Stuffed Animals and Adults

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Research Question

- In recent years, stuffed animals have enjoyed a resurgence of interest among children and adults. For example, in 2023, Squishmallows won Plush Toy of the Year at the annual Toy Association Awards ceremony. We are interested in identifying which people over the age of 18 still buy or keep stuffed animals. We are especially interested in whether certain personality variables predict who has these toys and why people retain Interest in these toys into adulthood.

Literature Review

- It is well established that stuffed animals provide emotional support for children (Barlow et al., 2012). Most children use stuffed animals as transitional objects to cope with anxiety, stress, and loneliness (Tribot et al., 2023). They also typically want the object physically close to them (Triebenbacher, 1996).
- Some social norms exist on how and where a transitional object may be used (Triebenbacher 1996). Parents also seem to believe a child should not need their transitional object after preschool, due to becoming more independent (Triebenbacher, 1996).
- Although it is well known that *children* regularly use comfort objects, what is currently unclear is to what degree *adults* use these objects, how they use them, and under what circumstances they want these objects physically near them. For example, Haynes et al (2022) found that using tactile aids, such as comfort cushions, helps reduce anxiety symptoms in adults. A similar study found that among adults with low self-esteem, holding a teddy bear can reduce dread and anxiety (Koole, et al., 2013).
- Few studies have specifically looked at adults' relationships with comfort objects and how they might benefit their mental states. The current study is designed to fill this gap in the literature.

References

Hypotheses

- **Hypothesis 1:** Adults who report feeling stress or anxiety with everyday life will report a higher likelihood of using stuffed animals to help them cope than adults with lower reported levels of stress and anxiety.
- **Hypothesis 2:** Adults who keep stuffed animals close to them will have higher levels of object attachment and self-esteem than people who keep them further away.
- **Hypothesis 3:** Adults who own stuffed animals keep them because they create an emotional connection with childhood memories. The open-ended answers from the survey will be assessed using qualitative analysis.

Method

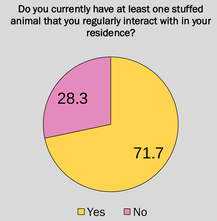
- This study was administered online using Qualtrics software. Participants were invited to participate via social media like Facebook, Instagram, and X. Recruitment also occurred via in-person by flyers placed in common spaces.
- Survey questions included:
  - ❖ Demographic questions
  - ❖ A stuffed animal ownership questionnaire (author)
  - ❖ Mental health history and childhood experiences with stuffed animals
- Participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation after completing the survey.

Participants

- **Participants:** *N* = 184 **Age:** *M* = 29.00; *SD* = 13.95
- **Gender:** 112 Women; 26 Men; 14 Non-binary; 1 prefer not to say; (31 missing)
- **Ethnicity:** 119 White/ European American; 8 Black/ African American; 5 Asian/ Asian American; 2 American Indian/ Alaska Native; 4 Hispanic/ Latino; 1 Native Hawaiian 12 Multi-racial/ Multi-ethnic; 2 prefer not to say; (31 missing)
- **Education:**

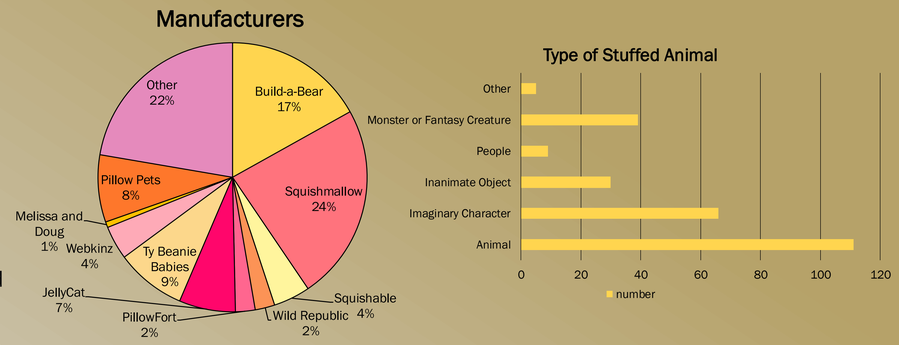
Education Level	N
Some High School	3
High School or Equivalent	29
Technical/Vocational Training	2
Some College	48
Associate's Degree	19
Bachelor's Degree	32
Master's Degree	14
Doctorate or Equivalent	6
Did not report	31

Stuffed Animal Ownership Status:



Number of Stuffed Animals Owned	N	Percentage (%)
1-9	57	31.0
10-19	20	10.9
20-29	5	2.7
30-39	5	2.7
40-49	4	2.2
50-75	4	2.2
75-100	1	.5
100+	4	2.2
"Too many" or "Lots"	8	4.3
Unknown	1	.5

Results



Hypothesis 1: This hypothesis was supported. Group means between high-stress/anxiety and low-stress/anxiety participants were compared using independent *t*-tests. Participants who owned stuffed animals reported higher anxiety (M = 8.01, SD = 2.97) than participants without stuffed animals (M = 5.55, SD = 2.63).

Hypothesis 2: This hypothesis was partially supported. Pearson's *r* correlational analysis revealed that among participants who own stuffed animals, object attachment and self-esteem were positively correlated ($r(111) = .246$, $p = .01$). However, proximity to where participants stored their animals and their attachment levels to those objects were not significantly correlated ($r(114) = -.055$, $p > .05$).

Hypothesis 3: Qualitative analysis using ChatGPT (Open AI) revealed that these words were most commonly used to describe participants' experiences with comfort objects:

- **Comforting/Comfort:** >30
- **Love:** > 20
- **Safe/Safety:** > 15
- **Sleep:** >10
- **Memories:** > 10
- **Happiness/Happy:** > 5

Discussion

- New markets to explore
- Demographic information
- Know the reason why people buy
- More research needed
- Helpful for therapists