Dog and Dog Owner Relationships in Consumer Behavior

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In this observational study, we document the death of a dog. Dog ownership reveals a reciprocal altruism supported by the development of a notional superego as the result of prohibitive restrictions which represent the owner’s moral values. The dependency on primitive cognitive functions enables the dog owner to internalize an ideal through the exercise of superego control. The role of the superego explicates the need for businesses to support pets and pet-related products with values and emotions rather than silly slogans and rational appeals to complement the strength of dog owners’ internalized view of their relationship with their dog.

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SESSION SUMMARY

Celebrity buyer Nicole Richie (heiress to Lionel Richie’s music fortune) has had hair extensions put in her poodle Honey’s hair each week to match her own (VH-1 Dec. 10, 2005). Many popular press articles recognize apparent extravagant spending on pets. For example, jewelry for dogs costing $200, a pet mobile phone costing $349, or pet beds costing $700+ are some extreme examples (Howard 2005). However, very little academic work has studied pet consumption and experience. This session includes papers that provide some reasons for such spending behaviors—excessive spending on pets, relationship satisfaction, self-identity through pets and personality development and memory.

There are several contributions of the proposed session. First, the content area is one of recent interest. There are literally dozens of recent popular press articles dedicated to the topic of pet consumption (including a new magazine called Hollywood Dogs). Moreover, the current year-long best selling book Marley and Me illustrates the current general interest in pet companions. Second, pets are an incredibly important part of our lives, they contribute to our well-being and we contribute to their well-being. An understanding of the reciprocal relationships between humans and pets is likely to provide insights into human relationships and provide new ways of thinking about self-identity, extended self, possessions and relationship partners. The fact that there is a special issue due out in 2007 at the Journal of Business Research dedicated to this topic adds to the credibility of having a special session on the importance of pets in consumers’ lives.

The papers in the session are very different and touch on a variety of aspects of pet consumption. As a result, the session provides a well-rounded variety of both theories and methods within the primary subject area. The first two papers use quantitative data, while the second two use qualitative data. The first paper examines the relationship between excessive spending on pets and spending excessively on oneself (buying primarily clothing and accessories). Using compulsive buying theory as a foundation for the paper, the authors show that there is a relationship between consumers’ tendency to buy excessively for oneself and on one’s pets. The second paper uses personality theory to examine the contribution that pets make to humans’ relationship satisfaction and sense of well-being. Personality measures of both pets and pet owners show that pets’ personalities play a dominant role in owners’ well-being. Relationship closeness increases overtime. Both of these findings provide some provocative avenues for future research on intimacy and relationship life-stage.

The methodology in the third paper uses self-reflections in the form of essays written by the investigators. The essays follow the lives of dogs from puppy hood until death. The four major themes that emerge are: the innocence of owners in the initial engagement and puppy selection process, early adjustment and relationship development, permanent bonds and loving intimacy as pets become integrated into the family, and special events and life transitions as pets help us through the tribulations in our lives. The third paper sets up the fourth paper very well, as it deals with the death of a dog and the authors’ memories of the event and of the beloved pet. Using Freudian theory, the paper reveals that dog ownership is a reciprocal relationship supported by the development (in the dog) of a superego that reflects the owner’s values. Documenting the death of one of the investigator’s dog provides evidence that both Freudian theory and memory theory play an important role in dog ownership and post-ownership.

The audience for this session would include those specifically interested in the phenomenon of pet ownership as well as those interested in understanding the special connection between owners and their pets and the consumption patterns that support these special relationships.

ABSTRACTS

“Over-Spending on Pets: The Relationship with Excessive Buying”

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Marketing researchers have studied pet companionship and the concept of pets (especially dogs) as family members for some time (Belk 1988; Hirschman 1994; Holbrook et al. 2001). An important area receiving attention in recent years is increased consumption for one’s pet (McLean 2004). Spending on pets has nearly doubled over the past 10 years (Kennedy 2006). The popular press keeps close tabs on celebrities and their extravagant spending on their dogs. For example, Nicole Richie has hair extensions put in her dog’s fur that match her own. (VH-1 2005). Similarly, Paris Hilton’s dog wears a diamond bracelet as a collar (Hollywood Dogs 2005). For non-celebrities, there are stores and websites selling dog jewelry for $200, a pet mobile phone priced at $349 and pet beds priced at $700-$800 (Howard 2005).

The present research uses two studies to investigate a possible reason underlying profligate expenditures on pets, specifically as related to a dispositional trait to engage in excessive buying for oneself. If pets, as Belk (1988) proposes, are an extension of us, spending on one’s pet may be tantamount to spending on oneself. Thus, we expect that people who spend excessively on themselves are also likely to spend excessively on their pets.

Most researchers find that the vast majority of pet owners consider their pets to be part of the family, with dogs most likely to fill this role. Explanations of why dogs are likely to be included in the family include their ability to facilitate human relationships, the fact that they maintain a childlike look throughout most of their lives and they give unconditional love and companionship (Hirschman, 1994). These explanations, alone, however, do not explain the relatively recent extravagant spending on one’s pets.

Studies of compulsive and excessive buying have received increasing interest in the consumer behavior literature (Black 2001; Faber and O’Guinn 1992; Koran et al. 2006). Unlike compulsive buyers, whose classification depends on financial harm, excessive buyers represent a broader group of consumers who may suffer...
from emotional consequences, not necessarily financial ones (Ridgway, Kukar-Kinney and Monroe 2005). Thus, excessive buyers represent a broader group of consumers.

In the first study, a focus group of nine pet owners was conducted. The focus group participants were recruited from an ad placed in a local weekly entertainment magazine, which called for participants who were both “shopaholics” and spent a lot of money on their pet. The following three major themes (with a sample verbatim from each) emerged: (1) excessive buying for pets (“Charlotte has lots of clothes. She has a little argyle sweater and she has a little jacket... She has Halloween costumes. This year she was a ladybug.”); (2) excessive buying for self (“Well, handbags are my weakness... I have over a hundred bags... It is definitely a high when I find that bag”); and (3) pets as children that need to be taken care of (“We can’t say no to Eda. We would sacrifice for ourselves to do stuff with her... When it is her birthday, we buy her a cake and invite the other dog friends... So we indulge her and we feel like good parents.”).

Study 2 was a quantitative study. Customers of an Internet clothing retailer were surveyed about their pet spending. Of those who responded, 62% owned one or more pets. The participants responded to an excessive buying scale, questions about frequency of buying for their pet, holiday season spending and Internet and bricks-and-mortar spending. As predicted, consumers who spent excessively on themselves bought more frequently for their pets, spent more on their pet during the holiday season, and spent more per month on their pet both online as well as at traditional retail stores.

Our research suggests that those who spend excessively on themselves are more likely to also spend excessively for their pets. In the larger sample of survey respondents from which pet owners were identified, 12% of the sample was classified as showing a tendency to buy excessively. However, for the sub-sample of pet owners, 25% exhibited a tendency to buy excessively. This observation leads to some areas for further research. First, since pets are often viewed as children, does excessive buying for pets fulfill the need to over-spend on one’s children? Second, the relationship between low self-esteem and excessive buyers has been shown by many researchers (e.g., Faber and O’Quinn 1992). By giving unconditional love, do pets enhance owners’ self-esteem, and does this lead to more or less excessive buying?

**“Wag the Human: The Influence of Canine Personality on Human Relationship Satisfaction and Well-Being”**

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Hillary Leonard, University of Rhode Island, USA

Debra Scammon, University of Utah, USA

Animals hold a special place in the hearts of many people. Animals are far more than mere possessions; they are partners in close social relationships. We note the consumption investments that Americans make in pet-related products and services and argue that the importance of human-pet relationships might be driving some of these expenditures.

Drawing on research in personality, relationships, and well-being, the current project empirically examines how not only human but canine personalities shape human relationship satisfaction and well-being. Our research is one of a small number of cross-species studies of personality and, to our knowledge, the first to look at the interplay of personality facets across species as predictors of relationship satisfaction and well being.

We examine the similarity between the personalities of humans and their dogs, the role that dogs’ personalities play in relationship satisfaction, and relationship characteristics (such as closeness and length of relationship) that impact the human partner’s well-being. We employ one of the most widely used methods of assessing human personality (Gatti et al. 2004) the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John and Srivastava 1999) as well as a canine analog to the BFI, the BFI-canine (Gosling, Kwan and John 2003) to measure dog personalities. Human well-being was assessed using a satisfaction with life scale measure (Pavot and Diener 1993). To assess human satisfaction with the human-dog relationship we modified a widely used measure of relationship satisfaction (Rusbult 1983). To assess closeness in the human-dog relationship we used a measure of perceived overlap, the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale (Aron, Aron and Smollan 1992) to capture a general sense of people’s feelings of interconnectedness with their dogs.

We replicate some findings from the human relationship literature yet identify several unique aspects of the bond between humans and dogs that may offer insight into some unresolved issues in the literature on relationships and well-being. The human relationship literature suggests that personality plays an important role in determining satisfaction with one’s close relationships. In our research, we found that two of the dog’s personality facets, openness and agreeableness, were both significant contributors to explaining relationship satisfaction, while the personality of the human contributed little.

Research suggests that satisfying relationships enhance well-being (Diener et al. 1999; Lent et al. 2005) and that human well-being is improved by relationships with pets (see Brown 2004; Holbrook et al. 2001, Serpella 2003). Research also suggests that, in human relationships, the quality of a relationship is likely to change over time. A relationship may be satisfying initially but become less satisfying as time goes by (Karney and Bradbury 1995). Based on our overlap measure (Inclusion of Other in Self), our data suggest that sense of closeness and length of ownership may combine in unique ways to predict well-being. Regression analysis revealed a significant positive relationship with well-being for length of ownership and a significant interaction between length of ownership and overlap of self with dog. Our findings suggest a possible departure from what is known of close relationships in the human psychology literature. Whereas, over time people may become disenchanted with their human relationships, deriving less of their well-being from such relationships, over time their relationship with their ever-loyal dogs appear to enhance their well-being, providing much needed stability, comfort, and security. Our findings suggest that a greater understanding of intimacy may be gained by looking more closely at the life stage of relationship partners in conjunction with length of relationship. Future research may focus on understanding why these relationship satisfaction trajectories differ.

Our research demonstrates the significant role of canine personalities in humans’ satisfaction with their human-dog relationships. It also establishes the importance of pets to humans’ well-being. We find evidence that dogs do indeed “wag their humans” and we contend that insights about relationships and well-being gained by studying pets can lead to better understanding of humans.

**“Consumer Behavior, Extended Self and Sacred Consumption: An Alternative Perspective from our Animal Companions”**

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The belief that living a dog's life is some form of inhumane punishment or a lower form of existence has changed dramatically...
over the decades. Mendelson (1998, p. S3) states: “No longer is Fido or Fifi just an animal that sits by the kitchen table waiting for scraps of food. Now, the household pet has worked its way up the family tree, in some cases even winning a coveted seat at the dinner table.” The consumer behavior concept of the extended self (Belk 1988) provides one explanation for understanding the consumption relationship between pet owners and their animal companions. Other researchers find that consumers buy pets to satisfy social needs, providing evidence that domestication of animals has more to do with companionship with other species than protection or other utilitarian purposes (Hirschman 1994; Endenburg et al. 1994). Pets also play the role of friend or partner, providing unconditional and nonjudgmental love for owners.

The research of Holbrook and his colleagues (2001) eschews the extended self paradigm to understanding our exchange relationships with animal companions. Their primary concern is that some scholars interpret these relationships as a means to ends such as enhancement of self-identity, failing to recognize the intimate bonds between parties that are best characterized as ends in themselves. Nonetheless, Belk (1988, p. 155) reinforces this long-term viewpoint when he asserts that the attitude of pet owners is “love me, love my dog.” Therefore, the extended self includes interspecies love and may involve a fusion of identities, allowing for a commitment that impacts the emotional fulfillment of pet owners and their animal companions. This research suggests that the relationship between human and nonhuman animals is best characterized as an experience that transcends ordinary consumer behavior to that of sacred consumption.

Our purpose is to report on a unique way of capturing the consumptive lives of animal companions based on the extended self/sacred consumption paradigms. This study uses self reflections. Our examination of canine consumption begins with essays written by three principal investigators, chronicling the lifecycle of their dogs from birth through puppy hood and until death. These essays were from memory and involved the use of preserved and cherished items such as photographs, collars and leashes, chew toys, and ashes to stimulate thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Each testimony was developed independently and projected the voice of the particular animal so that the anthropomorphic style of the storyteller would be reflective of his or her dog’s personality, behavior, and expressions.

Our findings indicate that pet owners possess a grasp on the consumption requirements and expectations of animal companions. Thus, firms with a mission to serve pets may gain market share and goodwill by using thematic categories such as those revealed by this research during product development. For example, initial engagement and selection decision reveal the well-intentioned yet naïve processes owners employ in their earliest interactions with and selection protocols for their canines. Given the consequences of such decisions, breeders and other pet suppliers would be wise to help customers craft more sophisticated purchase strategies to ensure loving choices.

The second theme of early adjustment and relational development recounts attempts on both sides of this sacred consumption to integrate animal companions into households. The excitement of this period may exacerbate emotional states associated with novel experiences, suggesting the need for providers to help owners become aware of adjustment issues and coping mechanisms for themselves and their animal companions. The third theme, permanent bonds and loving intimacy, shows that trepidation gives way to integration of pets into families. As described previously, these bonds are based on the establishment of regular schedules and forms of interaction that meet needs beyond owners’ original expectations. Pet suppliers facilitate bond formation by supporting growth of routines and modes of interspecies communication.

The fourth theme of special events and life transitions demonstrates how animal companions come to represent the best of times and the most difficult moments in our lives. While some providers market products linked to positive occasions, few help pets and their owners navigate difficult transitions such as job changes, cross-country moves, and divorces. A poignant example is captured by the final theme parting is such sweet sorrow, which chronicles the aging and final days of our pets’ lives. While health care providers such as psychologists and veterinarians recognize the important role dogs play in our day-to-day worlds, their advice usually fails to help owners grieve, repair, and recover from such losses. Teaching pet owners how to recognize end-of-life situations and develop their own mourning and coping processes would be a positive step forward.

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Introduction: Memories reflect “a source of human amusement and a source of and vehicle for folk wisdom” (Belk 1996, p.125) and shape an essential ingredient of family culture and folklore. A dog’s charm and character emanate from recalled behaviors, behaviors that some might consider odd or eccentric, trivial, possibly anti-social and even unacceptable by human standards. Yet, it is these same behaviors that invoke hilarity, affection and joy within the family. No one is under any obligation to own a pet but “the remarkable affection and rapport” that exists between humans and pets “just to keep me company” (Holbrook 1996, p.165) and the common notion that pets are “good for people” or as “medicine” (Belk 1996, p.122) are strong motivators for having a dog.

Study—Death of a dog: Hilly became ill over a relatively short period of time. She stopped eating and gradually she drank less and less. She had leukemia. Her last days and her death are described in the paper as well as the family decision of what to do with her remains, and the thoughts and feelings about Hilly after she had passed away.

Theory implications: The concept of dog ownership implies an unequal relationship. Unlike a child, a dog does not become independent and leave home. There is a clear line between an owner’s property and a dog’s property, what a dog is allowed to do and what a dog is not allowed to do, what is acceptable behavior and what is not. This will vary between dog owners, their values and expectations. Dogs are supposed to adapt to our expectations and they do so willingly. The dog in the role of surrogate child notionally develops a superego as the result of prohibitions and demands throughout life. This outcome is the result of external power and authority of the dog owner whether through formal training or informal demands. It can represent the owner’s striving for perfection through prohibitive restrictions. These restrictions are both protective and punitive and represent the moral values of the dog owner.

Dog owners internalize and determine a perception of an ideal relationship between themselves and the dog providing a unique opportunity to mould the instinctual needs and drives of their charges to harmonize with their own ego. Dog ownership enables the development of an existential id within the ego of a dog owning relationship. Primitive and instinctive cognitive processes are instructed by an affective state that represses the development of ego at an early stage in the bonding between owner and dog. No prohibitive superego develops to govern the behavior of the pet dog.
because it remains dependent on primitive cognitive functions within the domestic environment. This dependency enables the dog owner to internalize an ideal through the exercise of superego control of the dog without the constraints of time, maturity, mobility, economic independence, and loss of control even to the time and manner of death.

Dog ownership is in part an expression of idealism, a perception of life style, perhaps the way we wish to be seen. We make an implicit covenant with our pets in return for enrichment of and benefit to our life that is the consequence of a mutual exchange between owner and pet. Pets can be troublesome, time consuming, unpredictable, difficult, and hard work. Most of the time, however, they offer a very rewarding experience that augments the lives of those in close proximity. This relationship personifies the relationship between supplier and customer.

The role pets play in our lives is a vital facet in marketing pet and pet-related products. The role of the superego in the relationship between dog and dog owner is an aspect of consumer behavior that explicates the need for businesses to match pet products through values and emotions rather than silly slogans and rational appeals. Suppliers should take into account the potential strength of the dog owners' internalized view of their relationship with their dog.