



# The Pet-Effect in Real Life

## an experience sampling study in pet-owners

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### BACKGROUND

While there is a substantial body of research conducted on the idea that companion animals play a beneficial role in human well-being (termed 'the pet-effect'), there is a lack of conclusive evidence indicating that pet-owners are healthier and happier than people who do not own a companion animal. Existing research is often constrained by the limited reliability of self-reports, uncertainty about the direction of causality and inadequate control groups.

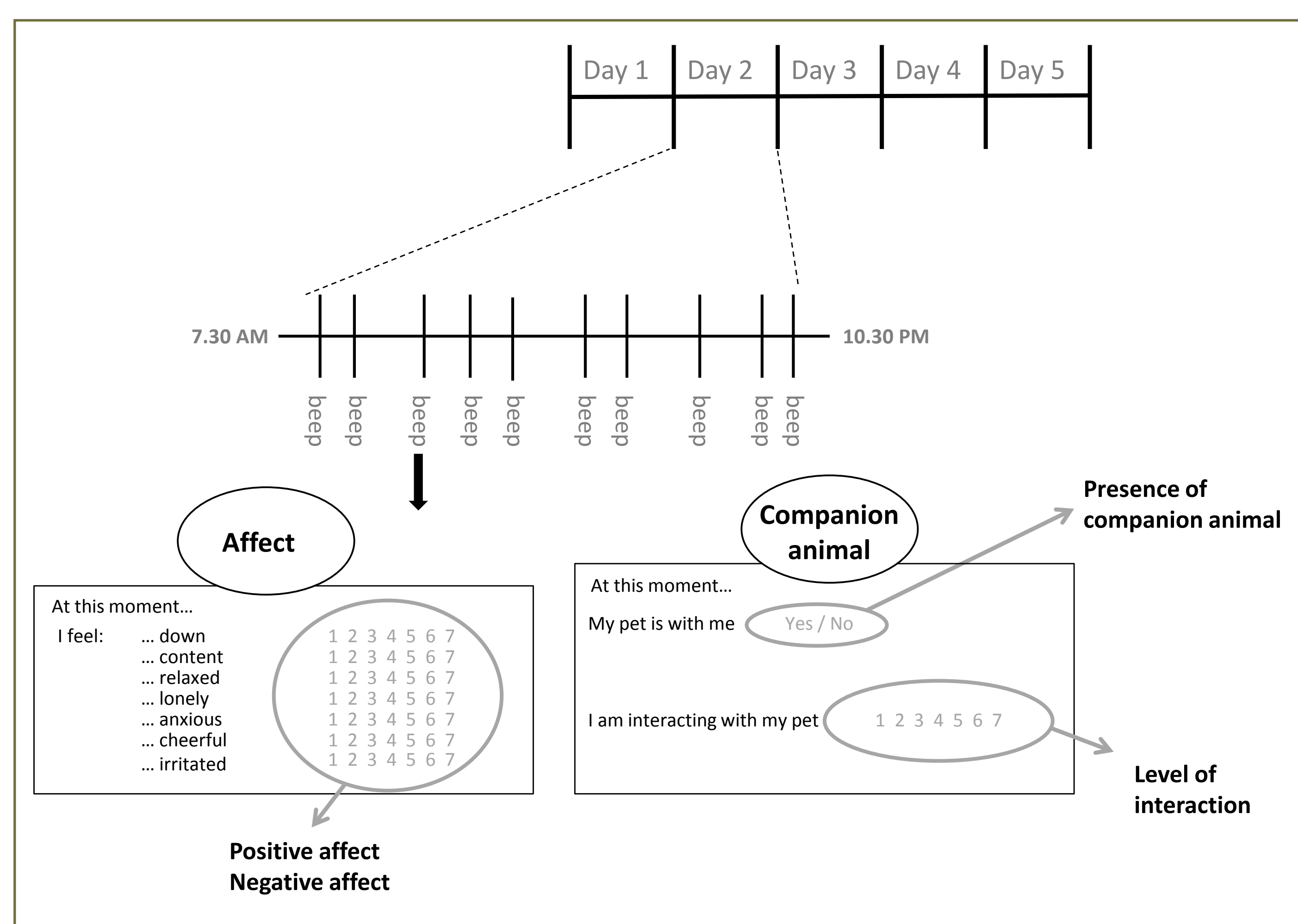
### OBJECTIVES

To study the association between companion animals and well-being in real life, investigating the relationship between companion animals (presence and interaction) and affect (positive (PA) and negative (NA)).

### METHODS

#### The experience Sampling Method

Using a mobile application, at 10 random time points a day for 5 consecutive days, participants reported on the presence and interaction with their companion animal, their current affect, the social context, activities, and location.



#### Advantages

- High ecological validity due to measurement in peoples natural environment
- Implicit design reveals the true nature of the effect as opposed to individuals' cognitive interpretation
- Measuring in the moment minimizes error and bias associated with retrospection
- Measuring within persons allows each individual to be their own control condition, preventing confounding by pre-existing differences between pet-owners and non-owners.

#### Subjects

The sample consisted of 55 companion animal owners (dog and/or cat), mean age 46.7 and 49.2% male.

### RESULTS

Multilevel regression analyses correcting for the opposite mood state, as well as age, gender and having a partner show the following results:

	Positive Affect			Negative Affect		
	B	P	95% CI	B	P	95% CI
Presence of companion animal	0.07	0.169	-0.03 ; 0.17	-0.09	<0.05	-0.16 ; -0.02
Interaction with companion animal	0.04	<0.01	0.01 ; 0.07	0.01	0.316	-0.01 ; 0.02

### CONCLUSIONS

Results show that companion animals have a positive effect on daily life well-being. In the *presence* of a companion animal people experience less negative emotions, but not more positive emotions. Strikingly, this effect is contrary to what happens when *interacting* with a companion animal, as people experience more positive emotions but not less negative emotions.

This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that (human) social interaction has been shown to correlate differentially with PA and NA, increasing PA but not NA. The interaction with a companion animal (as opposed to the presence of the animal) is much more a reflection of the need or wish to engage socially with a companion animal. The mere presence (often unconscious or unintended) does however exert its influence on affect as well. In the presence of a companion animal NA decreased. This could be due to the stress-buffering effect of companion animals.

This study aids in disentangling the beneficial effects of companion animals. The results are also relevant for Animal Assisted Interventions using companion animals, suggesting that the interaction with the companion animal (e.g. passive or active) can be implemented in accordance with the goal of the intervention (e.g. reducing NA or increasing PA).