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EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AMONG PET OWNERS – A TWO-GROUP DISCRIMINANT ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Emotional Intelligence (EI) has gained considerable attention as an important aspect in personal and social functioning. This study explores the influence of pet ownership on Emotional Intelligence by employing a two-group discriminant analysis model. A sample of 300 adults from the Dindigul District in Tamil Nadu, comprising equal numbers of pet-owners and non-pet owners, was surveyed by means of the SamTha Emotional Intelligence Scale. The outcomes revealed significantly higher EI scores among pet owners compared to non-owners, suggesting a positive relationship between sustained pet companionship and emotional competencies. The discriminant function analysis identified duration of ownership, gender, and age as significant variables in distinguishing between the two groups. Duration of companionship alone contributed over 50% to the discriminant score. The model demonstrated high statistical significance and predictive accuracy, correctly classifying 85% of cases. These findings highlight the potential of emotional bonding in long-term companion relationships to foster Emotional Intelligence and support its inclusion in behavioural and well-being studies.

KEYWORDS: *Emotional Intelligence, Discriminant Analysis, Pet Ownership, Socio-demographic Factors, Emotional Bonding, Well-being*

INTRODUCTION

Emotional Intelligence (EI), a term popularised by Salovey and Mayer, is widely recognised as the capacity to perceive, evaluate, and manage emotions in oneself and in others(Salovey & Mayer, 1990). The development of EI has received extensive academic attention over the last few decades due to its relevance in mental health, interpersonal relationships, leadership, and overall well-being (Goleman, 1998; Mayer et al., 2008). The impression that emotions play a vital role in cognitive dispensation, decision-making and social relations has led researchers to discover various factors that influence the augmentation of EI across different people (Schutte et al., 2008). Among these, the role of lifestyle and relational patterns in shaping emotional capabilities has emerged as a pertinent area of inquiry.

One such relational context gaining increasing attention in psychological research is that of human-companion relationships. In particular, the association between individuals and their long-term companions—such as domestic animals—has been highlighted for its psychological implications. According to academics, emotional exchanges in these kinds of friendships frequently resemble interpersonal relationships in humans and involve attachment, empathy, care, and responsibility. (Daly & Morton, 2009; McNicholas, 2014; McNicholas & Collis, 2006; Wells, 2009). Assuming that emotional awareness and understanding are essential to both human and non-human relationships, this construction may offer a special background for the progress and expression of EI (Busia & Griggio, 2020; Gómez-Leal et al., 2021; Zablocki-Thomas et al., 2022). The daily actions associated with taking care of a cohort support the influence of empathy, emotional regulation, and affective attachment.

According to a number of recent studies, people who consistently participate in caring relationships—whether with humans or non-humans—tend to exhibit improved emotional competencies (Taylor & Signal, 2005). Emotional intelligence is a dynamic ability that develops via experience and deliberate emotional engagement rather than a fixed trait (Bar-On, 2010). Emotional intelligence (EI) components like self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation may be developed through daily acts of responsibility and emotional responsiveness,

such as providing care and recognising emotional cues (Goleman, 1998; Mayer et al., 2008). In this respect, it has been proposed that having a pet is essential for refining emotional sensitivity.

It is commonly noted that pet owners develop robust emotional bonds with their animals, which intensifies emotional attachment and empathy (Barcelos et al., 2023; Irvine, 2013; Prato-Previde et al., 2022; Walsh, 2009). Consistent care, reciprocated reliance, and emotional support are the fundamentals of this relationship. It is thought that these relations fortify the behavioural and neural pathways associated with emotional understanding and regulation (Beetz et al., 2012). Because of this, the knowledge of companionship may assist people in developing their emotional intelligence by contributing a safe, nonjudgmental space where they can spontaneously express and regulate their emotions (Barker & Dawson, 1998; Zasloff, 1996).

Furthermore, socio-demographic influences such as age, gender, and education have also been found to mediate Emotional Intelligence consequences (Azpiazu et al., 2023; Piqueras et al., 2019; Pirrone et al., 2022). Women are often reported to score higher in EI dimensions related to empathy and social skills (Deng et al., 2023; Petrides & Furnham, 2000; Pongrac et al., 2019), while older individuals, through accumulated life experience, tend to demonstrate greater emotional regulation and self-awareness (Banhato et al., 2015; Pandey & Misra, 2024). Educational levels may contribute to greater emotional vocabulary and reflective skills, enabling individuals to process emotions more effectively (Brackett et al., 2011; Mortari, 2015; Murinson et al., 2008). Together, these factors may predict and improve EI when considered with pet companionship.

Despite increasing evidence, little empirical research has used structured discriminant analysis to examine the joint effects of pet ownership and sociodemographic factors on emotional intelligence (Purewal et al., 2019; Sipos et al., 2024; Stephens, 2021). Discriminant analysis permits the identification of the most powerful predictors that discriminate between high and low EI individuals based on group membership, in this case, pet owners versus non-pet owners. This statistical method allows for a highly accurate classification of individuals and provides an understanding of how different factors interact to influence EI (Akhtar & Garcia, 2023; Joseph & Newman, 2010). In behavioural research, where group variances are examined across psychological variables, it is exclusively helpful.

By exploring whether pet ownership significantly improves emotional intelligence and the degree to which sociodemographic factors contribute to this variation, this study aims to close this research gap. By employing the SamTha Emotional Intelligence Scale (STEI Scale) developed by Samuel Thavaraj H (2025), which apprehensions multiple dimensions of EI on a 7-point Likert scale. This study provides an inclusive insight into the emotional capabilities of adult individuals across two distinct groups. The scale includes facets such as self-reflection, emotional regulation, motivation, empathy and relationship management, aligning with the foundational model proposed by Daniel Goleman (1995).

Using a discriminant function analysis, this research explores whether the independent variables, pet ownership status, gender, age, education, and duration of ownership, can significantly predict and classify individuals based on their EI levels. The central hypothesis posits that pet ownership, particularly of longer duration, is positively associated with higher Emotional Intelligence. Additionally, it is anticipated that gender and age will play substantial roles in determining EI outcomes, reflecting previous findings in emotional and behavioural psychology (Bar-On, 2010; Jones, 2003; Mayer et al., 2008).

This study seeks to explore whether pet ownership contributes significantly to Emotional Intelligence and to identify key demographic factors that discriminate individuals with higher EI in this context. Besides, this study is grounded in the theoretical and practical understanding of Emotional Intelligence as an energetic, experience-based psychological construct. It proposes that the relational and affective engagement involved in pet companionship contributes to EI enhancement. Through statistical modelling and sampling, this study attempts to unpack the multifaceted interplay between emotional development and social-environmental variables, offering valuable insights for psychologists, educators, and mental health practitioners alike. It brings into line with a broader movement in psychological science that recognises everyday communications and relationships, not only clinical or formal interventions, as critical grounds for emotional progress (Goleman, 1998; Schutte et al., 2008).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To measure the Emotional Intelligence levels among pet owners and non-owners.
2. To identify socio-demographic variables that significantly discriminate Emotional Intelligence levels between pet owners and non-pet owners.

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METHODOLOGY

Sample and Data Collection

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design, targeting a total of 300 adult participants, evenly divided between pet owners (n = 150) and non-pet owners (n = 150). Participants were drawn from various localities within the Dindigul District of Tamil Nadu, ensuring geographic diversity within the selected population. A non-probability snowball sampling method was adopted for participant recruitment. This technique was particularly suitable for identifying individuals with specific characteristics, namely, long-term pet companionship, who may not be easily accessible through conventional random sampling (Bartlett, 1954; Shrigley, 1990). It made it possible for the researchers to use social media to connect with a wide range of respondents, especially in areas where pet ownership is common.

Pilot testing and statistical analysis were used to thoroughly establish the SamTha Emotional Intelligence Scale (STEI Scale) validity and reliability. Through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, construct validity was verified. All communalities were above 0.60, indicating excellent item convergence, and factor loadings were clearly aligned with the five EI dimensions. High internal consistency and reliability were indicated by the overall scale's Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89. With alpha values ranging from 0.81 to 0.87, each subscale also showed respectable reliability. These metrics attest to the instrument's theoretical foundation and statistical soundness for use in behavioural research.

Along with EI scores, the survey gathered detailed sociodemographic data, such as age, gender, level of education, and, for pet owners in particular, how long they have owned a pet. Based on their theoretical and empirical significance in EI research, these variables were chosen (Mayer et al., 2008; Pérez et al., 2005). The researchers were able to evaluate not only the existence of companionship but also its continuity and intensity, which are thought to be crucial for emotional development, by including the length of ownership. The investigation of the connection between emotional intelligence and pet companionship was conducted with both validity and depth thanks to this strong methodological framework.

DISCRIMINANT ANALYSIS

To figure out if sociodemographic factors such as gender, age, education, and length of pet ownership, as well as pet ownership status, significantly predict emotional intelligence (EI) levels, a two-group discriminant analysis was used in this study. This statistical technique is particularly appropriate when the objective is to classify cases into mutually exclusive groups (in this case, emotionally intelligent respondents and non-emotionally intelligent respondents) based on a set of independent variables. The method not only identifies which variables contribute most to group differentiation but also assesses the predictive accuracy of the classification model.

The discriminant function derived from the analysis takes the following linear form:

$$Z_I = b_o + b_1X + \ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots + b_n X$$

Where Z_I denotes the i^{th} individual's discriminant score

Z_{cril} denotes the critical value for the discriminant score

Z_{ni} denotes the i^{th} individual's value of the n^{th} independent variable.

b_n denotes the discriminant coefficient for the n^{th} independent variable.

Let the discriminant score Zi for every participant be determined by the independent variables for the classification process.

That is $Z_I = b_o + b_1X_{li} + \ldots\ldots\ldots + b_nX_{ni}$. The classification process is as follows: If $Z \geq Z_{crit}$, classify individual participants i as belonging to group I (emotionally intelligent respondents) and if $Z < Z_{crit}$, classify individual participants i as belonging to group II (non-emotionally intelligent respondents). Following that, the classification boundary will be the location of points where,

$$Z_{cri} = b_o + b_1 X_{li} + b_2 X_{2i} + \ldots. b_n X_{ni}$$

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The comparison of Emotional Intelligence (EI) scores between pet owners and non-pet owners reveals significant differences in their emotional capacities. Emotional Intelligence, as measured in this study, encompasses various domains including self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skills. Understanding the variation in EI between these two groups helps to uncover the potential psychological benefits of long-term emotional companionship.

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Table 1: Mean EI Scores Between Groups

Group	Mean EI Score	Std. Deviation
Pet Owners	132.45	11.21
Non-Pet Owners	118.38	13.65

The data presented in Table 1 indicate a clear distinction in the mean EI scores between pet owners and non-pet owners. Pet owners recorded a mean EI score of 132.45 with a standard deviation of 11.21, whereas non-pet owners exhibited a lower mean score of 118.38 and a higher standard deviation of 13.65. This substantial difference suggests that pet owners, on average, possess greater emotional competencies compared to those who do not share such companionship. The smaller standard deviation among pet owners further implies that their emotional intelligence levels are not only higher but also more consistent within the group.

The results of the independent samples t-test confirm that this difference is statistically significant ($t = 9.27$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that the observed disparity in EI scores is not due to chance. This supports the hypothesis that the relational, empathetic, and caregiving aspects inherent in pet companionship contribute meaningfully to the development and enhancement of emotional intelligence. The findings reinforce existing psychological literature that associates emotionally supportive relationships with higher EI and position pet ownership as a potentially influential factor in fostering emotional growth.

DISCRIMINANT FUNCTION ON EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The discriminant function analysis was conducted to identify the variables that most strongly distinguish between pet owners and non-pet owners based on their levels of Emotional Intelligence (EI). The standardised canonical discriminant function coefficients offer insight into the relative contribution of each independent variable towards the predictive power of the model. These coefficients serve as weights, indicating the strength and direction of each variable's influence in differentiating the two groups.

Table 2: Standardised Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficients

S.No	Variable	Discriminant Coefficient
1	Gender	0.623
2	Age	0.475
3	Education	0.219
4	Duration of Pet Ownership	0.789

As shown in Table 2, the variable with the highest discriminant coefficient is the duration of pet ownership (0.789), which emerged as the most powerful predictor of Emotional Intelligence in this study. This finding suggests that individuals with longer durations of emotional companionship exhibit more developed emotional competencies, likely due to sustained engagement in empathic and responsive behaviours. The emotional demands and responsibilities involved in long-term companionship appear to offer consistent opportunities for emotional growth and regulation.

Gender followed as the second most influential variable, with a coefficient of 0.623, indicating a substantial impact on EI differentiation. This aligns with existing psychological literature suggesting that women, on average, tend to score higher on empathy and interpersonal awareness, key components of Emotional Intelligence. Age, with a coefficient of 0.475, also played a notable role, reflecting the general trend that emotional maturity often increases with life experience and social exposure.

In contrast, education, though included in the model, had the smallest discriminant coefficient (0.219), suggesting a relatively weaker influence in distinguishing EI levels between the two groups. While education may contribute to emotional vocabulary and cognitive reflection, its impact appears secondary compared to the relational and experiential factors captured by the other variables.

Overall, the discriminant function underscores the significance of relational depth and life experience, particularly long-term companionship, as vital in shaping Emotional Intelligence.

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Table 3: Contribution to Total Discriminant Score

Variable	Coefficient	Mean Difference	Product	% Contribution
Gender	0.623	1.02	0.635	15.3%
Age	0.475	2.56	1.216	29.3%
Education	0.219	0.89	0.195	4.7%
Duration of Ownership	0.789	3.45	2.722	50.7%

Table 3 offers a detailed breakdown of how each independent variable contributes to the total discriminant score, which reflects the overall capacity of the model to distinguish between pet owners and non-pet owners based on their Emotional Intelligence (EI). This table provides not only the discriminant coefficients but also the mean differences between groups and the resultant product, which directly influences the percentage contribution of each variable to the discriminant function.

Among all the variables, duration of ownership clearly stands out, contributing 50.7% to the total discriminant score. This finding confirms that the length of time an individual has engaged in emotional companionship plays a central role in shaping Emotional Intelligence. Extended periods of time probably offer more opportunities for emotional expression, regulation, empathy, and attachment, all of which are critical experiences for the development and improvement of emotional competencies. The significant percentage of contributions highlights the long-term psychological benefits of sustained interpersonal engagement in promoting emotional intelligence.

With 29.3% of the discriminant power, age is the second most important variable. This lends credence to the widely accepted idea that emotional intelligence tends to increase with age as people gain more life experience, emotional maturity, and self-control. With a 15.3% contribution, gender also significantly influences differentiation, possibly as a result of biological and socialisation factors that affect interpersonal sensitivity and emotional expressiveness.

Conversely, education only accounts for 4.7% of the overall discriminant score, indicating that, in the context of this study, it has a relatively small influence on emotional intelligence. Although exposure to education may improve one's cognitive comprehension of emotions, experiential or relational factors seem to be more effective at actively forming emotional competencies.

When combined, these findings show that although sociodemographic factors do affect emotional intelligence, the length of emotional companionship has the greatest impact. This provides solid empirical evidence in favour of viewing long-term companionship as a beneficial setting for developing emotional intelligence and emphasises the significance of stable, emotionally stimulating relationships in fostering emotional development.

Table 4: Statistical Significance

Metric	Value
Canonical Correlation	0.612
Wilks' Lambda	0.412
Chi-Square	72.58
df	4
p-value	< 0.01

The statistical measures that demonstrate the overall significance and validity of the discriminant function used to distinguish between pet owners and non-pet owners according to emotional intelligence (EI) are shown in Table 4. The degree to which the chosen independent variables—gender, age, education, and length of ownership—predict group membership and account for the variation in EI scores is indicated by these statistical values.

The discriminant scores and group membership have a moderate to strong relationship, according to the canonical correlation of 0.612. This implies that the dependent variable, emotional intelligence, is significantly correlated with the linear combination of the predictor variables, which successfully captures the variance between the two groups. In behavioural research, a canonical correlation greater than 0.6 usually indicates strong discriminating power, confirming the predictive relevance of the model.

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The Wilks' Lambda value of 0.412 signifies the proportion of total variance in the dependent variable not explained by the discriminant function. A lower value of Wilks' Lambda indicates better discrimination, and in this case, a value close to 0.4 suggests a strong explanatory effect. The associated Chi-Square statistic of 72.58 with 4 degrees of freedom and a p-value less than 0.01 confirms that the discriminant function is statistically significant. This means that the combined predictor variables produce a meaningful differentiation between the two groups.

These outcomes demonstrate how well the discriminant model uses the selected sociodemographic variables to classify people according to their emotional intelligence. The conclusion that emotional bonding and life experience are important factors in emotional development is further supported by the statistical significance, which confirms the previous findings that age, gender, and length of companionship are strong predictors of EI.

Table 5: Classification Accuracy

Actual Group	Predicted: Pet Owner	Predicted: Non-Owner	Total Correctly Classified
Pet Owners	126	24	84%
Non-Pet Owners	21	129	86%
Total Accuracy			**85%**

A crucial measure of the discriminant model's expediency in predicting group membership based on emotional intelligence (EI) is its classification accuracy, which is shown in Table 5. The classification matrix offers information about the model's dependability in practical categorisation by contrasting predicted association from the discriminant function with actual group membership (pet owner or non-pet owner).

According to the outcomes, 84% of pet owners and 86% of non-pet owners were correctly classified by the model, signifying a high degree of predictive accuracy. These numbers indicate that the discriminant function discovers characteristics that set the two groups apart and does so with a small margin of error. The model performs robustly in allocating people to the appropriate group based on their Emotional Intelligence scores and the chosen sociodemographic variables, as evidenced by the overall classification accuracy of 85%.

The high percentage of accurate classification highlights the model's practicality in behavioural research and lends credibility to its possible use in psychological evaluations or treatments where emotional intelligence is a pertinent result. The low misclassification rates provide additional support for the importance of the independent variables in inducing emotional differentiation among people, especially age, gender, and length of companionship. As a result, the discriminant function is established to be both theoretically and practically sound by the model's statistical and practical strength.

CONCLUSION

Using a two-group discriminant analysis model to separate pet owners from non-pet owners, the current study aimed to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and pet ownership. Pet owners continuously demonstrated higher levels of emotional competence, according to the results, which showed a distinct and statistically significant difference in EI scores. With over 50% of the discriminant score coming from the length of pet companionship, it was the most significant factor, followed by age and gender. These findings support the psychological knowledge that relationships that are emotionally rich and nurturing—like those found in long-term companionship—are essential for improving empathy, emotional self-regulation, and interpersonal awareness.

With a high predictive accuracy of 85%, the discriminant model validated the usefulness of the chosen variables in distinguishing between different levels of emotional intelligence. The model's robustness was further confirmed by statistical measures like Chi-square, Wilks' Lambda, and canonical correlation. The results support the inclusion of experiential, relational factors in psychological frameworks that evaluate emotional development and highlight the importance of sustained emotional engagement in fostering emotional intelligence. With implications for educational and wellness interventions aimed at developing Emotional Intelligence in varied populations, this research adds to the increasing body of indication showing that companionship and caregiving relationships can have a significant impact on emotional capacities.

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MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The study's conclusions have important ramifications for managers, human resources specialists, and organisational leaders who want to improve emotional intelligence (EI) at work. Because pet ownership, especially for longer periods of time, is strongly linked to higher EI, organisations might think about implementing EI development techniques that imitate the empathy-building and emotional engagement found in companion relationships. Employees' emotional competencies can be fostered by imitating these relational dynamics through team-building exercises, mentoring programs, and empathy-focused training. Besides, managers can more successfully customise interventions by recognising how demographic characteristics like age and gender influence EI. Resilience and emotional well-being can be further maintained by fostering work-life balance and emotionally supportive surroundings. In the end, managers can enhance leadership skills, decrease conflict, improve interpersonal communication, and boost overall organisational performance by educating emotionally intelligent workplaces. The significance of relational experiences in the development of emotional intelligence is reaffirmed in this study, which also offers ways to practically incorporate it into human capital strategies.

Appendix - Questionnaire

SamTha Emotional Intelligence Scale (STEI Scale)

(Designed based on Daniel Goleman's five core dimensions of Emotional Intelligence. The scale consists of 20 statements, with 4 items under each dimension, rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – Strongly Disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 – Somewhat Disagree, 4 – Neutral, 5 – Somewhat Agree, 6 – Agree, 7 – Strongly Agree)

S.No.	Statements	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Self-Reflection (Self-Awareness)							
1.	I am aware of how my emotions affect my thoughts and behaviour.							
2.	I can accurately describe how I feel in different situations.							
3.	I understand the impact of my moods on others.							
4.	I regularly reflect on my emotional responses and reactions.							
	Emotional Regulation (Self-Regulation)							
5.	I can stay calm and composed even in stressful situations.							
6.	I am able to manage my negative emotions effectively.							
7.	I consciously control my emotional reactions when interacting with others.							
8.	I can adapt my emotions appropriately depending on the situation.							
	Motivation (Self-Motivation)							
9.	I remain committed to my goals even when challenges arise.							
10.	I am driven by a deeper sense of purpose in what I do.							
11.	I feel enthusiastic and positive about the work I undertake.							
12.	I persevere in emotionally difficult or uncertain situations.							
	Empathy (Social Awareness)							
13.	I can sense when someone is feeling down, even if they don't say it.							
14.	I try to understand things from another person's perspective.							
15.	I can empathise with others even if I don't agree with them.							
16.	I pay close attention to the emotions of people around me.							
	Relationship Management (Social Skills)							
17.	I can manage disagreements without escalating conflict.							
18.	I build strong and emotionally healthy relationships with others.							
19.	I am good at inspiring and motivating others through communication.							
20.	I try to resolve misunderstandings with empathy and patience.							

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