2024). *TurboScribe.ai* [Speech-to-text software]. <https://turboscribe.ai/>
- Wood, L., Martin, K., Christian, H., Nathan, A., Lauritsen, C., Houghton, S., & McCune, S. (2015). The pet factor-companion animals as a conduit for getting to know people, friendship formation and social support. *PLoS ONE*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0122085>