

Is Happiness a Warm Puppy?: Examining the Association Between Pets and Well-Being

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INTRODUCTION

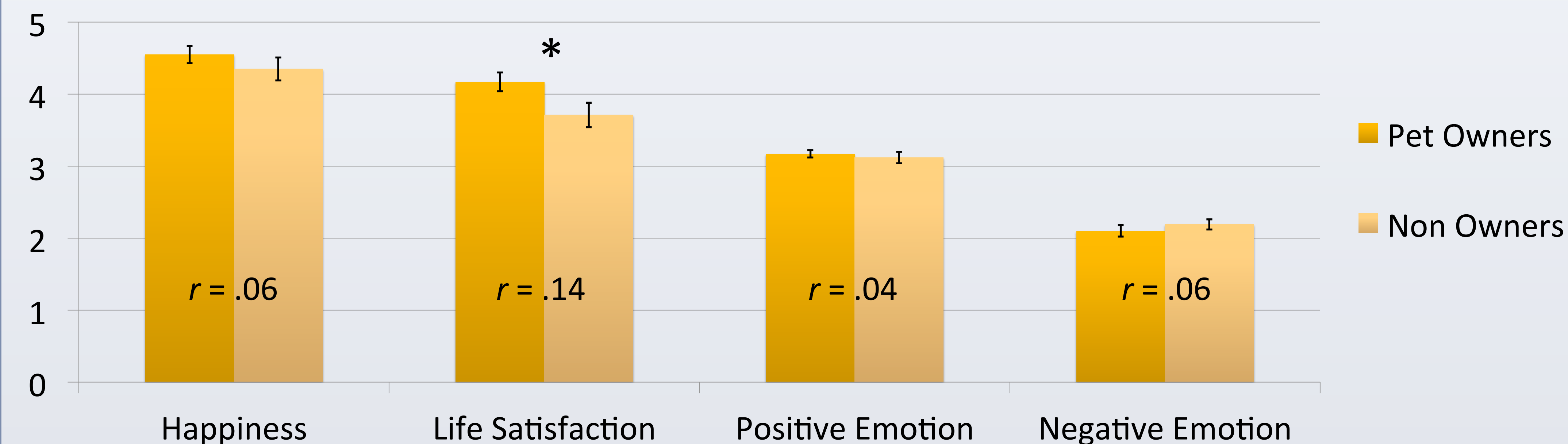
- Research has demonstrated a relationship between physical health and pet ownership (e.g., see Friedmann, Barker & Allen, 2011; Headey & Grabka, 2011), but little research has focused on mental health.
- Of those studies that have focused on the relationship between mental health and pet ownership, the focus has typically been on the more negative aspects of mental health, such as loneliness or depression (e.g., Clark Cline, 2010; Gilbey & Tani, 2015).
- Research on positive aspects of mental health, such as happiness, has shown conflicting findings (McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton & Martin, 2011; Ory & Goldberg, 1983; Pew Research Center, 2006), so the present study seeks to more fully investigate the relationship between pet ownership and subjective well-being, using multiple measures of well-being and a national sample.

METHOD

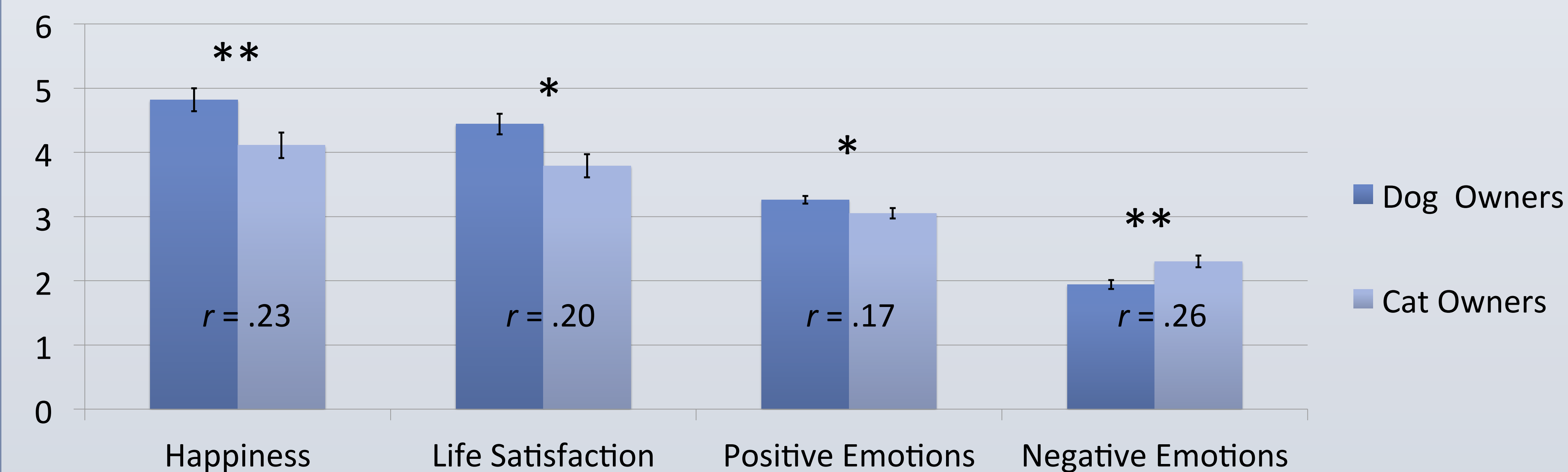
- Participants were 263 (131 males, 131 females, 1 declined to respond) American adults recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 68 ($M = 34.87$ years, $SD = 10.46$ years).
- Participants completed an online questionnaire about pet ownership, personality, and subjective well-being.
- 64% of participants owned a pet, and 36% did not.
- We asked participants to identify their primary pet, and most of the sample (94%) identified a cat or a dog (40.5% cat, 53.0% dog, 2.4% bird, 1.8% small mammal, 0.6% reptile/amphibian, 0.6% fish, and 1.2% other).

RESULTS

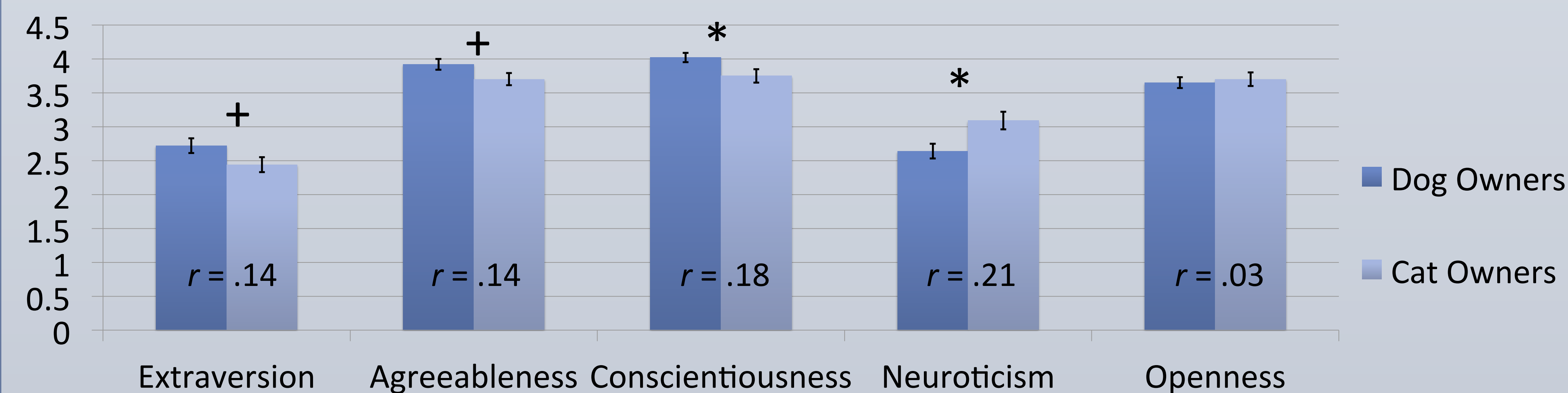
- Pet owners did not significantly differ from non pet owners in happiness, positive emotions, negative emotions, Big Five personality traits, emotion regulation strategies, trait anthropomorphism, need satisfaction, or demographic variables such as age or education.
- Pet owners, however, were more satisfied with life than non-owners, $t(245)=2.15$, $p=0.032$, $r=0.14$.



- Dog owners scored higher in well-being than cat owners on all well-being measures.



- Dog owners were significantly more conscientious and less neurotic than cat owners. Dog owners were marginally more extraverted and agreeable than cat owners. There were no differences in openness between cat and dog owners.



- Significant mediators of the relationship between type of pet owned and each of the well-being variables: the Big Five personality traits, emotion regulation strategy, and satisfaction of basic needs. Non-significant mediators: trait anthropomorphism and anthropomorphism of one's pet.

Note: + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; Error bars indicate SE

HYPOTHESES

- Research Questions:
 - Are there differences in subjective well-being (i.e., happiness, life satisfaction, positive emotions, and negative emotions) between pet owners and non-pet owners?
 - Are there differences in subjective well-being between cat owners and dog owners?
- Hypotheses:
 - If there are differences in well-being between groups, the following variables will act as mediators: Big Five personality traits, emotion regulation style, basic need satisfaction, and anthropomorphism.

CONCLUSION

- Pet owners were more satisfied with life than non owners, but there were no other differences in well-being or personality.
- Dog owners were happier than cat owners, which can be partially explained by personality, emotion regulation style, and need satisfaction.
- It's unclear whether the lack of differences between pet owners and non owners are due to adaptation to pet ownership (average length of ownership = 5.5 years) or if pets do not have a strong effect on well-being
- Future directions: longitudinal studies of pet ownership and well-being are needed to examine changes in the relationship between well-being and pet ownership over time.

CONTACT

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