COVID companions: Exploring pets as social support

Lynn Sudbury-Riley

Marketing Department, University of Liverpool Management School, Liverpool, UK

Correspondence
Lynn Sudbury-Riley, University of Liverpool Management School, Chatham Street, Liverpool L697ZH, UK.
Email: L.Sudbury-Riley@Liverpool.ac.uk

Abstract
This paper investigates the social support provided by domestic animals to humans during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study comprises interviews with 39 British and American pet owners during March 2021, the point at which the UK had recently emerged from the third national lockdown and US states were under various restrictions. A thematic network approach to data analysis revealed four global themes, illustrating how pets provided buffers to the stress of the pandemic, facilitated ontological security by maintaining a sense of routine and purpose, offered myriad types of emotional support and enhanced and enabled wider social support. Taken together, these results reinforce and extend knowledge pertaining to the importance of companion animals for social support.

Keywords
companion animals, COVID-19, lockdown, pets, social support

INTRODUCTION

Enforced containment measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, while underscoring existing inequalities, impacted everyone. Strict ‘lockdown’ policies, social-distancing guidance, and the need for clinically vulnerable people to shield, led to exceptional levels of social isolation,
creating new and intensifying pre-existing social support needs (Bertogg & Koos, 2022). ‘Lockdown loneliness’, defined as “loneliness resulting because of social disconnection due to enforced social distancing and lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic” (Shah et al., 2020, p. 2), ensued. Given that loneliness has major public health implications (Malli et al., 2023), its increase during lockdown is concerning, though unsurprising.

Burgeoning research spotlights a plethora of strategies employed to mitigate or buffer the negative impact of social isolation during lockdown. Some focus on using digital technologies to maintain social relationships (Shah et al., 2020), while other strategies include inter alia, using green spaces, exercising and crafting (Williams et al., 2021). However, relatively little attention has been given to companion animals, despite the immense increases in pet ownership during the pandemic. Probably due to the popular media representation of ‘a man’s best friend’ coupled with the frequently biased but widespread belief that pet ownership brings many positive benefits (Applebaum et al., 2020), by August 2020, one in four Britons had bought a pet to help them through the pandemic, mimicking trends across the US and Europe. The downside included grossly inflated prices, poor breeding practices from unscrupulous breeders and a rise in illegal puppy smuggling (The Dogs Trust, 2023).

These extremes—from ‘best friend’ to breeding abuses and illegal behaviour—are indicative of the complex relationships between human and non-human animals. Wide literature contemplates fundamental questions about the nature of these (Coulter, 2016; Serpell, 2000). There are contradictions in that some animals are eaten while others share people’s homes (Bradshaw, 2017). Domination and exploitation of non-human animals by humans has been widely debated (Coulter, 2016; Cudworth, 2021). Some argue that manipulation of animals for pleasure has resulted in them becoming ‘pets’—a term indicative of abuse of power (Tuan, 1984) and which carries connotations suggestive of toys or ornaments (Franklin, 1999). The term pet is also suggestive of ownership (as opposed to companionship), which while correct from a legal perspective (Cudworth, 2021) may instil inappropriate attitudes towards animals (du Toit, 2016). While in-depth evaluation of these debates is beyond the scope of this article (see, for example, Charles & Davies, 2008 for a brief overview and Podberscek et al.’s (2000) excellent collection for a more detailed discussion of the origins, nature and cultural differences regarding the ways animals are perceived and treated), in this research I use the term pet interchangeably with the term companion animal. This is justified because according to the Oxford English Dictionary, etymologically the term pet refers to “an animal (typically one which is domestic or tame) kept for pleasure or companionship”. Pet is used in this way in much of the anthrozoology literature, as a differentiator from wild animals. From this perspective, pets are animals that are named and not consumed for food. It is in this way that I use the term pet in this article and I in no way mean to use it as a derogatory label.

The overall aim of this research was to investigate the lived experiences of pet ownership during the pandemic. Interviews with British and American pet owners happened during March 2021, when the UK had recently emerged from the third national lockdown and US states were under various restrictions. This article focuses on people’s experiences of pets as social support during lockdown. Social support has been researched extensively, though relatively rarely during times of crisis, when new needs arise (Bertogg & Koos, 2022).
BACKGROUND

Social support and loneliness

Extensive and diverse, definitions and delineations of social support vary across studies and disciplines. In relation to health, social support is the belief that resources in the form of supportive relationships can be relied on, especially in times of crises (Gage, 2013; House et al., 1988). Social support is about both the availability and adequacy of supportive relationships. Availability is usually considered from the perspective of close ties in a person’s network (Thoits, 2021), though weak ties are also potentially important (Shah et al., 2020). Social support is multidimensional, and though models and facets differ, the literature distinguishes between emotional (empathy, trust, love), instrumental (assistance with tangible needs), informational (advice and suggestions) and appraisal support (encouragement and confidence building) (Thoits, 2021). Adequacy pertains to one’s perceived satisfaction of the social support available or received. Perceived social support, both availability and adequacy, is more closely linked to health and wellbeing outcomes than is actual social support (Lakey & Cohen, 2000).

A robust body of literature demonstrates the positive impacts of social support on physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing, with social support influencing emotions, cognitions and behaviours. Inadequate social support is related to problems with emotional regulation, maladaptive coping behaviours, insufficient health promotions, diminished quality of life and loneliness. Loneliness, defined as the subjective feeling of lack or loss of one’s social support system (Shah et al., 2020), is the most significant factor directly related to perceived inadequate social support. Inadequacy can arise from perceptions that one’s social support system is lacking quantitatively and/or qualitatively (Malli et al., 2023). Loneliness has increased recently and increased further during lockdown (Shah et al., 2020).

Different theoretical frames of reference attempt to explain the association between social support and health and wellbeing. Lakey and Cohen (2000) synthesise these into three overarching perspectives. The stress and coping perspective suggests that social support acts as a buffer to decrease the detrimental effects of stressful life events. The social constructionist perspective takes a more direct approach, suggesting that social support promotes self-esteem and self-regulation, enabling people to make sense of their world, thereby directly influencing health irrespective of stress. The relationship perspective comprises diverse theories that attribute social support to relationship benefits such as companionship, intimacy and relationship satisfaction that come with perceived adequate social support. Links between the relationship perspective and health are less clear than those suggested with other perspectives and are likely a combination of promoting self-esteem and enhancing active coping mechanisms. Whichever perspective researchers take, most social support literature concentrates on actual or perceived social support provided by various significant humans (Thoits, 2021). Yet, empirical evidence suggests human-animal relationships are important (Bonas et al., 2000), perhaps being even more significant during the extraordinary periods of pandemic lockdowns, especially if we take Coulter’s (2016, p.201) thesis that “the social is multispecies”.

Pets and social support

Research spotlights companion animals as family members and how they fit into multispecies households (Bonas et al., 2000). Some people view themselves as ‘pet parents’ (Power, 2008) and
Charles (2014) found that the bonds between humans and their companion animals are analogous to kinship in so far as kinship is an idiom that embraces whoever people choose to count as their family. In this perspective, pets are sentient, social actors (Coulter, 2016), who have some agency (Power, 2008) and are valued for providing emotional support via companionship, affection, empathy and acting as confidants (Charles, 2014; Ryan & Ziebland, 2015; Sanders, 1999). These relationships exist alongside other kin but are not necessarily the same as human family relationships (Ashall & Hobson-West, 2017) and their status within the family can change as human dynamics change (Shir-Vertesh, 2012).

Pets bring health and wellbeing benefits to their owners. There is increasing acknowledgement of the therapeutic benefits of assistance animals for the disabled (Mouret, 2019) and marginalised persons including the homeless or those facing domestic violence (Coulter, 2016). Recognition is given to care work by animals for humans which suggests a mutually beneficial relationship (Coulter, 2016; Porcher, 2014). Guide dogs, for example, have their capabilities mobilised, making them stimulated and happy (Mouret, 2019). In an increasingly uncertain world, more people are turning to animals for emotional support (Plourde, 2014), with pets taking on roles including friend, therapist, nurse and carer (Katz, 2004; Power, 2008). In turn, the companionship and emotional support provided by pets has a positive impact on the mental health of the humans they live with (Thoits, 2021).

Some empirical studies lend support for buffer theories as pets can reduce heart rate, blood pressure and anxiety and can significantly and positively impact mood and various measures of wellbeing (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Dog owners report heightened levels of physical exercise and perhaps more significantly, dog walking may contribute to improved social capital. Social capital refers to connectivity among people based on trust, sharing and cooperation. Wood et al. (2017) found pets to facilitate more than just friendly exchanges between dog walkers, identifying how different species of pets precipitated social interaction among people in their communities. Precipitating social interaction is significant because community ties are important from an ontological security perspective (Franklin, 1999). Ontological security is a sense of reliability and order, providing continuity which leads to people feeling secure in their self-identity (Giddens, 1991). Franklin’s (1999) thesis centres around how key cultural changes in the twentieth century have led to ontological insecurity, as privatism and social isolation become the norm in postmodern society. He argues that pets provide a solution to problems with forging and maintaining human relationships. Wood et al.’s (2017) findings support this, though Franklin (1999) also argues that the fragmentation of postmodern society has led to pets being substitutes for human social support. However, this ‘deficiency argument’ is complex because the highest pet ownership levels are found in households with families (Charles & Davies, 2008). Nevertheless, whether as substitutes for human companionship, or as conduits to it, it seems that pets are beneficial to humans. In sum, research contributes empirical support for all three groups of theories synthesised by Lakey and Cohen (2000), as pets may (1) act as a buffer against stressful life events and problems, (2) promote self-regulation and help people to make sense of their world and (3) offer social support via their own place in a person’s network as well as encourage further networking.

However, some research suggests the evidence for companion animals as providers of social support is not fully conclusive. Bradshaw (2017) rejects the contention that pets provide health benefits, arguing instead that affinity with animals is part of human evolution, with the so-called ‘cute response’ the reason for human-animal relationships. He also argues that perceived health benefits associated with pets are tangential. Indeed, in some research, the beneficial effects of pets emerged as extremely small or non-existent and there is much criticism
around some empirical studies due to methodological weaknesses (Williams et al., 2021). Stressors associated with pets may cancel out any health benefits, including unpaid carework (Cudworth, 2021) and destructive behaviour (Power, 2008). Notably, the pandemic may have spotlighted problems associated with pets, including concerns over job losses, looking after pets if people became ill, and, particularly during early stages of the pandemic, publicised evidence of the transmissibility of COVID-19 between animals and humans (Applebaum et al., 2020). Given these ambiguous empirical results, coupled with the unique situation of lockdown, the current study is judicious.

The overall aim of the research was to investigate the lived experiences of pet ownership during lockdown. For the sake of brevity, this article specifically addresses two questions: (1) In what ways (if any) do people view their pets as sources of social support? (2) What are the perceived health and wellbeing benefits of pet ownership during the pandemic?

METHODS

Ethical approval required full University committee scrutiny. Recruitment was via social media advertisements which contained a photograph of two spaniels and simply asked, “Would you like to take part in a research study about pet ownership during the COVID-19 Pandemic?” and invited interested people to make contact. Prospective participants were sent information sheets and consent forms giving assurance of confidentiality, anonymity, the voluntary and opt-in nature of the study and ability to terminate interviews at any point. Interviews took place electronically (due to lockdown restrictions) during March 2021. Recruitment continued until saturation was reached. The final sample, profiled in Table 1, comprises 39 participants. All names in Table 1 are pseudonyms. Animal companions are predominantly dogs and cats, though one participant lives with two parrots and another has a horse as well as a dog. Most participants (n = 33) are UK nationals living in the UK, though due to an American acquaintance on social media sharing the advertisement, six American citizens, living in a variety of places across the USA, volunteered. The vast majority (n = 37) of participants are female. This gender bias is typical of pet research (Herzog, 2010). Ages span 18–78 years, with an average of 52 years. During lockdown, four respondents purchased pets and a further seven experienced the death of one. The SES (socioeconomic status) column in Table 1 utilises the standard ONS census combined four-class system. Most (n = 21) are from higher socioeconomic groups. Household composition, which was of crucial importance during the pandemic, spans a range of situations.

Lakey and Cohen (2000) stress the need to consider what social support means to research participants in relation to the theoretical stance taken and urge researchers to choose measures carefully. However, with different perspectives suggested, coupled with the established finding that perceived social support is more closely linked to health and wellbeing outcomes than is actual social support (Lakey & Cohen, 2000), I argue that the nature, types, adequacy and benefits of social support should be defined by people’s perceptions rather than by researchers based on a priori hypotheses. Consequently, the interviews were semi-structured and the term ‘social support’ was not directly mentioned. Rather, results emerged from answers to the simple question, “do you think there are any advantages to having a pet during this pandemic?” This approach ensured interviews comprised topics pertinent to participants’ lived experiences. Follow-up questions and probes pertained solely to the topics generated by participants, who shared their experiences and perceptions with candour. Interviews for this study often felt like
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Pets</th>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Household (including participant)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>UK 1 dog (purchased during lockdown)</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband, 1 adult child &amp; 1 child aged 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>UK 1 dog (purchased during lockdown)</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband &amp; 2 children aged 10 &amp; 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>UK 1 dog &amp; 1 cat</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Lives with partner &amp; 2 children aged 4 &amp; 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>UK 2 dogs (another dog died during lockdown)</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Lives with husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>UK 2 dogs</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>Lives with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>UK 1 dog</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband and 16-year-old son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>UK 3 dogs</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Lives with husband and 17-year-old daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>UK 3 dogs &amp; 2 cats</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>Lives alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isobel</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>UK 2 dogs</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Widow, lives alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>UK 1 dog</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Single, lives alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>UK 7 dogs</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband and adult son during lockdown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>USA 3 dogs &amp; 6 cats</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband &amp; 2 children aged 5 &amp; 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>UK 2 dogs &amp; 1 cat</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Lives with partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>USA 4 dogs</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Divorced, lives with 16-year-old son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>USA 3 cats (another cat died during lockdown)</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>UK 4 dogs</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband, adult daughter &amp; her partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queenie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>UK 1 dog &amp; 1 horse</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Lives with husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhonda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>UK 5 dogs &amp; 2 cats</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband and 7-year-old son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>UK 1 dog (another dog died during lockdown)</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>UK 21 (rescue) dogs</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>Lives with husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivien</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>UK 4 dogs</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>UK 3 dogs</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>Recently widowed, lives alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>UK 3 dogs (another dog died during lockdown)</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>UK 3 dogs</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>Lives alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>UK 2 dogs</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>USA 1 dog</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Widowed, lives alone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 1 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Pets</th>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Household (including participant)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>USA 1 dog &amp; fosters cats</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Lives with husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>UK 1 dog (trained as assistance dog)</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>Lives with husband &amp; 2 children aged 12 &amp; 13, both with special needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>UK 2 cats (1 cat purchased during lockdown)</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>UK 1 dog (another dog died during lockdown)</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Widowed lives alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>UK 1 dog (another dog died during lockdown)</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>UK 4 dogs</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Lives with husband and father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirsty</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>USA 2 dogs</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Lives with partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>UK 2 dogs</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maureen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>UK 1 dog 2 parrots</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Lives alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>UK 2 dogs</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Lives with partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>UK 4 dogs</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband and son aged 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patsy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>UK 2 cats (1 cat purchased during lockdown)</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with husband &amp; 2 children aged 6 &amp; 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>UK 8 cats (another cat died during lockdown)</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Lives with 2 adult children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ONS census combined four-class system is used in the UK. The US utilises a different system. However, for pragmatic reasons, the American participants are categorised in the same way; hence AB refers to all those with higher and intermediate managerial, administrative, and professional occupations; C1 to supervisory, clerical, and junior managerial, administrative, and professional occupations; C2 to skilled manual occupations; and DE to those with semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations, unemployed and lowest grade occupations. This is not meant to be an accurate depiction of the American system, but rather provides a broad indication of people’s SES based solely on their occupation.

two friends chatting about a familiar topic. Perhaps this was because the interviews provided a relief from social isolation. Three interviews lasted over an hour, with the average spanning 33 min.

Interviews were audio recorded then transcribed verbatim. Manual data analysis used the thematic network approach (Attride-Stirling, 2001). First, transcripts were examined for basic themes related to social support and health and wellbeing without any a priori codes. The second step involved clustering the basic themes into constructs or organising themes. The third step comprised classifying these constructs into global themes. Rather than being hierarchical, the thematic networks that emerge are web-like nets emphasising connectivity.

FINDINGS

Analysis resulted in the four interrelated global themes of (1) pandemic appraisal and coping; (2) maintaining routine and providing purpose; (3) unique providers of social support; and (4) bridges to social capital. Each of these global themes comprises multiple organising themes,
depicted in Figure 1. The framework shown in Figure 1 is used to structure the presentation and discussion of the results. Like the human participants, the companion animal names used here are pseudonyms.

**Pandemic appraisal and coping**

Many believed their loneliness would be worse without pets:

> I am disabled, so I didn’t go out an awful lot anyway. The lack of visitors - it was solitary, it did feel lonely with only my husband. I certainly appreciated having them because it would have been even longer and lonelier if they hadn’t been there.  

[Yvonne]

Yvonne’s narrative revealed that her dogs (two spaniels and two Japanese Chins) were much cherished. However, while they reduced her lockdown loneliness (Shah et al., 2020), acting as a buffer to moderate it, they did not alleviate it completely. This supports buffer theories but not Franklin’s (1999) assertion that companion animals are substitutes for human companionship. Indeed, some made a distinction between the status of humans and pets. Chloe, whose children (aged 4 and 10) share their home with Dolly (a 3-year-old Cavachon) and Eddie (a young ginger cat), illustrates how pets were often perceived ‘the next best thing’ to human companionship:

> The kids had no contact with mates, you know, they’re that age where they need friends so if you can’t give them a friend that’s the next best thing isn’t it?  

[Chloe]

Chloe’s account supports the contentions that companion animals are “emotional anchors” in the absence of human interactions (Sanders, 1999, p. 11). This was particularly prevalent among
parents worried about children feeling lonely during lockdown. Both Chloe’s and Yvonne’s quotes are indicative of how participants framed their pets as part of the family, with the family comprising a pack with clear hierarchical status (Power, 2008) and not full substitutes for human companionship. Nevertheless, they mitigated the levels of lockdown loneliness and enabled people to cope. Maureen had no human company during lockdown, her sole companionship was her small dog Belle and Harry and Charlie her two parrots. Harry and Charlie were particularly valued for their chatting and funny sayings. She suggests that her pets were such important buffers against loneliness that they enabled her to cope:

I don’t think I would have coped; I’ll be honest with you. I don’t think I would have got through it

[Maureen]

Maureen’s quote reveals a direct link to coping: she appraised lockdown as a stressor that would have exceeded her resources if she had not had her pets to support her. Multiple participants had similar beliefs, often expressing doubts about coping if it were not for their pets. Given the high risks of physical and mental illness that loneliness brings (Shah et al., 2020), these results are noteworthy.

How pets provided buffers went beyond loneliness. For some people, pets facilitated them to view lockdown as a positive:

It’s been lovely. Throughout the 12 weeks we were in the garden with them, and it was lovely. To be honest, we’ll never get that time back, it was just such a special time.

[Jill]

For Jill, lockdown provided a unique time to spend with her human family and her four dogs, which was particularly important to her as two of her dogs, Bruno and Freddie, were aged 13. Time spent in this way countered pandemic anxiety and enabled her to view that ‘special time’ as beneficial rather than stressful. Certainly, many expressed a belief that their pets enabled them to perceive the pandemic in a less harmful way. These findings suggest that appraisal support, which research usually limits to information for self-evaluation purposes (Thoits, 2021), goes beyond the self and is useful to help people assess stressful situations and consider them as something they can, after all, cope with.

Pets also provided distractions to the stress of the pandemic, as Nathan, who lives with his 16-year-old son and four dogs, testifies:

I don’t know how I would have done it without them. Honestly. Having an autistic kid, even though he’s very high functioning, it’s difficult and it’s very, very stressful. My blood pressure did go up, I went on medications. And then just getting the dogs out and walking helped. But it’s also the comfort that the dog gives to the kids. And the fact that the dogs keep us distracted from COVID.

[Nathan]

The link between physical health and pandemic stress is clear from Nathan’s narrative and while his dogs were not the sole source of ease in so far as he needed medication, he is certain they helped. Nathan’s experience also illustrates how pets provided some relief from incessant
pandemic reminders. The pandemic was an intense and pervasive stressor (Bertogg & Koos, 2022), hence distraction from it is important. Analysis revealed clear indications of pets being extremely effective distractors, giving humans respite from the prevalence of pandemic stress. Some distractions came from dogs demanding walks and though acknowledging the physical benefits, the mental health benefits were perceived as more crucial:

I’m on the shielding list, it’s had a huge impact on me because I’m quite a social person. And not seeing anybody is a bit of an issue, mentally, for me. It’s been quite tough. But even though I’m shielding, I could still go out and have my exercise. And to be honest it was my salvation, you know, to get out of looking at the same four walls. I think the main thing, for me, has been their company; talking to them has really helped my mental state.

[Orla]

Like Nathan, Orla had human company, spending lockdown with her husband and adult son. Yet, in addition to getting her outside ‘the same four walls’, she greatly valued the companionship of her four little dogs, believing that talking to them provided major benefits. These findings support previous research that identifies pets as companions and confidants (Charles, 2014; Ryan & Ziebland, 2015; Sanders, 1999) and explicitly reveal a direct link to perceived mental health benefits.

Companion animals helping to keep mental health problems at bay was a constant theme:

Some days I have felt so desperate. It just grinds. Without the dogs I honestly think I would have ended up having real mental health problems. They’ve saved me. I think they’ve been that much; they’ve made that much of a difference

[Barb]

Helen, too, makes explicit reference to mental health:

I have to go for a walk every single day, obviously. If I didn’t have them, I’d probably wouldn’t even leave these doors. That is my saving grace, my hour walk in the morning with my three doggies. They gave me a reason for living to be honest. Is that a bit drastic?

[Helen]

Helen also lives with two elderly cats, but her candid admission reveals she perceives her three Dachshunds as crucially important to her mental health. Participants often mentioned how they would dread to think what life would have been like without them. The sentiment ‘they saved me’ was reoccurring.

**Maintaining routine and providing purpose**

Participants explained how lockdown severely disrupted normal life routines,

Everything is so up in the air and different, but Benji is a constant.  

[Eve]
Benji, a spaniel trained as an assistance dog for Eve’s two children with special needs, provided a structure and a welcome feeling of uniformity in a period of unprecedented instability. Queenie also refers to her 5-year-old Cavapoo Elmo as being a constant:

He’s the only bit of normality that we’ve got in this world. He wants his food at the same time, he wants his cuddles, he’s not bothered that Boris is on the belly. So, he’s a key to my sanity.

[Queenie]

The sense of normality resulting from pets demanding breakfast and forcing their owners to get dressed and walk them is important from an ontological security perspective. Even in the home, a place paradigmatic of ontological security, the pandemic diluted feelings of control and compromised a sense of the reliability that is so important. The demands pets placed on their owners counterbalanced the threats to the structuration of everyday life. Yvonne illustrates the importance of routine that her four dogs demanded:

They certainly were the reason that I got up every morning. They have kept me going. I do have a routine which involves them, I would not have had that. I think it would have been very easy to have just given up and stayed on the sofa or stayed in bed. Yes, they’re my reason for keeping going.

[Yvonne]

Giddens (1991) argued that mundane and seemingly trivial practices are important rituals that keep feelings of chaos at bay. The chaos to which Giddens refers transcends disorientation: it encapsulates feelings of great loss of both reality and people, which of course is extremely anxiety provoking. Inherent within the quotes from Queenie and Yvonne are references to the ways their pets have enabled a sense of ‘normality’ and ‘routine’. What is significant is that both refer to the chaos and anxiety that lurked without these everyday practices.

Pets’ demands to be taken care of also provided routine and ritual maintenance via feeding and grooming. These demands led to participants feeling needed, which was perceived as particularly beneficial, as Olivia, who spent lockdown with no human company but did have her four cats, explains:

It’s important for everyone I think to feel needed. To feel like you have a purpose in life, and I think animals give you that. I get less of that from work than I used to. Being in the office my boss would always come by and say, “Good job on the so and so case!” I don’t really get that anymore because, well we have our attorney meetings on Fridays on Zoom, but you don’t get that sense of accomplishment or worth. The animals make you feel needed and necessary in a world that is so confusing right now.

[Olivia]

Olivia’s quote reflects the belief, reflected by others, too, that feeling needed was vital. Social support theorists recognise the importance of reciprocity on wellbeing (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). However, reciprocity is usually considered from an exchange perspective with mutual interdependency, often ignoring power differences. When role theory is considered, the idea of reciprocity between humans and pets makes more sense. Successful roles build identity and
self-esteem, which positively impact wellbeing. Reciprocity is clear in Olivia’s quote: her cats need her, and her role as caregiver provides her with a needed sense of purpose. Feelings of self-worth result. Hence pets provide a form of appraisal support. Similarly, several parents noted the sense of responsibility their children got from taking care of a pet. Abbey lists many benefits she perceived for her 11-year-old daughter who, during lockdown, had finally got her wish to own a puppy when Flossy came to live with them:

Just having a dog, that responsibility as well I suppose. Because I said all along if she gets a dog, she has to be responsible for it. So, she has to clean up after it, she has to make sure it’s fed and watered and bathed and everything. And she does. Yes, and with ownership comes accountability, all that type of stuff comes into it, you know? Actually owning something that’s living and everything, she’s got that responsibility and that independence I suppose.

[Abbey]

Literature recognises that having goals that focus on helping others rather than oneself are beneficial to wellbeing (House et al., 1988). However, the focus is usually on human-to-human connections. These results demonstrate how a sense of purpose is also accomplished through taking care of pets, which took on greater importance during a time of restricted human connections.

**Unique providers**

While people referred to their companion animals as ‘pets’ more often than ‘animals’ they usually referred to them by their names, or by terms like ‘furkid’ or ‘furbaby’, insisting they were part of the family:

He’s part of our family, and I would lambast anybody that said anything different.

[Queenie]

However, what emerged was the uniqueness of their role in the family. Pets were described by their distinct personalities, lending support for previous research (Charles, 2014) that pets are important actors. Additionally, many participants acknowledged and celebrated their non-human qualities, as Fran illustrates as she talks about her four-year-old spaniel Juno:

Sometimes you just need a bit of comfort, and you want it silent. You don’t want somebody to offer an opinion, sometimes you just want to say something, or you just want to cry. You don’t really want anything from another person, just someone else there, if that makes sense? And you can do that a lot easier with a dog than with a person. The trouble with a person a lot of times is you end up moved away from what you actually want because you’ve ended up with a dialogue and a debate about it. You feel you’ve got to try and explain it, which you don’t have to do with an animal. He’s just there for me.

[Fran]
These results suggest that for many people, pets are unique family members, perceived as kin with qualities valued precisely because of the absence of drawbacks associated with some human relationships. While most participants, like Queenie, would readily ‘lambast anybody’ who suggested their pets were not family members, Fran’s experience provides an example of Serpell’s (2000) thesis that pets occupy a position between human and animal. He argues that if people are willing to appreciate the animal as well as the human attributes of their pets, their ability to mediate loneliness will be realised. Participants spoke of tensions due to being locked up with the same people, with pets often providing a welcome alternative, being valued for their non-human qualities while being perceived very much as family.

Pets provide emotional support (Thoits, 2021) in myriad ways, including companionship and comfort, especially due to their perceived ability for empathy, as Nathan explains:

They bring joy to me. They bring peace to me. They bring happiness to me. Bluebell, she is tuned into every emotion I have. If I’m stressed, if I’m happy, if I’m sad, she’s just tuned into that and knows that immediately, and she picks up on it.

[Nathan]

Nathan’s testimony, while including all four of his Cavalier Spaniels, mentions Bluebell who he perceives to have empathy with him. Here, we see that different pets are valued in different ways for their unique characteristics, transcending companionship (Ryan & Ziebland, 2015) and illustrating a rich and deep relationship. Pets as confidants were also important. Chloe’s 10-year-old daughter needed this:

She takes one or other [Dolly the dog or Eddie the cat] to bed every night with her. She talks to Dolly a lot because she doesn’t like telling us about her day. But I hear her chatting away to Dolly.

[Chloe]

Previous research argues that different sources provide different types of social support (Thoits, 2021). Here, we see that when alternative sources are perceived as inadequate (“she doesn’t like telling us about her day”), pets can fill that void and be perceived as a beneficial confidant.

Pets also had positive impacts on family relations. Data provided multiple indications of how they brought families together, confirming what Serpell (2000, p 109) calls “the social lubricant effect”. Beth, who purchased Lola (a puppy) during lockdown describes how her 14-year-old daughter Sara had, prior to Lola’s arrival, spent little time with the family and explained how this had changed:

I see more of my kids now than I have- I’m serious - than I have done for years really because, Sara normally spends all her time in her bedroom which is on the top floor but she’s downstairs loads now because she likes stroking and playing with Lola. It’s just lovely. Lola’s made family life better.

[Beth]

Lola’s ability to ‘make family life better’ illustrates the importance not just of the presence of significant others, but the perceived nature of relationship satisfaction. Pets often helped to
avoid family squabbles by serving as a diversion to lockdown boredom and frustration, as Patsy explains in reference to Lulu and Lily, her two cats:

They've been a huge help, they're like mediators. If the children are having a little argument about silly things, you can quickly distract them by handing them a cat and the cats are good for snuggling and are calming. They’ve been great for all of us.

[Patsy]

Pets also brought fun and laughter into people’s homes during a very bleak time,

They’ve given us laughs, you know. It’s funny, like when you see Eddie [cat] trying to start a toy fight with Dolly [dog] and the way they are with each other. And Eddie is clumsy, and he just falls, like he walks across the unit and he’ll miss a step and fall off. Just stuff like, you know, just like little things like that and they just make us all laugh.

[Chloe]

That laughter is important for interpersonal relationship maintenance is well established. Empirical research finds shared spontaneous laughter is positively associated with global evaluations of relationship quality, closeness of relations and perceptions of positive social support (Kurtz & Algoe, 2015). Family conflict is undoubtedly a source of chronic stress that has negative health implications (Applebaum et al., 2020). In a period of unprecedented stress, the benefits of pets bringing families closer together and making families laugh under such extreme circumstances, are not inconsequential.

**Bridges to social capital**

Pets provided access to social capital in two major ways. First, as a means of meeting other people,

Even though you’re not allowed to socialise with people, you do see other people when you’re walking your dog and you see people, acquaintances and friends that you know are walking their dog and so you have those very socially distanced conversations, so there was social interaction where, if I hadn’t had a dog, that wouldn’t have happened. I think I would have found every excuse not to bother to go out. Whereas when you’ve got the dogs, you’ve got to go out.

[Nadine]

Results support previous research suggesting dogs are a means of social capital because they enable social support via conversations with other dog walkers (Wood et al., 2017). Social interaction provides emotional support through empathy, and informational support through exchange of ideas and suggestions (Thoits, 2021), and hence makes people feel better during and after these encounters. Here, we can see the importance of this type of social capital during the pandemic, when, as Nadine states, without her dogs she would not have accessed this social interaction. While such (socially distanced) conversations with other people took on great
significance during lockdown, results reveal that pets enabled access to other forms of social support:

My dog training group, we started Zoom calls. So, it was an additional group of people to talk to, and I made more friends that way.

[ Catherine]

An important aspect of social capital is wellbeing promotion through supportive relationships. Catherine’s reference to making more friends suggests this network went beyond passing conversations into more significant relationships, while her reference to ‘we’ illustrates the collective and shared identity so important to a sense of community. Hence, as Wood et al. (2017) stress, the impact of pets on social capital goes beyond ice breakers in parks like Nadine talks about, into mechanisms to encourage and enhance social interaction leading to friendship formation, as we see from Catherine’s experience.

An important type of instrumental social support also emerged. Tangible, instrumental support is usually inherent in normative expectations from significant others, particularly in times of adversity (Thoits, 2021). Findings reveal instrumental support was available from groups formed because of pets, as Aggie, who has three Beagles, explains:

I’d just been made redundant and wasn’t going to get paid for six weeks from my new job. My doggie friends from the Beagle club, they bought me all kinds of dog food. So, literally I had enough food to keep me going for probably three or four months.

[ Aggie]

Social capital strengthens the social fabric of communities (Wood et al., 2017). The finding that pets brought people together who then provided instrumental support for community members extends current knowledge in this area, suggesting that how pets can positively impact communities has perhaps a larger ripple effect than was previously thought.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article contributes to the vast literature on social support. Its novelty is twofold. First, while social support has been studied extensively, few investigations have taken place during a time of great crisis, when social support needs increase and new needs develop (Bertogg & Koos, 2022). Data for the current study were collected from UK and US citizens mid-COVID-19 pandemic, both countries had experienced strict containment interventions, with the UK emerging from its third lockdown and parts of the United States still subjected to strict lockdown measures. Hence, the timing provides an opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of social support because its importance was magnified at a time when opportunities for social support were curtailed. Second, this research contributes to the extant sociological literature that focuses on family practices in multispecies households and the nature of kinship (Ashall & Hobson-West, 2017; Franklin, 1999), particularly for health and wellbeing.

Findings clearly show that during the pandemic crisis, participants viewed their pets as an important and reliable member of their social network, analogous to close kin and perceived as family members. This supports previous research that suggests pets are central to people’s
networks (Charles & Davies, 2008) and maintains families are “more-than-human” (Irvine & Cilia 2017, p. 8). There are new insights here, too, in terms of the specific role of pets in the family. Pets were valued precisely for their non-human qualities and characteristics, providing a unique type of social support not available from human networks. The support provided by pets was perceived as both available (and particularly reliable) and adequate, with high levels of satisfaction expressed.

This research demonstrates that social support from pets is multidimensional. Supporting previous literature, pets effectively provide emotional support such as companionship, friendship and acting as confidants (Charles, 2014; Ryan & Ziebland, 2015). Additionally, results support previous work that pets enhance community health through facilitating network connectivity by enabling social interaction (Wood et al., 2017). Findings reveal pets, as bridges to social capital, enable people to access informational support, which came from social interactions ranging from verbal conversations between dog walkers who met by chance, through to the formation of new friendships via Zoom sessions for breed and dog training groups. Further, results demonstrate empirically that such network connectivity leads to tangible instrumental support, in the form of people purchasing food for others. A further novel finding is that pets are also important sources of appraisal support. Pets gave humans esteem boosts in the form of confidence building and providing a sense of responsibility. This was particularly important during a time when encouragement and affirmation from other sources, such as the workplace, were lost. It was also extremely beneficial for children, for whom pets provided a focus and a lockdown distraction. Appraisal support usually refers to self-evaluation (Thoits, 2021). However, another form of appraisal emerged as extremely important. In addition to mitigating loneliness, results reveal pets enabled people to reappraise this crisis. Thus, this study suggests pets can be a conduit for situation reappraisal, enabling owners to view a crisis as beneficial and hence providing a unique way of coping.

Findings also advance nascent research pertaining to pets and ontological security. Franklin (1999) contends that pet popularity results from cultural changes which removed many traditional sources of ontological security, hence some people turned to pets “in lieu of a variety of human relations” (p. 86). This argument has been contested (Charles & Davies, 2008). Undoubtedly, the pandemic posed a substantial threat to ontological security, impacting people’s sense of self and fundamentally changing routines. Results provide insights into how pets gave people a sense of purpose and anchored them in daily routines. While results suggest participants in this study often appreciated pets for being pets rather than as substitutes for human companions, findings lend support for Franklin’s (1999) contention that pets do provide feelings of ontological security.

Numerous and clear links between the social support provided by pets and health and wellbeing emerged. Social isolation is empirically related to many health outcomes (House et al., 1988). During a time of enforced lockdown, physical health was often mentioned, particularly in relation to getting out and walking dogs. Likewise, participants told of pets ensuring they avoided physically unhealthy behaviours, such as being sedentary, which, many noted, was a real temptation during lockdown. Avoiding, or at least mitigating, mental health issues was explicitly discussed many times. Numerous indications of pets providing buffers to the stress of the pandemic emerged. Pets were perceived as ‘saving’ people: saving them from mental health issues and even, in the case of more than one respondent, providing a reason to continue with what would otherwise have been too stressful a situation. This finding is important because subjective evaluations of stressful situations are related to anxiety and depression (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Finally, pets undoubtedly had positive effects on emotional
wellbeing. Pets reduce loneliness, enable lockdown to be evaluated less negatively, sustain identities via maintaining routine and providing a sense of ontological security and enhanced self-esteem by making their owners feel needed. The emotional support provided by pets, including love, empathy, companionship, joy, laughter and acting as confidants, enabled people to better manage their situation and navigate the crisis.

Conceptually, results provide affirmation for all three overarching theoretical perspectives (i.e. buffer, social constructionist, or relationship) pertaining to social support and health. Pets acted as buffers to an extremely stressful situation, promoting coping and positively impacting crisis appraisal. Support for the social constructionist perspective emerged in how pets positively impacted identity, roles, self-esteem, and a commitment to others, as well as how they helped to maintain routine and promote ontological security. There is overwhelming support for the relationship perspective. Humans are social beings, with an inherent basic biological need to be with others. Pets met this need during an unprecedented time when proximity to other humans was curtailed. They also acted as catalysts to enhance human-to-human relationships through laughter, positive distraction and encouraging access to wider social networks. Much previous research tends to take one theoretical perspective. However, this is a hazardous strategy because it risks mitigating an understanding of the full extent of social support as a lived experience.

The research has limitations. Calls for participants via social media were open to any pet owners and no quotas were in place. It is acknowledged that the results here are overall extremely positive. This could be due to the nature of the advertisement which depicted two (extremely cute) spaniels, or it may be because people who felt their pets had been particularly beneficial during lockdown were attracted to the study. Moreover, many participants have multiple pets, suggesting that several people for whom pets are particularly cherished volunteered to share their experiences. Certainly, a large survey of US pet owners identified multiple disadvantages to pet ownership during the pandemic (Applebaum et al., 2020). The inclusion of six American citizens was serendipitous and ethnicity and sexual orientation data were not collected. Future research may consider the need for the sample to own a wider variety of species as pets, to purposely target participants living in specific countries and to consider any findings relating to ethnicity or sexual orientation. The sample has a gender bias typical to pet studies (Herzog, 2010). Nevertheless, the sample comprises people of different ages, socioeconomic backgrounds and different household compositions. The latter is significant due to social restrictions. The timing of the data collection, during a period of unprecedented social isolation, provides an exceptional examination of social support. Results reinforce and extend our understanding of the extent and importance of pets as providers of social support. It hopefully encourages researchers and practitioners to look beyond families and networks comprising solely human animals, to consider non-human species and the ways in which they impact our societies and our health and wellbeing.

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

**Lynn Sudbury-Riley:** Conceptualization (lead); Data curation (lead); Formal analysis (lead); Investigation (lead); Methodology (lead); Project administration (lead); Resources (lead); Writing – original draft (lead); Writing – review & editing (lead).

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I confirm there are no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

ETHICS STATEMENT
Ethical approval was granted by the University of Liverpool’s central ethics committee on 5th March 2021 after written and oral perusal by a full committee, reference number: 9770. The research was conducted in line with strict ethical principles of participant confidentiality and anonymity. The study was entirely voluntary and opt-in. Participants were given reassurance that interviews could be terminated at any point.

ORCID
Lynn Sudbury-Riley https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5097-3407

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