

PET ATTACHMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON FAMILY PLANNING IN SINGAPORE

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ABSTRACT

The growing popularity of pets in Singapore has coincided with record-low total fertility rates here, begging the question: Does pet ownership have an impact on fertility intentions? In-depth interviews with 26 pet-owning households provide valuable insight: 11 of these households reported that pet ownership did influence their decision on childbearing, but among them, this was polarised between those who were more inclined to have children and those who were less inclined. There were 14 who did not see pet ownership as an influential factor in their fertility intentions but reported that their pets have become an integral part of their lives and family. Overall, the study suggests that more attention be paid by policymakers to a potential new family structure – one with a pet in it – and focus on convincing families that it need not be a choice between having a pet or having a child. This could include making public spaces both children and pet-friendly, for example.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, relationships between people and their animals have become more intense and expensive than before, with recent accounts of owners treating the animals as more than pets, but as “fur babies”, where pets are even being dubbed as “emotional brokers” of the modern family (Blouin, 2012).

This growing popularity of pets appears to be no different in Singapore. For one, there has been a growing number of pet owners here. For example, from 2019 to the first half of 2022, the number of dogs licensed by the Animal & Veterinary Service (AVS) increased by 20 per cent, from 70,000 to 84,000 (Tan, 2022).

Furthermore, anecdotal accounts show that more owners perceive their pets as part of the family, and are going the extra mile to provide and care for them. Such care includes buying custom-made clothing and birthday cakes for their pets, and even bringing their “furkid” along on overseas trips at great effort and cost (Lee, 2023).

Businesses have also responded to this increasing affection towards pets. These include rehabilitation services for animals, pet insurance, pet daycare and pet cremations, among others.

The increase in pet ownership and attachment in Singapore comes amid record-low birth rates here. In 2022, the total fertility rate (TFR) reached a historic low of 1.05 (Rajah, 2023). The average number of citizen births fell from 32,700 between 2013 and 2017 to 31,800 between 2018 and 2022. Then, in 2024, Singapore's TFR estimates for 2023 fell to a new historic low of 0.97, as shown by preliminary estimates (Rajah, 2024).

Factors such as rapid modernisation, increased individualism (Yeung et al., 2018) and the increased cost of living and housing (Saguin, 2021) have often been cited as some of the key reasons for this decline.

However, as the concept of “fur babies” and pet parenting gains popularity, does pet ownership also have an impact on birth rates? Questions have been raised on this issue before, but no concrete study on this phenomenon has been done in Singapore.

There have been anecdotal reports on why some couples have chosen to have pets instead of human babies. Many have cited reasons such as lower costs, more freedom, and anxiety over the planet's future as reasons why they chose to have pets instead of children (Li, 2021).

Internationally, the phenomenon of pet parenting has also raised some alarm among religious circles, with Catholic head Pope Francis claiming that people who substitute pets for kids exhibit a “certain selfishness” (Sherwood, 2022).

However, international studies signal mixed outcomes of an increase in pet ownership when it comes to influencing fertility intentions. For instance, pet ownership and attachment have often been framed as a paradox by researchers, given the significant investment of time, energy and resources into a pet without the obvious benefits of survival and genetic fitness, and when pets are neither their own kin nor species (Serpell & Paul, 2011).

Pet attachment, which refers to the intimate and persistent connection between pets and humans, is also shown to have beneficial effects on pet owners. According to Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby & Holmes, 2012), the main feature of parents' attachment to their children is caregiving and protecting, and this is much the same as the attachment between pet owners and pets.

But how will this affect a pet owner's decision to have children?

One study in China showed that among pet owners of a higher socio-economic status, attachment to their pets was negatively associated with their intention to have children. However, this effect was not present among pet owners of lower socio-economic status (Guo et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, a study in the US showed that young childless couples who owned pets tended to refer to their pet affectionately and that the commitment required to care for their pets led many of these couples to see their pets as surrogate children, and thus they decide not to have their own human children (Laurent-Simpson, 2017). In the same study, some couples opted to have a pet first to weigh up how tiring it would be to take care of a human child in the future, thus also serving to delay childbearing

Another study on college students also showed that pet owners exhibited a higher level of concern for the next generation, as opposed to those who did not own pets (Marks et al., 1994).

Following such literature, the hypothesis in this study is that pet ownership polarises the fertility intentions of owners, and that they will either feel strongly against having children or feel a strong desire to have children.

2. METHOD

2.1 The interviews

To gather the sentiments of pet owners towards fertility, primarily in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. This type of data works well in informing researchers on participants' views and feelings in the contexts and structures of their lives (Charmaz, 2006).

The interview method is also often used as a pilot study to explore a topic before a larger-scale survey is designed, and this study aims to pave the way for a fuller study to be done on this issue.

The two main thrusts of the interview were to find out the participants' attachment to their pets, and whether this attachment had any impact on their intentions to have children.

The interview was designed such that the participants were able to explain their attachment to their pet, and then separately asked about their intentions to have children. Only then were they asked if having a pet did impact their intention to have children. This was done so the participants do not conflate both issues when discussing them, and can lay out fully their sentiments behind both, before being asked to consider any causal links, or lack thereof, between them.

When a participant said something that was not directly related to the question but could further the discussion in some way, subsequent questions were altered to suit the flow of the conversation.

A total of 31 interviews were conducted, following the University of Auckland's (2019) recommendation for thematic analysis, where a sample of 20 to 30 participants is recommended for doctoral research.

The interviews for the 28 participants who spoke over the phone or face-to-face lasted between 14 and 35 minutes. The remaining three participants replied over the following mediums: email, WhatsApp text message, and Instagram direct messages.

During the interview process, the level of insight that I attained from each new interviewee began to dwindle significantly after I had interviewed about 20 participants.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, where a list of questions was loosely adhered to.

2.2 The participants

The participants for this study were gathered through a snowball method; first through the author's personal networks, friends of friends, as well as through reaching out to pet Instagram accounts with the author's personal account. Some of these contacts were also asked for leads to reach out to their peers who were similarly invested in their pets. The main consideration was in finding pet owners who were in a phase of life where they would likely be thinking or have thought about their intentions to have children.

Pseudonyms are used for the participants to preserve their anonymity.

Among the 31 participants interviewed, there were 21 women and 10 men from a total of 26 pet-owning households — after which no further data was collected as data saturation was observed.

The interviews were conducted between mid-October and late November 2023. Most of the interviews were conducted with one member of the household; five of the interviews were conducted with two members of a household (i.e., husband and wife) present.

Due to the nature of the issue, most participants that were approached were either married or in a long-term relationship, as it would be more likely that such couples would have seriously considered whether they would want to have children, either in the present or future. Two of the participants were not in a relationship, although singlehood did not preclude them from thinking about whether they wanted to have children should they be in a relationship in the future.

The female participants were mostly within 10 years of Singapore resident's median age of mothers at first birth, which is 31.4 years old as of 2022 (Department of Statistics, Singapore, 2023), with participants ranging from 23 years to 43 years old.

The overall average age of the participants is 32.3. The average age of the female participants is 32.1, close to the median childbearing age. The average of the male participants is 32.6.

There were no requirements set for the type of pets a participant owned. While most owned cats or dogs, among the participants were also owners of fish, rabbits and quails.

3. RESULTS

The households fell into three broad categories:

- Those whose fertility intentions were strengthened upon having a pet
- Those whose fertility intentions were weakened upon having a pet
- Those who were already firm in their fertility intentions, and were not affected by owning a pet at all

The largest proportion of owners fell in the third category, with 14 households indicating that their decision to have a child (or a subsequent child) was not affected by owning a pet.

The second largest proportion was in the second category — eight pet-owning households reported that their fertility intentions were weakened after owning a pet.

Three households said their fertility intentions were strengthened upon having a pet.

A final pet owner said that having a pet influenced her decision to have a child, but she had not decided on which way it swayed her yet. She was not placed in any category.

Overall, of the 26 households interviewed, the number of pet-owning 12 households felt that owning a pet affected their fertility intention, while 14 felt that it did not. Among those whose fertility intentions were affected by owning

a pet, the majority (8) were swayed in a negative direction, while a minority (3) were positively swayed.

3.1 Fertility intentions strengthened upon having a pet

Three of the participants said their fertility intentions were strengthened upon owning pets.

These participants were initially either on the fence or against having children. Upon having pets, it revealed their “parental” side, and this made the pet owners feel like they could be up to the task of having children. This was discovered through the process of caring for the pets, with menial tasks like feeding, cleaning and bringing the pets to the vet. Moreover, they also felt that having pets filled a “void” in them that they had felt from not having children. However, they did not feel that this void was sufficiently filled, and this made them wonder what it could be like to have children of their own.

3.1.1 “Showed me I could take care of a human life”

Daphne, who owns three cats with her husband and has no children, said that before she was married, she was not keen on having children, but this mindset gradually changed when she got the cats:

“So before we got married, I was not open, like, I’ve never really been one who wanted kids, basically. [My husband], he knew I was not keen, and after we got married and then we had cats, I was actually a bit more open to have a kid. But I’m still not like 100 per cent... to me, if you want to have kids, you must want it 100 per cent, if not you may regret. Getting cats also kind of fills that hole, because you are looking after someone, like, yeah your furkids right, but obviously it’s not the same.”

She acknowledged that while having cats was a factor in helping her reconsider having children, it was not a main one, but one among other factors, such as perceiving a different stage in life, and seeing peers have their own kids.

When asked to describe why she was inclined to having cats as pets, and whether this experience affected her perception about taking care of a life, she replied:

“People around me are having kids, two [friends] get married and have kids, and oh, maybe I should... I guess things also change when you grow older. When you’re younger you’re like, ‘Oh I want to have my freedom, I want to travel whenever I want,’ and now when you’re a bit older you’re like, ‘Oh, maybe it’s time to settle down,’ that kind of thing... I think [having pets] is one of the factors.”

3.1.2 “Made me realise it would be nice to have children”

For other participants, they felt that having pets opened their eyes — albeit to a limited degree — to a life with children, which led to them desiring to have children of their own. This desire was brought about by feelings of “wholeness” when taking the pets out on family excursions, for instance. This was the case with Grace, who, with her husband, adopted two dogs in 2020 and 2021. She described how, before getting her pets, she was extremely against the idea of having children:

“For me, I never wanted children, I just never had a maternal side, I never liked children. I look at families and think that they just look stressed out, and like it’s not fun whatsoever, so I never wanted children.”

However, owning pets has made her reconsider her decision:

“[Owning pets] actually polarised me in both directions even more, so sometimes even more strongly I feel like I don’t want children because I do feel, because the way the dogs have disrupted my life and taken up my time, and changed the way I live, even though I love them, I realise that with children, that would be even more extreme. And because I’m quite career-driven, and I really value my alone time and I have a lot of hobbies, it made me realise if these dogs changed my life this much, even more so, children will be very difficult. So it pushed me in that direction even more. But it has also made me realise how nice it is to

have a family. Like, me and my husband, this morning, we rented a car and took our dogs to Marina Bay Sands for a sunrise walk, and those family activities we do with them has also made me realise that it would be nice to have children, whereas before I never would have thought that, I never would have been like ‘Oh, it would be nice to have a family,’ so it kind of split me in both directions.”

This may not come as a surprise, as an inclination to care for human children has been shown to increase among those with a higher attachment to pets (Marks et al., 1994).

While this has been shown by some participants, for participants who said that their fertility intentions were affected by having pets, a majority reported feeling less inclined to have children.

3.2 Fertility intentions weakened upon having a pet

For eight of the participants, they said that their fertility intentions were weakened after having a pet.

The most prominent reason given was that having a pet gave them the sense of “fullness” that they had craved from having a child, so much so that their desire to have children faded away.

3.2.1 “The dog is really like a kid”

For some couples who already had children, getting a pet was their attempt at culling the desire to have another child. For them, the time and effort in taking care of another life substituted the desire to have a child.

This was the case for married couple Fiona and Frank, who have two children. They toyed with the idea of having a third child, but their desire to do so was completely staved off with the introduction of a pet dog. As Frank explained:

“Now we are quite definitely ‘no’ [to having a third child] because the dog has somewhat filled up that gap to have a kid, because the dog is really like a kid.”

When asked more about how owning a dog had filled their desire to have a child, Fiona said:

“We treat the dog like a child, we still bring the dog out, we don’t leave the dog alone at home on weekends. When we go out on Sundays, we bring the dog along [with the kids] in the car, we just go to outdoor places with the dog.”

The feeling of bringing a dog out with the children gave the couple a sense of wholeness. Frank explained further:

“When we bring the whole family out — the kids and the dog out for a walk, it just feels complete, it just feels like we are done, there’s just a feeling.”

3.2.2 “Having a pet scratched that itch to have a child”

Other participants said that they were uncertain about having children, but that having a pet made them feel like they would not be ready to have a child, given the stress and labour that they had put in to take care of a pet, which they believed already paled in comparison to having a child.

Amelia, the owner of two cats, had mixed feelings about whether she wanted to have children. As she was growing up, she initially believed that having children was an inevitable life stage, seeing how her older sister moved through the life stages and had a child herself.

However, the way her sister’s life changed made her reconsider her convictions, as she saw firsthand the labour and energy it took to raise a child.

When Amelia and her boyfriend adopted their first cat, she was still split over whether to have children or not, but then taking care of the cat soon “helped her decide” where she stood. As she explained:

“I think like for me, [owning a cat] actually helped me to decide that maybe... because I felt like I was quite conflicted, I guess like there’s a bit of like a maternal instinct that I wanted to act on, then once I had my

cat, then I felt that I managed to kind of scratch that itch in like a sufficient manner that maybe I don't need to bring children into the world to kind of fulfil that kind of desire."

Furthermore, Amelia spoke about how daunting it would be to parent a human child, compared to a cat:

"The responsibility — and I'm definitely not comparing the two, definitely having children is so much harder — but yeah, precisely like the responsibility of having pets is already like enough of a stress, that at this moment, I don't feel like... like, it has satiated my curiosity enough that I don't feel that I need to have children to kind of fulfil maybe some of those feelings that I had when I thought that I wanted to have kids."

There were also those that had wanted a child, but then concluded through having pets that they would not make good parents. This was the case for Heather, who has two dogs with her husband, one for 12 years and another for 8 years. While she was at first ambivalent towards having children, she said that owning a pet did make her realise over the years that she and her partner's parenting styles were probably not compatible:

"The way we discipline our dogs is also a bit different.... He's a bit harsher, but I think he's also more loving, I don't know how to put it. For me, I don't believe in corporal punishment, which I think he kind of believes in, not that he will abuse the kid, but sometimes whacking is ok, I don't quite believe that, but I can be very harsh I think when it comes to things like academics and stuff like that. We are both harsh in different ways... as parents you need to put up a united front, if not there will be confusing signals to the kids."

However, it is also pertinent to note that Heather, as well as the other participants in this category, cited pet rearing as one of the factors among a few as to why they did not want to have kids. This is not surprising, as one larger-scale survey exploring why Singaporean couples do not want to have children (Ang, 2023) yielded a variety of reasons, including the high cost of living, a

general disdain for child-rearing, climate change and the uncertainties it brings to the world, among other reasons.

These were also the reasons that participants in this study, across all categories, raised as reasons not to have children.

3.3 Fertility intentions not affected by owning a pet

It is the presence of the above reasons that have led 14 of the participants to report that owning a pet has had no effect on their resolution to either have kids or not.

3.3.1 “Zero influence”

Participants gave a variety of reasons as to why they did not plan to have children. Ultimately, they did not see pet ownership as one of the determining factors, because it was either overshadowed by larger factors, or that they saw owning a pet as completely unrelated to raising a child.

For some of the participants, they had already decided on their fertility intentions prior to having a pet and had stuck with it.

For Jacob and his wife, they had adopted a dog in 2020, whom he said is a “big part” of their lives, but this had no impact on their decision not to have children, which he said they had decided on early in their relationship over 10 years ago.

He said that the primary reasons for not having children include fear that the state of the planet will degrade in the coming decades due to climate change, as well as the “uncontrollable” nature of how a child may turn out when they are older. He shared:

“I think the current state of the planet is not exactly the right kind of environment to bring a child or a life and to live like... because their generation will highly likely outlive my life, and they will be faced with the calamity that is likely to follow. Like, there’s a high potential to follow in terms of climate change, and conflict and all these kinds of stuff, so for me at the macro level that is one reason. At a personal kind of

reasoning... there's a kind of heavy responsibility of bringing another life into this world and the things you need to be prepared for, not just monetarily, but also the kind of involvement in terms of like, time and effort, there's a lot of things that can shape like, you know, the perspective or the growth journey of life, right? And there's too many uncontrollable forces, and that kind of scares me."

In light of these reasons, he said "having a pet has had zero influence in having children or not."

He said, however, that he and his wife had always envisioned having a pet in the family:

"Having a pet has always been in the pipeline for us as a family unit. It's just COVID sort of, like accelerated that process, I guess. Because of a lot of working from home and flexibility and so there was a lot of time to go out and have a look around."

For some who did not want to have kids, having a pet filled a "void", even though it did not influence their decision not to have a kid.

This was the case for Mason, who has owned a pet cat since April 2023. He said at the time of the interview that he and his wife were not planning to have children as they wanted to first focus on their careers, but he was not sure if this would still be his sentiment "three years down the road."

What he was sure about, however, is that having a pet would not affect whatever choice he makes with his wife over having children or not. However, it did help to "fill a void" they had expected having a child could fill:

"I think not being prepared to be a parent, that has been the same since two years ago already; it has always been the case, so it's not like having a pet has changed that in any sense. But it does kind of help to fill a void, which I thought that a kid would help to fill, but our cat did it anyway."

3.3.2 “Owning a pet is still a hobby after all”

Additionally, there were also those who believed that pet ownership is a separate endeavour from having a child.

Take the case of Ryan, who has schools of pet fish in three aquarium tanks in his home, and is married with no children. Having owned dogs in the past, he said he was generally very attached to his pets, reporting feelings such as “heart pain” whenever his fishes died. While he put in a lot of hard work daily maintaining the aquariums, he believed that owning a pet is entirely separate from raising a child:

“I would say that [owning a pet and raising a child] are two different things. Having an aquarium, or having a dog or cat, for some people they consider it a family member... but essentially they are still hobbies. There is some overlap in terms of the emotional fulfilment when it comes to raising a child and keeping a pet, but at the same time I do think that they are still different.”

He added that the only correlation between both endeavours is that having a child would take time away from his hobbies, such as rearing fish, and this was not something that he wanted for himself.

But like Jacob, there were larger overarching reasons for Ryan such as fear of worsening climate change and repulsion from seeing how stressful child-rearing has been on their peers, which Ryan and his wife considered when choosing not to have a child.

3.3.3 “Like a practice to having a child”

Among the 14 participants whose fertility intentions were not impacted by their pet ownership, there was a smaller sub-group of three who wanted to first own a pet as a “trial run” to having children.

This was the case for recently married couple Kayla and Kevin, who adopted a dog in June 2023, and were planning to have children in the future. They said

that they were planning to have children regardless of whether they owned a dog or not.

However, they soon realised that owning a dog was effectively a “trial run” for having a child in the future. For Kayla:

“For me, I’m open to having children, and I thought having a pet would be sort of like a practice, to see if his schedule would fit into mine, or how I have to go about with him inside my life.... In some ways, [a child and a pet] are quite similar, because you’re responsible for how your dog behaves, how your child behaves, like the training, the education comes from you, rather than other people.”

As for Kevin, he noted that “having a pet is like a first step to having a kid... we thought it would be a good dry run.”

At the same time, they understood that having a child comes with “a lot more” responsibility than having a pet. Having a pet also affected the couple’s timeline of having a child, because the dog, a puppy at the time, occupied the time and resources that could otherwise been put into raising a child.

Kayla said:

“[Owning a dog] has made us clearer as to whether we are ready for a child now, which is no. Because with this dog now, we don’t have the extra time to care for another being, not even another dog, let alone another young child. At this point in time it will be too much for us to handle, the cost of having a puppy is slightly more expensive now, because we have to send [it] for training, and spend more time with the puppy. But as the dog gets older, and he’s used to our routine, then we don’t have to spend as much time training him, then we can talk about having kids.”

For married couple Lily and Liam, they had always wanted children, but said that “life got in the way” to the point where they delayed the process. Both were aged 37 at the time of the interview, and they said they are “rushing” the process

of having children before age catches up. They say that owning two dogs has helped them feel more ready to have children.

For Liam, having owned dogs helped them better understand the responsibility of having a child, which they believed tied them down to certain responsibilities such as balancing care for the pets with time for other hobbies, much like what the couple would go through should they have a child. He said:

“We have already come to a point where routinely we know how to take care of these two dogs, we know that there are certain procedures and certain things that need to be in place before we leave the house, before we go somewhere, before we do something. I think it’s no different for a child also, we need to make sure that the child has certain requirements met before any sort of extra-curricular activities is engaged in. So, definitely, it has prepared us. I think having dogs first before [having children] gives you a wider perspective in terms of maturity, matures you as a person, ties you down with more responsibilities. Because there’s no way you can take care of a dog with a devil-may-[care] kind of attitude. So I think it’s very important to know what you’re getting into and make sure you have the right sort of mental attitude to be able to take care of a living being, one such as a dog.”

And, for some couples, having pets has helped them to figure out what kind of parental roles they could play for their future children.

This is the case for Olivia, who had an 18 month-old dog with her husband at the time of the interview. She explained:

“It didn’t change my mindset. But I felt like it made us a lot more prepared than we would have been.... Dating and being together, [versus] living together and parenting together, is very different. So I feel like from having [our dog] we could really tell what are each of our parenting styles, and how we respond and we are really, really very tired and we still have to take care of a dependent, and how we want to teach him. I

think it's very, very similar.... We kind of know each other's [parenting] style now, and we know what to look out for and fine-tune."

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 What the responses mean

Taken at face value, the responses paint a mixed picture. On one hand, about a third (11) of participants felt that owning a pet influenced their fertility intentions. Among them, most (8) were negatively swayed while some were positively swayed (3).

The following matrix table shows the different reasons as to how pet ownership influenced these 11 participants to be more or less willing to have children.

Table 1. How pet ownership influenced fertility intentions

Change in fertility intentions	More willing to have children after owning pets	Less willing to have children after owning pets
Reasons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More familiar with the responsibility of taking care of another life, and so more willing to have children • Felt a sense of fulfilment in taking care of pets that they want to replicate or enhance by having children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt like a pet is a direct substitute for a child • Curiosity about having a child was fulfilled by having a pet • Difficulties experienced in raising a pet made them fear having a child • Discovered through having pets that "parenting styles" were not compatible

For a smaller sub-group (3) within those whose fertility intentions were not decided, pets were also seen as a way to prepare them for eventually becoming parents to human children.

For the group whose fertility intentions were impacted due to their pet ownership, the results seem to concur with the available literature.

For those who felt that pet ownership negatively impacted their fertility intentions, reasons such as having an emotional void “filled” or an “itch” that had been scratched concurred with the study by Laurent-Simpson (2017), which showed that the commitment required to care for pets led to many couples in the study to see their pets as surrogate children.

On the other hand, some households reported a positive influence that their pets had on their fertility intentions, which concurred with a study by Marks, Koepke and Bradley (1994) showing that pets tend to evoke people’s desire to care and nature, thus leading to them being more concerned with the next generation.

This appears to be congruent with this study’s hypothesis that pet ownership polarises owners’ fertility intentions.

However, it also must be noted that a larger proportion of participants (14) report that owning a pet has had no effect on their fertility intentions. For many of these participants, they already decided whether they wanted children before getting a pet, which they claim is an independent decision.

And for a smaller sub-group, they already decided on having children but wanted to have pets as a “trial run”. This still meant that having pets did not affect their decision to have a child, but that the inclination to have children affected their decision to have a pet.

4.2 Limitations of the study

A key limitation of the study is the small sample size, which increases the chance of assuming a false premise as true (Faber & Fonseca, 2014).

Moreover, it comprises only responses from pet owners. For a wider qualitative study on fertility sentiments of childbearing-aged Singaporeans, interviews will need to extend non-pet owners too.

4.3 Three main takeaways

4.3.1 Rising pet attachment could be a result of one's fertility intentions

First, it is more likely that couples had already decided on whether to have a child or not, before getting a pet. For most, getting a pet was a consequence of already deciding not to have children, and not the other way around.

There are families who have already decided not to have children, and then subsequently decide to have a pet as a family member instead.

There are even families who decide to have pets as a way to prepare for later having children.

4.3.2 Pet ownership can still affect fertility intentions

Second, pet ownership can have a negative and positive impact on fertility intentions. However, it would be difficult to attribute significant societal shifts in fertility perspectives solely to pet ownership.

This is not only because of the dilution of such sentiments due to an unaffected majority, but also the fact that many pet owners cited their pets as just one factor among a few that contributed to their decision to have children.

4.3.3 Pets are no longer just pets

And finally, whether or not pets affect fertility intentions, they have become part of many families here and they are no longer seen as “just pets”.

Many of the participants have gone above and beyond for their pets, and they agreed that the level of care for pets in the modern household today far outstrips how their parents had treated pets.

This is conveyed with accounts of intensive pet training, scheduled walks and playtimes, grooming, regular visits to the vet, and feelings of great satisfaction in watching their pets grow to be part of the family.

4.4 Other observations

Social media, the participants say, has also been a key factor in helping dispel any preconceived stigma they may have for treating their pets as part of the family. Social media accounts created by pet owners help to reinforce a “baseline” level of care and concern that other pet owners should have for their pets, enforcing new norms where a pet is closer to being a member of the family than before.

Pets have also been reported to ease inter-generational tensions between the younger pet owners and their older relatives, who may have implicit demands or expectations for married couples to have children. For some participants, having a pet in the household instead of a child, whether it affected their fertility intention or not, served as a “distraction” for the older generation who had grown close to the pets, and had lowered their expectations of the younger generation to have children.

Participants also said that having pets exposed older family members to a “new” kind of lifestyle and family formation which they may not have been familiar with but are slowly beginning to accept through increased interactions with the pets.

4.5 What is the way forward?

So what practical steps can governments, individuals and society take from these results? There are two possible directions.

4.5.1 The rise of a new family structure

First, the realisation that pets will now be an integral part of the household — one that can potentially affect fertility intentions — means that a new kind of family structure could be considered in policymaking, to encourage more births.

Such a family structure is one that not just involves parents and children, but also pets.

To a limited extent, pets may have the potential to encourage parents to have children. Given Singapore's low fertility rate, pet ownership could be seen as either a complimentary measure or stepping stone to having children, rather than an activity that discourages childbearing.

After all, some couples who already have the intention to have children do see having pets as a first taste of what life with a child is like.

Should pet adoption be encouraged among families, in hopes that a new family structure of parents and child and pet emerge? Or perhaps more facilities that are pet-friendly can be children-friendly at the same time to promote this new kind of family structure?

More could be done to study the benefits of having a child that grows up in a household with a pet, to further understand the benefits of such a family structure.

Conversely, given Singapore's declining fertility rate, pets can also continually be seen as a "substitute" for children, having the ability to fulfil some emotional needs of its owners.

In other words, the number of couples that own pets could grow organically, reflective of the declining desire to have children.

It could be a continuation of an up-and-coming "dual income, no kids" (DINK) or "dual income, no kids, with a dog" (DINKWAD) way of life, where pets are a firmer feature and children are absent.

4.5.2 So... what are the upsides to having children?

While governments around the world have painted a bleak picture of how society will be affected by lower birth rates, individuals will more likely ask themselves whether having children would serve them well personally.

There are clear benefits to families that choose not to have children, such as greater financial freedom, more freedom to pursue hobbies, and fewer worries about how a child would turn out (Ang, 2023). More research is needed to uncover the personal benefits of having children in the context of Singapore.

After all, some participants, upon further questioning, admitted that having a child — while a more volatile and uncertain endeavour, would likely be a more rewarding experience than owning a pet that will not live as long as a child, nor could they offer a parent-child relationship.

Ultimately, many participants said they did not want to have children as the upsides to it were speculative and abstract, while there were more tangible downsides that appeared to outweigh them.

Having more literature in the Singapore context on the upsides of parenting that goes beyond anecdotes and abstract notions could help couples make a better personal decision between having a pet, a child, or both.

5. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the dataset attained through the three-month Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) News Fellowship was a deep dive into the real and raw details of how young pet-owning couples assess their fertility intentions.

A healthy range of in-depth interviews had served to uncover different nooks and crannies of an issue and bring to light valuable insight into how owning a pet had helped or hindered couples as they grappled with the question of whether to have children or not.

The study's small sample size is a key limitation. A mixed-method survey with a larger sample of pet owners could more accurately capture the sentiments on the ground, and this is a potential area for further study follow-up.

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APPENDIX A

Table of participants

Pseudonyms are used to preserve the identity of the participants.

No.	Participant(s)	Age	sex	Pet(s)	Relationship status	Intentions to have (more) children (currently how many)
1.	Amelia	27	F	2 cats	In a relationship	No
2.	Bella	29	F	1 cat	In a relationship	Leaning towards no
3.	Charlotte	30	F	1 cat	In a relationship	Undecided
4.	Daphne	32	F	3 cats	Married	Undecided
5.	Emily	31	F	1 dog	Married	No
6.	Frank and Fiona	29, 30	M, F	1 dog	Married	No (2)
7.	Grace and Gabriel	32, 32	F, M	2 dogs	Married	Undecided
8.	Heather	39	F	2 dogs	Married	Leaning towards no
9.	Isaac	28	M	2 dogs	In a relationship	No
10.	Jacob	34	M	1 dog	Married	No
11.	Kayla and Kevin	27, 27	F, M	1 dog	Married	Yes
12.	Lily and Liam	37, 37	F, M	2 dogs	Married	Yes
13.	Mason	29	M	1 cat	Married	Undecided
14.	Nora	38	F	1 dog and fishes	Single parent	No (2)
15.	Olivia	29	F	1 dog	Married	Yes
16.	Penelope	29	F	8 rabbits, 1 dog, 3 quails	Married	Yes (1)

17.	Quinn	26	F	1 cat	Married	Undecided
18.	Ryan	41	M	Fishes	Married	No
19.	Sophia	28	F	1 dog	In a relationship	Leaning towards yes
20.	Thomas	29	M	2 dogs	Single	Undecided
21.	Ulyana	32	F	1 dog	Married	No (1)
22.	Violet	36	F	2 cats	Married	No
23.	Wendy	43	F	4 cats	Married	Yes
24.	Ximena	42	F	1 cat	Single	Undecided
25.	Yarra and Yosef	34, 40	F, M	1 dog, 3 cats	Married	No
26.	Zoe	23	F	2 cats	In a relationship	Yes

APPENDIX B

List of structured questions that I put to each pet-owning household

1. Can you tell me about your current living situation and family structure? (e.g., Are you single, in a relationship, married? Do you have children?)
2. How long have you been a pet owner, and what type of pet(s) do you have?
3. What motivated you to get a pet(s) in the first place?
4. How would you describe your pet's place in your life?
5. Have you noticed any changes in your lifestyle or daily routine since becoming a pet owner?
6. What are your intentions to have children?
7. Do you believe that owning a pet has affected your thoughts about having children in the future? How so?
8. How do you perceive the responsibilities of pet ownership in comparison to the responsibilities of parenting?
9. [For those planning to have children or have children] Are there any challenges you've faced in balancing pet ownership and potential parenthood?
10. How do your friends, family, or societal norms in Singapore view having pets as part of the family? Are they changing?

11. The difference between pets and children is that children will go through very different life stages as they become adults. Do you fear that you will miss that life experience?
12. Do you feel that owning pets has helped you develop parenting skills, or do you think it might deter you from having children?