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Jill R. Mosteller
Portland State University

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Transformational Solutions of Self through Companion Animals

Jill Mosteller, Portland State University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

How consumers manage the dynamics between love and money can be intertwined in a myriad of ways. Based upon the growing presence of companion animals in U.S. households (now estimated at 62%) and related financial spend (over \$50 billion in 2011) (APPA 2011), understanding consumers' identity dynamics relating to companion animals may be theoretically insightful. The things we love exert a strong influence on our sense of self (Ahuvia 2005). Companion animals may be classified as extensions of oneself in addition to being associated with significant life events or experiences (Belk 1988; Ahuvia 2005). By understanding the meanings companion animals serve related to a person's self-concept and integration within society may serve as "relationship climate canaries" (Brownlie 2008). Given fundamental human need for social relatedness (Baumeister and Leary 1995) and assertions of decline in one's sense of community (Cushman 1990), do the roles one adopts as it relates to companion animals serve as adaptive solutions for social relatedness?

Consumers' motives for consumption and possession stem in large part from the "meaning of consumption objects and the value that meaning provides" (Richins 1994, 519). In North America, the freedom to create one's identity comes with the consumer responsibility to self-define, suggesting that the "goods" one acquires may be particularly meaningful because they may serve to help construct and communicate one's identity (McCracken 1986). Identities represent self-concepts because they reflect internalized role expectations within social relationships; the goal being to understand and explain how social structures affect self and self affects social behaviors (Stryker 2007).

Noting that “an adequate understanding of human behavior must begin with an exploration of how people define the situation, selves, and others that compose the social worlds they inhabit” (Sanders and Hirschman 1996, 112-113), a phenomenological approach was employed. Depth interviews ranging from one to three hours in length with continued documented conversations and observations covering a five-year period provide the basis for the emergent findings. People who engaged in a variety of animal related roles provided the foundation for this purposeful sample. Observations and conversations with other informants engaged in animal related roles, and people who knew the informants, were added to triangulate and enhance data credibility (Patton 2002). Two selected cases highlight how animal-related roles serve to create a self-conceptual fit within one’s community under varying degrees of resource (e.g. money, housing) and social support (e.g. community, family, professional). These two cases depict role trajectories that start, progress, and end on opposite ends of the perceptual map spectrum (social conflict/social support on the x-axis and access to resources draining/gaining on the y-axis). The emotional and financial trade-offs each makes within their respective social structures, inform identity project outcomes.

Role Abandonment to Role Acquisition: Transformative Synthesized Solution: Al

Al’s story ‘begins’ when he was 9 years old with his “own” dog. Due to Al not spending enough time caring for and fulfilling his dog responsibility duties, his parents facilitated the abandonment of his dog caretaker role by returning the dog to the ‘pound’. He had no control over the outcome; parents exerted control over resources. Al expressed conflict in terms of love and money, stating how the lack of money causes “love” to go away. To resolve this conflict, Al later worked to become Superintendent of an animal shelter, responsible for hundreds of animals. This role, a symbol of his animal stewardship achievement, helped to resolve his earlier

childhood conflict, seeing himself as being a bad dog caretaker. The path from role abandonment to role acquisition illustrates a synthesized solution (Ahuvia 2005) predicated on his love “for all things natural.” He constructed a desired self-concept by forcefully going after the roles that developed his animal caretaker ability and enabling him to exert control over animal life and death outcomes through the resources he responsibly managed. Al’s identity transformation required him to confront his dark side, as well as others’ dark sides concerning animal caretaking. This role acquisition enabled him to exert control over necessary resources so he could manage when and how love would go away.

Role Acquisition to Role Abandonment: Transformative Dysfunctional Solution: Deb

Deb began breeding dogs as a means to earn money while she cared for her mother. Over time she acquired more dogs than she sold. Rising food and care costs related to the growing number of dogs depleted her financial resources. She worked as a vet tech in a nearby city, a role she acquired from the vet who vaccinated and treated the puppies she bred. Initially, being a vet tech and breeder helped her financially, but Deb’s motivations shifted over time. To combat feelings of social isolation and reduced emotional intimacy she experienced after moving from the city back to the country, her animal family became her social surrogate. Social conflict emerged with community members calling the department of agriculture about the growing number of dogs. The sudden death of Deb’s mother, a critical source of social and financial support, overwhelmed Deb emotionally and financially. She voluntarily relinquished the dogs to authorities. Deb’s case illustrates how one’s need for money transformed into a need for love and social connectedness not fulfilled within her community. Deb’s sense of alienation and resulting identity emptiness after losing the animals is attributed in part by her inability to

manage resources needed to sustain the identity project and confronting her own dark side in the process.

Findings suggest that one's perceived degree of conflict or support within one's social structure influences the construction and evolution of identities and related role behaviors as a means of creating synthesized solutions. These two cases contribute to symbolic interaction by illustrating how social relations (e.g. love) and resources (e.g. money) shape consumers' identity projects with companion animals adding social dimension. For Deb, companion animals were a social surrogate, signaling her growing alienation and distrust of others within her community. For Al, companion animals were a social conduit that enabled a personal transformation, signaling integration and support from others.

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