

Experiences of Selected Filipinos on Dog Adoption during The COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: This qualitative study explored how dog adopters during the pandemic made sense of their experiences while coping with COVID-19. Using a phenomenological approach, a five-item open-ended questionnaire was administered to seven volunteers from St. Paul University Manila via Google Form. The sample size of seven participants aligns with phenomenological research principles, ensuring depth over breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers immersed themselves in the data, coded responses, and refined themes to capture lived experiences. Findings were presented with rich descriptions and direct quotations for interpretative depth. Results revealed that adopting dogs during the pandemic was driven by companionship, responsibility, emotional support, and opportunity. Over time, these motivations evolved into deeper coping mechanisms, fostering emotional stability, routine, and physical activity. Dogs provided comfort, alleviated stress, and strengthened family bonds, offering unconditional support and enhancing resilience during the uncertainties of the pandemic. Adopting a dog during the pandemic fostered emotional regulation, patience, mindfulness, responsibility, and companionship. Initially a coping mechanism, pet ownership evolved into personal growth, enhancing social confidence, discipline, and empathy. This dynamic process highlights how adversity, when navigated with support, can lead to resilience and long-term self-improvement. Adopting a dog during the pandemic shifted adopters' perceptions of stray dogs from fear to empathy. They recognized stray dogs as loving, sentient beings, equal to purebreds. This led to increased advocacy, compassion, and proactive efforts to support stray animals. Personal growth reinforced these changes, fostering greater awareness and adoption promotion.

Keywords: Dog adoption, Pandemic coping, Phenomenological approach, Emotional support, Personal growth

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted mental health worldwide, leading to increased prevalence of various psychological issues. According to the World Health Organization, there was a 25% global increase in anxiety and depression during the pandemic (Santomauro et al., 2021). Factors contributing to this surge include social isolation due to restrictive measures, fear of infection, and economic uncertainties. A study highlighted that morbidity and mortality associated with COVID-19 adversely affected individuals' mental states, with social separation and isolation further exacerbating this impact (Rajkumar, 2020).

Research indicates that the pandemic has led to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression across various populations. A comprehensive review identified various psychological problems and significant mental health consequences, including stress, anxiety, depression, frustration, and uncertainty, emerging progressively during the COVID-19 outbreak (Xiong et al., 2020). Certain groups have been more vulnerable to mental health challenges during the pandemic. For instance, healthcare workers, individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions, and those experiencing economic hardships have reported higher levels of psychological distress. A study focusing on the mental health impact of COVID-19 across different cohorts emphasized the need for targeted interventions to support these vulnerable populations (Khan et al., 2020).

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a substantial increase in mental health issues globally. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies, including accessible mental health services, public health interventions to reduce stressors, and ongoing research to understand the long-term psychological impacts of the pandemic.

Animal-assisted Therapy for Mental Health

Pet therapy, also known as animal-assisted therapy (AAT), involves the use of animals to support individuals' recovery and well-being across various health conditions. Research indicates that AAT can be beneficial for individuals with psychological disorders, developmental disorders, dementia, and chronic pain (Charry-Sánchez et al., 2018). Additionally, animal adoption itself has been shown to mitigate some of the detrimental psychological effects of lockdown, suggesting that the human-animal bond plays a vital role in mental health during periods of isolation (Ratschen, 2020).

In the context of psychological disorders, AAT has been associated with reductions in symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and major depressive disorder. For instance, children with ADHD who participated in canine-assisted therapy alongside cognitive-behavioral therapy exhibited a decrease in behavioral issues and improved socialization skills compared to those receiving only cognitive-behavioral therapy (Schuck et al., 2015). Similarly, individuals with ASD have shown improvements in social interactions and reductions in stress and anxiety levels through interactions with therapy animals. Therapeutic horseback riding and canine-assisted interventions have been noted to enhance mood and facilitate social engagement in children with ASD (Gabriels et al., 2015).

Beyond psychological benefits, pet ownership has also been linked to increased physical activity (Coleman et al., 2008). Studies indicate that dog walking can promote regular exercise and contribute to weight control, particularly for individuals living in high-walkability neighborhoods where walking is a common mode of physical activity. This suggests that the presence of companion animals not only supports mental health but also encourages a more active lifestyle.

For patients with dementia, AAT has been found to encourage emotional expression and provide cognitive stimulation. Engaging with therapy animals can lead to measurable improvements in quality of life, increased social interactions, and reduced agitation levels in these patients (Bernabei et al., 2013). Moreover, a comprehensive review of 17 studies on pet ownership and mental health suggested that pets provide significant emotional benefits to individuals with mental health conditions. This further supports the idea that both AAT and general pet ownership can contribute to psychological resilience and overall well-being (Brooks et al., 2018).

While the effectiveness of AAT is still under investigation, and more rigorous studies are needed to establish standardized protocols, current evidence suggests that incorporating animals into therapeutic settings can offer meaningful benefits for various populations. Furthermore, pet adoption itself may serve as an

additional means of support for individuals struggling with mental health challenges, reinforcing the value of human-animal interactions.

AAT during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted mental health globally, leading to increased interest in alternative therapeutic interventions, including AAT. AAT involves the incorporation of animals into therapeutic settings to enhance physical, emotional, and social well-being. During the pandemic, the implementation of AAT faced challenges due to social distancing measures and concerns about virus transmission. However, innovative approaches emerged to adapt AAT to the constraints imposed by the pandemic.

One notable adaptation was the transition to virtual platforms, where therapy animals were introduced through video calls. This approach aimed to provide comfort and reduce feelings of isolation among individuals affected by the pandemic. A study by Atsmon et al. (2022) explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the clinical practice of drama therapy, highlighting the shift to online settings and the associated challenges and adaptations. Although this study focused on drama therapy, similar challenges and adaptations were observed in AAT practices. Despite the limitations of virtual interactions, preliminary reports suggest that remote AAT sessions offered emotional support and a sense of normalcy to participants during periods of lockdown and social isolation. However, the efficacy of virtual AAT compared to traditional in-person sessions remains an area for further research.

Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated adaptations in the delivery of animal-assisted therapy, with practitioners exploring virtual avenues to continue providing support. While these innovations allowed for the continuation of therapeutic interventions during a time of physical distancing, further studies are needed to evaluate their effectiveness and to develop best practices for remote AAT.

Paulinian Environmental Society's Pet Parade Stories

Since the establishment of the PES pet parade at St. Paul University Manila as part of its annual foundation celebrations, numerous stories have emerged of students and staff adopting dogs during the COVID-19 pandemic. These accounts have become more apparent as the university resumed on-campus operations and face-to-face anniversary celebrations. This aligns with broader trends observed during the pandemic, where pet adoption became a coping mechanism for stress and isolation. Embudo (2021) reported that Filipinos had the highest interest in pet ownership in Southeast Asia during the pandemic, as evidenced by a 118% increase in online pet searches from 2019 to 2021, based on a study by iPrice. Similarly, Liu et al. (2021) noted that the global relative search volume for pet adoption terms peaked between April and May 2020, coinciding with the early stages of the pandemic.

Research in the Philippines by Esquillo et al. (2022) further supports the idea that companion animals played a significant role in enhancing well-being, happiness, and alleviating loneliness among college students during this period. A study utilizing a descriptive correlational design, it found a significant relationship between pet ownership and students' emotional well-being during the pandemic. Using Pearson R statistical analysis, the study demonstrated that pet owners exhibited a moderately high level of well-being and high levels of happiness and loneliness. The findings suggest that companion animals contributed positively to students' mental health but also highlight the complexity of their emotional experiences, as loneliness remained prevalent. The study, grounded in attachment theory, explored the bond between pets and their owners, reinforcing the idea that emotional attachment to animals can influence overall psychological well-being.

Philosophical Underpinning

This qualitative study is grounded in **interpretivism**, which emphasizes understanding human experiences from the perspective of those who live them. Unlike positivist paradigms that seek objective truths through quantifiable data, interpretivism acknowledges the subjective nature of reality, recognizing that individuals construct meaning based on their unique social contexts.

In this study, the lived experiences of dog adopters during the COVID-19 pandemic are explored through their own narratives. The study aligns with **phenomenology**, a philosophical approach that seeks to uncover how individuals perceive, interpret, and make sense of their experiences. By centering on the meanings that adopters assign to their companionship with dogs in the context of pandemic-related challenges, this research underscores the subjective and deeply personal nature of coping mechanisms.

Furthermore, this study is informed by **social constructivism**, which posits that knowledge is co-constructed through interactions and shared meanings. The emotional and psychological significance of dog adoption during the pandemic is not merely an individual experience but is shaped by broader societal discourses on resilience, mental health, and human-animal relationships. By capturing and analyzing participants' narratives, this study contributes to a richer, more nuanced understanding of how human-animal bonds are socially and personally constructed during times of crisis.

Thus, through an interpretivist lens, grounded in phenomenology and social constructivism, this study seeks to illuminate the complex, individualized, yet socially influenced meanings that dog adopters attach to their experiences of companionship and coping during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Statement of the Problem

This qualitative study, unlike the quantitative studies discussed above, sought to surface experiences to present how dog adopters during the pandemic who volunteered to participate made sense of their experiences as they coped with the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic in the company of their adopted dogs.

II. Methodology

A five-item open-ended questionnaire was distributed through Google Form to seven volunteer participants, students and staff of St. Paul University Manila. In phenomenological research, the focus is on the depth rather than the breadth of understanding, making smaller sample sizes appropriate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A sample size of seven participants is sufficient because phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of lived experiences rather than generalize findings to a larger population (Moustakas, 1994).

According to Smith et al. (2009), interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a widely used phenomenological approach, typically involves four to 10 participants to allow for in-depth exploration of individual experiences while maintaining manageable data analysis. Similarly, Van Manen (2016) emphasizes that rich, detailed descriptions from a few participants are more valuable than superficial insights from a large sample.

Moreover, Guest et al. (2006) suggest that data saturation, the point at which no new themes emerge, often occurs within the first six to twelve interviews. Thus, seven participants provide a strong foundation for identifying meaningful patterns while maintaining analytical depth and rigor. Thus, a sample size of seven aligns with phenomenological research principles, ensuring comprehensive insights into lived experiences while balancing feasibility and depth of analysis.

After collecting the survey responses through Google Forms, the study implemented thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a widely used method in phenomenological research to identify, analyze, and interpret

patterns of meaning within qualitative data. It is particularly useful in descriptive and interpretative phenomenology, as it allows researchers to uncover the essence of lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis in a phenomenological study follows a structured process to uncover the essence of lived experiences. Researchers began by immersing themselves in the data through repeated readings. They then generated initial codes by identifying meaningful segments that capture participants' experiences. These codes were grouped into themes that reflected commonalities while preserving individual uniqueness. Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure alignment with participants' narratives, followed by defining and naming them to highlight their significance. Finally, the findings were presented with thick descriptions and direct quotations, ensuring depth and interpretative insight.

III. Results

Decision to Adopt during the Pandemic

The thematic analysis reveals that adopting a dog during the pandemic was driven by various factors, including responsibility, emotional support, companionship, opportunity, compassion, and happiness. These motivations reflect the deep bond between humans and animals, particularly in times of crisis.

Responsibility and Experience. Some respondents highlighted that adopting a dog was a way to instill responsibility. One participant mentioned, "We decided to adopt the dog for experience since my parents wanted us to be responsible." This suggests that pet ownership was seen as an opportunity for personal growth and learning.

Stress Relief and Emotional Support. Several responses pointed to the role of dogs in providing comfort and alleviating stress during the pandemic. Statements like "Stress reliever" and "She was my comfort and support throughout the pandemic" indicate that dogs played a crucial role in emotional well-being, helping owners cope with anxiety and uncertainty.

Companionship and Socialization. Many participants adopted dogs to combat feelings of loneliness and isolation. One respondent stated, "The main reason is to have companionship. Since mostly are limited because of the protocols, adopting a dog is one of the best alternative ways to socialize." This highlights the role of dogs in fulfilling social needs when human interactions were restricted.

Opportunity Due to Circumstances. Some respondents noted that the pandemic provided the ideal conditions for adopting a pet. One participant shared, "I've always wanted a furry companion, and the pandemic provided the perfect opportunity to finally adopt a dog." This suggests that increased time at home allowed individuals to commit to pet ownership.

Rescue and Compassion. A few responses reflected a sense of duty or compassion toward animals in need. For instance, "A person we know had to let go of the puppy because the puppy was the runt of the litter, so he wasn't eating much and isn't as healthy as the other puppies." This indicates that some adopters were motivated by the opportunity to provide care for vulnerable animals.

Happiness and Well-Being. Finally, the theme of joy and emotional fulfillment emerged, as one respondent simply stated, "To have company and it makes me feel happy." This underscores the intrinsic satisfaction and happiness that dog ownership brought during challenging times.

Stories of Coping with the Pandemic with an Adopted Dog

Emotional Support and Comfort. Several participants described their dogs as sources of emotional stability during the pandemic. One respondent shared, "My dog, Kenchan, was a constant source of comfort during the pandemic. One day, I was feeling overwhelmed and anxious. Kenchan sensed my emotions and snuggled up beside me." Another participant expressed, "My dog was a huge help in coping with my mental health, especially during the lockdown when it was just me and my mom. It felt less lonely with Tequila around." These accounts highlight how dogs provided companionship, reassurance, and stress relief.

Sense of Routine and Responsibility. Many responses emphasized how caring for a dog helped establish a sense of normalcy and purpose. One respondent noted, "Because I had to put a lot of things on pause during the pandemic, getting to take care of my dog gave me a sense of normalcy and responsibility." Similarly, another participant shared, "Sasha helped me to improve my body clock as I've always slept very late during the pandemic. She taught me to change my usual routine into a more productive day." These stories reflect how dogs encouraged structure and healthier habits in their owners' lives.

Physical Activity and Outdoor Engagement. Some participants credited their dogs with promoting physical activity. One respondent simply stated, "Companionship during afternoon stroll," indicating that dog walks provided both exercise and emotional connection. Another participant described how their dog's love for physical activities motivated them to be more active: "*She loves to do physical activities. I want to make sure that I'm giving the love and care for her, alongside being a responsible dog owner.*"

Bonding and Social Connection. Owning a dog also strengthened relationships with family members. One response highlighted, "Taking turns training her gave us something to bond over. It was definitely a lot better than being stuck with just each other." This suggests that pet care became a shared activity, fostering connection and engagement between family members.

Unconditional Love and Acceptance. One participant reflected on the unique emotional support dogs provide, stating, "Dogs will always make you feel loved, accepted, no judgment whatever your condition or situation is." This sentiment encapsulates the deep emotional bond between owners and their pets, emphasizing how dogs provided unwavering companionship and reassurance during difficult times.

Complex Relationship between Motivations and Consequent Coping Experiences

The relationship between adopting a dog and coping with the pandemic is a dynamic process where initial motivations—whether companionship, responsibility, or circumstantial necessity—often evolved into deeper emotional and psychological coping strategies. Dogs provided their owners with a sense of stability, routine, and unconditional support, helping them navigate the uncertainties of the pandemic. This interplay highlights how human-animal relationships can be both a response to adversity and a mechanism for resilience, ultimately enhancing well-being in unexpected ways.

Thematic analysis of participants' responses reveals a bidirectional relationship: while the initial decision to adopt was often driven by a need for companionship, responsibility, or external circumstances, the experience of having a dog ultimately shaped coping strategies in profound ways.

From Seeking Companionship to Finding Emotional Stability. Many individuals adopted dogs as a means of addressing isolation and social restrictions brought about by lockdowns. As one respondent mentioned, "The main reason is to have companionship. Since mostly are limited because of the protocols, adopting a dog is one of the best alternative ways to socialize." This initial intent to mitigate loneliness evolved into a strong emotional bond where dogs became sources of comfort and psychological relief. One owner later reflected, "My dog was a huge help in coping with my mental health, especially during the lockdown when it was just me and my mom. It felt less lonely with Tequila around."

The Shift from Responsibility to Structure and Routine. For some adopters, the decision was motivated by a desire to instill responsibility, especially within a family setting. One participant stated, "We decided to adopt the dog for experience since my parents wanted us to be responsible." Over time, this responsibility translated into structured daily routines, such as feeding, training, and walking, which helped owners maintain a sense of normalcy amidst the unpredictability of the pandemic. One participant noted, "Because I had to put a lot of things on pause during the pandemic, getting to take care of my dog gave me a sense of normalcy and responsibility." Thus, what began as an obligation transformed into a meaningful coping mechanism.

Unexpected Physical and Psychological Benefits. While some individuals adopted dogs due to prior desire or opportunity—such as receiving a puppy from someone who could no longer care for it—the long-term impact often exceeded initial expectations. Owners found themselves more physically active due to daily dog walks and playtime. One participant mentioned, "Sasha helped me to improve my body clock as I've always slept very late during the pandemic. She taught me to change my usual routine into a more productive day." In this way, pet ownership encouraged healthier habits, reinforcing resilience during a challenging period.

Unconditional Support and Strengthened Bonds. Beyond individual well-being, dog ownership also reinforced family relationships and a broader sense of emotional support. One participant described how training their dog became a shared activity between family members, stating, "Taking turns training her gave us something to bond over. It was definitely a lot better than being stuck with just each other." This suggests that dogs not only served as personal companions but also facilitated stronger social connections within households.

Personal Development during the Pandemic

The thematic analysis reveals that adopting a dog during the pandemic contributed to personal growth in various ways, including improved emotional regulation, increased patience and mindfulness, strengthened responsibility, and a deeper appreciation for companionship. These transformations underscore the profound impact that pets can have on human well-being, fostering resilience and emotional enrichment even in challenging times.

Analysis of the responses reveals several key themes highlighting how adopting a dog during the pandemic contributed to personal development. These themes include emotional regulation, patience and mindfulness, responsibility and commitment, and appreciation for companionship and empathy.

Emotional Regulation and Social Confidence. Some respondents noted that having a dog helped them regulate their emotions and become more sociable. One participant shared, "I became more mellow considering I have quite a bad temperament and sociable since I tend to baby talk her a lot, pushed me to not be shy." This suggests that interacting with their dog helped in managing temperament and fostering social confidence.

Patience and Mindfulness. Many respondents emphasized how their dogs taught them patience and mindfulness. One stated, "It made me become more patient and thoughtful," while another noted, "Having a dog during the pandemic forced me to be more present and mindful. They reminded me to appreciate the simple things in life and to live in the moment." These responses highlight how caring for a dog encouraged greater awareness of the present, reducing stress and promoting a more mindful approach to life.

Responsibility and Commitment. The role of dogs in fostering responsibility was another recurring theme. One respondent explained, "I became more responsible, which I lost a bit when we were forced into confinement and I had to stop my studies." This indicates that the routine and care involved in pet ownership helped restore a sense of purpose and discipline during the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Appreciation for Companionship and Empathy. Several responses highlighted how dogs deepened their owners' appreciation for companionship and emotional connection. One participant reflected, "I become more appreciative of dogs' gestures. They are just also like humans that want to feel love, care, and security with their owner." Another noted, "Dogs teach me how to listen and be patient." These sentiments suggest that pet ownership nurtured empathy and a stronger sense of connection with others.

Complex Relationship between Personal Development and Coping Experiences

The relationship between coping with the pandemic and personal growth is not linear but rather a dynamic and reciprocal process. The coping mechanisms that adopters initially used—such as seeking companionship, maintaining a structured routine, and relying on their pets for emotional support—gradually evolved into deeper forms of self-improvement, emotional resilience, and personal transformation. This illustrates how adversity, when navigated with support and meaningful experiences, can lead to profound growth, reshaping individuals in ways that extend far beyond the immediate crisis.

The process of adopting and caring for a dog not only provided comfort and support in difficult times but also facilitated profound personal growth. These two aspects—coping and development—are mutually reinforcing, shaping adopters' emotional resilience, behavior, and perspectives.

Emotional Regulation as Both a Coping Mechanism and Personal Growth. The theme of emotional regulation emerged in both coping experiences and personal development. Many adopters found that their dogs provided comfort, companionship, and stress relief during the pandemic. One participant mentioned how their dog sensed their anxiety and stayed by their side, easing their emotional distress. This immediate coping mechanism evolved into a long-term enhancement of emotional stability, as seen in the way adopters learned to manage their tempers, become more sociable, and regulate stress through interactions with their pets.

Responsibility and Routine: From Structure to Self-Improvement. For many adopters, establishing a routine of care for their dogs became a crucial coping strategy during the uncertainty of the pandemic. One respondent noted that caring for a dog gave them a sense of normalcy and responsibility when their daily life had been disrupted. Over time, this initial coping strategy contributed to personal discipline, accountability, and a renewed sense of purpose, with some adopters expressing that they became more responsible and committed to maintaining structure in their lives.

Patience and Mindfulness: Finding Stability Amid Uncertainty. Another key connection between coping and personal development is the role of patience and mindfulness. Initially, many adopters turned to their dogs as a source of comfort and companionship to deal with loneliness and isolation. However, as they spent more time caring for their pets, they developed greater patience, empathy, and mindfulness—skills that extended beyond their interactions with their dogs and influenced their broader outlook on life.

Companionship and Social Connection: Redefining Human Relationships. For many adopters, their dogs served as social substitutes during a time when physical interactions with friends and family were limited. While this initially served as a coping mechanism for isolation, it also led to a deeper appreciation of relationships and emotional bonds. Several respondents indicated that their experiences with their dogs helped them become more empathetic, better listeners, and more attuned to emotional connections—skills that could translate into improved human relationships.

Consequent Change of Perception on Stray Dogs

The experience of adopting a dog during the pandemic significantly influenced adopters' perceptions of stray dogs, shifting attitudes from fear and indifference to understanding, empathy, and action. Through their own pets, adopters learned that stray dogs are not inherently aggressive or inferior but rather loving, sentient

beings in need of care and compassion. This shift in perspective often led to advocacy and small but meaningful actions to support stray dogs in their communities.

From the responses, several key themes emerged regarding how adopting a dog during the pandemic influenced perceptions of stray dogs. These themes reflect a shift in understanding, empathy, and attitudes toward animal welfare.

From Fear to Understanding. Some respondents initially perceived stray dogs as aggressive or dangerous. However, after adopting a dog, they realized that a dog's behavior is largely shaped by care and upbringing. One respondent mentioned that they had thought stray dogs were aggressive but later understood that, with proper care and attention, they can be gentle and loving. This theme highlights how direct experiences with pet ownership can challenge misconceptions and foster compassion.

Recognition of Stray Dogs' Emotional and Physical Needs. Several responses emphasized an increased awareness that stray dogs have emotions, needs, and individuality. One adopter noted that stray dogs are often longing for affection, reinforcing the idea that these animals are not just surviving but also seeking connection. Another respondent stated that they now see stray dogs as individuals with unique personalities, rather than just animals on the street. This reflects a shift from viewing stray dogs as nameless creatures to recognizing them as sentient beings worthy of care and love.

Equality Between Strays and Purebreds. A strong theme that emerged was the realization that stray dogs are just as deserving as purebred dogs. One response explicitly rejected the idea that purebred dogs are superior, stating that strays are equally capable of love, companionship, and loyalty. This shift in perception challenges societal biases that favor breed standards over the intrinsic value of all dogs.

Increased Compassion and Advocacy. Many adopters developed a greater sense of responsibility and empathy toward stray dogs, with some acting to help them. One respondent mentioned that they now bring packed dog food to feed strays they encounter. This demonstrates that adopting a dog not only changed their perception but also encouraged proactive efforts to improve the welfare of stray animals.

Unconditional Love from All Dogs. A final theme that emerged was the belief that dogs, regardless of breed or background, are capable of showing love. This realization reinforced the idea that stray dogs deserve the same care and affection as any other pet.

Complex Relationship between the Emergent Personal Growth and Change in Perception on Stray Dogs

The relationship between personal growth and changing perceptions of stray dogs is deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. As adopters became more responsible, compassionate, and emotionally aware through their bond with their pet, they extended these qualities to stray dogs, breaking misconceptions and developing a deeper sense of advocacy and empathy. This transformation demonstrates how personal experiences of care and companionship can lead to broader social and ethical changes in attitudes toward animal welfare.

Developing Empathy Through Care and Responsibility

One of the most profound personal growth experiences reported by adopters was the development of patience, responsibility, and mindfulness. Many mentioned that caring for a pet made them more present, appreciative, and compassionate. This emotional growth naturally extended beyond their own pets, leading to a broader understanding of stray dogs as equally deserving of love and care. For example, some respondents initially viewed strays as aggressive or inferior to purebred dogs, but after experiencing the emotional connection with their adopted pet, they began to see strays as sentient beings longing for affection.

Breaking Misconceptions and Forming New Attitudes. Personal growth often involves challenging previously held beliefs, and adopting a dog facilitated this shift in perspective. Many adopters initially saw stray dogs as dangerous or unworthy of attention, but over time, their personal bond with their adopted pet reshaped these views. Through their experience, they realized that a dog's temperament is largely shaped by care and upbringing, rather than inherent aggression. This shift in perception was reinforced by their own transformation as pet owners, where they learned to be more patient, nurturing, and open-minded.

Emotional Healing and the Expansion of Compassion. Several adopters found emotional support in their pets, particularly in dealing with stress, loneliness, and uncertainty during the pandemic. This experience of comfort and unconditional love not only helped them cope but also deepened their understanding of the emotional lives of dogs. As a result, they began to see stray dogs as more than just animals surviving on the streets—they recognized them as beings capable of giving and receiving love. This newfound emotional awareness often led to acts of kindness, such as feeding strays or advocating for their welfare.

From Self-Improvement to Advocacy. As adopters became more responsible and mindful, their actions extended beyond their own pets to the larger issue of stray animal welfare. Some individuals who initially adopted a dog for companionship or personal benefit later found themselves actively helping stray dogs in their communities. Their personal growth in areas like patience, empathy, and caregiving naturally evolved into a sense of duty toward improving the lives of stray animals.

Reinforcement of Adoption

Encouraging stray dog adoption requires a multi-faceted approach that involves digital advocacy, public education, storytelling, and personal influence. By breaking down stigma, promoting awareness, and highlighting success stories, the community can gradually shift perceptions and inspire more people to provide loving homes for stray dogs.

Leveraging Social Media and Digital Advocacy. Encouraging more people to adopt stray dogs in the community requires a multifaceted approach that involves digital advocacy, public education, storytelling, and personal influence. One of the most effective strategies is leveraging social media and online engagement. As one respondent shared, "As a part of the Paulicats program myself, we structured our own FB and IG accounts to spread awareness and engage with dog owners." Platforms like these can be used to share educational content on the benefits of adoption, promote awareness campaigns addressing pet overpopulation, and create community-driven programs that actively engage pet owners and advocates. By utilizing these digital tools, individuals and organizations can reach a broader audience and challenge misconceptions about stray dogs.

Promoting the Positive Effects of Dog Companionship. Another key factor in influencing adoption is promoting the positive effects of dog companionship. One participant noted that we can encourage adoption by "sharing positive effects of dog companionship," while another emphasized that "adopting a stray dog is a commitment of a pet owner which requires responsibility. Therefore, we can influence more people by giving awareness using our social platforms [about] the benefits of adopting a stray dog and how it would reduce the pet overpopulation." These perspectives highlight the emotional and psychological benefits of adoption, such as providing companionship, emotional support, and fostering a sense of responsibility and care. Showcasing success stories and highlighting these positive experiences can make adoption a more appealing and socially accepted option.

Breaking the Stigma Surrounding Stray Dogs. Additionally, educating the public is crucial in breaking the stigma surrounding stray dogs. One respondent suggested that we should "start by removing the stigma on stray dogs by educating people and making them aware of the suffering that stray dogs go through

every day." Misconceptions about their health, temperament, and behavior often prevent people from considering adoption. Raising awareness about the resilience and loyalty of rescued dogs, as well as the role of adoption in reducing pet overpopulation, can help shift public perception and make adoption a more desirable choice.

The Power of Personal Storytelling. Personal storytelling is another powerful tool in influencing others. As one participant shared, "Sharing personal experiences and testimonials of successful adoptions can help break down stereotypes and stigmas surrounding stray dogs, inspiring others to adopt." These narratives highlight the deep bonds and unconditional love that rescue dogs provide, helping to change the way people perceive stray dogs.

Leading by Example. Leading by example is an effective way to encourage responsible adoption. One respondent stated, "We can encourage others to adopt stray dogs by setting an example and making adoption more appealing than buying bred dogs. These rescues are incredibly affectionate, and knowing the hardships they've endured before finding a home makes them some of the most loving and loyal companions." Those who have adopted stray dogs can influence others by demonstrating the love and loyalty of their pets, actively advocating for adoption over purchasing from breeders, and challenging the idea that stray dogs are any less deserving of care and affection than purebred dogs.

The Complex Relationship Between Personal Experiences with Dogs During the Pandemic and Influencing Dog Adoption

The responses on how to influence people to adopt stray dogs are deeply intertwined with participants' personal experiences of owning a dog during the pandemic. The pandemic brought about unprecedented challenges, and for many, adopting a dog became a source of comfort, stability, and emotional support. These experiences shaped their perspectives on stray dogs and, in turn, influenced their ideas on how to encourage others to adopt. The relationship between personal experiences with dogs and advocacy for adoption can be understood through three interwoven themes: emotional connection and empathy, breaking stigma and reshaping perceptions, and the role of social influence and education.

Emotional Connection and Empathy as a Catalyst for Advocacy. Personal experiences with dogs during the pandemic fostered a deep emotional bond that made participants more empathetic toward stray animals. Many owners found companionship in their pets during lockdowns, reinforcing the idea that dogs are capable of providing love and emotional support regardless of their background. One respondent noted, "Stray dogs are mostly longing for affection, and it fosters kindness. It can enhance a person's empathy towards animals as well as individuals facing challenging circumstances." This growing empathy extends beyond their own pets to stray dogs, leading them to advocate for their care and adoption.

The idea that dogs are not just pets but loyal, loving companions who deserve care and security has been reinforced by firsthand experiences of owning a dog. As another participant shared, "Dogs may not have a long lifespan, but they are the most loyal companions we could have." This emotional realization fuels their desire to influence others, as they want more people to experience the same transformative bond they have developed with their dogs.

Breaking Stigma and Reshaping Perceptions of Stray Dogs. Many individuals' perceptions of stray dogs changed after adopting their own pets, leading them to challenge misconceptions and educate others. Before experiencing the joy of pet companionship, some participants viewed strays as aggressive or inferior to purebred dogs. However, their experiences reshaped these views, making them more aware of the need to

combat stereotypes. One respondent admitted, "At first, I thought they were all aggressive, but having our Koji made us realize that through enough care and parenting, they are better than humans."

This change in perception directly informs strategies for influencing adoption. Participants suggest that sharing personal experiences is a key method to shift attitudes toward stray dogs. As one respondent emphasized, "Sharing personal experiences and testimonials of successful adoptions can help break down stereotypes and stigmas surrounding stray dogs, inspiring others to adopt." By openly discussing how their own views changed, they hope to encourage others to see strays as deserving of love, rather than as animals to be avoided or feared.

The Role of Social Influence and Education in Adoption Advocacy. The pandemic not only heightened people's emotional connection with dogs but also influenced their sense of responsibility and engagement with pet-related advocacy. Many participants highlighted the importance of digital platforms and community-driven efforts in spreading awareness and encouraging adoption. For instance, one respondent who actively participated in an adoption advocacy program stated, "As a part of the Paulicats program myself, we structured our own FB and IG accounts to spread awareness and engage with dog owners." This demonstrates how personal experiences with dogs can translate into organized, strategic efforts to promote adoption.

Beyond digital advocacy, some participants emphasized the power of setting an example. The idea that adopting rather than buying dogs should be normalized is a recurring theme. One respondent noted, "We can encourage others to adopt stray dogs by setting an example and making adoption more appealing than buying bred dogs." The act of adopting a dog, caring for it, and sharing that experience becomes a powerful form of advocacy, demonstrating to others that stray dogs are just as loving and deserving as purebreds.

IV. Discussion

The complex relationship between personal experiences with dogs during the pandemic and influencing adoption efforts highlights a cycle of transformation and advocacy. Individuals who adopted dogs during the pandemic experienced emotional growth, increased empathy, and a changed perception on stray animals. These personal realizations then motivated them to share their stories, challenge stigmas, and educate others, ultimately contributing to a larger movement toward stray dog adoption.

By leveraging digital platforms, breaking stereotypes, and leading by example, those who have been positively impacted by dog adoption during the pandemic are now at the forefront of influencing others. Their journey from pet owners to advocates underscores how personal experiences can evolve into collective action, fostering a more compassionate and responsible approach to animal adoption in the community.

Framework for Understanding the Process of Stray Dog Adoption Advocacy Through Personal Experiences

This framework illustrates the transformative process that participants undergo—from adopting a dog during the pandemic to actively advocating for stray dog adoption. It highlights how personal experiences shape perceptions, influence emotions, and drive actions that contribute to community-wide change. The process unfolds in four interconnected stages, each supported by the emergent themes identified in the thematic analyses.

Initial Experience: Adoption as a Response to the Pandemic. The onset of the pandemic created a pressing need for emotional support, companionship, and routine, as individuals faced prolonged isolation and uncertainty. Studies have shown that pet ownership during crises can provide psychological benefits, including reduced stress and increased emotional resilience (Mueller et al., 2021). In response to these challenges, many

participants decided to adopt dogs, seeking comfort and emotional well-being during this difficult time. Research indicates that adopting a pet can help alleviate loneliness and provide structure in daily life, particularly when external social interactions are limited (Ratschen et al., 2020). The presence of a pet provided individuals with stability and a sense of purpose amidst the disruptions caused by the pandemic. However, early expectations regarding stray dogs were often shaped by preconceived notions, with some initially perceiving them as aggressive, untrainable, or inferior to purebred dogs. Misconceptions about stray dogs can create barriers to adoption, yet studies suggest that exposure to and positive experiences with these animals can change perceptions and increase empathy (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2021).

Emotional and Personal Transformation Through Dog Adoption. Adopting a dog during the pandemic led to profound emotional and personal transformation among owners. One of the most significant changes was the development of emotional connection and empathy, as participants reported increased patience, responsibility, and emotional sensitivity. Research suggests that human-animal interactions can enhance emotional regulation and foster greater empathy toward others (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2021). Additionally, dog adoption contributed to personal growth, encouraging individuals to become more mindful, appreciative, and resilient in their daily lives. Studies indicate that caring for a pet can improve psychological well-being by reducing stress and promoting positive emotional experiences (Mueller et al., 2021). Furthermore, direct experience with a pet challenged prior misconceptions about stray dogs, leading to a shift in perception. Many participants who initially viewed stray dogs as aggressive or untrainable grew to recognize their loyalty, intelligence, and capacity for love. Exposure to animals in need fosters compassion and increases the likelihood of advocacy for animal welfare (Ratschen et al., 2020). This transformation underscores the complex interplay between human experiences, emotional well-being, and evolving attitudes toward stray animals.

Shift in Social Awareness and Responsibility. Dog adoption during the pandemic led to a shift in social awareness and responsibility among participants. Many adopters broke previous stigmas, realizing that stray dogs are just as loving and loyal as any other pet. This newfound perspective motivated individuals to educate others about the misconceptions surrounding strays. Research indicates that direct interactions with animals foster empathy and encourage advocacy for animal welfare (Hawkins et al., 2021). Additionally, adopters became more aware of the struggles stray dogs face, such as lack of food, shelter, and medical care, which cultivated a sense of responsibility to help. Studies have shown that exposure to animal welfare issues can significantly impact human attitudes and behavior toward animal protection efforts (Protopopova & Gunter, 2017). As a result, some individuals acted by engaging in community efforts, including joining pet advocacy groups, feeding stray dogs, or initiating conversations about adoption. Community-driven initiatives and social engagement play a crucial role in shaping public attitudes and increasing support for stray animal welfare (Mills et al., 2020).

Advocacy and Influence on Others. Participants who adopted dogs during the pandemic became advocates for stray dog adoption by influencing others through various means. Sharing personal experiences played a significant role, as testimonials and success stories served as powerful tools for inspiring adoption. Research suggests that personal narratives can create emotional connections, making individuals more likely to consider adopting a pet themselves (Howell et al., 2022). In addition, digital platforms became essential for raising awareness, with social media campaigns and online engagement helping to spread information about the benefits of adoption and responsible pet ownership. Studies have shown that social media significantly impacts public perceptions of animal welfare and increases adoption rates through targeted awareness efforts (Morris & Gunter, 2019). Furthermore, participants led by example, demonstrating the positive impact of adoption by showcasing their own experiences with their rescued pets. Leading by example has been recognized as an effective strategy in advocacy, as visible role models can shape social norms and influence behavior (Chen & Cheng, 2021). Through these efforts, adopters not only enriched their own lives but also contributed to a broader cultural shift toward compassion and responsible pet ownership.

Based on the themes and studies reviewed, future research and practical initiatives can enhance understanding and promote responsible dog adoption while addressing societal perceptions and challenges.

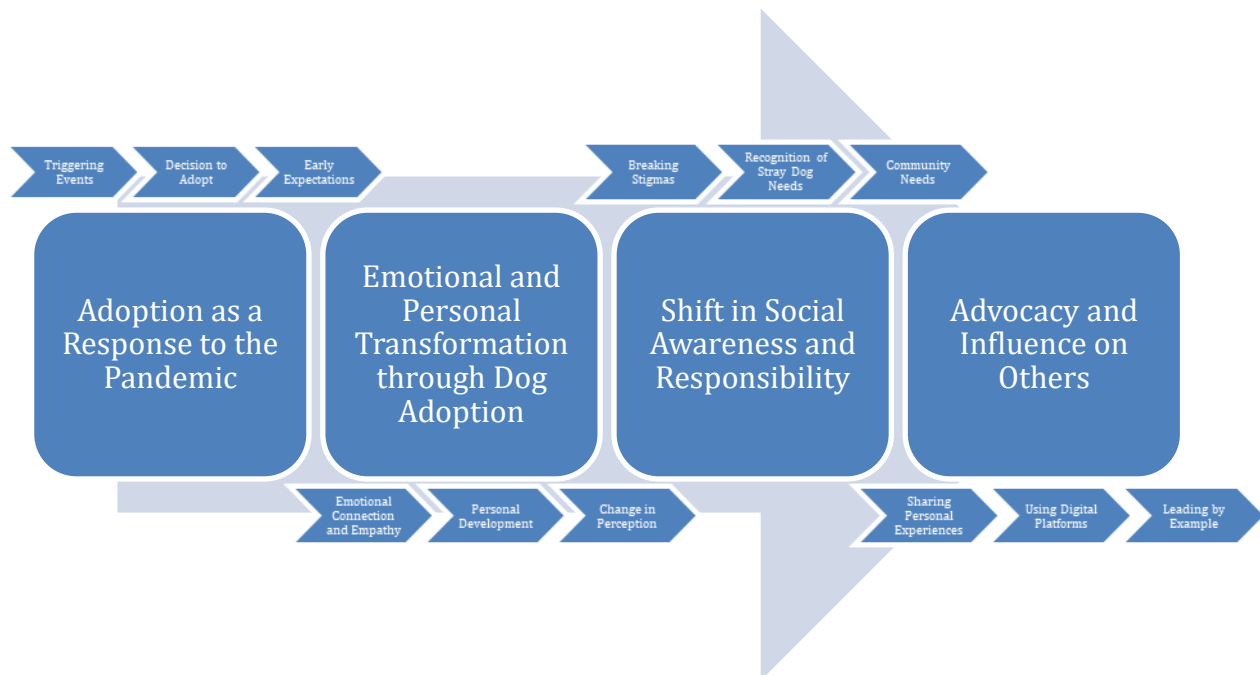


Figure 1

Visual Model of the Framework

Future Research Directions

Long-Term Psychological and Social Benefits of Dog Adoption. Future studies can explore how adopting a dog, particularly a stray, affects individuals' mental health, social interactions, and emotional resilience over an extended period. Research could focus on comparing long-term adopters with non-adopters to assess sustained emotional and psychological benefits.

Impact of Stray Dog Adoption on Community Engagement. Given the role of advocacy in changing perceptions, research can examine how adopting stray dogs influences individuals' participation in community activities, such as rescue efforts, social media campaigns, and public awareness initiatives.

The Role of Digital Media in Promoting Stray Dog Adoption. Studies can analyze the effectiveness of digital platforms, including social media, influencer campaigns, and online pet adoption portals, in shaping public attitudes toward stray dogs and increasing adoption rates.

Cultural and Regional Variations in Perceptions of Stray Dogs. Research could investigate how cultural beliefs and regional differences affect people's willingness to adopt stray dogs, identifying barriers and facilitators unique to different communities.

Comparative Study on Adopted Stray Dogs vs. Purchased Purebred Dogs. A comparative analysis of owner satisfaction, pet loyalty, health, and behavioral outcomes between adopted stray dogs and purchased purebred dogs can provide empirical support for adoption advocacy.

V. Recommended Actions

Strengthening Awareness Campaigns. Organizations and individuals should continue leveraging digital platforms to share real-life adoption stories, debunk myths about stray dogs, and emphasize the benefits of adoption.

Encouraging Educational Programs in Schools. Integrating animal welfare education into school curricula can instill empathy and responsibility toward stray animals from a young age.

Community-Based Adoption and Support Networks. Establishing local adoption networks and support systems can help new pet owners with training, veterinary care, and integration of stray dogs into households.

Policy Advocacy for Stray Animal Welfare. Advocating for stronger animal protection laws, incentives for adopters, and more accessible veterinary care can help reduce the stray dog population and encourage responsible adoption.

Encouraging Veterinary and Shelter Partnerships. Collaboration between veterinarians, animal shelters, and community groups can provide better health care, vaccination drives, and rehabilitation programs for stray dogs, making adoption more viable and sustainable.

By pursuing these research directions and actions, societies can foster a more compassionate and responsible approach toward stray dog adoption, ultimately improving the welfare of both humans and animals.

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