

A Collective Stereographic Photo Essay on Key Aspects of Animal Companionship: The Truth About Dogs and Cats

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper explores the consumption experiences involved in living with animal companions by means of an integrated approach to marketing and consumer research called the CollectiOve Stereographic Photo Essay or CSPE. By way of introduction, the e-publication begins by considering the context for the research -- namely, the manner in which people relate to their pets, the potential benefits from such interactions, and how these inter-species relationships shape the everyday worlds of many human consumers. Specifically, we focus on the essence of pet-related consumption experiences and on how our animal companions are welcomed into our most intimate or private moments, are loved, and are treated as family members in general or as children in particular. That pets offer us humans warm and enduring companionship is well-documented. Owners have characterized their pets as children, friends, or playmates; and most attest to the unconditional love offered by their companion animals. This study delves more deeply into these and other aspects of the human-animal relationship. It explores how consumption experiences with pets or animal companions add meaning to our lives as humans.

We focus primarily on pet owners who are deeply and positively engaged with their animals. By means of personal essays and photographs, we explore these owners' experiences of -- and with -- their animal companions. Toward that end, we employ a method designed to capture the essence of people's *experiences* of sharing their world with animal companions (a common aspect of consumption that many of us take for granted but that pervades our lives as human consumers). Our purpose here is to probe more deeply into the everyday context that surrounds the presence of animal companions in the mundane lives of ordinary human consumers.

Toward that end, in general, the study uses essays and photographs to undertake an in-depth exploration of how consumers experience interactions with the animal companions in their everyday world. In particular, we employ an integrated approach referred to as the *Collective Stereographic Photo Essay (CSPE)*. Briefly, this method combines four key aspects that characterize the concerns and techniques pursued in the present study: (1) The illustration of consumption experiences by means of *self-photographs* taken by the informants themselves; (2) The use of *three-dimensional stereography* to enhance the vividness, clarity, realism, and depth of these self-photographs; (3) The elicitation of *verbal vignettes* and the synthesis of these into a *photo essay*; and (4) The combination of these elements by means of *collective collaboration*.

We pursued this CSPE method in four phases of qualitative data collection. Phase 1 -- representing a small portion of a larger study (reported elsewhere) on the meaning(s) of happiness -- establishes the importance of animal companions in the lives of ordinary consumers. In this connection, it appears striking that a substantial number of informants viewed their pets or other animals as the key to "What Happiness Means to Me." Specifically 11 of 100 informants singled out their experiences with animal companions as *the* major factor contributing to happiness in their lives. This evidence of the role played by pet-related consumption experiences in conferring happiness, strongly suggests the usefulness of investigating the consumption experiences associated with pet ownership in greater depth. Accordingly, this topic became the major focus for Phases 2, 3, and 4 of the present study.

Phases 2, 3, and 4 applied the same CSPE method to three different samples of informants -- namely, a small convenience sample of adult pet owners; a larger sample of pet owners around the university community; and an in-depth subjective personal introspective account provided by one of the co-authors. This three-pronged approach identified and supported the existence of *seven key themes* in pet-related consumption experiences. These themes involve seven key opportunities provided by relationships with animal companions: (1) *The Opportunity to Appreciate Nature and to Experience Wildlife*; (2) *The Opportunity for Inspiration and Learning*; (3) *The Opportunity to be Childlike and Playful*; (4) *The Opportunity to be Altruistic and Nurturant*; (5) *The Opportunity for Companionship, Caring, Comfort, and/or Calmness*; (6) *The Opportunity to Parent*; and (7) *The Opportunity to Strengthen Bonds with Other Humans*.

After reporting the supporting evidence for these seven themes in some detail, we consider various implications and insights that emerge from our CSPE approach. Most importantly, the study supports an emphasis on the role of *enduring or deep involvement* in the lives of consumers as they relate with particularly high levels of cathexis to certain product categories or consumption experiences in general and to the category of animal companions in particular.

We believe that such elevated levels of pet-related deep involvement cut against the grain of the view that focuses on possessions as extensions of the self. This view treats the materialistic ownership of meaningful objects as a key to the formation of personal identity and as a basis for communicating that identity both to oneself and to others. But the view of pets or animal companions as possessions ultimately leads to an impoverished account of the human-animal connection. This perspective tends to consign animal companions to the role of a utilitarian function in a self-enhancing or identity-building means-ends relationship. By contrast with this pets-as-possession-as-self position, the dynamics of animal companionship -- as revealed in the responses of our informants -- appear to go far beyond the confines of anything that we might normally associate with material possessions. Indeed, they tend to preclude the notion of ownership or of treating pets as merely means to our own ends. As abundantly illustrated in our data, consumers bond with their animal companions in ways that resemble human relationships. Some go so far as to prefer animal companionship to that of humans. Others form relationships with their pets that begin to transcend or blur the boundaries of the human-animal distinction. What these consumers share in common is a deep awareness that their relationship with one or more animal companions is an *end in*

itself and definitely *not* merely a means to some other end such as an ego-enhancing self-identity, the admiration of others, an excuse to get exercise, or a creature to protect the house against intruders.

We conclude -- vis-a-vis the relevant literature on marketing and consumer research -- that pets represent *not* self-extending possessions but *rather* a series of opportunities (currently framed in terms of seven main themes) for deeply involved consumption experiences in the company of highly valued animal companions. Without excessive sentimentality, we can infer that pets are *part* of consumption experiences for many people but that these experiences are *above* the domain normally explored by marketing and consumer research. In that sense, pets occupy hallowed ground. They belong to the sphere of *sacred consumption*. Herein, aspects of pets-as-sacred rather than of pets-as-possession appear to tap the gist of the themes uncovered in the present study.

We close by pondering how American or Western aspects of pet-related consumption experiences compare to those found in *other cultures* and whether, perhaps, cross-cultural differences might carry implications for the *global ethics* of pet-related consumption experiences. For example, can we find economically inefficient or morally objectionable facets of pet consumption wherein resource allocation seems to have gone astray -- as in spending thousands of dollars to prolong the life of a sick animal suffering from an incurable disease instead of devoting the same resources to the alleviation of human suffering? And how, we might wonder, do other cultures resolve these and other issues concerning pet-related consumption experiences? In this connection, our strong hunch is that -- at superficial but perhaps not deep levels -- other cultures do differ considerably from the American or Western standard. The empirical answers to such questions must await the completion of further research currently in progress. However, we anticipate that we shall find -- below the level of surface cultural differences -- a common core of humanity that connects consumers from both our and other societies with deeply involving experiences enjoyed in the company of animal companions.

A COLLECTIVE STEREOGRAPHIC PHOTO ESSAY ON KEY ASPECTS OF ANIMAL COMPANIONSHIP: THE TRUTH ABOUT DOGS AND CATS

Not surprisingly, many of us admit our animal companions into the most intimate areas of our lives. We are not in the least embarrassed when a dog sees us in the shower or overhears an argument. In this, a companion animal provides an intimacy that exceeds any we may experience with virtually any other human being, including our spouses and children; the intimacy is on a par with that of mother and newborn infant, or of our own skins (Thomas 1996, p. ix).

These words from Elizabeth Marshall Thomas (1996) summarize the gist of the present essay on key aspects of animal companionship. Specifically, we focus on the essence of pet-related consumption experiences and on how our animal companions are welcomed into our most intimate or private moments, are loved, are treated as family members in general or as children in particular, and are deeply mourned when their cherished lives have come to an end. That pets offer us humans warm and enduring companionship is well-documented (Beck and Katcher ed. 1983; Hirschman 1994; Katcher and Beck ed. 1983; Loyer-Carlson 1992; Sussman ed. 1985). Owners have characterized their pets as children, friends, or playmates; and most attest to the unconditional regard offered by their companion animals (Holbrook 1996b, 1997a; Kowalski 1991; Stephens and Hill 1996; Weissman 1991). This study delves more deeply into these and other aspects of the human-animal relationship. It explores how consumption experiences with pets or animal companions add meaning to our lives as humans. For example, as the second author's cats age and suffer the ill effects of arthritis, kidney failure, bowel problems, and hyperthyroidism, her commitment to them becomes increasingly conscious and exacts emotional, financial, social, and temporal costs that she cannot imagine sustaining -- with such great largesse or so little ambivalence -- were the cats human. The sources of her devotion to her feline companions are their vulnerability and their serene, affectionate constancy. They are her refuge and her delight.

The second author is not alone in this partiality to another species. A colleague who spotted the cat photos on her desk volunteered a history of his own beloved felines, commenting that he wept openly in the veterinarian's office when one of his cats had to be euthanized because of a terminal illness. "I didn't cry like that when my mother died," he mused.

Formal surveys abound with evidence of the special place that animal companions occupy in this society. A recent example is the American Animal Hospital Association's 1999 survey of 1,200 animal-companion owners in the U.S. and Canada (AAHA 2000). Almost two-thirds of the respondents report that they celebrate their pets' birthdays; almost half share the bed with their pet; more than half have taken time off from work to care for a sick pet; and more than four out of five refer to themselves as their pet's mom or dad.

Like human children, animal companions are the targets or recipients of their caregivers' projections, expectations, and desires. And, as with human children, these internal mental representations lead to kindness, love, and nurturing (or -- conversely, when the process breaks down -- to emotional and physical abuse). This study focuses primarily on pet owners who are deeply and positively engaged with their animals. By means of personal essays and photographs, it explores these owners' experiences of -- and with -- their animal companions.

MEDICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC BENEFITS OF ANIMAL COMPANIONS

As one example of how animal companions enhance consumers' well-being, we might cite the burgeoning research in support of the medical, psychological, and psychotherapeutic benefits of pet-related consumption experiences.

Medical Benefits

More than two decades of research indicate that animal companions help to reduce stress, to improve cardiovascular fitness, and thereby to reduce the risk of heart disease while increasing the survival rates of individuals who suffer from heart ailments. For a review of this literature, please see Medical Benefits of Animal Companions.

Psychological Benefits

Living with an animal companion is associated not only with reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and with decreased physiological stress responses, but also with improved mental health. Sharing one's life with a pet contributes to greater self-reported psychological well-being; lower chances of clinical depression; reduced feelings of loneliness or isolation; and an enhanced sense of comfort, security, or entertainment. For further details on the mental well-being attributable to animal companions, please see Psychological Benefits of Animal Companions.

Psychotherapeutic Benefits

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT), involving the use of animals in treatment of humans with a variety of illnesses, has a long and venerable history. Many child- and adult-oriented psychotherapists have used animals as co-therapists in treating outpatients as well as institutionalized ones or have recommended that patients acquire a pet as an adjunct to therapy. Individuals struggling with depression associated with chronic illness or disability, low self-esteem, loneliness, and feelings of helplessness report that their animal makes them feel needed or secure, distracts them from their worries, and makes them laugh. (In this connection, recall the concluding portions of the recent film entitled *Girl Interrupted*, in which Wynona Ryder and her friends in a psychiatric hospital gain some measure of comfort from their relationships with a cat named Ruby.) For further discussion of the psychotherapeutic benefits of animal companions in treating such conditions as autism or learning disabilities, please see Animal-Assisted Therapy.

What About the Rest of Us?

The reader might wonder what all this implies for people who do not suffer from physical or mental problems. In other words, those readers fortunate enough to be in good health and free from autism or clinical depression might find themselves asking, "What About the Rest of Us?" Sure, pets might help to protect or to cure people in need of attention from medical doctors and psychotherapists, but what can they do for the typical man or woman on the street?

In tune with the widespread contemporary malaise that appears to characterize the postmodern ethos (e.g., Franklin 1999), the authors tend to regard the world as a fairly dangerous, threatening, or hostile place in which illness, sadness, or some other calamity is always just around the corner, getting ready to knock on one's door. In this sense, we all belong to the great sea of humanity that finds itself both afflicted by the trials and tribulations but also blessed by the opportunities and potentialities of the human condition. One such potential opportunity is that -- even for ordinary people -- however well-adjusted and happy our lives may already be, pets can make them even better-adjusted and happier. Pets perform this minor miracle through the simple act of interacting with us and participating in our everyday world.

In the view of Franklin (1999), humans began to build social and emotional ties with animals because it had become increasingly difficult for them to establish and maintain such ties among themselves: "No doubt a compelling argument could be made to show that the warm, companionate, caring relationships expressed towards animals by humans in postmodernity relate to a longing for such relations to be reestablished between humans" (p. 60). Thus, "Pets are able to provide their keepers with many social benefits which are no longer guaranteed by society" (p. 97). In short, this author sees pet-related consumption as a response to "ontological insecurity" in postmodern times:

What makes animals special, socially unique in late modernity is their potential to be like us and for the categorical boundary between humans and animals to be blurred. Of particular importance is their potential to be available, reliable, stable and predictable in their relations with humans at a time when human social relations are the opposite. In addition, animals are embodied, like us. The physicality and embodiment of important human social relationships is often what is missing, even where a relation is intact -- the absentee parent, the grown child moved from away (pp. 194-195).

In other words, animal companions play roles that deeply influence the nature of our daily consumption experiences.

Consumption Experiences

In adopting a focus on *consumption experiences*, we pursue an orientation that has recently gained wide acceptance in consumer research dealing with the fantasies, feelings, and fun that characterize the lives of human consumers (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; for reviews, see Holbrook 1995; Richins 1997). This experiential perspective has tended to emphasize the emotional aspects of consumption (Holbrook 1987; Richins 1997) -- especially in the context of products or experiences evoking high levels of *enduring or deep involvement* (Bloch and Richins 1983; Laurent and Kapferer 1985; Richins and Bloch 1986) and/or existing in the realm of *sacred consumption* (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

The importance of the consumption experience as an orientation for understanding consumer behavior has recently penetrated into the literature aimed at providing prescriptions for marketing strategy. In such books as *Experiential Marketing* (Schmitt 1999) and *The Experience Economy* (Pine and Gilmore 1999), various authors have offered guidance on how marketers can exploit the fantasies-feelings-and-fun, thoughts-emotions-and-activities, or thinking-feeling-and-acting that form the basis for experiential consumption. For example, Schmitt (1999) gives detailed illustrations of commercial possibilities in all walks of life, while Pine and Gilmore (1999) recommend charging a suitable price of admission for any and all experiential events.

Clearly, in the manner originally intended by the experiential view (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) -- before those concerned primarily with the possibilities for commercial exploitation got hold of it -- we are interested not in the purchase of pet-related products (dog food, kitty litter, bird cages) and not in the acquisition of the animals themselves (whether bought from fancy pedigreed breeders or brought home from animal shelters to save them from euthanasia), but rather in people's *experiences* of sharing their world with animal companions (an ordinary aspect of everyday consumption that many of us take for granted but that pervades our lives as human consumers). Consumer researchers and other investigators have recently begun to explore the experiential aspects of animal companionship (Sanders and Hirschman 1996). For example, analyzing interview data, Belk (1996) finds pets treated metaphorically as sources of pleasures or problems, extensions of the self, family members, or child substitutes. Gillespie, Leffler, and Lerner (1996) use (auto)ethnographic approaches to study dog-sport enthusiasts as examples of absorbing commitment or passionate avocation in identity-shaping leisure pursuits. Along similar lines, the present authors have examined the subjective personal introspective aspects of consumption experiences with animal companions (Holbrook 1996b, 1997a) and have documented the joy- or grief-inducing power of situations involving the love or loss of a pet (Stephens and Hill 1996). These earlier publications contain extensive references to the voluminous literature on experiences that arise in the company of animal companions (e.g., Serpell 1986). Our purpose here is to probe more deeply into the everyday context that surrounds the presence of animal companions in the mundane lives of ordinary human consumers.

Preview

In sum, our animal companions bring us far more than temporary pleasure or amusement. They may make significant contributions to our mental and/or physical well-being, helping to promote our happiness and/or to prolong our lives. Even in the absence of such welfare- or health-related benefits, pet-based consumption experiences add richness, depth, and meaning to the human condition. To better understand the ways in which pets work their magic on us, the present study uses essays and photographs to undertake an in-depth exploration of how consumers experience interactions with the animal companions in their everyday world.

METHOD

The Collective Stereographic Photo Essay

Toward the end of developing insights into the human-pet relationship, we employed an integrated approach referred to as the *Collective Stereographic Photo Essay (CSPE)*; justified at length elsewhere (Holbrook and Kuwahara 1997; 1998); and described here in only enough detail to facilitate its understanding in the present context. Briefly, this method combines four key aspects that characterize the concerns and techniques pursued in the present study:

1. The illustration of consumption experiences by means of *self-photographs* taken by the informants themselves;
2. The use of *three-dimensional stereography* to enhance the vividness, clarity, realism, and depth of these self-photographs;
3. The elicitation of verbal vignettes and the synthesis of these into a *photo essay*;
4. The combination of these elements by means of *collective collaboration*.

We shall briefly review each of these aspects as it applies to the findings reported here.

Self-Photographs

Numerous researchers have advocated the use of photographs to illustrate the insights gained via cultural anthropology (Bateson and Mead 1942; Collier 1967; Collier and Collier 1986), visual sociology (Becker 1986, 1995; Chaplin 1994; Harper 1988), or other branches of the social sciences (Wagner ed. 1979; Ziller 1990). Comparable photographic methods have been widely adopted by marketing and consumer researchers (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Heisley and Levy 1991; Rook 1991; Wallendorf and Belk 1987). Moreover, some have insisted on the importance of collecting such visual images from the informants themselves rather than from some set supplied by the researchers (Ziller 1990). Particularly insistent on this point, Zaltman (1996, 1997) and his colleagues (Zaltman and Coulter 1995; Zaltman and Higie 1993) have supplied informants with disposable cameras for purposes of letting them take their own photos of salient scenes that illustrate key concepts of interest. The present application borrows this idea by equipping informants with twin single-use cameras, fastened together end-to-end to allow them to capture three-dimensional stereographic images of their pets.

Three-Dimensional Stereography

Elsewhere, the first author has written at some length on the virtues of three-dimensional stereography as a way of enhancing the vividness, clarity, realism, and depth of visual images used in the collection of information, analysis of data, interpretation of meanings, and presentation of findings in marketing and consumer research (Holbrook 1996a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998; Holbrook and Kuwahara 1997, 1998). For further details on our manner of using stereo 3-D images in the present study, please see Three-Dimensional Stereography.

Photo Essay

Verbal vignettes collected by means of a written questionnaire are read, analyzed, and categorized for thematic content. Via this process, we move toward reaching agreement on the pervasiveness of various major themes (described in what follows). For further details, please see Photo Essay.

Collective Collaboration

In a study such as this, we regard our informants not as "respondents" in a survey "directed" by the principal researcher but rather as collaborators in a collective project aimed at the understanding of a mutually shared consumption experience. For further details, please see Collective Collaboration.

FINDINGS

Phase 1

Phase 1 refers back to a study on the theme of "What Happiness Means to Me" reported at length in another context by Holbrook and Kuwahara (1999). This previous research has focused on an aspect of the consumption experience shared by all consumers as part of the human condition -- namely, the nature and types of happiness that matter to consumers in their daily lives. As with the present work on pet-related consumption, our study of happiness has employed the CSPE approach just described. It invites consumers to tell and show us -- in their own words and via the use of pictures -- what happiness means to them.

The Happiness Project collected data in two stages from 100 informants in and around the New York City area. For further details on this sample, please see Phase 1 Sample in the complete text.

For a summary of conclusions from the earlier study, please see General Findings from the Happiness Project.

Here, we shall focus *only* on the findings from the Happiness Project of direct relevance to the present study on pet-related consumption experiences. In this connection, it appears striking that a substantial number of informants singled out their experiences with animal companions as *the* major factor contributing to happiness in their lives. Specifically 11 of 100 informants viewed their pets or other animals as the key to "What Happiness Means to Me."

Thus, many informants found happiness in their relationships with animal companions. Strongly supporting the themes of pets as caring companions or surrogate children -- capable of subtle or complex animal-human interactions -- informants emphasized the joyful feeling of love bestowed by one or more dogs or cats. Dog owners used such phrases as "a great friend and family member"; "mutual love and affection"; or "unconditional love." Cat owners spoke of their feline companions in similar terms -- "he is always happy to see me"; "the love that creates happiness"; "epitomize domestic happiness"; "loves me unconditionally"; or "simply joyful love." On a larger scale, one informant claimed that the "essence" of happiness "can be explained ... through my experiences with horses." For further details of the relevant results from the earlier study, please see Findings from the Happiness Project of Specific Interest to Phase 1.

Phase 1 draws on the Happiness Project to establish the importance of pet-related consumption experiences in the lives of ordinary consumers. Over ten percent of our informants identified animal companionship as the essence of "What Happiness Means To Me." This strongly suggests the usefulness of investigating the consumption experiences associated with pet ownership in greater depth. Accordingly, this topic became the major focus for Phases 2, 3, and 4 of the present study.

Phase 2 - Seven Major Themes in Consumption Experiences with Companion Animal

Twenty-three individuals responded to a questionnaire designed to explore the responses of these informants to their animal companions in depth. Verbal vignettes collected by means of the questionnaire were read, analyzed, and categorized for thematic content by four of the authors. Via this process, we reached agreement on the pervasiveness of seven major themes, described in what follows. In addition, visual illustrations appear in the form of stereo 3-D photographs. For further details concerning the sample, questionnaire, and stereographs used in Phase 2, please see Phase 2 Method.

Analyzing the interviews independently, describing themes, and extracting exemplars, four coauthors reached agreement about all of the key motifs discussed in what follows. Specifically, we found that pets provide many *opportunities* for their owners. Careful analysis of our informants' responses suggested the following *seven major themes* regarding the various opportunities associated with animal companionship.

The Opportunity to Appreciate Nature and to Experience Wildlife. At the simplest level, some informants report that their pets provide them an opportunity more fully to appreciate Nature in general or to experience "wildlife" in particular via a daily contact with members of another species. For further details, please see Theme 1.

The Opportunity for Inspiration and Learning. Pushing the expanded awareness of "wildlife" one step farther, some informants credit their companion animals with contributing to an even deeper level of inspiration or learning, as when cultivating a profound respect for God's creatures, bringing out a tender side of one's personality, or broadening one's sensitivity to living things in general. For further details, please see Theme 2.

The Opportunity to be Childlike and Playful. Closely related to the aspects of learning just mentioned, some informants appreciate the ways in which their companion animals bring out valued aspects of their own personalities. One such form of personal enrichment concerns the ability to engage more spontaneously in childlike games or playful activities. Sometimes our informants mention such intimations of youthfulness in connection with the effects of their pets on spouses in general and on husbands in particular. Others enjoy the experience, prompted by a pet, of an infectious playfulness that affects the whole family. For further details, please see Theme 3.

The Opportunity to be Altruistic and Nurturant. As expressed here, playfulness is viewed as a desirable personality trait. But sometimes pets encourage the development of even higher virtues, such as altruism and nurturance. Thus, some of our informants appreciate the tendency of their animal companions to prompt them to become not merely happier but also better human beings. For further details, please see Theme 4.

The Opportunity for Companionship, Caring, Comfort, and/or Calmness. Most of the opportunities noted thus far have addressed themes related to ways in which companion animals move their owners in the direction of various sorts of self-improvements at the personal level. Inextricably tied to such beneficial effects on one's own individual character traits, however, are the demonstrable ways in which pets facilitate and augment various aspects of interpersonal relationships. Obviously, at a basic level, pets provide companionship, mutual caring, and a sense of comfort, including the reduction of stress and the evocation of calmness. That dogs offer such benefits appears obvious -- both from daily observations and from the responses to our questionnaire. Some might be surprised to discover the extent to which cats can also provide comparable levels of comfort, caring, and companionship. Clearly, both cats and dogs can become members of what, in effect, amounts to nothing less than a surrogate family. For further details, please see Theme 5.

The Opportunity to Parent. An extension of the nurturing- and companionship-oriented themes just described regards a pet animal as a surrogate child and sees the self as engaged in the enactment of a quasi-parenting role. For example, one informant produces the marvelous epithet "fur children" to describe her two animal companions. For further details, please see Theme 6.

The Opportunity to Strengthen Bonds with Other Humans. Finally, extending the sphere of interpersonal relationships a bit farther, pets can exert a strong impact on the manner in which human members of a family relate not only to the animals themselves but also to each other. In this, animal companions again resemble children, but it appears that -- whereas children can sometimes be a source of inter-parental conflict -- pets are more likely to prompt consensus and harmony. This cementing of human relationships could occur within the extended family (aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc.). More often, the human bonding promoted by animals occurs within the context of the immediate family, most typically for a wife and her husband. Or, of course, the whole family -- parents and kids together -- can benefit from such enhanced interactions. For further details, please see Theme 7.

Phase 2 suggested seven key themes that appear to characterize the opportunities enjoyed by those engaged in consumption experiences shared with animal companions. These themes were developed inductively rather than deductively -- that is, they emerged from the pictures and vignettes provided by informants rather than from a more *a priori* categorization scheme. Nonetheless, they appear to carry face validity and to provide a convenient conceptual basis for typifying the kinds of experiential benefits stemming from pet-related consumer behavior. Accordingly, Phases 3 and 4 of the present study were directed toward supporting and fleshing out the findings of Phase 2 in more detail and depth.

Phase 3 - The Seven Major Themes Revisited

Forty-two informants from in and around the Columbia University community reported on their pet-related consumption experiences. As before, our CSPE approach was designed to explore the responses of these informants to their animal companions in depth. Toward that end, verbal vignettes were again read, analyzed, and categorized for thematic content with the result that each of the seven themes previously uncovered in Phase 2 was bolstered, supported, and corroborated. In addition, we once more provide visual illustrations in the form of stereo 3-D photos. For further details concerning the sample, questionnaire, and stereographs used in Phase 3, please see Phase 3 Method.

Careful analysis of our informants' responses in Phase 3 found strong consistency with the *seven major themes* regarding the various *opportunities* associated with animal companionship previously identified in Phase 2. Specifically, we again find key motifs suggesting that pets provide seven major types of opportunities for their owners, as follows.

The Opportunity to Appreciate Nature and to Experience Wildlife. Some informants continue to voice an almost intellectual satisfaction gained from the opportunity to encounter Nature face-to-face. For further details, please see Theme 1.

The Opportunity for Inspiration and Learning. Pushing the desire to experience Nature a notch farther, some informants again view their pet-related experiences as a guide to learning or even as a source of inspiration. For further details, please see Theme 2.

The Opportunity to be Childlike and Playful. As before, beyond the sorts of Nature-related and other educational experiences that pets provide, they also offer an opportunity for mutual engagement in active play. Thus, several of our dog and cat owners emphasize such childlike and playful activities as a primary benefit of pet ownership. For further details, please see Theme 3.

The Opportunity to be Altruistic and Nurturant. Beyond ministering to their pets' needs for play and recreation, many of our informants continue to find additional more self-sacrificing ways to foster the welfare of their animal companions. In this, they speak of "duty," "responsibility," "self-sacrifice" -- in short, gratifying altruism in the ability to provide nurturance. For further details, please see Theme 4.

The Opportunity for Companionship, Caring, Comfort, and/or Calmness. As in Phase 2, by far the most common thematic response from our informants concerns the role that pets play in offering companionship, caring, comfort, and/or calmness. In this connection, no fewer than 19 of our 42 informants comment explicitly on the companionship theme -- which is not too surprising when one considers that pets are, above all, animal companions. For example, our canine-adoring informants use such words as "security," "comfort," "friend," "confidant," "affectionate," "sympathetic," "loving," "always happy to see me," "happiness," "joy," "entertainment," "the only one in the family who greets me with that kind of excitement," "makes me feel like a celebrity when I come home," "has an uncanny way of sensing my emotional needs," "a good listener and a devoted friend" -- and, above all else, **companionship**. Cat owners stressing the theme of companionship are, if anything, even more effusive in the evocativeness of their language -- using such words as "a bond," "we really communicated," "tremendous love"; "great company," "affectionate," "an important part of my life"; "keep each other company and try to be there for each other"; "a good friend"; "a good relationship," "a great companion"; "means so much to me," "takes care of me," "my best friend," "always sits and listens," "love my cat like I love a person," "a big part of my family"; "makes me feel loved, every day"; "a house full of love," "showering me with affection," "loving me no matter what"; "a constant in my life during tremendous changes," "always there for me," and "a symbol of unconditional caring." For further details, please see Theme 5.

The Opportunity to Parent. Beyond mere feelings of companionship -- as in Phase 2 -- some respondents actually see their relationships with pets as comparable to those between parents and children. Reassuringly, no parental feelings surfaced among owners of tropical fish, but dog and cat lovers often adopted a maternal or paternal perspective toward their companion animals. For further details, please see Theme 6.

The Opportunity to Strengthen Bonds with Other Humans. Finally, as before, the presence of animal companions may affect the way their owners interact with friends, relatives, loved ones, and other personal contacts. For further details, please see Theme 7.

Phase 3 serves to corroborate the importance of the seven themes that emerged from Phase 2 and to enrich our understanding of their broad-scale applicability across a diverse set of informants. Further support, at a more intimate level of in-depth specificity, comes from Phase 4.

Phase 4 - Ellen and the Seven Thematic Meanings of Animal Companionship

In Phase 4, we pursued a more in-depth exploration of the animal-related consumption experiences in the life of one particular informant, Ellen, who subsequently became the third author of the present essay.

Ellen lives alone on a farm-like plot near Athens, GA in the company of numerous animals that include two geese, a donkey, two goats, some dogs, and several cats. She also owns a small horse or pony and a full-sized horse that she keeps nearby and visits regularly. Her devotion to these animal companions is famous among her friends, and her powers of insight into consumer behavior are also well-known in marketing-related academic circles.

Ellen was asked to provide stereographs and vignettes *before* she had in any way seen the other materials collected in Phases 1, 2, and 3 of the study. Hence, we view her responses as corroboration for the earlier findings. For further details on the method used to obtain responses from Ellen, please see Phase 4 Method.

The comments by Ellen provide powerful confirmation of the potential role(s) played by animal companionship in the lives of consumers. For the full set of stereographs and vignettes from Ellen, please see Findings from Phase 4. Further and more specifically, Ellen's responses support the seven themes identified previously in Phases 2 and 3.

The Opportunity to Appreciate Nature and to Experience Wildlife. Clearly, Ellen has a deep fascination with animals, studies their behavior, and feels intimately connected to the animal kingdom. So deep is this connection that Ellen feels with Nature in general and wildlife in particular that she regards the animal world as an essential part of her own identity. She seeks to enter the animal world and to communicate with cats, dogs, and other creatures using their own body language -- seeing these animal contacts as a sort of escape or refuge from the all-too-busy human world. She also sees the animal world as helping to keep her focused beyond her own self-centered interests and as contributing *novelty* to her life. For further details, please see Theme 1.

The Opportunity for Inspiration and Learning. Ellen indicates that, since her earliest recollections of a childhood spent on a midwestern farm, she has felt a special "attachment to and love for animals." This attachment goes beyond inspiration and learning to tap into a layer of experience that is essentially spiritual. Further, from a rather cerebral slant, Ellen tells a story about how her goats behave in ways that are "funny" in the sense of "philosophically intriguing." For further details, please see Theme 2.

The Opportunity to be Childlike and Playful. Like our other informants, Ellen experiences a sense of childlike release when playing with her animal companions. In this connection, she recounts stories of playfulness related to her geese and goats. For further details, please see Theme 3.

The Opportunity to be Altruistic and Nurturant. Ellen expresses a strong sense of nurturance in tending her flock of animals -- worrying about their health, arranging for their care when out of town, and even providing for them in her will. Ellen's altruistic caring for members of the animal kingdom reinforces her own self-esteem. This altruism occurs at the personal and practical level, rather than partaking of the more romantic or idealistic inclinations that prompt (say) vegetarians. But -- romantic and idealistic or not -- she feels a sense of joy in giving her geese, donkey, pony, and horse the finer things in life. For further details, please see Theme 4.

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The Opportunity for Companionship, Caring, Comfort, and/or Calmness. Ellen's account of her friendship with animals makes it clear that they are her constant companions. But, interestingly, she does *not* mention "unconditional love" as an attribute that attracts her to animals. Rather, having grown up on a midwestern farm, Ellen retains a bit of the practical orientation toward the animal kingdom as a lifeworld "context" that must be respected and honored. She displays great fondness for her animal friends, but -- in the back of her mind -- seems aware that animals often also serve such utilitarian functions as transportation. Or food. For further details, please see Theme 5.

The Opportunity to Parent. Ellen introduces the theme of pet ownership as a form of surrogate parenting. But she expresses some ambivalence in this direction. Specifically, she denies playing a parental role while simultaneously emphasizing the childlike qualities of her animals. One might summarize by suggesting that she finds them childish, but that their dependency does not make her feel maternal. For further details, please see Theme 6.

The Opportunity to Strengthen Bonds with Other Humans. Recalling our informants from Phases 2 and 3, Ellen uses her contact with the animal world as fuel for communication and conversation with human friends and family. Nonetheless, Ellen regards herself as a bit of a loner and sees her fondness for animals as something of a compromise position on the theme of sociability. Sometimes this stance leads to being labeled as a nonconformist. However, Ellen also expresses a need for human companionship of a type that is actually facilitated by her animal clan. For example, she turns to others for advice, consolation, and attention related to the misbehavior of her donkey. For further details, please see Theme 7.

DISCUSSION

Implications Concerning Methodology

Methodologically, the present study has demonstrated the usefulness of the Collective Stereographic Photo Essay (CSPE) as an approach to studying relevant types of consumption experiences in depth. For further comments in this connection, please see Implications Concerning Methodology.

Implications Concerning Key Substantive Theme(s)

Substantively, our findings address seven key themes reflecting the opportunities that pets bring to the human consumers who choose to share their lives with animal companions. In the preceding sections, we have described each of these seven thematic opportunities in some detail: (1) The Opportunity to Appreciate Nature and to Experience Wildlife; (2) The Opportunity for Inspiration and Learning; (3) The Opportunity to be Childlike and Playful; (4) The Opportunity to be Altruistic and Nurturant; (5) The Opportunity for Companionship, Caring, Comfort, and/or Calmness; (6) The Opportunity to Parent; and (7) The Opportunity to Strengthen Bonds with Other Humans.

It appears reasonable to conclude tentatively that -- beyond constituting the essence of pet-related consumption experiences -- these themes may help to explain the health-conferring aspects of animal companionship, whereby people who share their lives with pets tend to gain the medical, psychological, and/or psychotherapeutic benefits discussed earlier. Pet-related consumption may increase one's self-esteem (Themes 1 and 2); may relieve stress (Theme 3); may contribute a sense of accomplishment or competence (Themes 4 and 6); may enhance feelings of safety or security (Theme 5); and/or may help to forge stronger relations with friends and family (Theme 7). All these opportunities may plausibly contribute to physical or mental well-being, in ways that clearly deserve further exploration in future research.

In this connection, we might note one pervasive and life-affirming motif that cuts across the seven themes identified earlier - namely, *unconditional love*. For further documentation of this central motif, please see Implications Concerning Key Substantive Theme(s).

Insights from Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI)

Any force that can contribute such widely experienced *unconditional love* must be viewed as a powerful source of goodness and peace in the world. The authors speak with considerable feeling on this topic because we, too, have been visited by such blessings. For further discussion of our relevant subjective personal introspections, please see Insights from SPI.

Insights for Marketing and Consumer Research

Throughout the present essay, we have stressed the attempt to focus on pet-related consumer behavior from the viewpoint of *consumption experiences* shared with companion animals. This focus borrows from a two-decades-old literature on the importance of fantasies, feelings, and fun in the lives of human consumers (e.g., Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; for reviews, see Holbrook 1995; Richins 1997).

Particularly important to this experiential view has been an emphasis on the role of *enduring or deep involvement* -- as opposed to mere situational or purchase involvement in the form of (say) perceived risk -- in the lives of consumers as they relate with particularly high levels of cathexis to certain product categories or consumption experiences (e.g., Bloch and Richins 1983; Laurent and Kapferer 1985; Richins and Bloch 1986). Some consumers form subcultures around shared commitments to their Harley-Davidson motorcycles (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) or bond appreciatively with the Chicago Cubs (Holt 1995). Others attain elevated flow, peak, or otherwise extraordinary experiences from skydiving (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993, river rafting (Arnould and Price 1993), or surfing the Web (Hoffman and Novak 1996). Our informants -- as made abundantly clear by the vignettes and stereographs collected in the present study -- often show profoundly deep levels of involvement with their animal companions, leading them to speak in such terms as "unconditional love." As anticipated in the work on "enduring importance" (Bloch and Richins 1983), this deep involvement prompts pet owners to devote time to activities associated with "nurturance" (e.g., altruistic behavior) and "recreational usage" (e.g., playfulness) (p. 77).

We believe that such elevated levels of pet-related deep involvement cut against the grain of the view that focuses on possessions as extensions of the self (e.g., Belk 1988, 2000). This view treats the materialistic ownership of meaningful objects as a key to the formation of personal identity and as a basis for communicating that identity both to oneself and to others. In brief -- according to the focus on "Possessions and the Extended Self" -- "That we are what we have ... is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior": "possessions are an important component of sense of self" (Belk 1988, p. 139). Colloquially, a consumer might possess a Rolex watch, a BMW sports coupe, and an Armani suit that would combine to create a self-image serving to impress his friends and neighbors. Just as clearly, a consumer could "own" a fancy pedigreed Poodle for the purposes of building an ego-enhancing self-concept and of sharing this narcissistic self-image with others. In these senses, "Pets ... are regarded commonly as representative of self and studies show that we attempt to infer characteristics of people from their pets" (Belk 1988, p. 155).

We cannot deny that, legally, we "possess" the pets that we "own." If we wish, we can buy them, sell them, breed them, have them neutered, have them declawed, and/or put them to sleep. Except for moral compunctions or fear of adverse publicity from animal-rights activists, we could even torture them or eat them. In this sense, technically, they serve as our "possessions." Indeed, the term "pet" itself -- by contrast with the more politically correct "animal companion" -- tends to imply a possessions- as opposed to a relationship- or experience-oriented view of the human-animal nexus: "At some point over the past twenty years the term companion animal was coined and is rapidly becoming the politically correct term, while 'pet' carries negative connotations of plaything, and entertainment value" (Franklin 1999, p. 49).

But the view of pets or animal companions as possessions ultimately leads to an impoverished account of the human-animal connection. Thus -- though the possessions-as-self viewpoint notes that pets may be regarded as family members, that we mourn their death, and that eating them is taboo -- this perspective nonetheless tends to consign animal companions to the role of a utilitarian function in a self-enhancing or identity-building means-ends relationship: "pets are so *instrumental* to self-identity that they are often *useful* as transition objects" (Belk 1988, p. 155, italics added).

By contrast with this pets-as-possession-as-self position, the dynamics of animal companionship -- as revealed in the responses of our informants -- appear to go far beyond the confines of anything that we might normally associate with material possessions. Indeed, they tend to preclude the notion of ownership or of treating pets as merely means to our own ends. As abundantly illustrated in our data -- culminating in the idea of "unconditional love" mentioned earlier -- consumers bond with their animal companions in ways that resemble human relationships. Some go so far as to prefer animal companionship to that of humans. Others form relationships with their pets that begin to transcend or blur the boundaries of the human-animal distinction. Still others have a more conscious awareness that their treasured friend is "only" a dog, a cat, or a fish. Nonetheless, what these consumers share in common is a deep awareness that their relationship with one or more animal companions is an *end in itself* and definitely *not* merely a means to some other end such as the admiration of others, an excuse to get exercise, or a creature to protect the house against intruders. Nobody spoke in these terms. Only from the perspective of questions concerning the concept of possessions-as-extensions-of-self do we suddenly realize how conspicuous such views are in our data by virtue of their almost total *absence*. Along similar lines, notice that recent studies of attachment to material possessions (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995) and the meanings of irreplaceable possessions (Grayson and Shulman 2000) have *not* listed pets as among those objects emerging in response to possession-elicitation questions.

We conclude -- vis-a-vis the relevant literature on marketing and consumer research -- that pets represent *not* self-extending possessions but *rather* a series of opportunities (currently framed in terms of seven main themes) for deeply involved consumption experiences in the company of highly valued animal companions. Without excessive sentimentality, we can infer that pets are *part* of consumption experiences for many people but that these experiences are *above* the domain normally explored by marketing and consumer research. In that sense, pets occupy hallowed ground. They belong to the sphere of *sacred consumption* (cf. Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) in the sense that "the sacred is set apart and beyond mundane utility" (p. 9) so that, for example, "Pets are a type of sacralized animal" (p. 12). Indeed, proponents of the distinction between sacred and profane consumption explicitly regard deep involvement (with pets or whatever) as "the closest existing analog in consumer research to our concept of the sacred" (p. 13). In this, sacralization involves "the processes used by consumers to remove an object or experience from a principally economic orbit and insert it into a personal pantheon, so that the object or experience becomes so highly infused with significance ... that it becomes a transcendental vehicle" (p. 32). Herein, aspects of pets-as-sacred rather than of pets-as-possession appear to tap the gist of the themes uncovered in the present study.

The Cross-Cultural Perspective

As anticipated throughout the present essay, the conclusions just suggested apply primarily to American informants and to a few others who reside in the United States. In the USA, we consumers cheerfully spend enormous financial resources and vast levels of effort in the care, feeding, grooming, and nursing of our pets. Similar pet-oriented expenditures might occur in the case of a Poodle on the beach at Cannes or a Great Dane on the couch of a parlor in Copenhagen. However, one must wonder how the American or Western standard compares to that found in other cultures and whether, perhaps, cross-cultural differences might carry implications for the global ethics of pet-related consumption experiences.

For example, can we find economically inefficient aspects of pet consumption wherein resource allocation seems to have gone astray, as in spending thousands of dollars to prolong the life of a sick animal suffering from an incurable disease? Might we object to such misallocations on moral grounds, as when resources devoted to pet care might better be spent on medical research to reduce the toll of human suffering? Or is there something just plain decadent about buying a diamond collar for a Chihuahua?

And how, we might wonder, do other cultures resolve these and other issues concerning pet-related consumption experiences? In this connection, our strong hunch is that -- at superficial but perhaps not deep levels -- other cultures differ considerably from the American or Western standard. For example, our impression is that the Japanese refrain from many of the excesses of pet consumption found in the USA. Partly, the Japanese home may typically contain less physical space to devote to the housing of animal companions. Also, the inveterate cleanliness of Japanese consumers may mitigate against letting Fido eat at the dinner table or allowing Fluffy to sleep in the bed. Such questions are currently under investigation in

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an extension of the present study pursued by the first author and a Japanese colleague. The empirical answers must await the completion of this future research. However, we anticipate that we shall find -- below the level of surface cultural differences -- a common core of humanity that connects consumers from other societies with deeply involving experiences enjoyed in the company of animal companions.

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