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## Pet-related Variables and Stress Levels of Undergraduate Students

Katrin Haller<sup>3</sup>

*Pets have been and are an important part of humans' lives. There are many reasons for owning pets, including various physical and psychological benefits. The present study aimed to find out which pet-related variables, if any, were associated with stress levels of undergraduate students, and whether there is a relationship between certain pet-related variables and undergraduate students' stress levels. The study included 55 undergraduate students from Lindenwood University. Materials consisted of a self-made demographic survey, a self-made pet survey, and Cohen's and Williamson's Perceived Stress Scale (1988). A multiple regression and correlational analysis was conducted, entering the stress scale score as the dependent variable and the variables of class status, fondness of pets, pet ownership, weekly pet company, pet accessibility, importance of pets, and thought on whether pets and stress were related as the independent variables. Results revealed that there were no significant multiple regression weights ( $R^2 = .186$ ,  $F(7, 44) = 1.433$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and that none of the variables were significantly correlated. However, there were four weak negative correlations between the stress scale scores and the variables of pet fondness ( $r = -.247$ ), pet accessibility ( $r = -.235$ ), want of more access ( $r = -.307$ ), and pet importance ( $r = -.261$ ). Limitations include a small convenience sample and the problems associated with using a self-made survey. Future research should consider using a professional or enhanced survey, avoid convenience sampling, and potentially include other populations as well.*

Pets have been a part of the lives of humans for many years (Staats, Sears, & Pierfelice, 2006; Staats, Wallace, & Anderson, 2008) and they are still an important part of humans' lives today (Somervill, Kruglikova, Robertson, Hanson, & MacLin, 2008). Pets live in many households in the United States (Adamle, Riley, & Carlson, 2009) and across the world (Staats et al., 2006; Staats et al., 2008). Reasons for pet ownership have changed over the years from "need reasons" which were related to survival, such as for hunting and herding aid, physical warmth, and danger detection (Staats et al., 2006; Staats et al., 2008), to pets being considered a member of the family in many households (Adamle et al., 2009; Allen, 2003; Staats et al., 2006). One might wonder why people value pets as much, especially since owning a pet requires devoting

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time, money, and resources (Staats et al., 2006). There are various reasons pet owners give as to why they own pets. These include that animals provide comfort and love (Somervill et al., 2008), they create feelings of calmness and happiness (Allen, 2003), they provide help during stressful and hard times (Allen, 2003; Staats et al., 2008), they aid in staying active and meeting new people, and they prevent loneliness (Staats et al., 2008). Thus, pets often serve a practical function, such as to facilitate exercise, or a companionate function, such as to decrease loneliness and to provide help during hard times (Staats et al., 2006). They also meet the basic need of humans for companionship (Staats et al., 2008), because they are perceived as nonjudgmental and can therefore provide unconditional social support (Allen, 2003).

Aside from psychological benefits, there are also physical benefits associated with owning a pet (Staats et al., 2006). The physical benefits of pets have been looked at by a range of researchers. Results of various studies, as summarized by Allen (2003), have revealed that owning a pet can be a predictor to one-year survival after a heart attack, that there are lower cardiovascular responses when talking to a pet compared to when talking to people, and that blood pressure is reduced in children when reading aloud in the presence of pets. More generally, having a pet has been shown to be beneficial for cardiovascular activity and health (Allen, 2003; Somervill et al., 2008), and blood pressure can be reduced in some situations (Allen, 2003; Somervill et al., 2008). Allen (2003), however, also made clear that one cannot state that pets cause lower blood pressure or healthier cardiovascular activity as extraneous variables might also be influential and that research so far has mostly focused on short-term problems, not long-term ones. Additional criticism is mentioned by Somervill et al. (2008) who did not find supporting evidence for physiological benefits of pets after short exposure and only small effects during exposure. However, the researchers state, that these unsupportive findings may be due to the

discrepancy of short exposure to an unfamiliar pet and pet ownership (Somervill et al., 2008). People usually prefer to interact with their own pets and these interactions differ from those with unfamiliar pets (Somervill et al., 2008). They (2008) also concluded that the benefits may simply lie with the pleasurable experiences pets bring about in some people.

Even though research does not provide clear evidence for the positive physical and psychological benefits yet, many people believe in the positive benefits of pets and also report having experienced them. It is not surprising then, that pet therapy has been used, and has demonstrated to be successful with populations of diverse illnesses and disaster situations by helping to manage stress (Adamle et al., 2009). Adamle et al. (2009) evaluated whether pet therapy may also interest freshman college students and their results revealed that most students had pets at home and that they missed them now that they had left for college. Students also reported that during stressful times their pets provided them with support and comfort (Adamle et al., 2009). The transition to college can be very stressful (Adamle et al., 2009); just considering the change from living at home with family to living in a dorm and the increased work load and academic challenges. The majority of students asked in the study by Adamle et al. (2009) believed that pet therapy as a support program could help them during stressful times in college.

In conclusion one can say that programs like pet therapy or knowing about the potential physical and psychological benefits from pets, may be of importance for students, educators, schools, therapists and counselors, families and friends, and anyone else who might be interested in the topic. The present study was conducted in order to find out more about this topic because there is limited research available. The focus of the study was on undergraduate college students and their stress levels, as measured on a self-report stress scale, and on self-reported answers of a

pet survey, which asked questions about pet-related variables such as pet-ownership, pet-accessibility, and weekly pet-company. The study aimed to find out which pet-related variables, if any, were associated with stress levels of undergraduate students, and whether there is a relationship between certain pet-related variables and undergraduate students' stress levels.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

For this study the non-probability sampling type of convenience sampling was used. This form of sampling was justified as there was only limited time available for the completion of the study. Participants were recruited through the Lindenwood Participant Pool (LPP), which helps researchers with recruitment and provides students who are part of the LPP with opportunities to earn extra credit for certain entry-level classes. These classes are usually introductory courses in psychology, sociology, anthropology, exercise science, and athletic training, as well as some higher level social science classes whose professors approved of participation.

There were a total of 55 participants, all of whom were undergraduate students at Lindenwood University. The age range was between 17 and 25 years, with a mean of 19.76 years and a median of 19 years. Twenty-eight women and 27 men completed the study. There were 5 Seniors, 12 Juniors, 14 Sophomores, and 24 Freshmen who took the study. Eighty-three point six percent of the participants lived On Campus (Dorms), 3.6% lived Off-Campus (Housing), and 12.7% lived Off-Campus (Other). Thirty participants were from Missouri, 12 from other U.S. states, and 11 from countries other than the United States. One person did not provide an answer to where he or she was from, a second person answered that he or she was from the U.S. but did not provide from which state.

### **Materials and Procedure**

For recruitment, a description sheet and sign-up sheets for the study were posted at the LPP bulletin board located on the fourth floor of Young Hall across from the LPP office. The description sheet explained the study and the approximate time it would take to complete the study; sign-up sheets offered various times to take the study and the participants were able to sign up for one on their own accord. At the time of the study the participants reported to the designated room which was either a study room in the library or a psychology lab room. The study room in the library was a large room which consisted of a large table with many chairs and the psychology lab rooms were small rooms which contained two or three desks and chairs.

Upon arrival, participants were greeted by the researcher. They were then asked to sign the experimenter's list of participants, which was used by the LPP for organization purposes. Next, the participants were given two informed consent forms, were asked to read it carefully, and then asked if they had any questions. The consent forms informed the participants about the nature of the study, the potential risks involved, and their rights in concern to the study. Each was signed by the researcher and the participant, one copy retained by the participant, one by the researcher. The participants were then given a demographic survey made by the researcher (see Appendix A), which asked for the participants' age, sex, class status, where the participant lives, and the country or state the participant is from; a pet survey made by the researcher (see Appendix B), which asked questions about pet-ownership, weekly pet-company, and pet-accessibility, which were either asked on a Likert-scale or as an open-ended question format; and the perceived stress scale created by Cohen and Williamson (1988), which asked the participants to rate certain events or feelings on how often they occurred in the past month. The surveys and the scale were given to the participants all at once, but the order of the materials varied in order to counterbalance.

At the end of the study, the researcher gave the participants a participant receipt to drop off at the LPP office in order to receive the extra credit, the compensation for taking the study. Feedback letters were also given to the participants, which thanked them for their participation and informed them about details of the study. The researcher thanked the participants personally, debriefed them, and reminded them to contact her if they had any questions.

The surveys and the corresponding stress scale of each participant were stapled together and stored securely. Data were entered into Microsoft Excel and SPSS spread sheets which were used for analysis purposes.

### **Results**

Results from the pet survey were as follows. Fifty-eight point two percent of participants reported that they were very fond of pets, 14.5% were somewhat fond, 16.4% answered neutral, 7.3% were weakly fond, and 3.6% were not at all fond of pets (see Figure 1). Going along with being fond of pets the majority of participants indicated that being around a pet is either very or somewhat important to them (see Figure 2).

Reasons given for why it is important or unimportant (Reasons for Question 8) to the participant to be around pets were coded by whether they were positive (i.e., pets make me happy), negative (i.e., pets are a lot of work), or neutral (i.e., like pets but do not need them). As can be seen in Table 1, most participants reported positive reasons.

Forty of the participants owned a pet or pets and 15 participants did not own a pet or pets. Most people wrote that dogs were their favorite pet. Second most listed were cats. Other answers included fish, horses, cow, rabbit, snake, and hamster. The type of pet most participant owned were dogs, cats, fish, and horses. There was great variety in the number of how many pets in general a participant owned and how many of each type.

In Table 2 it can be seen that there was a wide range for how many times a person was around a pet during a regular semester week from 0 times to 14 times ( $M = 2.519$ ). Three pieces of data were discarded from this analysis because two participants reported seven or more times and one participant answered less than once. For those participants who provided a range of how many times they were around a pet during a regular semester week (i.e., 2 to 3 times, instead of i.e. twice a week) the average score was used.

The distribution of access to pets varied, as 36.4% participants indicated that they very easily had access to a pet during a regular semester week, 21.8% indicated that they had access to pets somewhat easily, 18.2% answered the question with neutral, 3.6% said access was somewhat difficult for them, and 20% said that it was very difficult for them to have access to a pet during a regular semester week (see Figure 3).

Despite most participants having easy access to pets, as can be seen in Figure 4, most participants still indicated to either agreeing or somewhat agreeing to wanting to be around pets more during a regular semester week.

Whether there was a relation between pets and stress revealed mixed results, as 29.1% believed they were weakly related, 9.1% said they were somewhat weakly related, 29.1% were neutral, 27.3% found that they were somewhat strongly related, and 5.5% thought they were strongly related (see Figure 5). Reasons given for the answer about whether there was a relation between stress and pets (Reasons for Question 10) were coded either positive (i.e., pets decrease stress), negative (i.e., pets add to stress), or neutral (i.e., pets and stress do not affect each other). About an equal percentage of participants provided neutral or positive reasons, the frequency and percentage of each type of reason is shown in Table 3. Data from 11 participants were missing



either due to the question being added after the participant had taken the survey or because no answer was provided, and were thus excluded from the analysis.

The scores from Cohen's and Williamson's (1988) perceived stress scale had a mean of 17.87, and a standard deviation of 7.090.

Correlational and multiple regression analyses were conducted to find out which, if any, pet-related variable was associated with stress levels of undergraduate students as measured on Cohen's and Williamson's Perceived Stress Scale (1988). The stress scale score was entered as the dependent variable and the variables of class status, fondness of pets, pet ownership, weekly pet-company, weekly pet access, importance of pets, and thought on whether pets and stress were related were entered as the independent variables. For correlational purposes the variable of whether more access was wanted was entered as well. These variables were entered because of their quantitative nature, because they seemed most important in determining whether there was an association, and because the other most of the other questions referred to them (i.e., by asking to provide reason for the response in one of the questions).

The multiple regression analysis with the above mentioned variables entered, revealed that  $R^2 = .186$ ,  $F(7, 44) = 1.433$ ,  $p > .05$ . There were no significant regression weights, indicating that none of the pet-related variables entered were predictors to perceived stress scale scores of the participants.

There were no statistically significant correlations, however there were four weak negative correlations between the stress scale scores and the answers of participants regarding how fond they are of pets ( $r = -.247$ ), how easily they can have access to pets during a regular semester week ( $r = -.235$ ), whether they would like to be around pets more during a regular

semester week ( $r = -.307$ ) and how important being around a pet is for them ( $r = -.261$ ). An abbreviated table of the correlational analysis can be found in Table 4.

### **Discussion**

The results of the multiple regression and correlational analysis did not yield any statistically significant results between certain pet-related variables and stress levels of undergraduate students. The reason for this may be due to the nature of the survey. Since the survey was self-made it likely had problems with reliability and validity. This is indicated by the wide range of answers as to whether people believed that their stress levels were related to pets. This question could be interpreted in two ways: positively or negatively, meaning that some participants may have interpreted it that pets decrease their stress because they make them happy (negative correlation), while others may have interpreted it that pets increase stress because of all the work (positive correlation), and depending on which interpretation answers differed. To figure out how participants interpreted the question, a following question asked the participants to clarify their answer, and then either coded as positive, negative, or neutral.

Reasons given as to why participants felt pets and stress were related a certain way, revealed that 40% of participants' answers were neutral, followed by 36.4% positive answers and only 3.6% negative answers. This indicates that most participants felt that their stress levels and pets were not related, which goes along with the results of the study. However, almost as many participants believed that pets had a positive effect on their stress levels, such as alleviating stress, which would go along with the idea that pets provide help during stressful and hard times (Allen, 2003; Staats et al., 2008) and the results of the study by Adamle et al. (2009) in which freshman college students indicated that they would be interested in pet-therapy as a support system to help during stressful times.

Another influence on the results may have been extraneous and confounding variables. An example would be that stress is influenced by many factors, including various factors which cause stress, as well as various causes which alleviate stress. It is not necessarily clear what exactly influences stress at a time, so students may not have been able to report on it correctly. An example would be that, despite the fact that most students answered that they had easy access to pets, it may be of importance to look into where those students come from, as depending on where the student lives he or she might be able to see pets more or less regular. If a student does see his or her pet regularly, because campus is close to home, there may also be other variables, such as being around family, which could influence the stress scores instead of pets alone.

Nevertheless, a majority of the participants indicated that they were fond of pets and that pets were important to them, as well as they would like to be around pets more during a regular semester week. This can be important knowledge as it shows that pets serve as an important part of students' lives, and thus this can be valuable to students, educators, schools, and other people who are interested.

There were several limitations to this study. First, the sample size was relatively small and convenience sampling was used due to time restraints. This influenced the variability within the participants, which can be seen as most participants were freshmen and lived in a dorm on campus. Second, due to lack of resources two of the surveys used were self-made by the researcher. This may cause problems with reliability and validity. Additionally, the researcher noticed after already having given out the pet survey five times that the question on whether the participants thought their pets and stress were related could be interpreted in two ways, so a question to clarify the answer was added; nonetheless, according to the responses from the participants the question was still not clear enough. This could be seen as some participants rated

that they believed that their stress and pets were not related, but then wrote that pets relieved their stress when asked to clarify their answer. This, obviously, is an issue. In hindsight, some of the other questions should have also been reworded and clarified, as well as some questions should have been added to the pet survey, as well as the demographic survey.

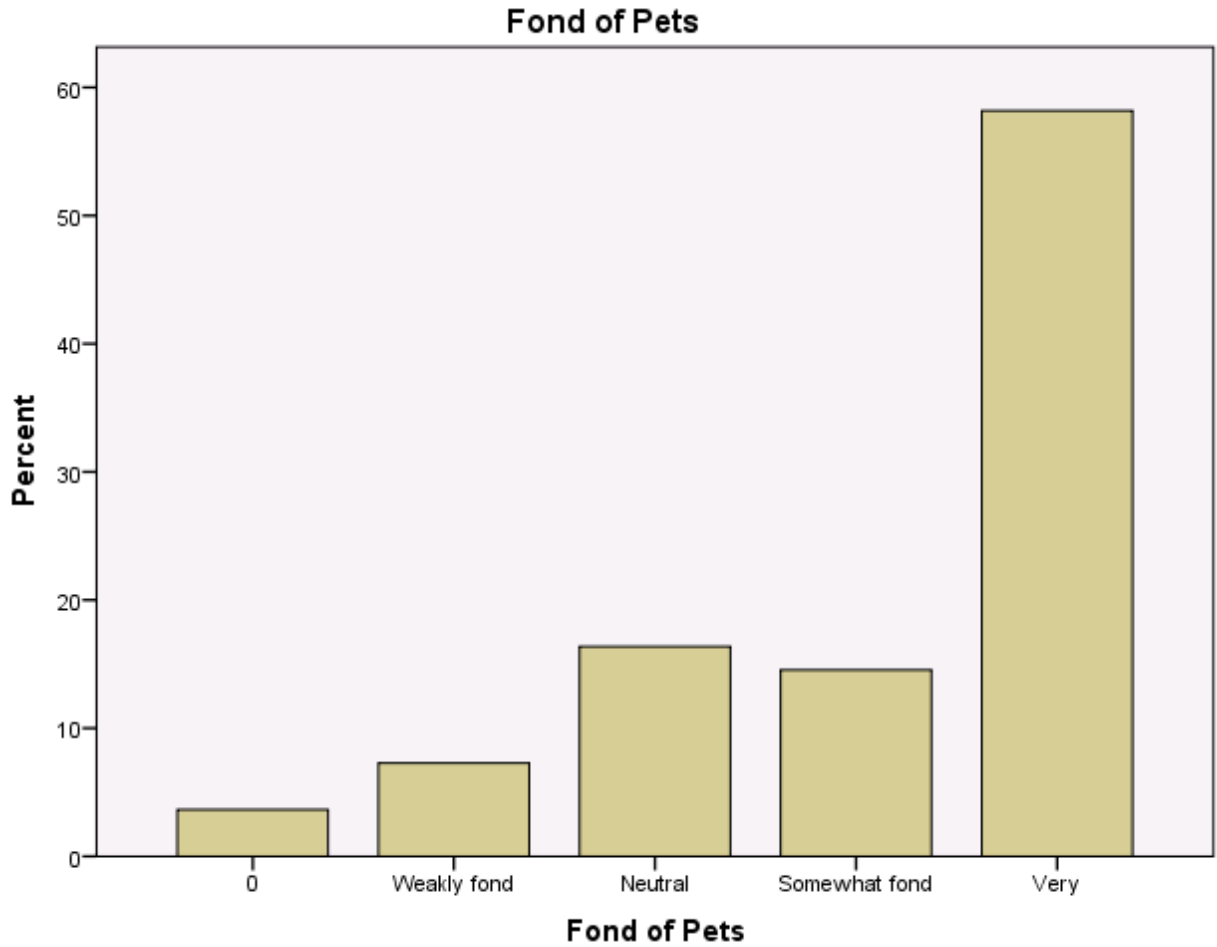
Another limitation was that unfortunately on some copies of the pet survey the Likert-scales were moved to the side, meaning that the sometimes part was moved under number five and the very part was moved past the five. The researcher did not notice this until after having given out three of the wrong surveys, however, it still seemed clear which belonged to which as participants did not ask for clarification when taking the survey. The subsequent surveys were fixed.

Future researchers should try and recruit more participants without using convenience sampling in order to add variability. Additionally, researchers should consider recruiting from other populations as well, such as graduate students and faculty. Researchers should also consider finding a professional survey on pet-ownership or another pet-related variable in order to avoid the limitations given by a self-made survey, such as reliability and validity issues. If this is not possible, future researchers should spend more time and detail into creating the survey and use a pilot-study in order to make sure that the questions are clear and yield to answers pertaining to the questions. It may also be helpful to focus on one specific variable and all its detail instead of looking at various variables at once, which may also be helpful in limiting extraneous and confounding variables. Researchers may want to focus on one of the four variables which have yielded a non-significant, but weak negative correlation with the perceived stress scale score in this study, such as pet-fondness, pet-access, and pet-importance. These do indicate that there may be an association between certain pet-related variables and stress levels of

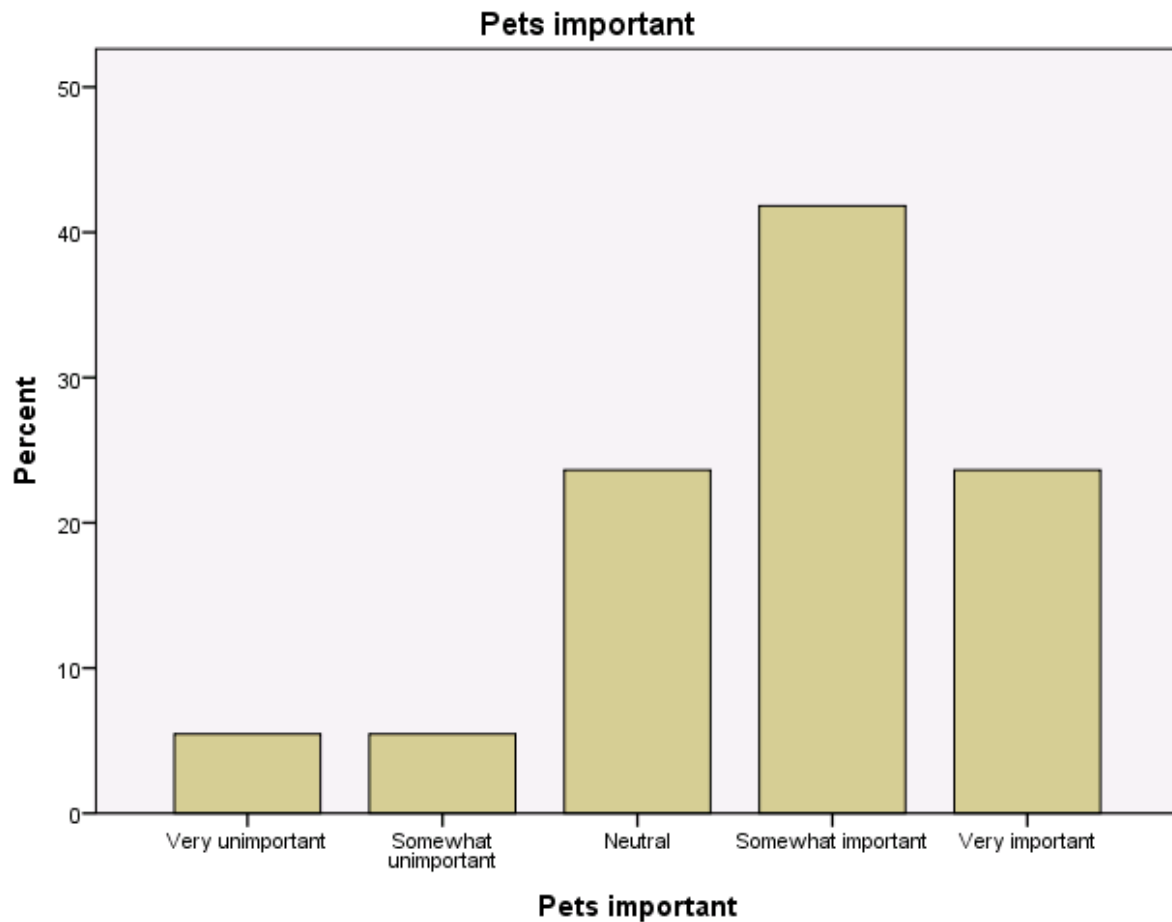
undergraduate students which may be important to students, educators, and schools, and which future researchers could find out more about.

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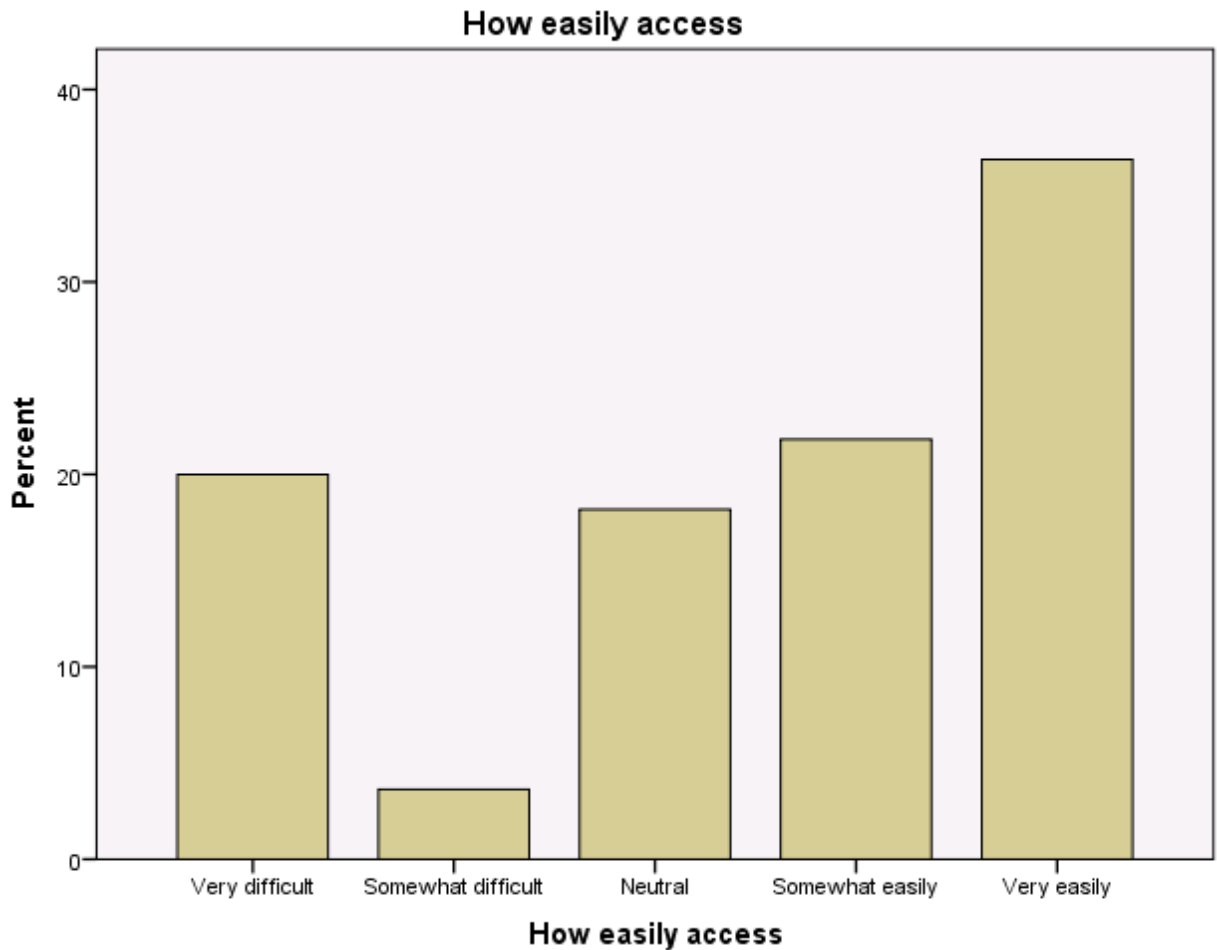
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*Figure 1.* Percentages of the ratings given by the participants regarding the question on the pet survey on how fond they are of pets.

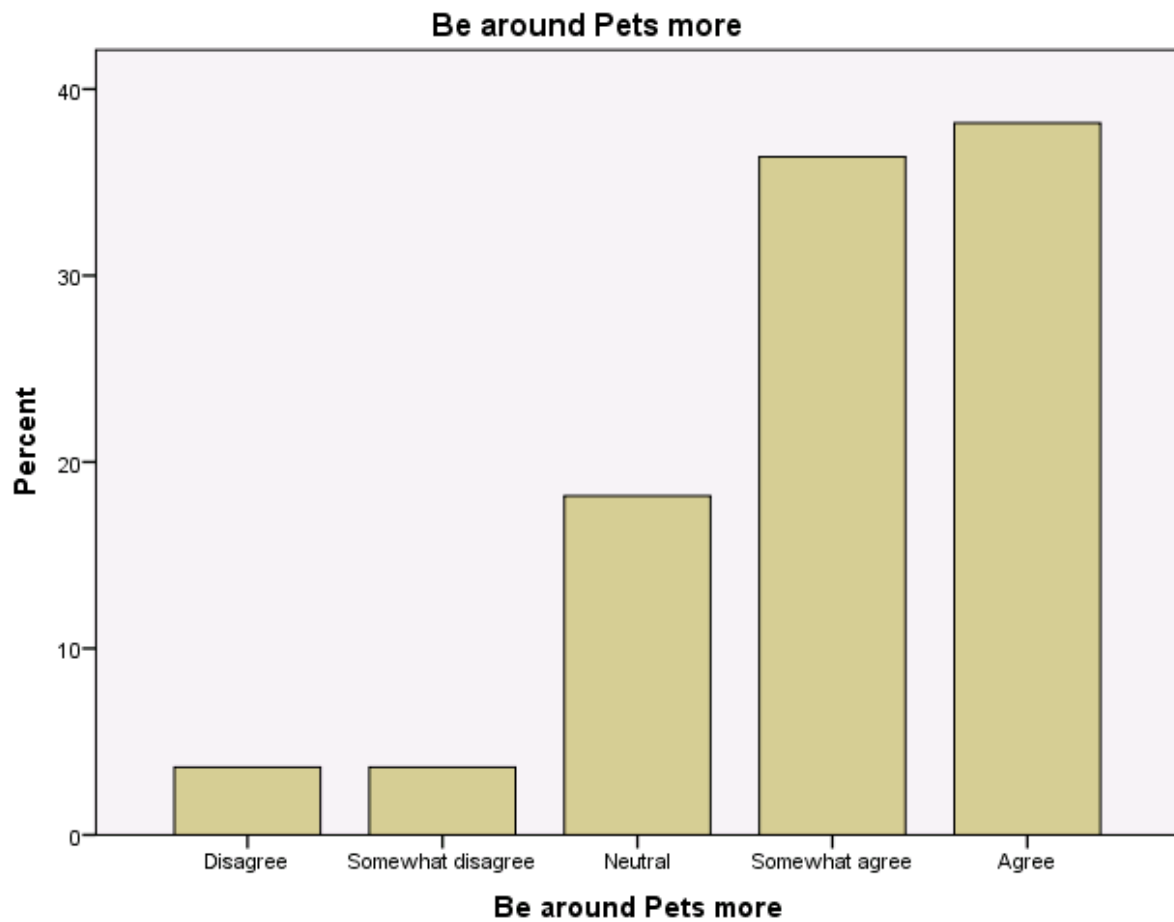


*Figure 2.* Percentages of the ratings given by the participants regarding the question on the pet survey asking about whether pets were important in their life,

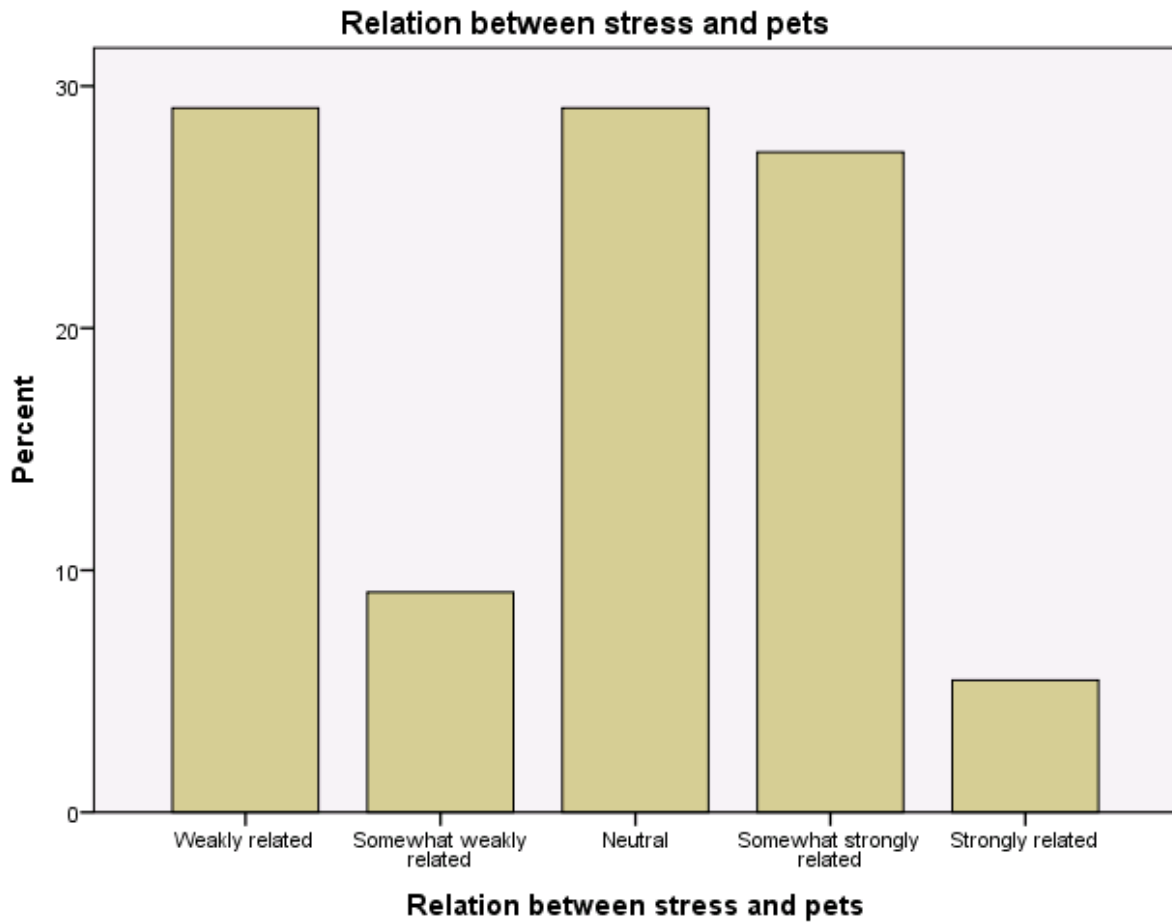


*Figure 3.* Percentages of the ratings given by participants regarding the question on the pet survey which asked how easily participants had access to any pet during a regular semester week.





*Figure 4.* Percentages of the ratings given by participants regarding the question on the pet survey which asked whether participants would like to be around pets more during a regular semester week.



*Figure 5.* Percentages of the ratings given by participants regarding the question on the pet survey asking how strongly the participants think their weekly access to pets is related to their stress levels.

Table 1

*Coded List of Answers Provided to the Question Which Asked the Participants to Clarify their Answer Given in Question 8 of the Pet Survey (Is Being Around a Pet Important to You).*

*Reason for Q8*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Positive	36	65.5	65.5	65.5
	Negative	4	7.3	7.3	72.7
	Neutral	15	27.3	27.3	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

*Note: Q8 = Question 8*

Table 2

*Numbers of Times and Percentages of How Many Times Participants Reported to Be around a Pet During a Regular Semester Week.*

*How many times around a pet/semester week*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	.0	11	20.0	21.2
	.5	1	1.8	23.1
	1.0	11	20.0	44.2
	1.5	3	5.5	50.0
	2.0	8	14.5	65.4
	2.5	1	1.8	67.3
Valid	3.0	3	5.5	73.1
	3.5	2	3.6	76.9
	4.0	1	1.8	78.8
	5.0	3	5.5	84.6
	5.5	1	1.8	86.5
	7.0	6	10.9	98.1
	14.0	1	1.8	100.0
	Total	52	94.5	100.0
Missing	System	3	5.5	
Total		55	100.0	

Table 3

*Coded List of Answers Provided to the Question Which Asked the Participants to Clarify their Answer Given in Question 10 of the Pet Survey (How Strongly Do You Think Your Pet-Access and Stress Levels May Be Related).*

*Reason for Q10*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Positive	20	36.4	45.5	45.5
	Negative	2	3.6	4.5	50.0
	Neutral	22	40.0	50.0	100.0
	Total	44	80.0	100.0	
Missing	System	11	20.0		
Total		55	100.0		

*Note: Q10 = Question 10*

Table 4

*Abbreviated Table of the Results of the Correlational Analysis between Stress Scale Scores and Various Variables of the Pet Survey and the Class Status.*

*Correlations*

	Scores from the Stress Scale	Class Status of the Participant	Fond of Pets	Own a Pet	How many times around a pet/semester week	How easily access	Be around Pets more	Pets important	Relation between stress and pets
Scores from the Stress Scale	1.000	.011	-.247	-.007	-.007	-.235	-.307	-.261	.052

## Appendix A

### Demographic Survey

Please fill out the following questions to the best of your ability by either filling in the blank or circling the applicable answer. If you are unable to answer a question or do not want to answer a question feel free to skip any item that you wish.

1) How old are you?

\_\_\_\_\_ years

2) What sex are you?

MALE    FEMALE

3) What is your class status?

FRESHMAN    SOPHOMORE    JUNIOR    SENIOR    OTHER, please specify:

4) Where do you live?

ON CAMPUS (Dorms)      OFF CAMPUS (Housing)      OFF CAMPUS (Other)

5) Which country are you from?/If from the U.S., which state? \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B****Pet Survey**

Please fill out the following questions to the best of your ability by either filling in the blank or circling the applicable answer. If you are unable to answer a question or do not want to answer a question feel free to skip any item that you wish.

1) How fond are you of pets?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all	Weakly	Neutral	Somewhat	Very
Fond	Fond		Fond	Fond

2) Of all possible pets which is your favorite? (you do not have to own it).

3) Do you own a pet or pets? If no, skip to question 5). YES NO

4) List the type of pets you own and how many of each of these types you own (e.g. 2 cats, 1 dog).

5) Approximately how many times are you around any pet (your own or somebody else's) during a regular semester week? \_\_\_\_\_times/week.

6) How easily can you have access to any pet (your own or somebody else's) during a regular semester week?



1	2	3	4	5
Very	Somewhat	Neutral	Somewhat	Very
Difficult	Difficult		Easily	Easily

7) Considering my answer in question 5) I would like to be around pets more during a regular semester week.

1	2	3	4	5
Disagree	Somewhat	Neutral	Somewhat	Agree
	Disagree		Agree	

8) How important is being around a pet for you?

1	2	3	4	5
Very	Somewhat	Neutral	Somewhat	Very
unimportant	unimportant		important	important

9) Provide reason for your response in 8):

10) How strongly do you think your weekly access to pets may be related to your stress levels?

1	2	3	4	5
Weakly	Somewhat	Neutral	Somewhat	Strongly
Related	Weakly		Strongly	Related
	Related		Related	

11) Provide reason for your response in 10):

## Appendix C

## Perceived Stress Scale

PSS

## INSTRUCTIONS:

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during THE LAST MONTH. In each case, please indicate your response by placing an "X" over the circle representing HOW OFTEN you felt or thought a certain way.

	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
	0	1	2	3	4
1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside your control?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>