

PET ATTACHMENT LIFE IMPACT ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how emotional bonds with pets influence the psychological well-being of 300 young adults navigating transitional life stages. Data were collected via online and physical surveys using the Pet Attachment Life Impact Scale (PALS; $\alpha=.92$) and Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale (PWBS; $\alpha=.74$). Statistical analyses in SPSS—simple linear regression and t-tests—revealed a significant positive impact of pet attachment on overall well-being, specifically boosting self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and positive social connections. The study also identified a gender difference, showing that women exhibit greater pet attachment than men, a difference likely driven by gender-based attitudes toward companion animals. Ultimately, these findings suggest that close relationships with pets foster mental health and emotional resilience in young adults. This highlights the importance of recognizing the human-animal bond as a valuable resource for promoting psychological well-being.

I. INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood—spanning roughly ages 18 to 30—is a distinct transitional phase bridging adolescence and full adulthood (Arnett, 2000). During this period, individuals navigate pivotal decisions regarding education, career, identity, and relationships (Lane et al., 2017) while undergoing continued, rapid brain development. Because this life stage is inherently turbulent, emerging adults frequently face heightened mental health challenges, including increased stress, loneliness, and lower life satisfaction (LeBlanc et al., 2019). In the midst of these challenges, strong social support systems and secure attachments act as vital protective buffers. One increasingly significant source of support is companion animals. For many young adults, pets are not just animals but valued companions integrated into their emotional and social lives. Emerging research indicates that the human-pet bond is positively associated with psychological well-being, with pet owners often exhibiting lower stress levels than those without animal attachments (Orlando & Chin, 2025). In a modern landscape marked by demanding careers, urban isolation, and shifting family structures, pets provide essential comfort, routine, and unconditional affection. Ultimately, they serve as everyday tools for emotional self-management—alleviating loneliness, reducing anxiety, and fostering the resilience needed to face adversity in early adulthood.

Pet attachment is defined as a close, emotional bond between a human and an animal that provides vital physical and emotional support. This unique bond serves as the foundation for a deep emotional relationship that has an incredible ability to keep owners healthy and happy (Aragunde-Kohl et al., 2020). Characterized by love, warmth,

and mutual support, a strong connection to a pet puts owners at emotional ease. Furthermore, international research on physically and mentally ill patients demonstrates that human-animal bonds actively reduce anxiety, suggesting that pets can effectively compensate for an owner's feelings of loneliness or isolation (Cole et al., 2007).

Key Features of the Pet-Owner Relationship

The human-pet dynamic is anchored by several core characteristics that dictate how animals integrate into our lives (Prato-Previde et al., 2022).

- **Companionship:** Pets regularly step into the role of a true partner. Rather than being viewed simply as animals, they are treated as integral family members and daily companions.
- **Symbolism:** In contemporary society, pets have become an indispensable part of individual lives (Kwong & Bartholomew, 2011). Owners often experience a "symbolic" love where they interpret comfort and affection from their pets' behaviors, inspiring them to provide even greater care in return.
- **Self-Concept:** Interacting with a pet can positively shape an owner's self-concept and emotional security. By fostering a sense of responsibility and empathy, this bond can actually help individuals build stronger, more efficient relationships with family members and society at large (Hart et al., 2005).

Psychological well-being—defined as an individual's overall state of mental, emotional, and social functioning—is shaped by factors such as interpersonal relationships, life satisfaction, and stress management. As interest in the human-animal bond expands, researchers are increasingly examining how emotional attachment to pets contributes to this well-being during adulthood. Despite growing interest, much of the existing literature either generalizes across all age brackets or overlooks the unique complexities of adulthood—a life stage defined by distinct roles, major transitions, and shifting responsibilities. Consequently, there remains a critical need to explore how pet attachment uniquely impacts adults' mental health and whether it serves as a primary or supplementary buffer for well-being. Furthermore, the relationship between owner demographics and pet attachment remains a point of academic debate, particularly regarding gender. For instance, Herzog (2007) noted that an owner's gender has a negligible impact on attachment levels. Conversely, Lewis et al. (2009) evaluated 336 participants and reported that females exhibit fundamentally higher levels of pet attachment than males.

Theoretical Framework

Originally developed to describe the foundational bond between infants and caregivers, Attachment Theory has since been extended to adult relationships, including human-animal bonds. According to Bowlby (1969), as cited in George (2010), secure attachments offer crucial emotional safety and serve as a reliable buffer against psychological distress. Pets—particularly companion animals like dogs and cats—can function as valid attachment figures by providing emotional support, consistent companionship, and a "secure base" for adults. Ultimately, the bonds adults form with their pets often mirror human-to-human attachment dynamics, actively contributing to psychological resilience, as cited in Teo and Thomas (2019). According to Wilson (1984), as cited in Rogers (2019), the Biophilia Hypothesis posits that humans possess an innate, evolutionary tendency to seek connections with nature and other living systems. This biological inclination produces positive emotional and physiological effects when fulfilled. Close interactions with companion animals satisfy this deeply rooted need, promoting a sense of calm, environmental connectedness, and daily purpose—all of which are factors intrinsically tied to higher psychological well-being. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) emphasizes that psychological well-being is contingent upon the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

- Relatedness is directly fulfilled through the deep companionship and mutual bond shared with a pet.
- Competence is fostered through the daily responsibilities and routines required in pet caretaking.
- Autonomy is supported by the pet's unconditional positive regard, which reinforces the owner's self-worth and emotional independence.

By satisfying these core needs, pet attachment serves as a practical mechanism for enhancing mental health and emotional stability in adults (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The stress-buffering hypothesis suggests that robust social support mitigates the detrimental impacts of chronic stress on psychological health. Pets are frequently cited as vital sources of emotional support, especially when human social networks are limited or strained. Beyond subjective emotional comfort, this model is supported by physiological evidence: interactions with pets have been shown to reduce cortisol levels and blood pressure while

simultaneously stimulating oxytocin production. Consequently, pet attachment contributes to overall well-being through a dual-action pathway, providing both immediate emotional support and a measurable physiological buffer against stress (Ghosn et al., 2025).

Literature Review

The impact of pet attachment on psychological well-being has garnered significant attention in recent decades. As adults increasingly seek companionship and emotional support from companion animals, researchers have begun investigating how these unique bonds shape mental health outcomes. Empirical data consistently demonstrate that attachment levels vary across individuals based on personality traits, animal species, and the duration of ownership (Kurdek, 2008). Psychological well-being itself is a multidimensional construct encompassing life satisfaction, positive affect, a sense of purpose, and emotional stability. As a critical indicator of overall mental health and stress resilience, well-being is heavily influenced by protective factors like robust social support, meaningful relationships, and fulfilling daily activities. Numerous empirical studies demonstrate a positive relationship between pet attachment and psychological well-being. For instance, Zasloff (1996) found that adults with high pet attachment reported significantly lower levels of loneliness and depression. Similarly, a longitudinal study revealed that pet owners experienced greater perceived social support and higher self-esteem, both of which directly enhanced overall well-being (McConnell et al., 2011). This bond appears to function as an alternative or supplementary source of social support, particularly for individuals lacking dense human social networks. By providing emotional comfort, reducing isolation, and increasing feelings of security, pets offer a vital psychological buffer against daily stressors (Coy & Green, 2018).

However, this relationship is not uniform and is often moderated by demographic and contextual variables. For example, gender plays a documented role; women frequently report higher levels of pet attachment and derive greater psychological benefits from companion animals compared to men (Muldoon et al., 2019). Despite a growing body of research, critical literature gaps persist. Much of the existing data focuses strictly on specific sub-populations—such as older adults or clinical samples—which limits the generalizability of the findings to healthy emerging or young adults. In recent decades, companion animals have assumed increasingly significant roles in human lives, serving as vital sources of emotional support, comfort, and surrogate attachment figures. This global surge in pet ownership has intensified academic interest in how the human-animal bond shapes core psychological outcomes, including emotional resilience, daily purpose, and life satisfaction (Marsa-Sambola et al., 2017). While subjective benefits are widely reported, empirical research utilizing robust psychometric tools—such as Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS)—confirms that strong pet attachment is explicitly linked to higher happiness, reduced loneliness, and improved stress coping mechanisms (Teo & Thomas, 2019).

This dynamic is especially critical during emerging adulthood, a developmental stage marked by profound identity shifts and role transitions. During this crucial life phase, young individuals often experience profound emotional isolation, finding themselves unable to communicate their struggles openly. When human social networks feel limiting, judgmental, or inaccessible, companion animals offer a rare, unconditional space for emotional vulnerability and security. Despite the obvious therapeutic potential of this bond, there remains a notable scarcity of empirical literature regarding human-animal relationships within South Asia and Pakistan specifically. This study directly addresses this regional gap by providing localized empirical evidence. By evaluating the precise impact of pet attachment on the multi-dimensional well-being of Pakistani young adults, these findings can lay the groundwork for culturally tailored, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) programs and mental health interventions designed to foster resilience in under-supported populations.

Objectives

1. To examine the impact of pet attachment on the psychological well-being of young adults.
2. To identify gender differences in pet attachment and psychological well-being.

Hypotheses

1. Pet attachment will significantly predict the psychological well-being of young adults.
2. Females will score higher on Pet attachment and Psychological Well-being as compared to males.

Conceptual Framework



II. METHOD

Participants

This study is based on a quantitative research design to examine the impact of pet attachment on the psychological well-being of young adults. The sample comprises 300 (n=77 Males, n=233 females) early adults throughout Abbottabad. Participants aged 18 to 30 were included. Participants with an age range below 18 and above 30 were excluded. Individuals who do not have any pets were not the part of the study.

Measures

[1] Pet Attachment and Life Impact Scale (PALS) is a 35-item measure that was developed to assess the impact companion animals have on the lives of pet owners and pet owners' attachment to pets (Cromer & Barlow, 2013). The measure includes four subscales: love (17 items; e.g., "My pet is part of my family," "My pet gives me unconditional love"), regulation (9 items; e.g., "My pet teaches me to trust," "My pet provides stability for me"), personal growth (5 items; e.g., "My pet teaches me responsibility," "I have learned compassion from my pet"), and negative impact (4 items; e.g., "My pet is a financial hardship," "Having a pet is stressful"). Participants ranked on a 5-point Likert scale (from *not at all* to *very much*) how strongly each statement reflected the impact their companion animal had on their life. The items comprising the total score and the love, regulation, and personal growth subscales, but not the negative impact subscales (.88, .81, .52, respectively), demonstrated excellent internal consistency. **[2]** The Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB), developed by Ryff (1989), is a widely used instrument designed to measure multiple dimensions of psychological well-being. Unlike general measures of happiness or life satisfaction, the PWB focuses on positive functioning and self-realization. The PWB scale assesses six key dimensions of well-being: Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life & Self-Acceptance. Participants rate their agreement with statements on a Likert scale, typically ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). Scores for each dimension are calculated separately or combined for an overall well-being score, with higher scores indicating greater psychological well-being.

Procedure

Formal permissions were obtained via email from the respective authors to use the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS) and the Pet Attachment Life Impact Scale (PALS). Data collection used a cross-sectional design, gathering responses through a combination of paper questionnaires and online surveys to maximize reach. Participants were recruited using a non-probability purposive sampling technique. Before completing the survey, all respondents were provided with clear instructions detailing the study's purpose, their right to voluntary participation, and data confidentiality. No administrative time limits were imposed, allowing participants to complete the questionnaires at their own pace to minimize response fatigue and ensure data quality. The researchers strictly ensured all the ethical principles to conduct the study.

III. RESULTS

Table I: Frequencies and Percentages of Demographic Variables of the Study

Variables	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Males	77	25.7
	Females	223	72.3
Age	18-20	40	13.3
	21-25	250	83.4
	26-30	10	3.3

Table II: Psychometric Properties of the Study Scales

Scales	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	Cronbach's α
Pet Attachment Life Impact Scale	116.51	30.67	35-175	.92
Psychological Well-Being Scale	54.72	12.44	18-97	.74

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and internal consistency reliability coefficients for the Pet Attachment Life Impact Scale (PALS) and Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale (PWBS) based on the responses of 300 participants. The PALS, a 35-item measure ($k = 35$), had a mean score (M) of 116.51 ($SD = 30.67$), with scores ranging from 35 to 175. The Cronbach's alpha (α) for the PALS was .92, indicating excellent internal consistency. For the PWBS, which comprises 18 items ($k = 18$), the mean score (M) was 54.72. ($SD = 12.44$), And the scores ranged from 18 to 97. The internal consistency of the PWBS was acceptable, with a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .74.

Table III: Prediction Effect of Pet Attachment on Psychological Well-Being

Scales	<i>B</i>	95% CI	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	37.71	[32.18, 43.24]		13.42	< .001
Pet Attachment	0.15	[0.11, 0.19]	.36	6.66	< .001

A simple linear regression was conducted to determine if pet attachment significantly predicts overall psychological well-being among young adults. The results indicated that pet attachment is a significant positive predictor of psychological well-being, $F(1,298) = 44.37$, $p < .001$, accounting for 13% of the variance ($R^2 = .130$). The unstandardized regression coefficient ($B=0.15$, $p<.001$) indicates that for every one-unit increase in pet attachment scores, psychological well-being increases by approximately 0.15 units.

Table IV: Gender Differences in Pet Attachment and Psychological Well-Being

Variables	Male ($n = 77$)		Female ($n = 223$)		<i>t</i> (298)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
PALS	107.29	36.03	119.69	27.99	-2.75	.00	0.4
PWBS	55.98	11.26	54.52	12.85	.48	.39	-

Table 4 presents the results of an independent samples t-test. For the PALS, there was a statistically significant difference in scores between males ($n = 77$, $M = 107.29$, $SD = 36.03$) and females ($n = 233$, $M = 119.69$, $SD = 27.99$), $t(298) = -2.75$, $p = .002$, 95%. Females reported significantly higher scores on pet attachment than males.

DISCUSSION

As shown in Table 2, the 35-item Pet Attachment Life Impact Scale (PALS) demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha=.92$). With a mean score of 116.51 ($SD=30.67$) and scores spanning the scale's full theoretical range, the data confirmed healthy, realistic variance in how deeply participants were bonded to their animals. Meanwhile, the brief 18-item Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale (PWBS) yielded a mean score of 54.72 ($SD=12.44$) and displayed acceptable reliability ($\alpha=.74$). The primary goal of this study was to see if emotional bonds with companion animals predict a young adult's psychological well-being. The regression data confirmed this hypothesis, revealing a statistically significant, positive relationship ($p<.01$). Put simply: as an individual's emotional attachment to their pet grows stronger, their overall psychological well-being increases alongside it. These results offer exciting real-world weight when paired with existing literature. For young adults navigating the isolating or stressful transitions of early independence, a pet provides far more than passive amusement. Daily activities like walking a dog double as social icebreakers, lowering social inhibition and helping owners form warmer, positive relationships with others in their communities (McConnell et al., 2011).

Furthermore, the simple, grounding act of caring for an animal offers deep emotional security. Qualitative research highlights that managing a pet's daily needs gives owners a profound sense of reassurance and personal

purpose. By offering unconditional affection, companion animals function as a reliable psychological buffer, easing distress and stabilizing mood when human social networks feel overwhelming or distant (Ghosn et al., 2025).

As reported in Table 4, females scored significantly higher on the Pet Attachment Life Impact Scale (PALS) than males. Conversely, no statistically significant gender differences were observed regarding overall psychological well-being (PWBS), indicating that baseline well-being levels remained comparable across both groups. The finding that women exhibit stronger emotional attachment to companion animals aligns with a segment of existing literature suggesting heightened female attachment (Muldoon et al., 2019). However, it is crucial to note that this variance is typically driven by gender-specific socialization, distinct attitudinal patterns, and differing relational values toward animals rather than a biological divide (Marsa-Sambola et al., 2017).

Interestingly, while women often report deeper emotional ties, the foundational desire to live with companion animals appears universal. Comprehensive global surveys indicate that nearly identical proportions of men and women own pets. Furthermore, developmental research reinforces this commonality, demonstrating that gender does not reliably predict pet ownership rates in either adolescent populations or adult cohorts, while the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS) confirms that strong pet attachment is explicitly linked to higher happiness, reduced loneliness, and improved stress coping mechanisms (Teo & Thomas, 2019). Taken together, these insights suggest that while men and women are equally likely to seek out pet ownership, they navigate the resulting relationship differently. Women within this developmental window appear to cultivate a more intense emotional reliance and attachment to their animals, whereas men may view the relationship through a different functional lens.

Implications, Limitations and Future Directions

Public Awareness: Raising public awareness about the empirical links between the human-animal bond and mental health can encourage owners to actively nurture the relationship quality with their animals, maximizing the emotional and psychological benefits of pet ownership. **Preventive Care:** Promoting companion animal attachment offers a viable, non-clinical preventive strategy to buffer against stress, chronic loneliness, and anxiety. This is especially valuable for young adults navigating vulnerable, isolating life transitions where traditional support networks might be limited. **Community Programs:** Public health organizations and local policymakers can leverage these findings to integrate pet-friendly spaces and community wellness initiatives into urban planning, fostering healthier environments that support human-animal interactions. **Mental Health Interventions:** The strong predictive power of pet attachment suggests that incorporating companion animals or formal Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) protocols into structured mental health treatment frameworks can significantly reinforce emotional resilience in adults. Practitioners, counselors, and clinical psychologists can actively assess and utilize a client's relationship with their pet as a legitimate therapeutic asset, tapping into it as a functional "secure base" to build stronger emotional coping strategies. First, this study utilized a non-clinical sample of young adults, meaning it does not provide specific insights into how pet attachment functions for individuals managing diagnosed, severe mental health conditions. Furthermore, the reliance on a cross-sectional design prevents the drawing of definitive causal conclusions. Future research should implement longitudinal tracking and incorporate diverse clinical populations within Pakistan to more comprehensively map the therapeutic boundaries of the human-animal bond.

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this study was to evaluate the impact of pet attachment on the multidimensional psychological well-being of young adults. Our findings revealed a statistically significant positive impact of pet attachment on psychological well-being, establishing pet attachment as a robust and significant predictor of overall well-being. These results align seamlessly with existing literature, confirming that a deeper emotional bond with a companion animal consistently predicts superior psychological functioning, including enhanced self-acceptance and a stronger sense of purpose. Additionally, this study explored potential gender differences across these constructs. While the data revealed no significant variance between men and women regarding baseline

psychological well-being (PWBS), it did identify a distinct gender difference in attachment levels, with women reporting higher pet attachment (PALS) than men, indicates that while the drive for psychological well-being is felt equally across genders, young adult women in this sample cultivated an emotionally closer, more reliant bond with their companion animals.

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