

# THE EFFECTS OF OWNING A PET ON SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-EFFICACY OF MALAYSIAN PET OWNERS

CHEONG SAU KUAN<sup>a</sup>

TEOH HSIEN-JIN

Sunway University College

NG LAI OON

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

In this research, 200 pet owners and non-pet owners were studied to ascertain the effects of owning a pet on the self-esteem and self-efficacy of the pet owners. All the respondents completed self-reported questionnaires. While the results showed no significant differences, it was noted that there was a tendency for people with pets to generally have slightly higher self-esteem and self-efficacy as compared to people without pets. The study also showed that higher self-esteem contributed towards predicting higher self-efficacy.

Key words: Pet, self-esteem, self-efficacy.

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## INTRODUCTION

The rate of mental health problems in Malaysia, and around the world, is rising. In Malaysia, the prevalence of mental health problems among adults was estimated at 12.7% (Maniam et al., 1997). In Malaysia, several initiatives are being taken to develop programmes that address the mental well-being of citizens. At present, the various factors that promote positive mental health are being identified. What role do pets play in this process? There are some suggestions that having a pet may help to relieve stress, and thus result in better mental health for the owner. A few studies have examined this hypothesis, but much of this work is in its infancy. This paper describes the effects of having a pet on the well-being of its owner.

Many definitions of mental health exist. Among these definitions are depression, anxiety, self-efficacy and self-esteem. In this study, the terms self-esteem and self-efficacy will be used. Self-esteem is the feeling of oneself being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and of being worthy of happiness. The behavioural aspects of self-esteem are manifested in such behaviours as assertiveness, resilience, decisiveness and being respectful of others (Reasoner, 2000). Self-efficacy is concerned with people's beliefs in their capabilities to exercise control over their own functioning and over events that affect their lives. People's beliefs in their efficacy are developed by a mastery over experiences, by seeing people similar to themselves successfully manage task demands, by social persuasion

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E-mail: <sup>a</sup>skcheong@academic.sunway.edu.my.

that one has the capabilities to succeed in given activities, and by inferences from somatic and emotional states indicative of personal strengths and vulnerabilities (Bandura, 1994).

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Studies suggest that having a pet may help alleviate mental health problems. Serpell (1990) noted that pet owners, when compared with non-pet owners, had fewer minor health problems and higher self-esteem. In the study, the reduction in minor health problems also resulted in an increase in healthy behaviours such as physical exercise (i.e., regularly walking the pet). It would appear that the pet also improved the owner's ability to carry out tasks, thus increasing overall self-efficacy. Many pet owners also appear to experience lower levels of anxiety as a result of ownership of their pets. Dog owners reported experiencing a reduction in their fear of being a victim of crime (Serpell, 1990). In addition, they reported having a slight increase in self-esteem. While these studies have been conducted on foreign pet owners, we wonder if the same results are observed among Malaysian pet owners. In addition, no studies have specifically examined the impact on the owner's self-efficacy.

Pets appear to have a positive impact on their owners for a number of reasons. Some are a source of love, affection and companionship (Cusack, 1988). Other pets promote social relationship among people whether they are in an institutional setting or simply strangers on the street. The pet acts as an icebreaker, thus facilitating social interaction among people (Cusack, 1988). Finally, some studies suggest that pets assist in promoting positive family interactions. Allen (1998) noted that couples with pets report greater closeness and satisfaction in marriage as compared to non-pet owners.

Regardless of the type of pet, the psychological benefits of having a pet are noticeable. Straede and Gates (1993) studied the psychological well-being of cat owners and non-pet owners and found that cat owners had lower levels of mental health problems. The study showed acquisition of, and later attachment to, the pet contributed to general mental health. While pets make little contribution to the owner's economic status, they provide benefits in terms of physiological and psychological well-being.

The above literature review suggests that pets contribute towards the physiological and psychological health of their owners. However, the studies do not clearly show whether the improvement in self-esteem also results in an increase in one's perception of being able to complete a variety of tasks. Thus, this study focuses on the psychological impact of having a pet, and how it affects self-efficacy. The research questions in this study are:

1. Is there a difference in self-esteem between pet owners and non-pet owners?
2. Is there a difference in self-efficacy between pet owners and non-pet owners?
3. If a pet owner has higher self-esteem, how does this relate towards greater self-efficacy?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

A single survey was used to obtain answers to the research questions. Subjects were divided into two groups, pet owners and non-pet owners. The pet owner group was recruited at several veterinary clinics, and the non-pet owner group—matched for age-range and gender—was obtained from the general population. The samples were selected on a random basis, and were dependent on the subjects volunteering to complete the questionnaires. The questionnaires included questions on self-esteem and self-efficacy, and were self-reported by the subjects.

### Subjects

The pet owner group consisted of 100 subjects among whom were 55 dog owners and 45 cat owners. The non-pet owner group consisted of 100 subjects. The sample ranged in age from 14 years to 68 years old. Among the respondents, 69% were female, and 31% were male (Table 1); 57.5% of the samples were single, 41% were married and 1.5% were either divorced or widowed. The multiracial sample consisted of Malays (23%), Chinese (59.5%), Indians (13%) and others (4.5%) (Table 2). Most of the respondents had at least secondary school education (i.e., secondary (18.5%); diploma (21%); and university (60%)). The majority of the respondents worked in the private sector (50.5%) or were self-employed (15%). They came from a range of occupational backgrounds, for instance, professionals (41.5%), administrators (11.5%), clerical (4%), sales (5%), and service industry (8%). Most pet owners lived in houses (89%), and a smaller number in condominiums (10%).

Within the pet owner group, the number of pets owned ranged from 1 to 35. The mean number of pets was 5. The descriptive statistics of the subjects are stated in Table 3.

When describing the breed of dog that the subjects had, dog owners had mongrels (25.5%), followed by German Shepherds (14.5 %) and Shih Tzu (10.9%). Other breeds of dogs were less commonly found in the sample. Among the cat owners, 46.6% had Persian cats. Other cat owners had local breed (40%) or mixed breed (3%).

Table 1. Distribution of Sample by Gender

Gender	With Pets	Without Pets	Total Sample
Male	35 (35%)	27 (27%)	62 (31%)
Female	65 (65%)	73 (73%)	138 (69%)
Total	100 (100%)	100 (100%)	200 (100%)

Table 2. Distribution of Sample by Race

Race	With Pets	Without Pets	Total Sample
Malay	28 (28%)	18 (18%)	46 (23%)
Chinese	50 (50%)	69 (69%)	119 (59.5%)
Indian	16 (16%)	10 (10%)	26 (13%)
Others	6 (6%)	3 (3%)	9 (4.5%)
Total	100 (100%)	100 (100%)	200 (100%)

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Demographics of Pet Owner Group

Demographics	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Range
Age	100	32.5	12.56	14–68
Number of pets	100	5.00	6.45	1–35

### Measurement Devices

The measurement instruments consisted of two questionnaires. The questionnaires were translated from English into Bahasa Malaysia by a clinical psychologist and scrutinised by another clinical psychologist who spoke both languages fluently. The questionnaires are:

- a) Self-esteem Testing Scale (SERS) (Nugent and Thomas, 1993) which measures self-esteem from a range area of self-evaluation including overall self-worth, social competence, problem-solving ability, intellectual ability, self-competence, and worth relative to other people. The scale consists of 40 items which subjects respond to on a seven-point scale. The internal consistency has an alpha of 0.97. The items are summed to produce a total score ranging from –120 to +120. Positive scores indicate more positive self-esteem whereas negative scores indicate more negative levels of self-esteem.
- b) Self-efficacy Scale (Sherer et al. (1982) which measures generalised self-efficacy expectations. The scale consists of 17 items which subjects respond to on a five-point scale. The internal consistency has an alpha of 0.86. The items are summed to produce a total score ranging from 17 to 85. Higher scores indicate higher self-efficacy.

### RESULTS

This study was set up to ascertain if there was a difference in mental health status and self-efficacy between pet owners and non-pet owners. In addition, the study intended to find out

if there was a relationship between self-efficacy and self-esteem among subjects. To examine the different levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy between the pet owner group and the non-pet owner group, the mean scores of each group were compared.

The mean scores for self-esteem and self-efficacy were computed, and the difference between people with pets, and people without pets, was observed using a series of univariate Analyses of Variance. The dependent variables were self-esteem and self-efficacy and the independent variable was the two groups (i.e., pets vs. no pets). The results of the analyses indicated that there was no significant difference between the groups on measures of self-esteem [ $F(1,815)$ ], and self-efficacy [ $F(0,530)$ ] (see Table 4). Despite the insignificant results, there was a slight trend where pet owners, as compared with non-pet owners, had slightly higher self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Self-esteem and Self-efficacy

Description	Pet	No Pet	Total	<i>F</i> Value
Self-esteem	53.39 (24.12)*	48.09 (31.08)	50.74 (27.87)	1.815
Self-efficacy	63.93 (9.22)	62.90 (10.73)	63.42 (9.99)	0.530

\*The numbers are: mean (standard deviation).

The analyses also focused on estimating the relationship between self-esteem and self-efficacy. To obtain the results, a linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the role of self-esteem in predicting self-efficacy. The results indicated that self-esteem significantly predicted self-efficacy [ $F(1,199) = 99.497, p < 0.01$ ] (see Table 5). In addition, 33% of the variance in predicting self-efficacy was contributed by self-esteem. Thus, the higher a person's self-esteem the more they feel they are able to accomplish things.

Table 5. Summary of Ordinary Least Square Multiple Regression Analysis for Self-esteem Predicting Self-efficacy ( $N=200$ )

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	
<i>Self-efficacy</i>			
Self-esteem	0.207	0.021	0.000**

Notes:  $R^2 = 0.334$  [ $F(1,199) = 99.497, p < 0.01$ ].

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

## DISCUSSION

This study was designed to evaluate several issues. Firstly, the study examined the differences in levels of self-esteem between people who have pets and people who do not have pets. Secondly, the differences in levels of self-efficacy between pet owners and non-pet owners were investigated. Finally, the study investigated how a person's self-esteem contributed to his or her self-efficacy.

Several conclusions were drawn from this study. Firstly, the analysis revealed that there was no significant difference in the levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy between pet owners and non-pet owners. Since the results were statistically not significant, the null hypothesis is not rejected, and we cannot draw a conclusion as to whether pet owners, as compared with non-pet owners had slightly higher self-esteem and self-efficacy. While other research noted the importance of having a pet in increasing a person's mental health including increasing personal self-esteem and self-efficacy (Bergler, 1988; Lee, 1983), the results of this study were not conclusive.

The importance of this study's results is to create awareness within the community about the importance of owning a pet. Pets can function in many ways to help increase mental health (Becker, 2002; Beck and Katcher, 1996; Cusack, 1988).

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, the sample was restricted to people ranging from young adults to elderly people, and did not include children. The questionnaire was not designed to apply to younger-age people. Thus, the results may not be generalised to the younger-age group. Knowing that pets play an important role in the development of childhood, further studies may be needed to explore this point. Perhaps significant differences between pet-owners and non-pet owners on measures of self-esteem and self-efficacy could have been detected if the sample did not include non-pet respondents who were actively involved in religious organisations. It is anticipated that people with a strong faith tend to have higher self-esteem.

Given the findings and limitations of this study, further studies that examine pet owner and non-pet owner groups on a variety of dimensions would be necessary. Among these dimensions are socioeconomic status and devotion to one's religious beliefs. In addition to this, it would also be of interest to know what pet owners get out of their pets, how social support from pets is conveyed, and finally how the pets bond with their owners. At present few studies have examined the mental health benefits of pets on owners. While useful information can be obtained from studies in other countries, more studies need to be carried out to provide data relevant to local needs.

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