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## **Introduction**

It is generally agreed that pets can improve the quality of our lives in various ways (James et al, 2004). Even medical institutions and corporations are incorporating pets into their facilities as a way of promoting patients and employees' well-being (Barker, 2005; Dotson and Hyatt, 2008; Holak, 2008).

Despite these benefits, the research on animals has been mainly carried out in the field of veterinary science until the last two decades. Today, animals no longer fulfill an economic function only, but can play a much wider role (Hirschman, 1994). Nevertheless, Hirschman (1994, p.616) still urged the need for additional research in to this area, writing that 'despite the widespread practice of keeping companion animals, virtually no consumer behavior studies have been conducted on this phenomenon'.

This call was answered in a special issue of the Journal of Business Research in 2008. The studies, such as those by Megehee (2008), Hill et al (2008), Holbrook (2008), Lancendorfer et al (2008) and Morwitz (2008), which are devoted to pets, their human companions and the world of commerce, furthered our understanding of human's best friend in an unprecedented era. These studies range not only across the fields of marketing, management and consumer behaviour but also to different research methods, including ethnography, content analysis and personal history (Holbrook and Woodside, 2008).

Even with these publications' contributions, research on pets is still lacking in all areas, especially in terms of any longitudinal review of this subject. The following sections will highlight some of the most influential thoughts, developments, concepts and frameworks that combine the pet, human and the commercial worlds. It will first outline some of the characteristics of the pet industry, followed by the changing role of animal companions due to social changes. It will examine different roles that pets play in our lives. Finally, it will focus on some of the modern approaches to pet research.

### **Putting the Pet Market within the Modern Context**

Without a proper understanding of the context of the pet industry, it will be difficult to realise its potential. We can discuss the pet market's size in different terms, such as through the total size of the industry, the average spend per consumer or their willingness to seek quality services/products for their beloved pets.

In 1997, Davids (1997, p.57) wrote that the 'pet industry is still small and friendly enough that companies in different categories can come together'. It was a market worth slightly more than four billion USD. Nevertheless, it is already growing by 15% per year. By 2007, the pet market had already become a 41 billion dollar industry (Holak, 2008; Megehee, 2008; Ridgway et al., 2008). Not only is the size of

the market attractive to marketers, but its rate of growth is even more impressive (Caldwell, 2008). Additionally, after breaking down the segments within this market, it remains relatively stable, despite its growth (Aylesworth et al., 1999; Megehee, 2008). Moving away from the macro aspect, the pet market appears promising as well when we look at individual spending. According to the research by Ceissler (2002), 31.6% of US household own at least one dog (1.7 dogs on average), while 27.3% own a cat (2.2 cats on average). Based on studies conducted in 1999 and 2002, pet owners spent about \$187 and \$147 on their dog and cat companions per year. This translates to roughly \$11,581 per dog per its life-time and \$8,665 per cat per its life-time (Aylesworth et al., 1999; Ceissler, 2002). The majority of the spending is on pet food (40%), vets' bills (25%) and medicines (24%), while 7% is spent on pet services and only 5% is devoted to the purchase of the pet (Megehee, 2008).

All inputs above are US-based. This makes non-US-based research more difficult with all the vital data lacking. On the other hand, it is the opportunity for cross-cultural and comparative research. With the modern pet market's size and potential established, let us turn to the scholars' views on what drives pet owners' behaviour and the changing roles of pets.

### **The roles of pets**

The increasing spend on pets may be related to their increasing importance in their owner's life; however, this is not the whole picture. In fact, pets can play various roles within our lives (Davids, 1997; Mosteller, 2008; Dotson and Hyatt, 2008). This is also the subject on which most pet-human relationship research concentrates.

To begin this subject, some research studies are dedicated to the treatment that pets receive in modern times. Apart from the five billion USD spent on pets during the Christmas period (Aylesworth et al., 1999), Hill et al (2008) conclude that a third of pets' human companions celebrate their pet's birthday and take them on holiday with them. Common household pets nowadays enjoy many privileges that are unparalleled in any other period. For example, 70% of pets sleep with their human companion, while about the same number receive gifts from their human companion. Moreover, a significant number of pets' human companions cook for their pet, dress them in clothes and take them to work (Anon, 2007).

If this is not enough, some recent research has shown a possible new trend in this pet-human relationship in terms of vets' and other relevant medical services. As noted earlier, a large proportion of spending on pets is on vets' bills and medicine, much more than was paid for the pet originally. This is largely due to the high price-tag for pet's medical services, the fact that very few pets are insured and, of course, the fact that their human companions are willing to pay for these treatments (Brockman et al, 2008).

In 2002, there are about 59,000 vets in the US, while many of the pet owners wish for a more convenient and quality service (Ceissler, 2002). Subsequent research estimated that employment related to pets' medical services is still growing and will increase by 44% during 2008-10 (Cavanaugh et al, 2008).

If these numbers cannot tell us enough about how the human companions value their pets and the relationships with their pets, then Brockman et al's (2008) involvement related to the agony of the pet owner's decisions while their pet is ill or injured should be able to show us more about their struggle between emotion and reason. Through their personal struggles with their pet's surgery, they conducted qualitative research on pet owners and the owners' usual decision-making process when their beloved pet needs medical treatment costing over 1,000 USD. This price range is normal, since only 1% of cats and dogs are insured, as mentioned above (Brockman et al, 2008). Within their research, most pets received treatment, but not without arguments, especially if the owners have different views on the role of their pet. It is quite common for the person who is more involved with their pet to win the argument due to the devotion he/she shows to his/her counterpart. As Morwitz (2008) and Cote (2008, p.500) jointed agree, pet-related expenses are very often high involvement and emotional rather than high knowledge.

On the other hand, not all domestic animals receive these privileges and positive attention. Many domestic animals still fulfill an economic and utilitarian function (Hirschman, 1994; Beverland et al, 2008). This leads to another issue, which is how the human companions view their pets.

Pets play a variety of roles within people's lives (Cavanaugh et al, 2008). This is even being recognised by the US government as part of their emergency evacuation plan due to some pet owners refusing to leave their pets behind during emergencies (Leonard and Scammon, 2007).

Hirschman (1994) categorised animals into the following: as object/product, as self and as a family member. This is obviously not the only classification, but it generally covers the other classification methods offered by other researchers.

Those who treat their animals as an object/product see animals as ornaments, status symbols, avocations or equipment. Beverland et al (2008) back up this view through their research on the dark side of pet ownership. Some owners will view their pets as status symbols or even toys. An attitude like this could still lead to pet owners spending more on their pets in order to increase their economic value or just as a mean of conspicuous consumption.

Alternatively, the author suggests that over 70% of pet owners define their animals as siblings, or brother and sisters. According to Brockman et al (2008) and Downey and Ellis (2008), pets will improve children's socialisation skills, which adds

to their appeal as members of a family. Additionally, this relationship is also investigated and confirmed by Davids' (1997) research, partly because the American family structure has changed, so there are fewer children within households, and so more couples see their pet as a child-figure or child-substitute. Within Barker's (2005) research, it is found that there are no significant differences between humans and their pets with regard to their family members, especially for females (Anon, 2007). It is said that this tendency has contributed to the increase in the ownership of cats rather than dogs, since cats are typically more independent (Downey and Ellis, 2008). Treating a pet as a member of the family certainly can help to explain much of the consumption behaviour displayed by their human companions.

Finally, there are also those who value their pets as an extension of themselves. Linking consumption, possession and the extension of the self is not a new idea; however, Secord (1968) and Veevers (1985) were among the first to apply the concept of the extended-self to pet ownership. This concept is later re-examined by other researchers, like Belk (1988) and Sivadas and Venkatesh (1995). This concept offers an alternative to viewing pets as a member of the family. By seeing pets as an extension of the self, pet owners treat their animal companions with luxurious products and services as a reward, symbolically, given to themselves. In Ridgway et al's (2008) work, they further this research by connecting spending on pets with the owner's personal spending through those who have excessive shopping records. Based on their study, those who exhibit excessive buying behaviour typically spend more on their pets as well.

As discussed earlier, Hirshman's (1994) classification is quite sufficient to cover most of the roles that pets play in our lives; however, Mosteller's (2008) amendments should be noted, since they fill in some of the blind spots within the existing roles. In their view, pets can also be a rescuer, caretaker and social mediator for their human companion. In this respect, pets have the ability to take the initiative within a relationship rather than acting purely as a receiver.

### **Managerial implications and research opportunities**

Without doubt, pets are receiving growing attention from marketers and academics because of the potential that pet owners unleash and the devotion they offer. But in which direction is this going?

To start with some current managerial issues, vets will continue to play a crucial part due the entry barrier and the emotional attachment that pet owners have towards their pets. It is shown that many pet owners will pay for their pets' expensive veterinary care (Brockman et al, 2008) but it did not receive promising feedback when Ceissler (2002) advocated the idea of a mobile vet service. Despite this being convenient for modern families, most pet owners have doubts about this distribution

method, mainly due to their concern about its quality. For practitioners, the opportunities lie in finding a balance to accompany modern families' needs through the life-cycle of their relationship with their pet. Another potential spotlight could be on pet food and its marketing, since 40% of the spending on pets is related to food purchase, as mentioned earlier. At the moment, no consumer research has examined the marketing communication issues within this market. Only Ewing et al (1999), who studies pet food advertisements within supermarkets, touched on this issue by noting that pet food advertisements are the most recalled and liked ads within the supermarket environment. However, they did not go on to discuss its implications for marketers or the reasons behind this phenomenon. Finally, purebred and designer pets are still popular among some market segments, despite this being a display of control, self-relevance and domination (Beverland et al, 2008). Even with the ethical debate, there is no question that pet owners will select pets based on their appearance. It is rather a matter of how far the pet owners will go in order to obtain a pet with the look that they desire (Cate, 2008).

For academics, tackling pet-related consumption mentalities and behaviour are also a new frontier. At the moment, apart from the Special Issue by the Journal of Business Research in 2008, the research on the pet industry is scattered, with limited interaction. This is not a subject that can be dealt with easily. As Hill et al (2008, p.560) put it, 'while no one expects these dogs to answer questions or write their own life histories, using an empathic and anthropomorphic style may not resonate as truthful. On the other hand, limited options exist under such circumstances'.

For this reason, the methodologies used by existing research studies, interestingly, all favour the qualitative approach. For example, Hirschman (1994) advocated the ethnography approach and semiotic analysis, Holbrook (2008) used diary style and Hill et al (2008) suggested an observation and story-telling approach. Positive research is the minority in this field (Holak, 2008). On the other hand, the qualitative methods used in existing research are rather narrow, for example, with relatively little use of focus groups and in-depth interviews.

### **Concluding notes**

For now, the central challenge within this subject is its lack of reliability since cross-cultural comparative study is difficult with non-US related data unorganised or absent. With little verification, can we apply the above literature and norms to other cultures? Additionally, cross-cultural research will not be easy in this field since we cannot directly communicate with pet themselves. Nevertheless, research like this should be encouraged and promoted. It will definitely be rewarding with contribution to knowledge on marketing, consumer behaviour and the wider managerial studies.

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