

# The Impact of Pet Companionship on Adolescents' Emotional States, Emotional Recognition, and Interpersonal Relationships

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**Abstract.** This study investigates the effects of pet companionship on adolescents' emotional states, emotional recognition abilities, and interpersonal relationships. Conducted with 11 Chinese university students from Northwest Normal University who have prior experience with pet ownership, the research utilizes semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data. The findings reveal that interacting with pets consistently fosters positive emotions such as happiness, relaxation, and reduced stress, while also occasionally eliciting negative emotions related to pet behavior and care responsibilities. Additionally, pet companionship enhances adolescents' abilities to recognize and regulate their own emotions, as well as to perceive and understand others' emotions more effectively. The presence of pets also facilitates the development of interpersonal relationships by providing common interests that strengthen friendships and improve family cohesion. The study highlights the significant role of pets in supporting adolescents' emotional well-being and social skills. However, it acknowledges limitations including a homogeneous sample and reliance on self-reported data, suggesting the need for further research to explore these dynamics across diverse populations and contexts.

## 1 Introduction

With the development of modern society and the accelerated pace of life, adolescents are at a critical stage of psychological and emotional development. Helping adolescents better regulate their emotions, recognize their feelings, and establish healthy relationships has become a joint concern for families, schools, and society. In this context, pet companionship, with its unique emotional support and psychological comfort functions, has increasingly become a research and application hotspot.

Pets have become important members of many families due to their gentle, loyal nature and intimate interaction with humans. Pets have been part of households in urban environments for over 30 years [1]. During interactions with pets, adolescents can experience unconditional love and care, which helps them receive comfort and support when facing emotional fluctuations. Pet companionship can significantly improve emotional states. Through intimate interactions with pets, adolescents can find ways to release their emotions

when they are feeling down or anxious. Sable used attachment theory and social support to explain why attachment to pets can reduce loneliness and relieve stress [2].

Pet companionship also positively impacts emotional recognition abilities. A survey by Joseph et al. found that individuals who perceive higher levels of unconditional positive regard and empathy from pets have higher life quality[3]. During interactions with pets, adolescents need to learn to observe and understand the emotions and needs of their pets. This ability can not only enhance their sensitivity to others' emotions but also help them better understand and manage their own emotions. As family members, pets can serve as emotional bonds between family members, enhancing family cohesion and intimacy. Those with close contact with pets report lower levels of loneliness and greater social support [4].

Although there is substantial research showing the positive impact of pet companionship on adolescents' emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships, there are still some shortcomings and challenges. Existing research often focuses on quantitative studies, with limited exploration of the specific mechanisms of pet companionship. The impact of different types of pets and individual differences on research results has not been fully considered, and different types of pets may have significant differences in their effects on adolescents.

## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Participants and procedure

Researchers used a convenience sampling method to recruit participants from Northwest Normal University, having determined the selection criteria before advertising. The criteria were: (1) university students, (2) 18 years or older, (3) Chinese, and (4) having previous experience with pet ownership. The purpose of the study was explained before the interview, and participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their personal information. They were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. Participants were interviewed via online voice calls, with the study background, purpose, and privacy explained. During the interview, participants could withdraw at any time. This study employed semi-structured interviews. The interviewer had a set of questions designed based on the research objectives and revised after discussion with the advisor. A total of 11 participants (mean age = 22, SD = 1.86) were included. Specific information about the participants is shown in Table 1. After completing the interviews, participants received 14 RMB (2 USD) as compensation for their time and effort.

**Table 1.** Details of participants

No.	Name	Gender	Age	Pet type	Number Of pets	Cognize Of pets	Feeding Duration (year)
1	H	Female	23	Hedgehog, snake	2	Heterogenia	2
2	Lin	Female	24	cat	2	Normal	3
3	Yang	Male	22	Tortoise, parrot	2	Heterogenia	1
4	Lee	Male	24	dog	1	Normal	4.5
5	Wang	Female	19	dog	10	Normal	6

6	Zhao	Female	24	cat	1	Normal	2.5
7	Ou Yang	Female	22	hamster	1	Normal	2
8	Meng	Male	23	rabbit	1	Normal	1
9	Zhang	Female	20	Chicken, duck	4	Heterogenia	1
10	Liu Yuan	Male	19	hamster	12	Normal	3
11	Fu	Male	20	spider	7	Heterogenia	1

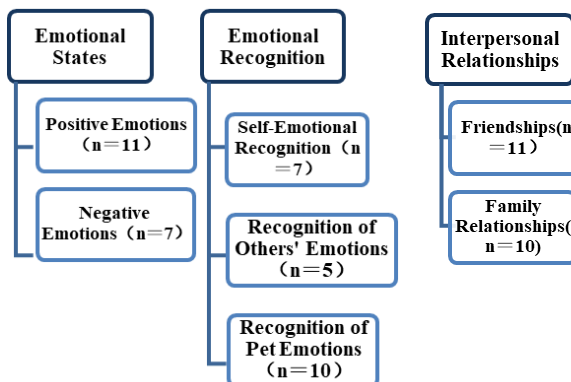
### 3 Data analysis

To maintain anonymity, all names and other identifying information have been changed. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze each interview [5]. To understand the participants' subjective experiences, the researcher needs to explore, interpret, and describe how participants make sense of their experiences[6].

The data analysis in this study consisted of five steps. The researcher began by listening to recordings and reading transcripts to understand the participants, making detailed notes on each line. Next, they analyzed exploratory notes to identify subordinate themes. Similar steps were applied to each case, categorizing subordinate themes into superordinate themes based on patterns. Finally, the researcher ensured alignment between the themes and transcript data by sending notes to the supervisor for triangulation.

### 4 Results

Regarding emotional states, all 11 participants reported that pet companionship brought them positive emotions, while 7 participants indicated that pet companionship sometimes also brought negative emotions. In terms of emotion recognition, 7 participants stated that pet companionship had a positive impact on their self-emotion recognition, and 5 participants mentioned that it improved their recognition of others' emotions. Additionally, 10 participants reported that they were able to recognize their pets' emotions well. Finally, concerning the improvement of interpersonal relationships, all 11 participants expressed that pet companionship had a positive impact on their friendships, and 10 participants reported that it also had a positive influence on their relationships with relatives.



**Fig. 1** Details of superordinate and subordinate themes

## 4.1 Emotional States

All participants reported on their emotional states during pet companionship. There were two subordinate themes: (1) positive emotions, and (2) negative emotions.

### 4.1.1 Positive emotions

All 11 participants indicated that pet companionship brings about positive emotions, regardless of whether they perceived their pets as conventional or exotic.

For example, H said, *“When I’m unhappy, my cat provides comfort. It’s reassuring to have them around when I’m lonely. The pressure of university life has noticeably decreased since I adopted two cats.”* Yang said, *“Turtles and parrots provided emotional compensation during my childhood, making me happy even when my parents weren’t around.”* Ouyang said, *“When I’m anxious, I quietly observe them, and after a while, I calm down. When I’m down, interacting with them makes me feel needed.”*

### 4.1.2 Negative Emotions

Seven participants reported that pet companionship brings about negative emotions.

H said, *“Initially, I was very upset when the hedgehog bit me. Sometimes, I would feel anxious when it stayed still, worrying that it might be sick.”* Lin said, *“The cat sheds too much hair and needs frequent brushing, which feels a bit troublesome.”* Lee and Zhao said, *“Occasionally, it disobeys, which makes me angry.”*

## 4.2 Emotional Recognition

All participants reported on whether pet companionship affects their ability to recognize emotions. There were three subordinate themes: (1) self-emotional recognition, (2) recognition of others' emotions, and (3) recognition of pet emotions.

### 4.2.1 Self-emotional recognition

Seven participants reported that pet companionship has an impact on self-emotional recognition.

H said, *“When I’m angry with them, I realize that I’m in an angry state.”* Zhao said, *“One night, the cat was making noise outside the mosquito net, and I got really angry and hit it a couple of times. Later, I felt I was too harsh and impatient, especially since it was only a few months old at that time. Since then, I’ve felt that I might not be cut out to be a pet owner, lacking patience.”*

### 4.2.2 Recognition of others' emotions

Five participants reported that pet companionship affects their ability to recognize others' emotions.

Meng said, *“Learning to observe the emotions of pets, which are often hidden, has made me more sensitive to recognizing others' emotions, as my friends say I communicate and express myself better.”* Liu Yuan said, *“Sometimes, human behaviors and personalities resemble those of animals, such as a timid hamster being careful about many things, which helps me better detect the emotions of similar people in real life.”*

### 4.2.3 Recognition of pet emotions

Ten participants reported that they are able to recognize their pets' emotions well during companionship.

H said, *“When the hedgehog is angry, it makes a hissing sound. When it’s happy, it runs around. When the snake is agitated, it bumps against the box.”* Lin said, *“When I brought the new kitten home, I could feel that the previously raised cats were upset and became more clingy.”* Lee said, *“When not going out for a long time, the pet becomes listless. When hungry, it uses its paws to tap the food bowl.”*

## 4.3 Interpersonal Relationships

All participants reported that pet companionship has positively impacted their interpersonal relationships. There were three subordinate themes: (1) improvement in friendships, and (2) Improvement in family relationships.

### 4.3.1 Improvement in friendships

All 11 participants indicated that pet companionship improved their friendships.

Zhao said, *“I have many friends who own dogs and cats. We discuss pet behaviors, share photos, and exchange links for good deals on pet supplies.”* Liu Yuan said, *“I became closest with my current best friend after discovering that we both keep small animals. We privately share updates about our pets, which has made our relationship stronger.”* Fu said, *“I’ve connected with many people online about spider care, expanding my social circle to include friends of various ages.”*

### 4.3.2 Improvement in family relationships

Ten participants reported that pet companionship improved their family relationships.

Zhao said, *“After getting a cat, my communication with family members increased. The cat also helps mediate conflicts and sometimes even prevents arguments by diverting attention.”* Meng said, *“Caring for the rabbit has brought me closer to my parents. The rabbit is smart and begs for food at the table, which makes us all laugh. We divide tasks—I handle feeding the rabbit, and they clean up. We also play with the rabbit together when we have free time.”* Zhang said, *“Because chickens and ducks don’t have specific spots for waste, we all brainstorm ways to manage their droppings. Over time, this has become a routine that we treat as exercise, strengthening our family bond.”*

## 5 Discussion

This study is the first to examine the subjective experiences of Chinese university students regarding the impact of pet companionship on emotional states, emotional recognition, and interpersonal relationships. Based on the participants' experiences, we found that pet companionship positively affects their emotional states, enhances their ability to recognize their own, others', and pets' emotions, and improves interpersonal relationships both directly and indirectly.

Firstly, participants experienced more positive emotions, while interacting with their pets. Existing research indicates that companion animals can buffer negative emotions and that interactions with them may have additional positive effects on emotions. Additionally, the manner in which pets provide companionship might influence emotional outcomes

differently—whether simply existing or actively interacting with their owners [7]. This could explain the variations in positive emotions reported by participants. This finding supports the social support theory, which suggests that pets, as a form of “non-human social support,” provide emotional comfort[8]. However, some participants also reported experiencing negative emotions during pet care, such as frustration from pets not obeying commands or anxiety over their health. Previous studies have shown mixed effects of pet companionship on emotional health, with some reporting no benefit or even negative outcomes [9]. Our study confirms that early in pet ownership, negative emotions can arise from adjusting to the pet’s personality or unfamiliarity with its habits. However, as participants spend more time with their pets, these negative feelings diminish. Even if short-term frustrations or anger occur, they quickly subside, and overall emotional states remain relatively stable.

Secondly, pet companionship improved adolescents’ emotional recognition abilities. Previous research highlights that pets are characterized by their cuteness and unconditional love [10]. Interacting with pets allows adolescents to experience a supportive emotional environment, which helps them face and express their emotions more effectively. Additionally, pets’ needs and behaviors can teach adolescents emotional regulation. Previous research suggests that interacting with pets enhances interpersonal emotional cognition and processing, as it helps develop empathy and emotional recognition skills [11].

Finally, the study clearly shows that pet companionship enhances adolescents’ social skills and the quality of their interpersonal relationships. Pets are often seen as “social lubricants” [12], making it easier for adolescents to connect with others. Pets, especially in social settings, can reduce adolescents’ anxiety, making them feel more relaxed and confident. This helps them interact more naturally and openly with peers and adults. The study corroborates earlier findings about dogs as social “icebreakers” [13]. Participants found that initiating conversations about pets is an effective way to engage with unfamiliar peers and strengthen relationships. Earlier research reported that dogs are often conversation starters between strangers [14]. Dog owners are more likely to experience social interactions compared to those walking alone [15]. Similarly, this study found that walking dogs leads to encounters with dog enthusiasts and other dog owners, fostering communication and potential friendships. Furthermore, research suggests that this icebreaking role is not limited to dogs; small animals like turtles and rabbits also facilitate conversations among strangers in park settings [16]. Participants’ exotic pets, such as snakes and hedgehogs, similarly contributed to positive interpersonal interactions. In family relationships, despite initial resistance from family members regarding pet ownership, pets are gradually accepted, and interactions involving the pets improve family dynamics. This aligns with previous research showing that pets can act as buffers in conflict-prone families [17].

## **6 Cultural differences**

Regarding the cultural differences in the status of pets, in many Western countries, pets are viewed as family members and have a very close relationship with humans. Currently, about two-thirds of American households and half of British households have pets. But keeping pets as common practice has only emerged in these countries in the last 200 years [18].

In contrast, in some Asian and African countries, the status of pets might be relatively lower, and they are sometimes viewed as tools or symbols rather than emotional companions. For example, the Kiambu people in Kenya live with dogs primarily to drive away animals and deter strangers, but they do not view these dogs as companions [19]. Therefore, the role of pets in emotional recognition and regulation may differ from that in Western cultures.

Cultural preferences also influence the types of pets chosen. This can influence how adolescents develop emotional recognition skills through pet interactions. Gray and Young

found in their meta-analysis that a variety of animals, including caimans, ostriches, turtles, pigs, monkeys, bears, and bats, are kept as pets[20].

## 7 Limitations

From a research sample perspective, this study focused primarily on contemporary university students, with participants exclusively from Northwest Normal University. This homogeneity in the sample may limit the ecological validity of the findings. Moreover, this study primarily relies on self-reports from participants, which may be subject to subjective bias. Future research should incorporate objective measurement methods to validate self-reported results.

Emotional recognition is a complex process involving cognitive, psychological, and social skills. While pet companionship can facilitate this process in certain aspects, its effects might be limited to specific contexts or types of emotions, and may not comprehensively address adolescents' emotional recognition needs in various situations. Recent research by Golle found a shared mechanism in the encoding of human and non-human infant faces[21]. The idea of extending infant-like responses to human-animal relationships is supported by evidence suggesting that the bond between pets and their owners bears striking similarities to the relationship between human parents and their children. Language used with animals often mimics “motherese” or “infant-directed speech” [22]. Based on previous studies and the results of this research, these insights may provide useful implications for understanding the internal mechanisms of how pet companionship influences adolescents' emotions and social interactions.

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