



French Bulldog welfare crisis: a preliminary descriptive survey on caregivers' awareness of breed-specific health issues and behavioral impact

Viviana Orsola Giuliano¹, Chiara Mocci², Fabiana Ligas²,
Francesca Dichiarà², Emanuele De Gasperis²

¹ *Department of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Production,
University of Naples Federico II, Naples, Italy*

² *Veterinary behaviorist freelance*

Abstract: The longstanding popularity of the French Bulldog, despite recognized significant health hazards associated with genetic selection, underscores a critical dichotomy between caregivers' information and purchasing decisions. This preliminary Italian study sought to examine caregiver motives for obtaining a French Bulldog, their level of health awareness, and the subsequent impact on future adoption plans. An online survey was conducted with 121 Italian French Bulldog caregivers to evaluate demographics, acquisition sources, primary motivations (temperament versus aesthetics), health awareness, and intentions for future repurchase. The primary incentive for adoption was found to be temperament. A significant level of awareness was observed, with 97.5% of caregivers recognizing potential health difficulties and 81% admitting that genetic selection induces suffering. Notably, most French Bulldog necessitated surgical intervention or specialist consultations for breed-specific concerns. Notwithstanding these factors, 71.1% of caregivers expressed their plan to acquire the breed once more. The elevated repurchase intention is driven by robust breed loyalty and the expectations regarding favorable behavioral traits of the dogs. The findings reveal a notable awareness paradox: factual knowledge of health dangers does not inhibit purchasing behavior, indicating a normalization of sickness in which non-health variables predominantly influence decision-making. Proactive pre-purchase consultation by veterinary behaviorists is essential to close this educational gap and facilitate genuinely informed adoption.

Key Words: brachycephaly, canine behavior, temperament, personality, pain.

* *Corresponding Author:* vivianaorsola.giuliano@unina.it

Introduction

In the past fifty years, the perception of companion animals in human society has evolved significantly, with many individuals now considering them as integral members of the family. Nonetheless, various diseases undermine their lifespan and overall well-being, primarily as a result of the increase in genetic disorders that define pedigree breeds (Rollin, 2018). Many contemporary dog breeds have emerged from rigorous artificial selection processes designed to establish specific physical and behavioral characteristics, largely influenced by a significant level of inbreeding (Bonnett et al., 2023). Brachycephaly is a skull shape marked by a shortened and flattened muzzle, commonly seen in various dog breeds. The term originates from the ancient Greek words "brakhu" (short) and "cephalos" (head), describing a condition where the skull is shortened, such as in pugs, French bulldogs, English bulldogs, and Boston terriers (Mitze et al., 2022). While these breeds are greatly valued for their "puppy-like" appearance, a characteristic that is often desired for its capacity to elicit feelings of tenderness and affection (Hecht and Horowitz, 2015; Sternglanz et al., 1977), their anatomy significantly undermines their overall well-being (Menor-Campos, 2024). The core issue associated with brachycephaly is the imbalance between skeletal and soft tissue structures, leading to various serious health complications, particularly Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome (BOAS), which results in breathing difficulties. Brachycephalic dogs often experience ophthalmic, gastrointestinal, dermatological, and orthope-

dic disorders (O'Neill et al., 2018; Fawcett et al., 2018; Patel et al., 2022; Teng et al., 2022)). This compromised health and persistent stress due to disorders like obstructive brachycephalic airway syndrome yield not only physical repercussions but also significantly affect the dog's emotional and behavioral aspects (Schatz et al., 2021). Recent research indicates a linkage between fear and anxiety and changes in intestinal microbiota, validating the notion that emotional well-being is intrinsically connected to physical and gastrointestinal health (Gorzellanna et al., 2024; Kiełbik et al., 2024; Sacchettino et al., 2025). Therefore, an essential aspect of comprehension is that the behavioral issues observed in these populations, including aggression, reactivity, and anxiety, should not be viewed primarily as inherent temperamental flaws, but rather as secondary and functional expressions of ongoing physical distress. The suffering arises from chronic pain, ongoing physiological stress related to breathing difficulties, and significantly, a restricted ability to communicate effectively due to compressed facial conformation (Mills et al., 2020; Schatz et al., 2021). Quantitative research has examined the effects of chronic physiological stress by analysing the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis (Gazzano et al., 2025; Giuliano et al., 2024). A study comparing French Bulldogs and Pugs with BOAS to healthy dogs revealed that dogs with BOAS exhibit consistent salivary cortisol levels, an indicator of stress, following an exercise test. This response is atypical, as cortisol levels in non-brachycephalic dogs generally rise in reaction to a stressor (e.g., exercise) and subsequently decline, indicating an adaptive response. The alteration in cortisol levels of dogs with BOAS indicates potential dysregulation or exhaustion of the HPA axis, aligning with a clinical presentation of persistent chronic stress. The persistent state of stress undermines the animal's capacity to respond appropriately to typical environmental stimuli, thereby heightening the probability of exaggerated or anxious behavioral reactions (Kähler et al., 2024). Furthermore, respiratory issues significantly impact sleep, with studies indicating that around 56% of brachycephalic dogs experience sleep disorders (Roedler et al., 2013; Packer et al., 2020). Despite the increasing scientific evidence regarding these issues, the popularity of breeds such as the French Bulldog continues to rise. This phenomenon prompts essential inquiries about owners' awareness and perception of the health risks linked to the breed (Mitze et al., 2024; Packer et al., 2024).

This preliminary survey investigated the awareness paradox of French Bulldog popularity amidst a severe welfare crisis. Specifically, it examined the caregiver motivations, particularly the attraction to key aesthetic and behavioral paedomorphic traits, their degree of awareness and subsequent normalization of illness, and how this combination of factors influences their intention to reacquire the breed.

Materials and methods

This study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. An online questionnaire was used to gather information for the study on the demographics of caregivers, how they got their French Bulldogs, why they adopted them, and how breed-specific illnesses affect the health of the animals and their owners' knowledge. The gathered information was analyzed using univariate descriptive statistics. The absolute frequencies and percentage distributions (N and %) for each categorical and nominal variable were computed in order to summarize the findings. Since the main goal was to investigate and measure the phenomenon within the sample surveyed, no inferential statistical analyses were carried out. Data were collected via an online survey, written in the Italian language and administered between August and September 2023. Participants were recruited using a non-random sampling strategy through veterinary clinics and online social advertisements (primarily breed-specific enthusiast groups). The questionnaire was completed on a voluntary and anonymous basis via an online platform (Survio), which processed the data. Written, informed consent was collected from all participants before their involvement in the

study. The time needed to complete the survey was approximately 10 minutes. The questionnaire consisted of 10 items structured to capture four main themes relevant to behavior, welfare, and responsible ownership:

- Demographics and acquisition: composition of the family unit, the number and species of animals in the home, and the source of animal acquisition.
- Behavioral motivation: caregivers' primary motivations for choosing the French Bulldog, specifically assessing the influence of temperament and appealing behavioral traits versus aesthetic or breed-specific factors.
- Welfare awareness: caregivers' awareness of the health issues specific to the breed before and after adoption, including their perception of genetic selection and its impact on suffering.
- Future intentions: caregivers' willingness to acquire another animal of the same breed in the future, providing a measure of breed loyalty versus welfare concern.

Results

A total of 129 participants engaged with the study questionnaire. Following the exclusion of 8 incomplete or disqualified responses, the final sample size comprised 121 fully completed questionnaires (N=121).

Family composition and pet ownership

The distribution of household size among participants indicated a high prevalence of smaller family units: the largest share of respondents (35.5%) was in two-person households, followed by four-person households (25.6%), three-person households (23.1%), and single-person households (12.4%). Households with more than four people were the rarest (3.3%).

Number of French Bulldog in the home and previous experience with the breed

The majority of participants owned a single French Bulldog (77.7%). The remaining respondents resided with two (9.9%), three (6.6%), or more than three (5.8%) French Bulldogs. The 14.9% of the participants had previously experienced a dog of the same breed, while 85.1% of the respondents had no prior experience with the breed.

Presence of other companion animals in the home

The 59.5% of the participants reported that they lived exclusively with their French Bulldog and did not have any other companion animals. Additionally, 35.5% of the participants resided with animals of other species. Only 5.0% of the sample also owned dogs of a different breed.

Source of acquisition

The mode of acquisition showed a strong preference for commercial and non-shelter sources, which is a critical finding related to the discussion on genetic suffering: professional breeders were the predominant source, accounting for over half of all dogs acquired (51.2%), as reported in Figure 1.

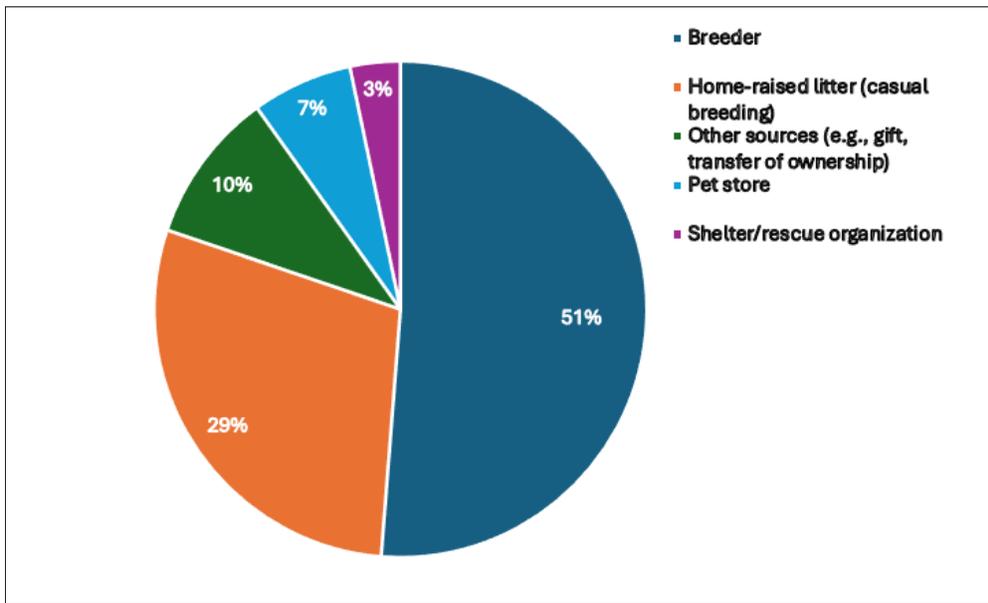


Figure 1. Presents the results regarding the sources of dog acquisition. Professional breeders represent the primary source, constituting more than fifty percent of all dogs acquired.

Caregivers’ motivation to adoption a French bulldog

Temperament was the primary motivation for selecting the breed (50%) as reported in Figure 2.

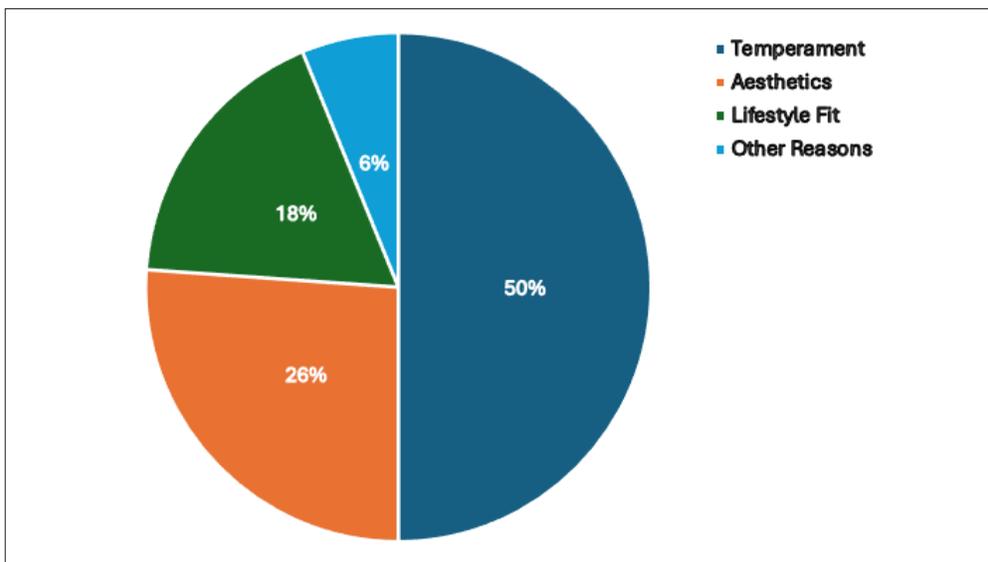


Figure 2. Shows the French bulldog caregivers’ motivation. The primary reasons cited for choosing the breed is temperament, followed by aesthetics, lifestyle fit, and other reasons (e.g., gift, transfer of ownership).

Caregivers' awareness of French bulldog breed-specific diseases, pre and post adoption

In terms of health awareness, 97.5% of caregivers reported being aware of potential breed-specific health issues, whereas only 2.5% indicated they were not. Of those surveyed, 63.6% had knowledge of the issues before adoption, 19% had some awareness, and 17.4% were not aware at all prior to adoption.

Source of information to understand breed-specific diseases

In response to the inquiry regarding the source of information about potential illness, 5% identified the seller/breeder, 36% the veterinarian, 48% both sources, and 19% indicated neither.

French Bulldog medical treatment faced by caregivers

The 57.9% of participants indicated that their French Bulldogs underwent surgical procedures and/or specialist consultations due to breed-specific issues, while 42.1% did not.

Future purchase of a French Bulldog

The 71.1% of participants responded favorably when asked whether they would acquire a dog of this breed again in the future, while 28.9% responded negatively.

Evaluation of the negative impact of breed-specific diseases on their dog

When requested to evaluate the negative impact of breed-related issues on their dog's quality of life, 81% of owners asserted that genetic selection has resulted in suffering among individuals of this breed, whereas 19% disagreed.

Discussion

This is the first survey in Italy investigating the attitudes, aspirations, and perceptions of individuals caring for French Bulldogs by analyzing the caregivers' underlying motivations, particularly their preference for essential aesthetic and behavioral traits and their awareness of their dogs' health. The most interviewed caregivers lived with only bulldogs, predominantly a single dog, and most were first-time caregivers of this breed. Packer et al. (2020) found that first-time caregivers of brachycephalic dogs were over twice as inclined to acquire another dog of the same breed and three times more likely to endorse their breed to others compared to caregivers with prior experience of other dog breeds. This phenomenon can be elucidated by the disparities in perceptions of "normalcy" between novice and experienced dog caregivers. Acquiring a brachycephalic breed for a first dog can lead to a skewed perception of normal canine health and behavioural needs; indicators of suboptimal health may be regarded as "normal" (Holland et al., 2019), while favorable behavioral characteristics may be deemed distinctive to their breed. The interplay of these two elements may enhance favorable perceptions of their breed, thereby augmenting their inclination to maintain ownership and advocate for it to others (Packer et al., 2020). Moreover, the fact that more than half of the respondents are members of larger households likely indicates that the breed's endearing behavioral traits (such as their ability to interact well with children, as noted by Packer et al., 2017) have a significant non-healthful influence, resulting in a sustained demand from families.

Our findings indicated that the primary motivations for choosing this breed were predominantly associated with temperament. This is consistent with the results of thematic analyses conducted by Packer et al. (2020), which identified three themes that elucidated the reasons why

caregivers recommend their breed: the breed's positive behavioral characteristics for a companion dog, its suitability for households with children, and its suitability for a sedentary lifestyle with limited space. Nevertheless, this optimistic assessment of the temperament and personality of French bulldogs may not be entirely accurate. The impediment to social communication is a critical, frequently disregarded component of brachycephalic pathology; the dog's capacity to generate and display clear and legible communication signals, such as threat signals (growling, baring teeth) or expressions of fear, is impeded by its extremely compressed facial structure. The brachycephalic dog is compelled to resort directly to an unexpected aggressive reaction, resulting in a rapid escalation of conflict due to its inability to communicate its discomfort in a subtle manner (Schatz et al., 2021). Furthermore, physical discomfort is a contributing factor to emotional disturbances (Mills et al., 2020; Sacchettino et al., 2023). This critical link between compromised physical health and behavioral dysregulation is a recognized challenge across all populations, including shelter dogs, where poor health management often exacerbates stress and emotional disturbances (Gazzano et al., 2025). Moreover, separation anxiety is more prevalent in brachycephalic dogs, which is likely due to their perpetual reliance on caregivers in problem-solving task and in environmental assistance - e.g., managing heat or climbing stairs (Ujfalussy et al., 2023; Schatz et al., 2021). Consequently, it is not surprising that the genetic selection led to a substantial decrease in well-being as a result of the combination of physiological fragility, genetic predisposition to pain-induced aggression, and the inability to communicate effectively.

Although research regularly indicates that caregivers place significant importance on the physical health of an ideal companion dog (King et al., 2009; Diverio et al., 2016). Our findings reveal a crucial awareness paradox: many caregivers indicated awareness of the potential health issues associated with French Bulldogs prior to adoption. This discovery, however, did not result in a reduction in purchases. This is consistent with Packer et al. (2017), who discovered that caregivers of brachycephalic breeds are less influenced by considerations of health and longevity in their breed selection. The significant association between heightened awareness and ongoing acquisition indicates that the recognized health hazards are eclipsed by other considerations, chiefly the breed's attractive behavioral characteristics and aesthetic qualities. Thus, caregivers' awareness is not a principal constraint on demand. Conversely, our data indicates the normalization of disease (O'Neill et al., 2017), wherein the breed's inherent pain is mostly disregarded or tolerated due to predominant non-health-related incentives. Equally paradoxical is the finding that 57.9% of French Bulldogs necessitated surgical intervention and/or specialist consultations for breed-specific complications. Despite this, and the reality that 81% of caregivers perceived genetic selection as a cause of suffering in dogs of this breed, 71.1% of respondents still answered affirmatively when asked if they would adopt a dog of this breed again. The high willingness to re-adopt the French Bulldog, despite known risks, highlights a powerful breed loyalty phenomenon. This result is consistent with Packer et al. (2020), who noted that high repurchase intention and recommendation rates drive the persistence of brachycephalic popularity. Crucially, the affirmation rate in our study is significantly higher than the 29.2% of sure repeat purchasers reported by Sandøe et al. (2017). This escalating loyalty suggests that non-health factors overwhelmingly dominate the purchase decision, leading to the continued normalisation of illness.

Even though veterinarians are the primary information source, breeders/sellers play a minor role, our findings indicate a substantial failure in pre-adoption education. This discrepancy is concerning because the seller is the initial point of contact and is responsible for prioritizing the welfare of the pet through informed adoption. This variable is likely to be impeded by the economic interest in selling the pet. As a result, the veterinarian is the critical figure responsible for rectifying distorted owner perceptions and providing evidence-based counsel. The profession is currently responsible for the primary burden of post-purchase education, as evidenced by the high rate of reliance on veterinary information. This aligns with calls in the literature that underscore the veterinarian's key role in disseminating the necessary information and education on

responsible ownership (Bognár et al., 2023). Therefore, to guarantee that prospective caregivers have a comprehensive understanding of the lifelong health and financial obligations associated with owning a French Bulldog, we contend that proactive pre-purchase counselling by veterinary professionals is indispensable

Limitations

Limitations of this study are the number of questionnaires collected, which although in line with previous studies, is not to be considered representative of the entire population, being the analysis of data explorative. Another limitation is data collection based solely on the perception of the caregiver, and therefore subjective. This approach is susceptible to social desirability bias, where respondents might unconsciously report behaviors or expectations that align with what is considered socially acceptable or responsible, potentially leading to an overestimation of their awareness or a minimization of their dog's health issues.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, E.d.G, C.M. F.L.F.D.; writing—original draft preparation, V.O.G., E.d.G, C.M. F.L, F.D.; writing—review and editing, V.O.G., E.d.G, C.M., F.L, F.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank Raimondo Aniello and Zildijan Aleo for supporting the survey.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Crisi del benessere dei Bulldog francesi: indagine descrittiva preliminare sulla consapevolezza dei caregiver riguardo ai problemi di salute specifici della razza e all'impatto comportamentale

Viviana Orsola Giuliano¹, Chiara Mocchi², Fabiana Ligas²,
Francesca Dichiarà², Emanuele De Gasperis²

¹ Dipartimento di Medicina Veterinaria e Produzione Animale,
Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, Napoli, Italia

² Comportamentista veterinario freelance

Sintesi

La popolarità del Bulldog francese, nonostante gli ormai noti rischi per la salute associati alla selezione genetica, sottolinea una dicotomia critica tra le informazioni dei caregiver e le decisioni di acquisto. Questa indagine italiana ha cercato di esaminare le motivazioni dei caregivers nell'acquistare un Bulldog francese, il loro livello di consapevolezza in materia di salute e il conseguente impatto sui futuri piani di adozione. È stato condotto un sondaggio online su 121 caregivers italiani di Bulldog francesi per valutare i dati demografici, le fonti di acquisto, le motivazioni principali (temperamento contro estetica), la consapevolezza in materia di salute e le intenzioni di riacquisto futuro. Il motivo principale che ha spinto all'adozione è risultato essere il temperamento. È stato osservato un livello significativo di consapevolezza, con il 97,5% dei caregivers che riconosceva potenziali problemi di salute e l'81% che ammetteva che la selezione genetica induce sofferenza. In particolare, la maggior parte dei Bulldog francesi ha avuto la necessità di sottoporsi a intervento chirurgico o di effettuare visite specialistiche per problemi specifici della razza. Nonostante questi fattori, il 71,1% dei caregivers ha espresso l'intenzione di acquistare nuovamente questa razza. L'elevata motivazione al riacquisto è determinata dalla forte fedeltà alla razza e dalle aspettative sulle caratteristiche comportamentali favorevoli di questi cani. I risultati rivelano un notevole paradosso di consapevolezza: la conoscenza oggettiva dei rischi per la salute non inibisce la volontà di acquisto, indicando una normalizzazione della malattia in cui variabili non legate alla salute influenzano in modo predominante il processo decisionale. Una consulenza proattiva pre-acquisto da parte dei veterinari specialisti in comportamento animale è essenziale per colmare questa lacuna educativa e facilitare un'adozione realmente informata.

