

“He was like, my ride or die”: Sexual and Gender Minority Emerging Adults’ Perspectives on Living With Pets During the Transition to Adulthood

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Shelby E. McDonald¹ , Angela Matijczak¹ , Nicole Nicotera² ,
Jennifer W. Applebaum³ , Liza Kremer², Grace Natoli⁴,
Ryan O’Ryan⁴, Laura J. Booth¹, Jennifer L. Murphy¹ ,
Camie A. Tomlinson¹ , and Shanna K. Kattari⁵ 

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the benefits and risks associated with living with companion animals during the transition to adulthood among 117 sexual and gender minority (SGM) emerging adults living in the U.S. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using template analysis. Thematic analysis identified several risks (caregiver burden, pets as barriers to relationships, animal-related psychological stress) and benefits (pets as a buffer to stress, pets as social capital, pets as a coping mechanism for mental health, and pets as identity and purpose) associated with living with pets. Our results suggest that pets may influence SGM emerging adult identity development and related wellbeing by facilitating feelings of belongingness, positive self-regard, and purpose; promoting social interactions; and providing emotional support and comfort to cope with stress. However, pets, and their associated care, were also a source of caregiving burden and psychological stress. We discuss practice and policy implications and directions for future research.

Keywords

minority stress, pets, human-animal interaction, LGBTQ, coping

Approximately 56% of U.S. emerging adults live with at least one pet, with dogs and cats being the most prevalent (Applebaum, Peek, & Zsembik, 2020). One reason for the popularity of living with pets is that they are frequently portrayed as beneficial to human health and psychological well-being (Morgan et al., 2020). Research links pet ownership and relationships with pets (e.g., attachment, bonds, caretaking) with increased physical activity (Christian et al., 2013; Dall et al., 2017; Levine et al., 2013; Potter & Sartore-Baldwin, 2019), stress reduction (Beetz et al., 2012; Cardoso et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2009; Nagasawa et al., 2009), and higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy at multiple stages of human development (McConnell et al., 2011; Schulz et al., 2020; Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995).

Although pet ownership is common among emerging adults, there has been minimal empirical attention regarding the mechanisms through which living with companion animals impacts human health and wellbeing during this developmental phase (Graham et al., 2019; Piper & Uttley, 2019). A study of

emerging adult university students identified that the most common motivations for pet-keeping were to combat loneliness and to assist in coping with hard times (Staats et al., 2008). A recent qualitative study examining the role of dogs in emerging adulthood development found that having a dog provided young people with a sense of stability, autonomy, and

¹School of Social Work, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA

²Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver, CO, USA

³Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

⁴Department of Psychology, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA

⁵School of Social Work, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

Corresponding Author:

Shelby E. McDonald, PhD, School of Social Work, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1000 Floyd Avenue, Richmond, VA 23284, USA.
Email: smcdonald3@vcu.edu

responsibility (Graham et al., 2019). The authors of this study hypothesize that these benefits of pet ownership are especially appealing because the emerging adulthood transition is marked by instability and emergent autonomy. Indeed, there is evidence that strong bonds with pets are associated with less loneliness and reduced social anxiety among emerging adults (Siebenbruner, 2019). However, these benefits may vary as a function of an individual's social context and resources. Graham et al. (2019) identified several negative aspects of pet ownership in emerging adulthood, such as financial difficulties (e.g., cost of veterinary care), challenges finding pet-friendly housing, limits to one's spontaneity due to caretaking responsibilities, and relationship conflicts due to the presence of the pet or the pet's behavior.

Emerging adulthood is a challenging period of development often characterized by transition, changes in social relationships, and intense identity exploration; it is also identified as a period of optimism and possibilities (Arnett et al., 2014). The risks and benefits of living with pets may be particularly salient for emerging adults from marginalized backgrounds, such as sexual and gender minority (SGM; e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender identities, or "LGBTQ⁺") young people who experience disproportionate risk for adversity (e.g., employment discrimination, housing insecurity, family and peer rejection) and a broad range of health disparities (Matijczak et al., 2021; McDonald, O'Connor, et al., 2021; McDonald, Murphy, et al., 2021). Several studies link pet ownership and strong bonds with pets to barriers in housing security, healthcare, and personal safety in a variety of population groups (e.g., survivors of domestic violence; Collins et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2018; Power, 2017; Rhoades et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2020). However, few studies have examined how the benefits and risks associated with living with pets may be impacted by the sociocultural context and unique stressors faced by emerging adults who hold marginalized sexual and gender identities. With the goal of identifying population-specific benefits and risks associated with living with companion animals during the transition to adulthood, the current study draws on minority stress (Meyer, 2003; Toomey et al., 2013) and queer theoretical frameworks to qualitatively explore themes in SGM emerging adults' experiences of living with companion animals.

SGM Emerging Adults and Minority Stress

As SGM people navigate new cis-heteronormative social contexts in emerging adulthood (e.g., workplace, college), they are at increased risk for experiencing a number of unique socio-cultural and interpersonal stressors due to oppressive structures and attitudes toward SGM people within those contexts and across other ecological contexts that are central to their social lives. This experience is often termed *minority stress* (Fulginiti et al., 2020; Hall, 2018; Meyer, 2003). Minority stress broadly includes diverse experiences such as identity-based peer and family rejection, discrimination, victimization, and internalized stigma; these stressors can be both overt (e.g.,

interpersonal victimization) and covert (e.g., microaggressions) in nature (Kosciw et al., 2018; Toomey et al., 2013). SGM emerging adults often experience concurrent gender and sexual minority stress that accompanies potential fluidity and shifts in their gender identity, gender expression, and/or sexual orientation during the transition to adulthood (McDonald, O'Connor, et al., 2021; Rieger et al., 2008; Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012). The subtle and overt oppression that they experience can complicate an already challenging developmental period. Due to this accumulation of stress, it is hypothesized that developmental trajectories of SGM youth and emerging adults, and the risk and protective factors that shape their wellbeing, may differ from their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts (Scroggs & Vennum, 2020; Wagaman et al., 2016).

The accumulation of minority stress also contributes to SGM emerging adults' increased risk for a broad range of health and social disparities. Compared to their cisgender and heterosexual peers, SGM youth are more likely to have a negative sense of self and experience hopelessness and psychosocial development difficulties (Potoczniak et al., 2007; Saewyc et al., 2008; Safren & Pantalone, 2006; Wagaman et al., 2016). SGM emerging adults are also more likely to experience psychological (e.g., internalizing behavior symptoms, suicidal ideation; Liu & Mustanski, 2012; Mustanski et al., 2016), behavioral (e.g., substance use and dependence, risky behaviors; Dank et al., 2015; Mustanski et al., 2016), and physical health problems (e.g., obesity; Paul & Monahan, 2019). Collectively and interactively, these stressors and their effects may influence emerging adult outcomes such as the ability to secure stable housing (Cochran et al., 2002; Durso & Gates, 2012), gain and maintain employment (Ream & Forge, 2014; Sears & Mallory, 2011), and attain educational goals (Aragon et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2013). As such, it is important that researchers avoid the assumption of comparable effects of pet ownership across SGM and non-SGM populations and investigate population-specific aspects of human-animal bonds among SGM emerging adults.

SGM Emerging Adults, Social Support, and Animal Companionship

Several studies identify social support and belongingness as important factors in SGM identity development and resilience (Chakrapani et al., 2017; Doan Van et al., 2019; Ehlke et al., 2020; Friedman & Morgan, 2009; Wagaman et al., 2016). Prior research links a higher sense of belongingness and number of confidants to decreases in depression and enhanced self-esteem and life satisfaction in SGM populations (McLaren, 2009; McLaren et al., 2008; Vincke & Van Heeringen, 2002). Given prior evidence that SGM adults consider pets to be "chosen family" and confidants, it is not surprising that several recent studies link pet ownership and other aspects of human animal interaction (HAI) with risk and resilience in this population (Putney, 2014). For example, two studies indicate that both pet ownership and positive engagement with pets help

to mitigate associations between familial victimization and psychological stress in SGM samples (Riggs et al., 2018; Rosenberg et al., 2020). In addition, a recent study of 134 SGM emerging adults found evidence of an indirect effect of exposure to SGM microaggressions on personal hardiness (an indicator of interpersonal resilience) via HAI (i.e., attachment and emotional bonds with pets; McDonald, Murphy, et al., 2021). Specifically, experiences with microaggressions were associated with increases in HAI; in turn, increases in HAI were associated with higher levels of personal hardiness among these youth.

Although there is a persistent narrative that portrays pets as social relationships capable of improving human health and promoting positive development, empirical evidence of these benefits is limited, inconsistent across studies, and often correlational in nature (Purewal et al., 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2021). A number of studies have reported no associations between pet ownership or other aspects of HAI and human health and development across a variety of samples (e.g., Hill et al., 2020; Mathers et al., 2010); moreover, some studies suggest positive correlations between bonds with pets and various forms of mental health symptomatology (Antonacopoulos & Puchyl, 2010; Peacock et al., 2012). Although recent studies link aspects of HAI with SGM resilience, there is also evidence that relying on companion animals for emotional comfort may exacerbate the impact of SGM stressors on mental health. Matijczak et al. (2021) found that exposure to interpersonal microaggressions was positively associated with depressive symptoms when SGM participants reported medium or high levels of comfort derived from pets. However, the relationship between interpersonal microaggressions and depressive symptoms was not significant when SGM individuals reported low levels of comfort from pets. Findings from this study suggest that a high degree of reliance on pets for emotional comfort may exacerbate depressive symptoms for individuals experiencing this type of SGM stressor.

Queer Theory and SGM Identities

To date, there has been little research focusing on the experiences of SGM emerging adults and their nuanced experiences with HAI (McDonald, O'Connor, et al., 2021; McDonald, Murphy, et al., 2021), and none of it employs a queer framing. Queer theorists argue that gender and sexual orientation identities are fluid and shift throughout development (Better, 2013; Kattari, 2019; McDonald, 2017), with each SGM emerging adult having their own, unique perspective on their own identities, language used, and interactions with the world at large. Queer theory supports SGM individuals in naming their own identities and experiences, rather than trying to fit into existing socially constructed boxes that do not fit their lived realities. Instead of asking SGM emerging adults to report their lived experiences through quantitative research that often uses scales that were not developed or validated on this population, qualitative studies are needed to identify and center SGM populations' unique experiences, beliefs, and

perspectives regarding animal companionship in emerging adulthood. In addition, the dearth of evidence on the benefits of HAI for SGM emerging adults as well as the inconclusive findings on the relationship between microaggressions, depression, and HAI among this population suggests the need for deeper understanding of how HAI may or may not be beneficial to SGM emerging adults.

Current Study

Drawing from queer and minority stress theoretical frameworks, the current study addresses gaps in the literature on emerging adult risk and resilience by qualitatively exploring themes in SGM emerging adults' experiences of living with companion animals during the transition to adulthood. Our research questions were as follows:

1. In what ways does living with a companion animal support wellbeing among SGM emerging adults?
2. In what ways does living with a companion animal pose risks to wellbeing among SGM emerging adults?

Method

Participants

The qualitative data reported in this paper reflect a subset of participants from a larger, longitudinal, mixed methods study on associations between stressors, supports, and wellbeing among SGM youth. Data collection occurred between April 2019 and March 2020 in an urban city in the southeastern region of the United States. The larger study was reviewed and approved by the Virginia Commonwealth University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Inclusion criteria included: being 15–21 years of age, self-identifying as LGBTQ⁺, and understanding spoken English. Living with a companion animal in the past year was not a requirement to participate in the overarching study, but those who had lived with a pet in the past year were eligible to complete an interview regarding their experiences with pets. Participants were recruited in a variety of ways. We partnered with five local agencies with LGBTQ⁺ inclusive services to distribute recruitment materials (i.e., flyers, handouts). Project staff also posted materials to community boards at local businesses, residential buildings, and recreational centers. Electronic recruitment materials were distributed via local university and community partner agencies' email listservs and social media platforms including Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. In addition, project staff recruited participants in person by attending meetings and events held by student and local organizations that focused on the LGBTQ⁺ community (e.g., LGBTQ⁺ Pride events). Interested individuals contacted the project coordinators, who conducted a screening call to confirm eligibility and to schedule an interview date.

For the current qualitative study, we restricted our sample to emerging adult participants (ages 18–21 years) who had lived with a pet in the past 12 months and who completed the qualitative interview. In addition, we restricted our analysis to those

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants and Companion Animals ($N = 117$).

Variable Name	Variable Categories	n	%			
Racial/ethnic identity	Asian/Asian American	2	1.7			
	Black/African American	17	14.5			
	Latina/Latino/Latinx	7	6.0			
	Multiracial/Mixed Race	15	12.8			
	South Asian/Pacific Islander	1	0.9			
	White	74	63.3			
	Prefer to self-describe	1	0.9			
	Agender	4	3.4			
	Cisgender man	7	6.0			
	Cisgender woman	51	43.6			
Gender identity	Genderfluid	1	0.9			
	Genderqueer	5	4.3			
	Nonbinary	10	8.5			
	Transgender man	15	12.8			
	Transgender woman	1	0.9			
	Not sure/questioning/prefer to self-describe	4	3.4			
	Multiple identifications	19	16.2			
	Asexual	2	1.7			
	Bisexual	28	23.9			
	Demisexual	1	0.9			
Sexual orientation	Gay	7	6.0			
	Lesbian	16	13.7			
	Pansexual	11	9.4			
	Queer	15	13.7			
	Straight/heterosexual	2	1.7			
	Multiple identifications	35	29.9			
Lived With		Primary Caretaker ^b		Topic of Interview		
Pet Type ^a	n	%	n	%	n	%
Bird	3	2.6	3	100.0	3	2.6
Cat	67	57.3	36	52.9	52	44.5
Dog	75	64.1	33	44.0	56	47.9
Fish	10	8.5	9	90.0	4	3.4
Lagomorph	8	6.8	4	50.0	2	1.7
Reptile	4	3.4	3	75.0	1	0.9
Rodent	9	7.7	6	66.7	5	4.3
Tarantula	1	0.9	0	0	0	0

^aParticipants reported information on up to three pets. The categories are not mutually exclusive.

^bPercentages are based on total number of participants that lived with the specific pet type.

who participated in our study prior to the start of local COVID-19 restrictions (March 17, 2020). We anticipated that the COVID-19 restrictions (e.g., social distancing, shelter-in-place, business closures) would impact the degree to which people were home with pets and compromise the transferability (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Shenton, 2004) of the data and emergent themes to SGM emerging adults within the context of a pandemic. This yielded a sample size of 117 participants. Demographic information for participants can be found in Table 1. The average age of participants was 19.32 years ($SD = 1.13$). Approximately 37% of our sample reported a racial/ethnic minority identity, 49.6% of our participants reported a gender minority identity, and 98.3% reported a sexual minority identity. All of our participants

were currently living in the U.S. at the time of participation; 10 participants were born outside of the U.S. (e.g., Australia, Pakistan, Russia). Participants were able to identify a maximum of three companion animals with whom they lived in the past year. Most participants (96.6%) reported living with at least one dog or cat in their household; other pet species reported included fish, rodents, lagomorphs, reptiles, birds, and a tarantula. Approximately 57% of participants were the primary caretaker of at least one of the pets with whom they reported living within the past year. Further, 97.4% of our sample stated they consider at least one of their pets as a family member, with only three participants indicating that they did not consider their pet to be a member of the family.

Table 2. Qualitative Interview Question Guide.

For those who lived with a pet or companion animal in the last 12 months:
1. Do you have a pet in mind? Tell me about the pet.
2. Talk about your relationship with the pet / animal you have lived with.
3. What does your relationship with this pet mean to you?
4. When you think about the impact that the pet has on you, how would you describe that?
5. When you think about your journey as an LGBTQ ⁺ young person, what role does the pet play, if any, in that journey?
6. When you think about other relationships in your life, what impact does the pet have on those relationships?
7. Have you faced any barriers or challenges to having pets in your life? If so, talk about those.
8. Have you experienced anything that has helped or supported your ability to have pets in your life? If so, talk about those.
9. Is there anything else that you think it would be important to share with us about your experience of having a pet or living in a household with a pet?

Design and Procedures

For those who met eligibility criteria, we offered a choice of completing an interview in a private location on a university campus or in a private space at a community partner agency. A majority of interviews (108) were conducted in a private office space within a university building and nine took place in a community agency. Each interview was conducted by one of 11 research assistants (four undergraduate students, seven graduate students). Ninety-seven percent of the interviews were conducted by project staff who were emerging adults and identified as a sexual and/or gender minority; 3% of interviews were conducted by emerging adults who did not identify as a member of the LGBTQ⁺ community. All interviewers received extensive training prior to conducting any interviews; this involved reviewing a PowerPoint presentation on LGBTQ⁺ identities and interviewing techniques and role-playing with a project coordinator or trained team member. Additionally, all interviewers were provided with a detailed packet that described interview procedures and were instructed to bring this to every interview. There was no or minimal (e.g., a research assistant may have recognized someone from a community event but did not know them) preexisting relationship with the participants; project staff did not conduct interviews with participants with whom they were familiar due to immersion in the local LGBTQ⁺ community. Interviewers wore name tags with their name and pronouns during their interactions with participants, but did not disclose whether or not they identified as LGBTQ⁺ unless they were asked by the participant and felt comfortable sharing that information.

Interview procedures. At the beginning of each interview, research assistants explained the purpose of the study and completed the informed consent process. All participants began the

interview process by completing a quantitative survey. Participants who indicated they had lived with a pet in the past year were then invited to complete a qualitative interview. Research assistants began the qualitative portion of the study by explaining the interview process and asking permission to record the interview via an audio-recording device. The qualitative interview consisted of nine questions related to the participant's experience of living with a pet (see Table 2). These questions were developed by the principal investigator in consultation with two LGBTQ⁺ identified social work faculty with experience working with LGBTQ⁺ youth and emerging adults. Moreover, research assistants who identified as LGBTQ⁺ emerging adults and representatives from our community partnerships were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the questions, which were refined based on their feedback. At the beginning of the interview, participants were instructed to speak about the pet(s) they felt closest to when answering the interview questions. After the interview was completed, the research assistant provided the participant with monetary compensation (\$50). On average, interviews took approximately 10 minutes to complete. IRB-approved crisis protocol was established to provide guidance if participants expressed statements regarding harm or threat of harm to themselves or others, potential suicidal ideation or mental distress, unmet basic needs (e.g., food, shelter), and animal cruelty. No disclosures required mandated reporting. All participants were offered a resource list of LGBTQ⁺, mental health, and animal welfare supports in the area at the end of the interview.

Analytic Procedures

All audio-recordings were later transcribed by one of seven research assistants; a second research assistant checked the transcribed interview against the audio recording to confirm all information was accurate and any identifying information was removed. The principal investigator conducted regular spot-checks of the transcriptions each week. These processes were used to monitor and promote fidelity of the interview procedures. Transcripts were analyzed in ATLAS.ti (Version 7) using the process of template analysis (Brooks et al., 2015; King, 2012), which guided our analytic strategy. This method is applicable to a wide range of epistemologies and involves a series of analytic steps through which the researcher codes data and develops a series of templates (King, 2012). The initial template can either be developed from a priori codes derived from the study's research questions, theory, or from the data itself via the process of in-vivo coding (Brooks et al., 2015; King, 2012). In our study, the template was built from three processes, each of which was completed by different research team members to avoid bias. In the first process, two of the team members independently created a template of a priori codes suggested from the literature. Then, two other team members created a template of a priori codes suggested by a summary of the qualitative interviews. The third process involved four team members in-vivo coding a total of 24 randomly selected transcripts from the 117 transcripts that

comprised the data set. In-vivo coding involves creating codes taken directly from the participant's own words (Saldana, 2012). This third process was completed to ensure that the voices of the participants were prominent within the main template. Members of the team kept reflexivity memos throughout the coding process to record how they were interpreting codes and to inform group discussions when disagreements emerged.

Next, in-vivo codes were refined to create a list of salient codes found across the randomly selected transcripts. The main template was then developed by comparing and contrasting the three templates (codes suggested from the literature, codes suggested from summary, and in-vivo codes) and generating a template to apply to the entire data set. This combined template was then applied to 40 randomly selected transcripts. The coding team consisted of four students and each transcript was coded by two coders to ensure that the template was comprehensive (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .71$). The coding team then met with the principal investigator (first author) and third author to discuss necessary modifications to the template. Three of the original four coders then proceeded to code the remaining transcripts (two coders per transcript) in two batches of approximately 40 transcripts, modifying the template between batches to incorporate new codes so as to ensure that the voices of all the participants were echoed in the final template and study findings. The fourth coder then merged all coded transcripts together and resolved code discrepancies. The final template consisted of 54 codes; inter-rater reliability was .81.

Identification of themes. Next, we examined the data for saturation and frequency of each code across interviews, ensuring that retained codes were reported by several participants and were not reflective of outlier experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first, second, and third author met to determine commonalities among codes. We used an inductive analysis approach to identify themes (Terry et al., 2017). Codes were classified into thematic groups based on common patterns in the data and were triangulated with existing literature on HAI science and emerging adulthood development to further support the classification of thematic groups (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Results

All participants in the sample described positive aspects of living with pets. Across 117 transcripts, segments reflecting positive aspects of relationships with pets were coded 1,678 times. Obstacles associated with living with pets were coded 318 times across transcripts, with 88.9% of the sample describing some form of stress or risk associated with living with pets.

Research Question 1—Pets as Supports to Wellbeing

Theme 1: Pets as a buffer to life stressors. Nearly all participants (98.9%) described how their pets helped them cope with general life stressors. Many elaborated on the mechanisms through

which their pet assisted in their coping process, highlighting the role of the pet's ability to provide emotional support (45.3%), facilitate positive emotions, and assist in their ability to regulate negative emotions (65.8%). Relatedly, many participants recounted how their pets provide comfort in stressful or uncertain times (57.3%); the importance of pets' ability to provide physical affection and touch was often discussed (53.8%). In addition, many participants highlighted that they appreciated the consistency, companionship, and stable form of unconditional love that characterized their relationship with their pet (72.6%).

Subtheme: SGM Minority Stress. Although many youths spoke to pets as a buffer to general life stressors, a majority (73.5%) also provided rich examples of how pets were unique and valued forms of support in the context of specific minority stressors. Most often, these descriptions included examples of how their pet helped them cope with identity-based discrimination, rejection, and microaggressions from peers, friends, and/or family members and/or contributed to their resilience as an LGBTQ⁺ person. For example, one participant described:

A lot of times I felt very, very isolated. Uh, um, my parents didn't find out until this year that I was gay, um, but my dog has always been there at points where my mom would say really nasty comments about lesbians or really nasty comments about gay people, um, it would really, really upset me, so my dog has always been there to be able to comfort me, um. Also in life as well, at points where people would say really nasty things about gay people either online or in person, she's been there too, where I can fall back on and feel, feel like—cause there are points where you just don't wanna talk about the issue... So my dog being someone that I don't have to talk to, I can just be with her, and she can just comfort me some, has been very helpful in my journey.—20-year-old, lesbian, nonbinary participant

The role of pets as a non-judgmental and affirming confidant, and the importance of having this support, was also evident across many interviews (60.0%), particularly in the context of the coming-out process, which is exemplified in the following two quotes:

More so just comfort. My family isn't the most accepting of me being trans, let alone when I came out in high school as a lesbian, because I liked girls, but I wasn't out as trans at that point. So, when I would get into arguments with my parents or when I would have just like, a rough day at school, I would have my dog and she'd be there to comfort me. We'd go outside and play.—19-year-old, heterosexual, transgender man

Um so I'd say in like conversations with, I'd say it's more of a support thing, when I went home and I had the conversation with my parents and I was like "yo, I'm a lesbian,"... my dog was sitting next to me and like, they are like, a diffuser of situations. Oh, we're having this really intense conversation and then like [Dog Name] sighs because he's sleepy and it's like oh there's that dog that we all love. Um, and also just like there

are a lot of stressors like growing up as an LGBTQ⁺ kid and like things that you like experience that not everyone does and like just like ways that your identity is questioned and invalidated and I think like if I would've come home and like not had dogs to hug, my life would look very different . . . it's just really nice to be able to hug this animal and be like no matter what I'm just this dog's human, you know?—21-year-old, who identified with several sexualities and gender identities (i.e., lesbian, queer, genderfluid, cisgender woman)

Theme 2: HAI as a mechanism for coping with mental health. The challenges of coping with mental health symptoms, particularly anxiety, depression, and related suicide ideation, were prevalent in participants' narratives about their relationship with their pet (41.9%). For example, one participant stated:

Um, and I just felt like, really like I wanted to die in that moment, . . . he, um, like he relies on me so much, like for caregiving, that I felt like if I died there wasn't going to be anyone left to care for him. And so um, it just, like, kept me from acting on my thoughts and um, I just felt like he needed me so I couldn't um, think those thoughts anymore.—21-year-old, cisgender woman, who identified with multiple sexualities (i.e. lesbian, bisexual, queer), speaking about a cat

Another participant explained that:

She's [dog] um, helped me be able to get out of the house on a daily basis when I'm depressed, and actually feel like going to school, and going shopping, 'cause I know I need to get things for her, and coincidentally get things for myself. And just feeding her in the morning, feeding her at night reminds me to eat and take my medication.—21-year-old, bisexual and queer, transgender man

As demonstrated in the previous quote, many participants identified that the sense of stability in routine and sense of purpose that caring for the pet provided, played a significant role in developing healthy behaviors and overcoming mental health challenges.

Theme 3: Pets as purpose. The sense of purpose derived from caring for pets emerged in more than half (59.0%) of the interviews. Key features of the role of pets in self-purpose included their ability to facilitate a sense of feeling needed (16.2%) and a sense of belongingness (41.9%), which often manifested from the responsibility and structure needed to care for the pet. In addition, participants often described scenarios that exemplified how pets contributed to self-efficacy. For example, one participant stated:

Um, she gives me something to like, like every morning when I wake up and I like, go downstairs and I let her out and stuff, she gives me something to like take care of, some kind of sense of like, almost like, not mothering obviously, but ya know, caretaking or something. I feel like I'm responsible for her and she relies on me so it makes me feel kind of needed. It's my, like, job, in a nice

way. I like having a task to do.—19-year-old, lesbian, cisgender woman, speaking about a rabbit

Theme 4: Pets as an aspect of identity. Participants' accounts of how pets helped them develop a sense of purpose often overlapped with the role of pets as a part of the person's identity and positive self-regard (39.3%), which emerged as another theme in our data. For example, a participant stated:

Cause I think I have trouble sometimes seeing myself as a good person, and like, having an animal in my life where that's all I am to her is a good person who loves her kind of helps me reframe how I think about myself.—20-year-old, bisexual, cisgender woman, speaking about a cat

In addition to describing the pets as a core feature of personal self, pets were described as an aspect of identity (10.3%), particularly in the context of being a family member (21.4%) and, in some cases, the participant's child (18.8%). One participant explained, "I think he's definitely family. I think he's definitely like a part of me; he's just a different extension of me" (18-year-old, pansexual, transgender man, speaking about a dog). Another stated, "It's almost kind of like a personality trait of me that I, like, have this cat" (21-year-old, pansexual, transgender man). Sometimes this sense of identity was described as reciprocal in nature. One participant noted, "Um, I think I was definitely like, his [cat's] person. Like, among anyone in the house, like . . . um, like he'd always like, sleep in my bed. And like, be at my side and stuff. He was like, my ride or die" (20-year-old, bisexual, nonbinary participant).

Theme 5: Promoting social capital. A majority of participants (65.8%) also described living with pets in relation to social capital, often noting the role of animals in facilitating positive relationships, interpersonal trust, and building social networks. Pets were identified as a helpful conversation topic that facilitated healthy family interactions (18.8%). One person stated:

Living in a household with a pet is a relief . . . in my household, there's a lot of tension. There's a lot of emotions being directed from people to people, and just having the cat provides, like, something to talk about other than the more heavy-handed subjects. Um, it provides, like, a comedic relief, and overall, I think, the presence of my cat, it just, also allowed some of my family members to bring out their more tender sides to the surface.

—21-year-old, pansexual, nonbinary participant

Participants also described how pets helped them navigate new types of social relationships that are typical in emerging adulthood, such as romantic partners, roommates, and new peers. Many of these accounts suggested that pets helped youth to find common ground with others and served as a conversation starter and a means to diffuse tension (32.5%). This is exemplified in the following two quotes:

I find that um, pets tend to be a great way to start conversations with other people who you otherwise might not be able to. Like

my current boyfriend, our first conversation was about cats, and as someone who was like, newly out, and newly in the queer community, having a comfortable topic that isn't dealing with uh, sexual identity, sexual orientation or gender identity, is very helpful in navigating the community.—18-year-old, bisexual, genderqueer participant

[Pets] can sort of be diffusers of tension um, because they're, like I said, neutral and happy. Just oblivious to problems. Um, so they can defuse tension whether it's with my roommates, um, it can be a bonding experience with several people. Um, and it can—the same thing with my family.—20-year-old, lesbian, nonbinary participant, speaking about a dog and cat

Research Question 2—Pets as Risks to Wellbeing

Theme 6: Caregiving burden. Participants (63.2%) provided robust accounts of how caregiving was a burden that impacted their life, including access to basic needs. Within this theme, subthemes emerged including: (a) the role of pets in contributing to economic insecurity (42.7%), (b) pets as a barrier to accessing housing (32.4%), and (c) generalized stress associated with being a pet's caregiver (32.5%). Meeting pets' needs, such as medical and behavioral health issues, was a notable concern in the context of managing finances. For example, one person stated, "Him and most of the other pets I've had have had some pretty severe medical issues, so that was like, kind of like emotionally and financially difficult" (20-year-old, bisexual, nonbinary participant, speaking about a cat). This also created caregiving burdens that negatively influenced time management. Another person explained:

It's also like, now she needs a lot more attention than she used to. She has to go to the bathroom frequently. Um, she has to take her insulin twice a day. She always has to have food, like, because she's losing so much weight, because of the diabetes.... She always has to have like, more than enough bowls of water because she drinks so much.—20-year-old, lesbian, nonbinary participant, speaking about a dog

In some cases, financial burdens associated with pets required young people to navigate and rely on relationships with family members for financial assistance, even when those relationships were unhealthy, complicated, or generally negative. In addition, some participants expressed that stress related to the lack of an alternative caregiver for their pet (4.3%) was a contributing factor to their sense of caregiving burden, such as the following example:

Sometimes it was difficult if I needed to leave or like go out of town.... you have to make arrangements and that can be stressful. Or just leaving her alone for too long obviously, like there'd be some days where I'd have to be um, gone for like a while,... I worked basically every day.—20-year-old, gay, transgender man, speaking about a dog

Theme 7: Psychological stress due to animal-related trauma. More than half of the sample (52.1%) described psychological stress

associated with loss, potential loss, and/or harm to their pet; in some cases, this was related to traumatic (10.3%), or potentially traumatic, experiences. Although these experiences often overlapped with Theme 6, they emerged as a distinct finding in our thematic analysis. Across interviews, there were a wide variety of situations and experiences that contributed to psychological stress, including injuries to pets by other animals in the community (e.g., off-leash dogs), animal cruelty by family members, and acute and anticipatory grief related to animal death and/or medical issues (47.86%). One participant recounted:

When he [cat] was having those health issues, ... I had a lot of panic over whether I could, like, financial issues, but also like, the thought of losing him was just really unbearable, and um like, I rearranged my whole schedule and my um, life, so that I could take him to the vet immediately. And I had a lot of panic and anxiety over that situation.

—21-year-old, cisgender woman, who identified with multiple sexualities (i.e., lesbian, bisexual, queer)

Some participants highlighted that they ruminated on thoughts related to when their pet would die, and how they would adjust to that life transition (e.g., "I think too much about them [dogs] dying, I wish I didn't. That really scares me," 20-year-old, pansexual and queer nonbinary participant). Participants' accounts of psychological stress often included feelings of guilt and shame, particularly as it pertained to not being able to meet pets' needs and/or protect or care for them. For example, when discussing relinquishment of a pet, one participant stated:

I moved in with my sibling and they already had two cats, and like, the landlord um, didn't really want more than two, so um, and I didn't want her to go to the bathroom in the new house that had a lot of carpet and furniture that was provided to us. So, um, I had to get rid of her, and it was a really hard process of trying to rehome her, and um, find someone else who would love her as much as I did.—21-year-old, who identified with several sexualities and gender identities (i.e., pansexual, queer, genderqueer, nonbinary), speaking about a cat

Interestingly, one participant expressed struggles reconciling the realization of the intersection between their own trauma and that of their pet's:

My dad was abusive, and um, he would sometimes take the anger on the animal, and I was not aware of that until a later age.... [it] terrifies me to know, like, that would be inflicted on an animal. And my animal, specifically. So to know that was happening when I was, like, younger and then to know, oh my bird isn't like, people wanna hold it but like, he just doesn't like to be picked up. So, to know, like, oh, birds have trauma too.—20-year-old, lesbian, cisgender woman

Theme 8: Pets as an obstacle to building relationships. Nearly a quarter of our sample (24.8%) described living with pets as

an obstacle to building and maintaining relationships with peers, family members, intimate partners, and/or roommates. In this context, pets' behavioral issues and personalities were often referenced. One participant stated that:

Because a lot of people see how scared [the dogs] are, and then for some reason—which, I don't get this, but for some reason, they start being hostile towards them . . . And, I realize it's, like, an insecurity thing for that person, but I've literally had like friends be like, they haven't straight out said they don't come to my house anymore because my dogs don't like them, but it's very like, evident that, the fact that my dogs are scared of them, really bothers them.—20-year-old, lesbian, cisgender woman

Other people's allergies to pets were also noted as a factor that caused difficulties and/or barriers to relationships. One person explained, "I'm seeing somebody right now who's allergic to cats, and they always push my cat off the bed and shut it out of the room, and I'm like, can't be long term, sorry, cat comes with me" (21-year-old, lesbian, cisgender woman). Another participant expressed that, due to their bond with their pet, they expect other people to adjust their behavior and/or compromise their wellbeing when socializing at their home. Specifically, they stated:

I think I'm just skeptical of anyone who says they're allergic to cats now. Because I'm allergic to cats, and I have a cat. And so I'm just like, I think you just need to power through it. They're like, oh I can't come over . . . I'm like, everyone in this house is allergic to cats, so I'm gonna need you to take some Claritin.—21-year-old transgender man, who identified with several sexualities (i.e., bisexual, queer, asexual)

In addition, several participants indicated that if someone did not like their pet, they were more likely to be wary of them or avoid them altogether.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first qualitative study aimed at understanding how relationships with pets contribute to resilience and risk in SGM emerging adults. Our analysis was guided by two research questions: 1) in what ways does living with a companion animal support wellbeing among SGM emerging adults? and 2) in what ways does living with a companion animal pose risks to wellbeing among SGM emerging adults? With respect to our first research question, we found five themes (percentage of participants who experienced each): pets as a buffer to stress (98.9%), pets as a coping mechanism for mental health (41.9%), pets as purpose (59%), pets as identity (39.3%), and pets as social capital (65.8%). Three themes emerged in relation to research question two: caregiver burden (63.2%), animal-related psychological stress (52.1%), and pets as barriers to relationships (24.8%).

The results of our study support a central hypothesis in the HAI field: in the context of past and/or current adversity, aspects of HAI, such as bonds and attachment, may confer

unique and pronounced benefits in relation to human health and wellbeing (Hawkins et al., 2019; Matijczak et al., 2021). Our work also extends much of the literature on HAI to date and provides evidence that overt and subtle stressors that are disproportionately prevalent among marginalized and/or minority groups and their effects on emerging adult transitions may be exacerbated by several aspects of the human-animal bond and multispecies cohabitation. Consideration for the potential role of pet-related stressors on emerging adult development has been relatively absent to date (Graham et al., 2018; Matijczak et al., 2021). Although all of the participants spoke to positive aspects of living with pets, nearly 90% endorsed related stress. This high endorsement rate indicates the prevalence of potential risks associated with pet ownership in this population and the importance of accounting for the intersection of HAI-related supports and stressors in practice and research with SGM emerging adult communities.

Pets and Wellbeing

Participants' accounts of the mechanisms through which their pets provided support to their wellbeing mirrored many of the hypotheses of the HAI field to date. The most prevalent theme in our data was the role of pets in buffering stress, including SGM-specific adversities. Research on HAI in both child and adult populations indicates that pets provide psychological and health benefits by aiding in regulating stress through emotional comfort and social support (Beetz et al., 2012; Pendry & Vandagriff, 2019). It is this stress-buffering effect of HAI that may help to protect against negative affect, emotional dysregulation, and related mental health outcomes (e.g., depression; Pendry & Vandagriff, 2020); emerging adults in our sample recognized these beneficial aspects of HAI and how their pet(s) influenced their ability to cope with various forms of stress. Thus, for most participants, our data suggest that time spent with pets reflects a healthy coping behavior with the capacity to promote wellbeing. This finding is promising given SGM emerging adults are at greater risk of engaging in risky and dangerous behaviors (e.g., unprotected sex, binge drinking, substance use, suicide, non-suicidal self-injury) as a means of coping with SGM-related adversity and other stressors, particularly in the context of low social support (Gonzales & Henning-Smith, 2017; Salvatore & Daftary-Kapur, 2020).

Relatedly, participants recognized the role of HAI in coping with mental health challenges. Although the psychophysiological benefits of HAI were often referenced in the context of coping, participants also provided practical examples of how pet-related responsibilities, such as feeding, walking, and general care-taking activities, offered stability of routine that fostered healthy coping and mental wellness. Our finding that pet-related routines helped support medication management also mirrors prior studies demonstrating that youths' involvement and responsibility in caring for animals and household pets may translate to better management of their own health needs, particularly those requiring routines like daily medication (Maranda & Gupta, 2016; Maranda et al., 2015). Our

findings also mirror those of previous studies that identify the importance of pets as non-judgmental confidants and stable sources of emotional support; multiple studies suggest that relationships and bonds with companion animals may help to ameliorate loneliness, remedy negative impacts of social isolation (Gee et al., 2017; Graham & Glover, 2014; Krause-Parell et al., 2019; Wells, 2019; Wood et al., 2017), and promote social connection with other humans (McNicholas & Collis, 2000; McNicholas et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2005).

An unanticipated finding was the importance of pets for SGM emerging adults' sense of purpose (Theme 3), which emerged in more than half of our interviews. This theme is related to Theme 2, in that participants reported feeling that their pet depended on them and the responsibilities associated with pet caretaking gave them a sense of purpose which helped them cope with mental health symptoms. The work of Hill and colleagues (2016) underscores the importance of these findings. They found that emerging adults' purpose in life scores were associated with qualities that may be protective in relation to issues with poor self-image and depression. This is important given that SGM people are more likely to have a negative sense of self and experience hopelessness (Potocznak et al., 2007; Saewyc et al., 2008; Safren & Pantalone, 2006). In addition, the theme *pets as purpose* crossed over with the theme *pets as an aspect of identity*. This intersection resonates with quantitative research suggesting that among emerging adults, identity and purpose are significantly intertwined elements of the "self" (Sumner et al., 2015). It is notable however, that prior research suggests purpose is related to more aspects of wellbeing than identity (Sumner et al., 2015). Considered within the context of this other research, our themes, *pets as a coping mechanism for mental health*, *pets as purpose*, and *pets as identity*, suggest that companion animals may be protective for SGM emerging adults' wellbeing. Further HAI research with SGM emerging adults is needed to ascertain this suggestion.

Our findings also support prior HAI studies documenting the importance of pets in promoting social capital among humans (Wood et al., 2017). In today's society, having a pet can be a way to connect and engage with others; animal companions are a popular topic that offer a foundation to begin a conversation or make small talk, to meet up at the dog park, or encourage friends to come over to play with your rabbit while you hang out. However, given some of the challenges of having a pet (such as costs and potential need for parental or roommate consent), not all young people have access to a pet. Additionally, given all of the benefits of being around animals (Graham et al., 2019; Siebenbruner, 2019), it makes sense that having a pet could be seen as a form of social capital. Indeed, pet ownership has been associated with higher social capital, particularly among adult dog-owners (Graham & Glover, 2014; Wood et al., 2017). Further, there is evidence that individuals are perceived as more friendly and trustworthy when in the presence of a companion animal (Guéguen & Cicotti, 2008; Wells & Perrine, 2001). With many SGM emerging adults having experienced discrimination and violence (Kosciw et al., 2018; Toomey et al., 2013), being disconnected

from their family of origin, and/or experiencing a lack of secure housing (Durso & Gates, 2012), being able to have access to a pet (whether their own or having a friend with a pet) could serve as a way to foster connections, develop new friendships and relationships, and diffuse emotional tension in groups of SGM young adults and their friends. This was reflected in our findings, in that participants reported pets serving as a safe topic for conversation with family and peers and a shared activity to facilitate interactions with others.

Pets and Risks to Wellbeing

Despite the potential benefits of HAI, our findings support prior research with other vulnerable groups and indicate that difficulties related to caring for and living with pets are salient and influential experiences that have the potential to compromise wellbeing; associated emotional and financial burdens often play a key role in this risk, particularly in the context of already stressful scenarios (Applebaum, Tomlinson, et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2018). As previously discussed, a recent study of SGM emerging adults found that exposure to interpersonal microaggressions was positively associated with depression when participants reported medium or high levels, but not low levels of comfort derived from pets (Matijczak et al., 2021). Results of our thematic analysis indicate several potential explanations for this finding, including the potential intersection of pet attachment with caregiver burden, animal-related trauma, and the impact of pet-related conflicts on human relationships; these factors were not accounted for in the aforementioned study. It is possible that highly attached people experience more burden or social conflicts associated with their dedication to their pet, and that the protective aspects of HAI may be compromised in these situations.

Our results suggest that caregiver burden may influence how emerging adults benefit, or do not benefit, from their bonds with pets. Indeed, more than 60% of our sample recounted salient experiences of caregiver burden. It is well documented that caregiver burden exacerbates psychological distress among those who care for human family members; moreover, caregiver mental health and caregiver burden are strongly associated (Bartolo et al., 2010; de Oliveira et al., 2015). Similar findings have emerged in studies of pet owners. For example, in a study of owners of pets with suspected cancer, Shaevitz et al. (2020) found that caregiver burden correlated with higher stress, greater symptoms of depression, and lower quality of life. It is possible that these associations may be even more pronounced in SGM caregivers of pets, given their disproportionate risk for psychological distress and reduced access to social support and economic resources. Caregiver burden also extends beyond the context of concerns about pets' health. Some pet owners may have unrealistic expectations for their pets, setting them up for disappointment, frustration, and stress. Caring for and accommodating a pet exhibiting problematic behaviors can lead to hardships and resulting negative impacts on wellbeing (Applebaum, Tomlinson, et al., 2020; Buller & Ballantyne, 2020). Our findings suggest that behavioral issues

can become especially salient during stressful times. When emerging adults do not have resources to address the behavior, this can impact access to housing and relationships with other household members, such as partners and roommates.

About one-third of respondents mentioned stressors related to housing. In particular, participants described experiences with, or anxiety about, finding and maintaining pet-friendly housing. Further, some respondents discussed having to get rid of their pets in order to maintain housing. These findings are consistent with previous literature reflecting an association between pet ownership and both actual and perceived housing instability, particularly among those who are economically vulnerable or otherwise marginalized (Graham et al., 2018; Power, 2017; Rose et al., 2020). For those who are unwilling to separate from their pets, inability to access housing could result in homelessness. In some cases, pet-owning individuals experiencing homelessness will remain unhoused and forgo service use in order to avoid separation from their pets, putting themselves into potentially unsafe situations (Kim, 2019; Rhoades et al., 2015). Given the economic burden related to pet ownership among the emerging adult respondents, this could pose a serious concern for housing stability, and subsequently, detrimental impacts on health and wellbeing.

Respondents also discussed pet-related stressors around financial security and independence. Previous research has underscored the risks associated with pet ownership as a consequence of limited social and economic resources, including negative consequences such as the delaying or avoiding of healthcare in order to care for pets (Applebaum, Adams, et al., 2020; Canady & Sansone, 2019). Expenses for pet supplies and care were specifically invoked, such as the financial strain associated with paying for medication and unexpected veterinary bills. Veterinary care is indeed costly, and access can be a challenge for those with limited financial resources (LaVallee et al., 2017). In some cases, an unexpected expense, such as an emergency visit to a veterinarian, could hypothetically limit individuals' ability to afford their own basic needs, like food or medication. In the interest of managing competing expenses when resources are limited, SGM young people may be faced with difficult choices around retaining or relinquishing their pet(s). For those who share a strong bond with their pet or otherwise benefit from the relationship, the loss of a pet via relinquishment or otherwise could result in compromised wellbeing. This aligns with our finding that more than half of our sample experienced psychological stress as a result of animal-related trauma, such as pet relinquishment and loss.

An unexpected finding that emerged from our study was that nearly a quarter of participants reported that their pets were a barrier to the development of peer and family relationships. Our study highlights an underexplored area in emerging adult and HAI research; there have been many studies investigating the mechanisms through which pets may facilitate social interaction and the building of social networks (McNicholas & Collis, 2000; Wood et al., 2017), but few studies have investigated ways in which pets may create stress and disagreement among individuals. To our knowledge, the only study that has

investigated this with an emerging adult population supported our findings in that some participants reported that their pet caused conflict in their relationships, particularly with their romantic partner (Graham et al., 2019). This could be an especially harmful stressor for SGM emerging adults, who are at an increased risk for familial and peer rejection (Kosciw et al., 2013; Rosario & Scrimshaw, 2013). We found that participants typically reported pet behavior and personality as the main reason for the pet's negative impact on their relationships. Considering evidence that finds that SGM individuals are more likely to live in poverty than their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Badgett et al., 2019), it is possible that SGM emerging adults may have limited or reduced access to pet-training and related behavioral services. Thus, one potential support that may be important for SGM pet-owning emerging adults is access to low-cost pet behavioral services. Further studies are needed to understand the mechanisms that may lead to pets negatively impacting relationship development during emerging adulthood.

Limitations

Our study is subject to several limitations. Our sample for the current study was limited to individuals living in or near a specific urban city in a southeastern region of the U.S. Interviews were also conducted in person, which could have potentially limited participation due to prospective participants' ability to find transportation. We also used a variety of recruitment techniques and are unable to assess whether there are sample characteristic differences across recruitment methods. During interviews, participants were asked to focus on a pet that they felt closest to when answering the qualitative questions, which may have limited their ability to speak on their experiences with all pets, if they lived with more than one. Participants may have had strong relationships with multiple pets, and having participants identify one pet for discussion may have limited our ability to see the full spectrum of supports and stressors that participants experienced living with multiple pets. Our interview protocol did not specifically ask participants about perceptions of their mental health or other experiences that might have been useful. Though interviewers were informed of how participants identified, interviewer identities were not shared with participants, with the exception of pronouns. This lack of transparency from the research team may have made participants not as comfortable to discuss potentially difficult topics during the interviews.

Implications for Practice & Future Research

Our study has several implications for clinical and community practice with SGM emerging adults. First, it is important to note the role that pets clearly play in both supporting and affirming these young people, as well as adding potential stress and burden to their lives. Given the role that pets play, it would behoove mental health professionals to ask about their clients' relationships with animals and if they have pets, perhaps even including pets as a section on their intake form to initiate

this conversation. In addition to asking about pets generally, finding out more information about how the individual benefits from this relationship could open pathways to discussions around using caring for their pet(s) as a mindfulness activity (i.e., stroking their fur, feathers, or scales, giving their pet a bath, throwing and receiving back a ball, etc.), a way to remember to take medication, and as a conversation starter for building relationships. Evidence suggests that mindfulness interventions serve as an antidote to minority stress (Edwards et al., 2014; Le & Proulx, 2015; Toomey & Anhalt, 2016), as such, innovative professionals could teach their SGM emerging adult clients to practice mindfulness with their pets as a potential added benefit to managing the challenges of oppression. Additionally, practitioners should assess the challenges their clients might face as a result of having a pet such as costs, access to care, and housing concerns. If the client lives with others such as family or housemates, and is concerned about violence, ensuring that their pet(s) is included in any safety planning is also a crucial step.

Human service professionals working with SGM emerging adults should be prepared with local resources for low/no cost vaccination clinics and veterinary services, SGM-friendly veterinarians, pet friendly housing, support groups for pet loss, and other such services. If a client does not have a pet, practitioners can initiate a conversation regarding their interest in having a pet, how to best prepare them in deciding whether or not that is a good choice at that moment in time, as well as the benefits and challenges that having an animal companion might bring into an SGM emerging adult's life. Community and group-oriented professionals who host support groups or drop-in centers might consider allowing SGM emerging adults to either safely bring their pets, or at the least, talk about them in group settings. Having visiting animals for those individuals who do not have their own pets can also support their mental health (Pendry & Vandagriff, 2019). In residential treatment spaces, encouraging residents to put up pictures of their pets and talk about them would be a way to include these meaningful family members as part of treatment. Given the high rates of homelessness among SGM youth (Morton et al., 2020; Norris & Quilty, 2020), youth shelters should be very intentional around their pet policies, and if they are not able to house pets, should build partnerships with local agencies to offer fostering of pets while their consumers are in transitional housing spaces.

SGM populations are typically underrepresented and overlooked in HAI studies as evidenced by the field's general reliance on cis-heteronormative models of psychosocial development (e.g., Purewal et al., 2017) and binary assumptions of gender identity and sex (e.g., Siebenbruner, 2019; Staats et al., 2008). Gaining more awareness of how HAI may benefit SGM emerging adults is critical to advancing hypotheses and future investigations regarding the mechanisms through which HAI influences emerging adult health and development, particularly in the context of minority stress and related health disparities. There is substantial need for longitudinal research intentionally designed to understand how these pet-related stressors and supports interact over time in relation to outcomes

that disproportionately impact SGM communities. Future quantitative studies may also benefit from exploring differences in HAI across SGM identities along with the intersection of other historically underrepresented and/or marginalized groups. We recommend participatory research methods, such as photovoice, digital storytelling, and other arts-based methodologies, which offer the opportunity for anyone, including SGM emerging adults, to give a deeper glimpse into their development and experience, as a starting point in informing this work (Leavy, 2020). When done with a HAI focus, participants can include images and stories of their pets in an innovative and authentic way, giving researchers the chance to more clearly understand the role that these animal companions play in their participants' lives. Moreover, research shows that community-engaged and participatory research is incredibly useful in engaging members of the transgender and nonbinary communities, who are often left out of traditional research methods due to cissexism and heterocentrism in research (DeChants et al., 2020).

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Author Contributions

McDonald, S. E. contributed to conception and design, contributed to analysis and interpretation, drafted manuscript, critically revised manuscript, gave final approval, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. Matijczak, A. contributed to acquisition, analysis, and interpretation, drafted manuscript, critically revised manuscript, gave final approval, agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. Nicotera, N. contributed to analysis and interpretation, drafted manuscript, critically revised manuscript, gave final approval, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. Applebaum, J. W. contributed to interpretation, drafted manuscript, critically revised manuscript, gave final approval, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. Kremer, L. contributed to acquisition, analysis, and interpretation, drafted manuscript, critically revised manuscript, gave final approval, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. Natoli, G. contributed to acquisition and analysis, drafted manuscript, critically revised manuscript, gave final approval, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. O'Ryan, R. contributed to acquisition and analysis,

drafted manuscript, critically revised manuscript, gave final approval, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. Booth, L. J. contributed to acquisition and analysis, drafted manuscript, critically revised manuscript, gave final approval, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. Murphy, J. L. contributed to acquisition, drafted manuscript, critically revised manuscript, gave final approval, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. Tomlinson, C. A. contributed to acquisition, critically revised manuscript, gave final approval, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. Kattari, S. K. contributed to interpretation, drafted manuscript, critically revised manuscript, gave final approval, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy.

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ORCID iDs

Shelby E. McDonald  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6094-6234>
 Angela Matijczak  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6371-329X>
 Nicole Nicotera  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7672-1021>
 Jennifer W. Applebaum  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8091-5344>
 Jennifer L. Murphy  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3101-8951>
 Camie A. Tomlinson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7973-3295>
 Shanna K. Kattari  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3489-7058>

Open Practices Statement

Data and materials for this study have not been made publicly available with the exception of the qualitative questions asked during the interview. Data and materials are available upon request. The design and analysis plans were not preregistered.

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Author Biographies

Shelby E. McDonald is the director of Research for the Department of Strategy and Research at the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals®. She is also the director of the Children, Families, and Animals Research (CFAR) Group, LLC, in Richmond, Virginia, and a faculty affiliate of the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) School of Social Work. Her research interests include the role of human-animal interaction in risk and resilience during childhood through the transition to adulthood.

Angela Matijczak is a doctoral student at VCU School of Social Work. Their research centers around risk and protective factors for LGBTQ+ youth, particularly focusing on relationships between LGBTQ+ youth and their family members. She is also interested in the role of pets in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth.

Nicole Nicotera, PhD, is a professor of social work at the University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work (GSSW). She applies her expertise in qualitative and mixed methodologies to research topics that include promotion of health and well-being across the life span; the role of risk, protection, and resilience in health; civic engagement and mindfulness practices as pathways to well-being; measuring civic development and engagement; interventions to enhance civic leadership and positive youth development; and issues of unearned privilege and oppression in social work practice, education, and research.

Jennifer W. Applebaum, is a Sociology doctoral student and NIH predoctoral fellow at the University of Florida. Jennifer holds an MS in Veterinary Medical Sciences with a concentration in Shelter Medicine from University of Florida's College of Veterinary Medicine. Her research is centered around the impact of social inequalities on human-animal relationships, with the overarching goal of improving health and wellbeing outcomes for marginalized populations of people and their pets.

Liza Kremer, BSW, is a master of Social Work student at the University of Denver focusing on policy and organizational leadership with plans to work in LGBT and education policy after graduating. Liza's long-term career goal is to open an LGBT agency that offers a number of services, such as case management, support groups, and a housing program for LGBT youth experiencing homelessness.

Grace Natoli is a recent VCU graduate who obtained Bachelor's degrees in Psychology and in Gender, Sexuality, and Women's studies. Grace's research interests include factors related to LGBTQ+ mental health, trauma and its effect on mental health, specifically in women. In the fall, Grace will

be pursuing a Doctorate of Psychology in Clinical Psychology at Nova Southeastern University.

Ryan O'Ryan is a graduate of VCU's College of Humanities and Sciences with a BS in psychology and sociology. They are interested in LGBTQ+ youth development and the bonds between queer-identified people.

Laura J. Booth, MSW, is a recent graduate of VCU School of Social Work. Her research interests include exploring the experiences of families of children with cancer and public health responses to widespread disease. She received a Fulbright research grant in 2019 to focus on sibling experiences of pediatric cancer in Northwest Argentina and plans to continue research collaboration in international and intercultural settings.

Jennifer L. Murphy, MS, MSW, is a doctoral student at VCU School of Social Work. Her research focuses on the academic success and emotional wellbeing of adolescents, identifying factors that impact school mental health service utilization.

Camie A. Tomlinson, MSW, is a doctoral student at VCU School of Social Work. Broadly, her research interests include promoting the wellbeing of youth who are or have been in foster care. She focuses on identifying factors that impact the relation between childhood adversity and psychosocial outcomes, and the developmental mechanisms through which these factors impact long-term psychosocial functioning.

Shanna K. Kattari is an assistant professor at the University of Michigan School of Social Work, the Department of Women and Gender Studies (by courtesy), and Director of the [Sexuality|Relationships|Gender] Research Collective. A queer, White, Jewish, nonbinary, disabled, chronically ill Femme, their work focuses on understanding how power, privilege and oppression systematically marginalize, exclude, and discriminate against people regarding their identities/expressions through negative attitudes, policies reinforcing oppression, oppressive actions and isolation.