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Investigating the Emotional Consequences of the Phenomenon of Pet Ownership in Iranian Families

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Abstract

Abstract

The present study aims to Analyses the emotional consequences of the phenomenon of pet ownership, with a particular focus on dogs and cats in Iranian Families. The present study is applied in terms of purpose and was conducted within a qualitative approach grounded in lived experience, using Diekelmann's interpretive phenomenological method. Sampling was conducted based on four predefined criteria, using purposive chain sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews continued until data saturation was achieved, with 20 participants. To ensure the validity of the data collection, expert review was used. The trustworthiness of the findings was established through concurrent data analysis, constant comparison, ongoing review of data, and peer auditing. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis of manifest and latent content revealed a four-faceted perspective for positive emotional outcomes among participants, including creating a sense of usefulness, increasing resilience, satisfaction with personal life, and creating healthy habits. Moreover, inappropriate emotional outcomes were identified and extracted in eight components, such as insecure attachment style, reduced interpersonal communication and social skills, the formation of interspecies families and their impact on family emotional well-being, weakened religious beliefs, economic and financial consequences, the erosion of social capital, and implications for overall health. Based on the findings, living with pets can strengthen resilience and play a facilitating role in coping with emotional stress at certain stages of life; but because of deep and undesirable consequences on attachment style, family interactions, interpersonal communication, and social skills, it is suggested that this cohabitation be limited. Furthermore, some inappropriate non-emotional consequences such as current costs, transmission of diseases, and the erosion of social capital were inexcusable.

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Introduction

In recent years, the increasing desire to keep pets has become one of the emerging social phenomena; a phenomenon that, beyond traditional functions, gradually plays an emotional substitute role in family relationships. The prevalence of this phenomenon has followed the weakening of the role of the family as the main institution for regulating and shaping fundamental emotions, the transformation of the family structure from an extended to a nuclear type, the increase in individualism and the prioritization of personal needs, which has led to the limitation of deep emotional interactions within the family. The result of this transformation has been an increasing sense of loneliness and a change in emotions as the most fundamental category in the dynamic system of the human personality. In addition, it has brought about positive or negative emotional consequences (Lotfabadi., 2025). Research evidence suggests that negative emotions can have significant effects on physical and mental health, and can affect cardiovascular function and circulatory function through chronic activation of stress responses (Contrada, 2025; Shimbo et al., 2024). According to the results of Northrope et al.'s (2024) study, people who have a very strong attachment to their dog report lower levels of mental health, which is partly explained by an insecure attachment style in human relationships. A systematic review has shown that keeping pets can be associated with consequences such as increased stress, anxiety, depression, caregiving burden, perceived costs, and even reduced life satisfaction (Zoanetti et al., 2024). Other researchers have found that walking a dog encourages exercise; However, there is no difference between the mental health of dog owners and people without dogs (Toth et al., 2023). Furthermore, in another study, the role of pets in mental and spiritual health was assessed positively (Kateryna et al., 2023). A review of the literature indicates that previous studies on pet ownership have mainly focused on adverse health outcomes, disease transmission, or its social consequences, and have paid less attention to the emotional dimensions of this phenomenon in the context of the family or the lived experience of family members. Therefore, the main objective of the present study was to investigate the positive and negative emotional consequences of keeping pets (i.e., dogs and cats), with an emphasis on the family context and the lived experience of family members.

Method

This research study was conducted using a qualitative approach and Dickelman's Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In addition, it was applied in terms of objectives. Participants were selected through purposive sampling method from among the owners of dogs and cats who used the services of pet care clinics in Isfahan. The inclusion and exclusion criteria and ethical considerations were considered. The interviewees included 20 individuals; the semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in person and in care clinics for 45-70 minutes until theoretical saturation of the data was achieved. In order to ensure the validity of the interviews, professors' comments and to confirm the trustworthiness of findings, concurrent analysis, constant comparison and continuous review of data, and peer checking were used. Furthermore, to examine the reliability of coding, the data was coded by the second researcher. The agreement between the coders was 0.83. After summarizing and categorizing the obtained codes, data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis. In this regard, the researcher first wrote the text of the interviews and identified meaningful codes. Then, from among the set of codes, he extracted the initial themes that represented the main codes. Then, the relationships between the codes were investigated, and the organizing categories were identified. The categories that were related to the focus of the study formed positive and negative emotional consequences.

Results

Descriptive statistics indicated that among the participants, the highest frequency was related to women (13 individuals), who had a bachelor's degree (8 individuals) and were housewives (6 individuals); their mean age was 28-38 (8 individuals). Qualitative data were analyzed in three stages: analyzing the transcription of the interviews, describing and interpreting the material considering the positive and negative emotional consequences of pet ownership, and finally determining initial themes and extracting organizing codes. The first research question was what positive emotional consequences the phenomenon of keeping pets (case study of dogs and cats) has in Iranian families. The results showed that there was a four-faceted view of positive emotional consequences among the participants. These consequences included creating a sense of usefulness, increasing resilience, satisfaction with personal life, and creating healthy habits. The component of feeling useful included basic concepts (i.e., feeling self-efficacy, self-confidence, and usefulness, strengthening the spirit of benevolence, and increasing responsibility). The component of increasing resilience included the initial concepts such as overcoming severe emotions (e.g.,

depression, grief, loneliness, and anxiety); the component of satisfaction with personal life included the basic concepts of filling free time, having a sense of contentment and satisfaction, expressing mutual affection between humans and animals. Finally, the component of creating healthy habits included the subcomponents of playing, forcing oneself to do physical activities, and walking with the animal. Among them, the component of increasing resilience, with 32 semantic expressions and three basic concepts, had the highest frequency.

The second research question explored the negative emotional consequences of the phenomenon of keeping pets (dogs and cats) in Iranian families. The findings showed that there was an eight-faceted view of negative emotional consequences among the participants: the insecure attachment style with basic concepts (i.e., reduction of desirable and enjoyable interpersonal interactions, unequal comparison and feelings of hatred, a wider sense of loneliness, decreased intimacy within the family, changing one's personal attitudes towards humans, interspecies emotional dependence and attachment, sexual disorders, anxiety due to possible loss, and painful and prolonged mourning after the death of an animal), reduced communication and social skills with basic concepts (i.e., lack of compromise and adaptation with others, non-acceptance of opposing opinions, creating restrictions on traveling or going to parties, preference for communicating with pets instead of conspecifics, decreased interest and value for oneself, decreased communication with spouse, decreased relationship between children and parents, and decreased relationship between parents and children), interspecies family formation and the impact on the emotional health of the family with basic concepts (i.e., changing in attitude towards family, spouse and friends, changing in family structure and role changing from animal to child, changing the role of the animal to a support and companion, and decreasing the desire to have children), weakening religious beliefs and convictions with basic concepts (i.e., having impact on spiritual health, prioritizing keeping a pet over religious beliefs, changing religious beliefs and behaviors according to one's taste, and changing lifestyle from Islam to others), economic and financial consequences with basic and initial concepts (i.e., high cost of animal nutrition, high cost of animal health care, and high cost of animal caregivers), weakening social capital with basic concepts (i.e., reducing happiness or sustainable extraversion in society, having an impact on social health, prevalence of mental states of animalism, and strengthening self-centeredness in individuals in society), impact on health with basic concepts (i.e., having an impact on physical health, and decreasing interpersonal trust), and finally adverse emotional consequences for others (i.e., experiencing panic attacks when facing animals especially in children, creating acute and chronic anxiety after an undesirable encounter with an animal, and having nightmares and disturbing thoughts after an undesirable encounter with an animal). Among these components, insecure attachment style had the highest frequency, with 118 semantic expressions and nine basic concepts.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the emotional consequences of keeping pets (dogs and cats) in Iranian families. One of the most prominent results of the present study was the positive emotional consequences, which were summarized in four categories: a sense of usefulness, increased resilience, life satisfaction, and the creation of healthy habits. Other researchers, in line with the present study, concluded that pet ownership can be effective in treating some behavioral disorders (Bagheri et al., 2022; Siavashi et al., 2021). This can be explained by the fact that communication with a non-judgmental living being helps an individual increase life satisfaction and have a sense of contentment by having a purposeful activity accompanied by pleasure and movement in free time.

Negative consequences from the interviewees' perspective were identified and confirmed in eight components. These consequences included insecure attachment style, reduced communication and social skills, impact on family emotional health and interspecies family formation, weakened religious beliefs and convictions, negative economic and financial consequences, weakened social capital, and impact on physical health. In other studies, consistent with the present study, negative emotional consequences of cohabitation with a pet have been mentioned (Bagheri et al., 2023; Mirahmadi et al., 2024; Niazi et al., 2019). In explaining these findings, it can be stated that a pet cannot criticize and constructively conflict; therefore, reinforced egocentric expectations are formed in the individual towards society. Pet owners focus their emotional resources on a closed and unexpandable network with the animal. As a result, they will withdraw from wider and more diverse social networks that are necessary for social resilience. It is suggested that cohabitation with pets be minimized due to negative emotional consequences on the family context, interpersonal relationships, and tangible and intangible economic and cultural consequences. Moreover, acquiring communication skills and empathy techniques, promoting a family-oriented lifestyle, and representing

interpersonal communication values with the help of the media can lead to redefining the roles of individuals in the family and shouldering shared responsibility.

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Conflict of interest
According to the authors, this study had no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement
The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted technologies were used at any stage of the preparation, writing, editing, analysis, or translation of this manuscript.

Ethical Approval
The authors declare that All procedures performed in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible institutional and national research committee.

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