

# Feline Ownership and Well-Being During COVID-19 Mandated Lockdowns

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## Abstract

Extant literature on how pet ownership impacted individuals' well-being during the global COVID-19 pandemic is inconsistent and broad in scope, with some studies reporting a positive impact and others reporting a null or negative impact. This paper presents the results of a case study (n = 1) that sought to explore the lived experience of cat owners and how cat ownership affected their sense of well-being during periods of COVID-19 mandated self-isolation. The current study employed a semi-structured interview conducted with a single participant. The interview transcript was then analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, with some data approached through the lens of attachment theory. Findings revealed that the impact on the participant's well-being was mostly positive and the result of assuming the role of attachment figure. Positive benefits of cat ownership and benefits for the participants' cats were also explored. Results of this study can further our understanding of how cats can help individuals cope with prolonged periods of social isolation.

**Keywords:** pet ownership, cats, COVID-19, qualitative, interpretive phenomenological analysis

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## Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic was undeniably a unique period in recent human history, the long-term psychological impact of which is not yet fully understood (Adorjan and Stubbe, 2023). During the immediate days of the pandemic, certain individuals experienced episodes of boredom, anxiety, and depression during times of mandated lockdowns (Bozdağ, 2021). In older adults, research also reveals that periods of lockdown resulted in lower levels of physical activity, sleep quality, and overall well-being (De Pue *et al.*, 2021). More generally, a study of 932 participants in

the UK who experienced periods of self-isolation over the course of the pandemic found that women, youth, low-income earners, smokers, and individuals with multiple chronic conditions had a higher prevalence of poor mental health (Smith *et al.*, 2020). Although there was a noticeable spike in pet ownership during the early days of the pandemic (Ho, Hussain and Sparagano, 2021), it remains uncertain whether pets could act as a mitigating factor against any of these negative psychological effects. Similarly unclear is the extent to which pet ownership had an impact on well-being during periods of COVID-19 mandated self-isolation.

Some market research studies of questionable reliability highlight the overall benefits of owning a pet on well-being during the pandemic to varying degrees. For instance, one study of 2,000 American cat owners conducted on behalf of pet food producer Royal Canin found that 57% of participants indicated that pet ownership alleviated feelings of loneliness, while 49% said the same regarding feelings of anxiety (Haaland, 2021). A similar study on behalf of pet care product supplier Zoetis found that 72% of American pet owners indicated they would not have been able to make it through the pandemic without their pets, while 81% indicated an increase in closeness with their pets during the pandemic (SWNS, 2021).

Of principle concern with such market research studies is how often they rely on one-off survey instruments of dubious scientific integrity that have not been assessed for either validity or reliability (Davis, Douglas and Silk, 1981). Consequently, this can lead to social desirability bias; for example, where participants provide answers that may not correspond to their actual attitudes or beliefs to feel better about themselves or to look better in the eyes of others (Larson, 2019). Meanwhile, more rigorous, and scientifically sound studies, are inconsistent regarding the impact of pet ownership on well-being during the pandemic and do not necessarily coincide with laypeople's expectations. Some describe generally positive benefits of the presence of pets during episodes of pandemic-mandated self-isolation, such as lower scores of depression (Xin *et al.*, 2021). Meanwhile larger proportions indicate either null or even negative effects including poor quality of life, and increased stress and anxiety (Denis-Robichaud *et al.*, 2022).

On the positive end of the spectrum, researchers in Singapore found that pet owners with a stronger attachment to their pets correlated positively with emotional well-being (Tan *et al.*, 2021). However, this study's scope was broad in terms of its definition of pet ownership with dogs, cats, small animals, and birds being open for consideration. Conversely, a cross-sectional study of Canadian adults found that individuals who owned pets scored lower across several well-being indicators than those who did not own pets (Amiot, Gagné and Bastian, 2022). This study also allowed for the inclusion of various types of pets such as dogs, cats, and other animals. Similarly, a large-scale longitudinal study of UK participants found that pet owners actually reported higher loneliness and mental health concerns than non-pet owners (Parsons *et al.*, 2024). Once again, this study's definition of pet ownership included various animals ranging from dogs, cats, fish, and rodents.

The common thread among these studies is how they are predominantly of a quantitative nature. While this allows for the results thereof to be considered generalisable to a wider population, it reduces human experience to a set of measurable variables, which has the unfortunate disadvantage of decontextualisation. Qualitative research, particularly that conducted from a phenomenological perspective, can therefore provide richer insight into the meaning participants ascribe to a given experience (Willig, 2019). Furthermore, the paucity of pandemic research related specifically to cats highlights a greater need for additional study in this area. Thus, this case study sought to address the following research question: “How did cat owners perceive their relationship with their cats, and whether this affected their general sense of well-being during periods of COVID-19 mandated lockdowns?” Results of this study can help further our understanding of how pets in general, and cats in particular, may help humans cope with the psychological effects associated with social isolation of an extended duration. It should be noted that for the purpose of this study, the definition of well-being was left intentionally broad to allow for a greater depth of exploration into the lived experience of cat ownership with regard to its meaning for the participant.

### **Method**

#### *Design*

This qualitative case study employed a semi-structured interview and assumed a phenomenological perspective to explore the participant’s lived experience as a cat owner, and the impact of cat ownership on well-being during the pandemic. This position was chosen as the phenomenological approach is best suited to gaining a deeper understanding of a given experience from the participant’s subjective point of view (Qutoshi, 2018).

#### *Participants*

The study was conducted with a single participant ( $n = 1$ ): a Canadian male owner of two cats. The participant was between the ages of 35 and 49 and was recruited using purposive sampling through online direct messaging. Inclusion criteria were adults who owned cats during the pandemic.

#### *Procedure*

The participant completed a 20-minute, in-person, semi-structured interview consisting of five questions, which was conducted at the primary researcher’s home. The audio recording of the interview was transcribed using an online automated transcription service. The resultant transcript was then checked against the recording for any errors or inconsistencies and corrections applied as necessary.

### ***Ethics***

The participant was given a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) ahead of the interview. The PIS outlined the study's purpose, its voluntary nature, what the participant could expect during the interview, what was required, risks and benefits, their right to withdraw, and their right to privacy and confidentiality. To obtain informed consent, the participant completed a Participant Consent Form. Following the interview, the participant was shown a Debriefing Form and given an opportunity to voice any concerns with the researcher.

The study acted in accordance with the guidelines and values outlined in the Canadian Psychological Association's *Code of Ethics for Psychologists* (2018) and the British Psychological Society's *Code of Human Research Ethics* (Oates *et al.*, 2021). To maintain the participant's anonymity, no personal information beyond age and gender was included in either the interview transcript or this report. This study received ethical approval from the online campus of the University of Essex.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher applied the steps outlined by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) to conduct an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the interview transcript. As a participant-oriented approach, the underlying principle of IPA is to gain an understanding of individuals' lived experiences by examining the meaning they give to these experiences (Alase, 2017). This iterative process involved familiarisation of the interview data through repeated readings of the transcript. Initial exploratory comments were recorded in the transcript's left-hand margin. From these, emergent themes were then recorded in the right-hand margin. Similar themes were clustered together, and finally organised into superordinate and subordinate themes (see Table 1 below). Where appropriate, some data was approached through the theoretical lens of Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1979). Generally, however, the data was left to be clear and self-explanatory in order to remain as true to the participant's lived experience as possible.

### **Results**

The impact of cat ownership on the participant's sense of well-being was expressed primarily through a narrative of attachment, affection, reward, and fulfilment. This was revealed across three superordinate themes: assuming the role of attachment figure, the benefits to the participant, and the benefits to the participant's cats.

Table 1: Summary of Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme	Example Quote
Assuming the role of attachment figure.	Approximation of parent-child relationship.	“I think it's possible or even maybe likely that my being there more often, sort of increased their attachment to me.”
	Taking on the role of caregiver.	
Benefits to the participant.	Sense of fulfilment.	“I still kind of feel as much of a fulfilment from the relationship I have with my pets.”
	Positive mental health benefits.	
Benefits to cats.	Fostering attachment.	“I think they would be more attached now.”
	Impact on cats' well-being.	

### Assuming the role of attachment figure

The prevailing feature of how the participant’s sense of well-being was affected was through his ability to act as an attachment figure for his feline companions during the pandemic. In attachment theory, the term *attachment figure* is used to refer to those to whom infants become attached in their formative years (Sherman, Rice and Cassidy, 2015). These are frequently parents, grandparents, or other members of the family, which was reflected in the participant’s narrative surrounding his relationship with his cats.

### *Approximation of parent-child relationship*

The role of attachment figure was first revealed by the participant towards the beginning of the interview when he was asked to describe his relationship with his cats, which he noted was similar to that of a parent to their child:

“In general, I would say I have a close relationship with my cats. I don't have children, but I suppose it might be similar to a parent-child relationship, without necessarily, I mean, acknowledging that it's not the same.”

This was elaborated upon by the participant's sense of responsibility over his cats, highlighting how his relationship with them transcends that of a mere friend or acquaintance, which places him in an even greater paternal position:

“And, also, I don't see them as, like, just a friend, like, human acquaintance can be because of the extra sense of responsibility I have over, you know, maintaining their existence.”

### ***Taking on the role of caregiver***

Further accentuating the attachment figure theme was how the participant returned on a few occasions to the idea of providing care and love for his cats:

“I take care of them, take them to the doctor, when they need it, and, yeah, all that kind of stuff. And I provide a home for them. And I also provide love to them, which in my opinion is something that a parent should provide to a child.”

### **Benefits to the participant**

More broadly, the participant outlined various benefits to his well-being that his relationship to his cats afforded him during the pandemic, which were chiefly derived from acting as a caregiver to his cats.

### ***Sense of fulfilment***

Firstly, the participant's assumption of the role of attachment figure gave him a sense of fulfilment by creating an outlet through which he could externalise his paternal caregiver instincts:

“I am taken out of that by the presence of the cats and the needs that they have and the demands they make. Yeah. So, it gives me... it gives me something to shift my focus away from the internal monologue, that might otherwise just completely monopolize my waking life at home if I were completely alone.”

This was echoed by the sense of reward the participant felt, due to the increase in affection from his cats resulting from him being at home more frequently during the pandemic:

“I suppose it just provides a sense of appreciation of yourself, like, maybe even as fundamental as, like, your existence just being acknowledged and appreciated, not ignored or more rejected or something like that.”

### ***Positive mental health benefits***

In addition, although the participant was not adversely affected by periods of lockdown himself, he also highlighted the possible mental health benefits of having positive interactions with his cats:

“It probably is very important for mental health, staves off depression probably, and, yeah, I don't know. Yeah.”

### **Benefits to cats**

Like many during the pandemic, the participant was able to work from home, which was seen as a benefit not only for himself, but for his cats as well.

### ***Fostering attachment***

More than once, the participant broached the topic of how his cats appeared to have developed a deeper attachment to him, which reinforced his feelings of reward and fulfilment that underscored his narrative during the interview:

“Since the pandemic, I'm at home a lot more, and they're more affectionate or they're closer or they're... they seem more attached.”

### ***Impact on cats' well-being***

Finally, the participant noted more than once how his increased presence at home during the pandemic may have had a greater impact on the well-being of his cats than his own:

“I think COVID benefited my cats because I was at home more with them to be able to interact with them and take care of them, you know, throughout the week.”

### **Discussion**

This study sought to explore the question of how cat owners perceived their relationship with their cats, and whether they affected their general sense of well-being during periods of COVID-19 mandated lockdowns. Findings revealed that well-being was positively affected by the participant acting as an attachment figure and caregiver for his cats, which produced feelings of reward and fulfilment. Findings also showed how the well-being of the participant's cats was similarly expressed through an increase in attachment to the participant.

Novel research applying attachment theory to human-cat relationships reveals how cats can form bonds with their caregivers in a similar fashion to that of children to their attachment figures (Vitale, Behnke and Udell, 2019). Furthermore, extant literature on attachment style shows how close relationships contribute positively to psychological well-being (Sagone *et al.*, 2023). This coincides with the findings of this study, as well as with those of Tan *et al.* (2021). Paradoxically, however, these findings are misaligned with those of the large corpus of quantitative research, highlighted previously on the subject of pet ownership and well-being during the pandemic. Therefore, the role of attachment between cats and their owners should be considered during future research in this area.

This study also found that pandemic-mandated lockdowns afforded a greater opportunity to amplify the role of caregiver, of which the resulting feelings of reward and fulfilment can contribute to overall well-being. This supports findings by Kanat-Maymon, Antebi and Zilcha-Mano (2016), which linked higher well-being of pet owners with the satisfaction of their pets' needs. Future studies could explore this effect longitudinally or cross-sectionally to assess whether it endures beyond temporary periods of self-isolation.

Finally, although this study's findings were primarily positive, the participant described himself as an introvert who did not experience any of the negative psychological effects typical of the pandemic, namely depression and anxiety due to loneliness as a result of self-isolation (Palgi *et al.*, 2020). This supports earlier findings by Kouser, Hanif and Saeed (2022), which described how introversion impacted positively on psychological well-being during the pandemic. Thus, personality disposition should also be considered in future research into the impact of cat ownership on well-being throughout periods of COVID-19 mandated lockdowns.

### Conclusion and Limitations

Ultimately, the impact of feline ownership on individuals' well-being during the COVID-19 global pandemic is still not yet fully understood. This study provided a small glimpse into one individual's lived experience as a cat owner during the pandemic; however, there remains ample opportunity for further investigation into the nascent field of COVID-19 related research. Although this study provided a rich account of one individual's lived experience, it does share the same limitations as any single-participant case study. Namely, the small sample size and qualitative nature of this study makes the findings difficult to be more broadly generalisable. Despite the researcher having employed reflexivity when analysing the interview data to minimise introducing bias, IPA is by definition dependent on the researcher's subjective interpretation. Other researchers may arrive at different conclusions, and it is therefore recommended that future studies make use of a larger scale, mixed method designs to corroborate this study's findings.

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