

The perceptions and experiences of Australian pet owners as a result of easing COVID-19 restrictions: Insights from an online survey

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Abstract: The majority of Australian dog and cat owners living alone during the first COVID-19 lockdown endorsed the idea that their pet made the isolation easier, reduced feelings of loneliness, and provided companionship. More companionship/attention was also the most highly endorsed way pet owners perceived that the lockdown affected their pets. With the advent of the removal of the first lockdown restrictions and an attempt to return to a 'COVID normal' lifestyle, the aim of the current study was to elucidate how pet ownership affected the experience of the easing of restrictions in Australia, and how returning to a state of 'normalcy' might have impacted pets. A total of 208 pet owners from Australian states and territories completed an online questionnaire. Participants included 101 dog owners and 107 cat owners. Results revealed that despite official easing of restrictions, ongoing concern of contracting COVID-19 played a role in participant tendency to continue a reduced level of socialising and going outside the house. As a result, there was minimal perceived behavioural and/or emotional impact on most pets. However, for those who were returning to work and/or a life more outside the home, there were reports that both owners and their pets experienced separation anxiety. Participants also reported that they benefited from interaction with pets while working from home, and therefore implementing more pet-friendly policies in workplaces should be considered.

Keywords: cat; corona; dog; lockdown; pet

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Despite official easing of restrictions, ongoing concern of contracting COVID-19 has lead pet owners to maintain a reduced level of socialising and going outside the house. As a result, there was minimal perceived behavioural and/or emotional impact on most pets.
- For those who were returning to work and/or a life more outside the home, there were reports that both owners and their pets experienced separation anxiety.
- Participants reported that they benefited from interaction with pets while working from home, and therefore implementing more pet-friendly policies in workplaces should be considered.

INTRODUCTION

On 23rd March 2020, Australia experienced an unprecedented event, like many other countries around the world in response to the global pandemic, whereby the country went into “lockdown”. For the following 8 weeks, the only valid reasons to be out of one’s house was i) shopping for food, ii) accessing medical services or providing care, iii) exercise, and iv) going to work as an “essential worker”. This resulted in people spending a lot more time inside their homes, including working from home in many cases. On May 11th the individual Australian states began an easing of these first restrictions by allowing people to meet socially in small groups and to return the workplace.

During the global lockdowns pets have been shown to have a positive impact on their owners including: reducing feelings of loneliness (Oliva & Johnston 2021), decreasing mental tensions (Jeziarski et al. 2020), and increasing social support (Bowen et al. 2020). This coincided with an increase in interest in pet adoptions worldwide (Ho et al. 2021). However, pets are for a lifetime, not a lockdown, and as lockdowns begin to lift and we return to our lives as ‘normal’, it is important to consider the impact that this might have on our pets. For example, if they have gotten used to their owners being home all the time, they will need to adapt back to a situation where they may be left alone again for extended periods of time, or, if they are newly acquired pets that have not been adequately socialised, they will need to learn how to interact appropriately with other animals they may encounter outside.

There has been some concern that pets may be able to become infected and/or transmit the COVID-19 virus (Huang et al. 2020; Parry 2020). In their global study, Jeziarski et al. (2020) reported that approximately one third of dog owners avoided allowing their pets to be in contact with people and other pets during the lockdown periods, while similar findings were reported from the UK (Christley et al. 2020). Preventative measures included shorter, fewer, and/or different walks specially chosen to avoid contact with other dogs and owners. However, this may have a potentially negative impact on the socialisation of the animal, as random dog-dog greetings, such as those observed in dog parks, are believed to function to reduce arousal and fear, and escalation to a situation of potential conflict (Ward, 2020).

Several studies have also reported on behavioural changes in pets such as increased contact and/or attention seeking inside the home (Bowen et al. 2020; Jeziarski et al. 2020; Oliva & Johnston et al. 2021). While studies have reported that their owners perceived their pets were ‘calmer’ or ‘happier’ that their owners were home more often during lockdown (Holland et al. 2021; Jeziarski et al. 2020; Oliva & Johnston 2021), this may translate into heightened separation anxiety with the easing of the lockdowns and more frequent time apart. Indeed, ‘concern about pet post-isolation’ was identified as a common theme in Oliva and Johnston’s study investigating how Australian dog and cat owners living alone perceived the first COVID-19 lockdown may have impacted their pets. Similar concerns were endorsed by dog owners in the UK (Holland et al. 2021). Hence, the aim of the current study was to elucidate how being a pet owner affected the experience of the easing of restrictions in Australia after the



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first lockdown, and how this might have impacted their pet. Pets were restricted to dogs and cats in single owner households only.

METHODS

Participants

A convenience sample of participants was recruited through social media, email, the researchers' personal contacts, and following up with participants from Oliva and Johnston (2021) who provided their emails for subsequent studies. The current study was part of a larger study open to participants from all Australian states and territories, however, participants located in the state of Victoria were analysed separately as they were experiencing a second lockdown at the time of the study. Findings relating to Victorians, as well as non-pet owners from other states and territories, have been published elsewhere (Lau & Oliva 2022). Eligible participants for the current study included dog and cat owners who were living alone, Australian citizens or permanent residents not currently experiencing lockdown (i.e. those located in Victoria were not included), and aged 18 or older. Ethical approval was granted by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee.

| <i>State</i> | <i>n</i> |
|------------------------------|----------|
| New South Wales | 38 |
| Queensland | 21 |
| Tasmania | 23 |
| Northern Territory | 2 |
| South Australia | 25 |
| Western Australia | 77 |
| Australian Capital Territory | 22 |
| Total | 208 |

Table 1. State Breakdown of Participants. n = number of participants.

In total, participants included 208 pet owners from Australian states and territories other than Victoria (see Table 1). Fifty one owned dog(s) only, 99 cat(s) only, and 34 owned both dogs and cats, (nine dog and cat owners, 11 dog only owners, and 4 cat only owners also owned other pets including birds, horses and fish). The number of dogs owned ranged between 1-4 with a mean of 1.5 (SD=0.7), and the number of cats owned ranged between 1-35 with a mean of 2.1 (SD=3.1). Participants were asked to select only the one pet they felt closest to or spent the most time with to base their responses on. This resulted in 101 who were grouped as dog owners and 107 who were grouped as a cat owners. The mean and standard deviation for age according to group and gender are presented in Table 2. Length of ownership for dogs ranged between a few weeks to 15 years with a mean of 5.25 years (SD=3.82), length of ownership for cats ranged between a few weeks to 19 years with a mean of 6.58 years (SD=5.18).

The description of the COVID-19 lockdown experiences are shown in Table 3. Note that 26.5% of participants who selected "none of the above" described



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| <i>Participants</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>M_{age}</i> | <i>SD_{age}</i> |
|-------------------------------|----------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Dog owners | | | |
| Male | 4 | 47.3 | 12.5 |
| Female | 96 | 48.1 | 13.0 |
| Prefer not to disclose gender | 1 | 69.0 | - |
| Non-binary/gender diverse | - | - | - |
| Cat owners | | | |
| Male | 7 | 44.3 | 13.5 |
| Female | 99 | 44.5 | 11.8 |
| Prefer not to disclose gender | - | - | - |
| Non-binary/gender diverse | 1 | 29.0 | - |

Table 2. Participants’ Mean and Standard Deviations for Age According to Group and Gender. n = number of participants.

| <i>Description</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>%</i> |
|---|----------|----------|
| None of the above (describe your unique situation) | 60 | 28.8 |
| I continued my employment as an 'essential worker' | 66 | 31.7 |
| I did not experience significant change | 55 | 26.4 |
| I was able to keep my employment through the JobKeeper* program | 15 | 7.2 |
| I lost my employment and had to apply for JobSeeker** | 12 | 5.8 |
| Total | 208 | 100.0 |

Table 3. Description of the Experiences of Non-Victorians During COVID-19. n = number of participants. * JobKeeper is an Australian government subsidy for business significantly impacted by COVID-19 (Australian Taxation Office, 2021). ** JobSeeker Payment refers to financial assistance offered to Australian job seekers from age 22 to pension age. Applicants may be unwell or injured, consequently being unable to carry out their normal work or study duties (Services Australia, 2021).

themselves as either being retired, working from home, full time students, or were on sick leave or unable to work due to a disability.

Participants’ experience with socialising, and going out since restrictions were lifted are presented in Table 4.

| | <i>Socialising</i> | | <i>Going Out</i> | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|----------|---|----------|-------|
| | <i>n</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>%</i> | |
| I am socialising less than normal | 148 | 71.2 | I am going outside the house less than normal | 133 | 63.9 |
| I am socialising as normal | 57 | 27.4 | I am going outside the house as normal | 70 | 33.7 |
| I am socialising more than normal | 3 | 1.4 | I am going outside the house more than normal | 5 | 2.4 |
| Total | 208 | 100.0 | Total | 208 | 100.0 |

Table 4. Participants’ Experience with Socialising and Going Out Since COVID-19 Lockdown Restrictions Were Lifted.



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Materials

The study advertisement invited Australian citizens or permanent residents who were living alone to take part in an anonymous online survey about COVID-19 experiences within individual states or territories, with or without a pet cat and/or dog.

Participants completed an online questionnaire created through the online survey platform, Qualtrics. Questions pertained to demographics, pet ownership, and COVID-19 experiences (see Appendix). Participants were also asked two free-hand response questions about the impact of the lockdown restriction removal on themselves and their pet (e.g. In your own words, describe the ways being a pet owner has affected your experience of the removal of the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions? and In your opinion, how has the removal of the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions affected your pet?).

Procedure

Participants self-selected into the study by accessing an online questionnaire via secure link in the research advertisement between 15 August and 14 September 2020. After viewing an explanatory statement, consent was implied upon submission of the completed survey. The questionnaire could be completed online at a time and place of the participants' convenience. No payments or incentives were offered for participation.

Qualitative data analysis

To capture the experience of how being a pet owner affected participants' experiences of the removal of lockdown restrictions, and how the restriction removal affected their pets, thematic content analysis was conducted on freehand responses provided by participants. This was done via the six steps described in Braun and Clark (2006). First, the researchers became familiar with the data by reading through the responses, second, initial codes were generated in an attempt to identify the meaning behind participant responses, and this was done independently by the two coders for the first 10 responses to each question. Mutually agreed upon code names were then created, and included in a dynamic coding manual (Syed & Nelson, 2015), which were then used to



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independently code the next 10 responses. The independent coding of the researchers was then compared and, where required, code names and definitions were refined and updated in the dynamic coding manual. This procedure continued until 80% of the excerpts coded for every 10 responses were done in the same way by both coders. Subsequently, one of the researchers [R.R.Q.L] completed the coding, which was then reviewed by J.L.O for quality assurance. Any differences were resolved via discussion. The third step involved the identification of overarching conceptual constructs that could be grouped together as a theme. This was done via discussion among the researchers. The fourth step involved the researchers independently reviewing the themes and resolving any points of difference via discussion. As per step five, theme names and definitions were defined, and then endorsements were calculated for the production of the report (step 6). Only themes endorsed by 5% of either dog or cat owners were tabulated as per Oliva and Johnston (2021). Participants who did not provide a response or provided a response that did not adequately respond to the question were removed from the sample size calculation for each question.

Themes for dog and cat owners were identified separately. For the first question, 13 codes were originally identified within both the dog owner dataset: Continuing to stay home / no difference, Can take pets to more places, Prompted to go out more, Constant companionship outside the home, Good for mental health, Feel guilty when leaving home, Missing pet, Had stronger bond with pet, Still cautious/anxious, Less likely to socialise with others when going out, Feel wanted/needed, Avenue for physical touch, and Good for physical health. And the cat owner dataset: Continuing to stay home / no difference, Can take pets to more places, Constant companionship outside the home, Prompted to go out more, Good for mental health, Good for physical health, Feel guilty when leaving home, Missing pet, Had stronger bond with pet, Still cautious/anxious, Less likely to socialise with others when going out, Feel wanted/needed, and Avenue for physical touch. Through the six steps mentioned above, these were winnowed down to nine themes in each dataset. Unique responses that could not be coded were placed into a miscellaneous column. As each dataset had one theme which was unique to it ("Able to take pets out more" for dog owners and "Stronger bond with pets" for cat owners), this resulted in 10 themes that are presented in Table 5.

For both pet owners, "Continuing to stay home / no difference" was split into "Continuing to stay home / no change in routine" and "Pet ownership makes no difference". "Prompted to go out more" and "Constant companionship outside the home" was combined into "Socialising more/Social life improves". "Ease of restrictions makes pet ownership easier", "Spend less time with pets", "Spend more time with pets", and "Concern for pet's welfare" were later identified, with the latter three combined into the theme "Adjust to time spent with pet". The themes "Still cautious/anxious", "Less likely to socialise with others when going out", "Feel wanted/needed", and "Avenue for physical touch" were untabulated as they were endorsed by less than 5% of respondents. Specifically for dog owners, "Can take pets to more places" was renamed "Able to take pets out more".



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For the second question, 5 codes (No change, Behavioural or emotional change, Physical change, Pets miss owner, and Life goes back to normal) were initially identified in both the dog owner and the cat owner datasets, with unique responses placed into a miscellaneous column. "Physical change", "Pets miss owner", and "Life goes back to normal" were winnowed down, while "Pets go out and socialise more" and "Left alone more" were later identified. These resulted in four themes in the dog owner dataset, and 3 themes in the cat owner dataset. As the dog owner dataset had one theme that was unique to it ("Pets go out and socialise more"), this resulted in 4 themes that are presented in Table 6.

Thematic saturation was calculated for each qualitative question for dog and cat owners separately, using a base theme of 10, run length of 2, new information threshold of <5%, and the methods outlined by Guest et al. (2020). For both questions thematic saturation was achieved at 12 cases for both cat and dog owners. However, coding was completed on the entire dataset for the purposes of calculating frequencies of endorsement, as this is the objective of thematic content analyses. Through this process 5 and 6 new themes emerged for dog and cat owners respectively for question 1, while 2 new themes emerged for both dog and cat owners for question 2. These new themes were added into the coding manual.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To understand the impact of the easing of COVID-19 restrictions on pet owners and their pets, cat and dog owners were asked how being a pet owner affected their experience of the removal of the first COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in Australia, and how the restrictions removal affected their pet. The main themes are summarised in Tables 5 and 6.

As can be seen in Table 5, the majority of pet owners were not greatly impacted by the lockdown removal because they were continuing to stay home, including working from home. However, findings reported in Table 4 reveal that working from home was not the only unchanged part of their routine, with the vast majority reporting that they were socialising less than normal (71.2%) and going outside the house less than normal (63.9%):

"We are still living as if the lockdown was still on, with only visits to the supermarket and to Bunnings".

This may reflect an ongoing anxiety about the virus and one's ability to contract it whilst out and about in the community:

"I think I am still very cautious when walking him. I keep my distance but am friendly to others when they show interest in my furry friend";

"I am a lot less likely to socialise while at the dog park and try to go out when other people are not around".

This avoidance of opportunities to socialise with other dogs and owners is in line with findings from Christley et al. (2020) and Jezierski et al. (2020) during lockdowns across the globe, and suggest that fears of contracting the virus still



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persist outside of lockdown. However, for dog owners in particular, the ability to take their pets out more and to use this as an opportunity to socialise were positively endorsed by many (refer to Table 5). It is perhaps not surprising that this was not highly endorsed by cat owners, as most cats are either indoor cats, or spend time outdoors alone (either in a backyard enclosure or free roaming) rather than with their owners (Lawson et al. 2020). Cat owners tended to respond slightly more strongly, however, to missing their pet when they leave the house and to feeling guilty when they do:

“I got a second cat to keep my cat company cause I will no longer be around all the time”

Cat owners also uniquely endorsed the idea of having a stronger bond with their pet post lockdown. Together, these findings suggest that pet owners might cope better with return to work models that are hybrid in nature, allowing them to work part time in the office and part time from home.

“I was anxious about leaving my dog when I returned to the office in July, after working from home for 16 weeks and having him with me 24/7”

“Prefer to remain working from home. My cat and I have a solid routine, I don’t want to break it.”

As shown in Table 6, for most pets, the removal of the lockdown had minimal observable effect, however this may be due to the fact that the vast majority of participants were still staying at home more than usual (refer to Table 4). Approximately one quarter of dog owners and one third of cat owners did report a behavioural or emotional change in their pet. For dogs, approximately one third were reported to be happier to be able to get out more:

“She’s much happier because she has her play dates back, and can see her favourite people”.

While the remaining two thirds reflected an increase in boredom or anxiety when the owner left home:

“He is more prone to separation anxiety because I’ve barely left him since March. When I leave him he barks in protest whereas he didn’t before.”

For cats, the vast majority related to being bored or anxious when the owner left home, with only 2/32 reported to be happier that the owner was not around as often. This is interesting following Oliva and Johnston’s (2021) study which reported a more variable response in cats to their owners being home during the lockdown, including feelings of being “put out”. This may suggest that cats are just creatures of habit that are more disturbed by a change in their routine than by the presence or absence of their owners.

Holland et al. (2021) have discussed the idea of subjecting pet dogs to “alone time” during periods of lockdown so they don’t become accustomed to being with the owner all the time. But perhaps there are other ways we can better integrate dogs into our daily lives. As previously mentioned, our findings suggest that pet owners might be more amenable to a hybrid model of returning to the office. Hoffman (2021) has reported on the positive benefits of working from home with a pet, including a stronger bond with their pet, as owners had



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| Theme: | Definition: | Example: | FD | FC |
|--|---|---|----|----|
| Continuing to stay home / no change in routine | Owner has continued to stay home or experienced no difference in life since the restrictions were lifted. | I am still working from home so it hasn't made much changes. | 26 | 26 |
| Pet ownership makes no difference | Owning pets did not make a difference to the post-lockdown experience. | The lockdown restrictions and their removal, has not really affected my experience as a pet owner. | 18 | 20 |
| Able to take pets out more | Owners are able to take their pet outside of home more frequently since the lockdown restrictions were lifted. | I am able to take my dog out on longer, better walks | 12 | 0 |
| Socialising more / Social life improves | The pet provides increased opportunities to socialise with people. The quality of socialisation also improves. | I feel she provides a way of interacting with others while we are walking. I feel I can in a small way, get back to normal. My dog helps me reconnect with others that I have not seen during lockdown. | 10 | 1 |
| Good for mental health | Pet ownership improves the owner's mental state or well-being via distraction, regulation of emotions and/or mood, and by helping owners to cope with an ongoing uncertain and stressful situation. | My dog has helped me through the COVID experience, both the lockdown period and after as a loved companion. | 8 | 7 |
| Adjustment to time spent with pet | Owners spend more or less time with their pets after lockdown restrictions were lifted. This sometimes lead to owners expressing concern for their pet's welfare. | Because my work got busier during the lockdown I spend more time with her after the craziness of everything died down a little bit. | 6 | 4 |



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| Theme: | Definition: | Example: | FD | FC |
|--|---|--|----|----|
| Feeling guilty | Owners feel guilty about leaving their pet alone when they leave the house. | I feel slightly bad going out again because my cat gets stressed when I leave. This wasn't the case before the COVID lockdown. | 4 | 7 |
| Ease of restrictions makes caring for a pet easier | The easing of restrictions makes pet ownership-related activities outside of the home such as walking, going to the vet, and buying pet food, easier. | Removal of restrictions made it easier for my cat to get vet treatment, I was able to go into the vet clinic and speak with vet face to face. | 4 | 3 |
| Miss pet when outside of home | Pet owners miss their pet when they are not at home, including feelings of separation anxiety. | Working from home had created a stronger bond with my cats and when I had to go back to work there was definitely some separation anxiety on both sides. | 3 | 9 |
| Stronger bond with pets | Owners feel a stronger bond with their pets after lockdown restrictions were lifted. | I love spending time with my cats and bonded with them hugely while working from home. I find I am even more content to stay at home with them since restrictions have lifted. | 0 | 5 |

Table 5. Common Themes for How Being a Pet Owner Affected Their Experience of the Removal of COVID-19 Lockdown Restrictions. FD Frequency for Dog Owners (n = 80) FC Frequency for Cat Owners (n = 80). Out of 101 dog owners and 107 cat owners, 21 dog owners and 27 cat owners provided either no response or responses that did not address the question. Of the dog owners who did provide an adequate response, 4 were male and 75 were female. One participant preferred not to disclose their gender. Of the cat owners who provided adequate responses, 3 were male and 76 were female. One participant identified as non-binary/gender diverse.



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more time and flexibility to focus on their pet's needs. Dog owners also reported increased physical activity and socialising with other humans. Bussolari et al. (2021) concurred with Hoffman (2021), asserting that the elevated amount of time spent with pets due to COVID-19 restrictions encouraged increased physical activity and creates a buffer from stressors such as relationship and work stress. Spending more time with pets has enhanced work-life balance and created more time away from human co-quarantine partners (Bussolari et al. 2021). Pet owners also experienced reduced loneliness from increased pet interaction, which created a distraction from COVID-19 related stresses (Hoffman 2021). Thus, pet ownership may be protective against loneliness by compensating for social loss and distracting owners from COVID-19 related concerns. Claims have also been made that pets may encourage a stronger

| Theme: | Definition: | Example: | FD | FC |
|---------------------------------|---|---|----|----|
| No change | There has been no observable change to the pet's experience of life since COVID-19 lockdown restrictions were lifted | Not at all. They're indoor only cats. I've continued to go to work as per normal so they haven't noticed anything different. | 52 | 61 |
| Behavioural or emotional change | Removal of lockdown restrictions resulted in a change in emotion or behaviour in the pet. | She was very clingy when I got home from work following the resumption of working in the office and seemed very anxious more of the time. | 22 | 32 |
| Pets go out and socialise more | Since the removal of lockdown restrictions, the pet had an opportunity to leave the house and socialise more | We socialise more since restrictions have eased and go for a walk once a day. | 15 | 0 |
| Left alone more | Relative to the lockdown, pets are left alone at home more after the removal of lockdown restrictions due to owners returning to work and study, and other pre-lockdown activities. | During lockdown my hours were reduced and I was fully working from home so I got to spend more time with my pets. Returning to business as usual hours and working on site means I have less time to spend with them. | 4 | 6 |

Table 6. Common Themes in Pet Owners' Perception of How Their Pets Were Affected by the Removal of COVID-19 Lockdown Restrictions. FD Frequency for Dog Owners (n = 94) FC Frequency for Cat Owners (n = 99). Out of 101 dog owners and 107 cat owners, 7 dog owners and 8 cat owners provided either no response or responses that did not address the question. Of those dog owners who did provide an adequate response, 4 were male and 89 were female. One participant preferred not to disclose their gender. Of the cat owners were provided adequate responses, 6 were male and 92 were female. One participant identified as non-binary/gender diverse.



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connection between colleagues (e.g. “the occasional cat across the screen, or arm bump by a dog is a nod towards silver linings and an opportunity for humor as people reconnect in this new context”, Vincent et al. 2020, p. 115).

There are also more general benefits of working from home, for example, a survey conducted by Bolisani et al. (2020) found that most respondents appreciated that working from home allowed them to “save transportation time”, to be “close to family” and “focus on work without interruptions”. A third (35%) of respondents also appreciated “avoiding spending time in long meetings” (Bolisani et al. 2020). Other benefits include a reduction in travel costs associated with reduced commuting time, more time to rest, more flexibility in balancing work and family commitments (i.e., enhanced work-life balance), decreased work related stress, and the ability to control start and finish times and the pace of work (Dockery & Bawa 2020; Vyas & Butakhieo 2021).

Having companion animals in offices has been shown to reduce stress and increase work engagement (Delanoetje 2020). Given that pets enhance well-being and work performance, organisations could implement more pet-friendly policies to facilitate stronger bonds between pet owners and their pets (Delanoetje 2020; Hoffman 2021). This strategy may be important in helping pets adjust to their owners being away from home again. Allowing pets in offices might also help ease separation anxiety and alleviate stress from the owner as well. According to Hall’s (2019) pre-pandemic study that sought to quantify the benefits of bringing pets to work, organisations can benefit from “take your dog to work days” through above average work engagement, and significantly lower turnover intention. Employees were also found to experience better general well-being, working conditions, job satisfaction, and quality of life (Hall 2019).

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research Recommendations

This study was unique in that it examined and compared the experiences of cat and dog owners across various Australian states outside of Victoria in a post-lockdown situation, and first attempt to return to a ‘COVID normal’ lifestyle. In addition, the qualitative nature of this study enables the ability to gain a deeper insight into these novel experiences for the pet owner population, and their perceptions on how this also impacts their pets. There are opportunities for further research such as replicating this study after subsequent extended lockdowns, as there is early support for cumulative negative impacts of extended and sequential lockdowns (Johnston & Oliva 2021). Future research could monitor how such extended lockdowns impact the bond between pet owners and their pets, as well as potentially stronger separation anxiety that may occur. This study is limited by the fact that it only examined participants who were living alone. Comparing the findings of this study with the impact of the removal of lockdown restrictions in pet owners who are living with other people would also be of interest as previous studies have shown parents of human children are more likely to form more avoidant type relationships with their dogs (Oliva et al. 2016). This may diminish the impact of pet ownership on their experiences because of the reduced emphasis they place on the relationship, or alternatively, pet ownership may be seen as more of a burden in



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a multi-person household, especially during periods when more people are home more often. In addition, only pet cats and dogs were examined. Hence, future studies could replicate this study in pets other than cats and dogs. Finally, as with all studies of a qualitative nature, responses may be biased by the way the questions are framed and presented to participants. In the current study, the questions asked 'how' (rather than 'if') being a pet owner affected their experience of the removal of the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, and 'how' (rather than 'if') the removal of the COVID-19 lockdown restricted affected their pet, and therefore it could be assumed that participants needed to search for an impact they may not have otherwise been consciously aware of. However, despite not asking *if* they were affected, the most commonly endorsed themes were that the participants experienced no change, or that being a pet owner made no difference, and that their pets also experienced no change. Hence, it does not appear that not using the word 'if' biased their responses.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study has found that the removal of the first Australian lockdown restrictions did not significantly impact the majority of pet owners as their routines remained largely unchanged. Ongoing concern of contracting COVID-19 played a role in the observed tendency to reduce socialising and going outside the house. This also resulted in minimal behavioural and/or emotional impact on most pets. However, due to findings that both pet owners and their pets experienced separation anxiety if they did go outside the home more, and that pet owners benefited from interaction with pets while working from home, implementing more pet-friendly policies in workplaces should be considered.

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