



Owners' Valuation of Companion Animals: A Multidimensional Review of the Human-Animal Bond

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ABSTRACT

This review attempted to synthesise these research findings by investigating owners' perceptions and definitions of the importance of companion animals. Today, pet animals occupy an increasingly central role in human emotional lives. People across cultures no longer regard these creatures as mere means of functioning but as emotionally significant members of households and families. A synthesis across disciplines, this paper reviews literature examining how and why pet owners value their pets, drawing on psychological, sociological, anthropological, public health, and consumer behaviour research. Accordingly, the analysis emphasized that pet value involves several dimensions: emotional attachment, psychological well-being, social support, identity formation, physical health behaviours, and economic investment. Attachment theory, anthropomorphism, and social capital frameworks are intertwined to discuss the dynamics through which owners came to value their pets. Additionally, this review highlighted the importance of considering cultural and contextual differences in pet ownership, as perceptions of pet value could vary across societies and individual life circumstances. Despite a wealth of valid data highlighting positive emotional and social effects of pet ownership, the literature also presented inconsistencies and context-dependent findings, especially with regard to mental and physical health. Future research should aimed to explore longitudinal patterns and cross-cultural comparisons to better understand how these dimensions of pet value evolve over time. Owners' valuation of pet animals was multidimensional, relational, and socially constructed, the review concluded, and required nuanced interpretation as well as longitudinal and cross-cultural research.

KEYWORDS: Companion, emotion, human-animal bond, pet, social support

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1. INTRODUCTION

Time immemorial, the relationship between humans and animals has been one of the most profound and intricate in history. In the history of human evolution, animals were only valued as useful for work, food, protection and self-sufficiency (Serpell, 1996). Over time, humans also began to recognize animals' roles in companionship, social learning, and emotional support, beyond mere utilitarian functions. Studies have shown that early humans may have also used animals to reinforce social cohesion, teach responsibility to children, and enhance cognitive and emotional development. However, the attitudes in the late 20th century and until the 21st changed markedly. Companion animals were reinvented, reappreciated for what they were, moving well beyond their functionality to become significant, emotional and sociable household members of the human family. This transformation, which has frequently been referred to as the 'humanisation' of pets, indicates fundamental alteration or paradigm shift in perception (Pame et al., 2025). People see animals no longer simply as commodities or possessions, but as emotional beings, with moral significance. Today they live in intimate domestic settings, often referred to as family members, or as "fictive kin," as an index of their status in human society (Charles, 2014; Cohen, 2002; Walsh, 2009). More importantly, the shift is not linguistic or symbolic just the way some have framed it. It's really more about the definition of human duty generally, a recognition of moral obligation to nurture and protect creatures. Greater sociologic changes have made this revaluation possible. Urbanization, the rise of nuclear families, single-child households, postponement of marriage and childbearing, and the weakening of traditional social networks have transformed relational landscapes. The increased prevalence of urban living has intensified the importance of pets as companions who provide consistent social and emotional support in otherwise fragmented environments. In these environments, pets often act as touchstones of emotional stability, physical proximity and nonjudgmental companionship—the kinds of things that are rapidly declining in digital mediated human communication (Raghy et al., 2023). Moreover, pets often facilitate social engagement outside the household, encouraging community interaction through parks, pet events, and neighborhood activities, which in turn can enhance social capital. Consequently, the value of pet ownership is not limited to economics and extends beyond. Owners' perceptions of this value are considered multidimensional, which includes emotional attachment, psychological stability, social connectedness, identity expression, and moral responsibility (Dotson and Hyatt, 2008; McConnell et al., 2011). These dimensions evolve across sociology and psychology to marketing, public health, and human-animal studies (Brooks et al.,

2018; Hart, 2014; Hawkins and Williams, 2017). Positive outcomes of pet ownership such as improved well-being and social integration have been consistently reported in the literature (Mueller et al., 2018); Schulz and Eden, 2016), along with potential costs concerning caregiving burdens, emotional strain, and grief following pet loss (Purewal et al., 2017; Toohey and Rock, 2011). Given the complexity of the human-animal bond, this duality calls for nuanced understanding. Hence, this review attempts to synthesise these research findings by investigating owners' perceptions and definitions of the importance of companion animals. Rather than a descriptive inventory, it highlights conceptual convergence and explanatory pathways, and highlights critical debates in the literature (Solomon et al., 2019; Turner, 2017). In particular, it examined the emotional and psychological facets of the human-animal connection; sociocultural constructions of pet value; health-related consequences of ownership; economic and identity-derived implications; and determinants and barriers influencing current owner-pet relationships. It also considers emerging themes, including pets' role in public health, urban lifestyle adaptation, cultural differences in pet value perception, and their impact on household dynamics and societal norms.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND

Table 1 summarises the key theoretical perspectives underpinning contemporary interpretations of owners' valuation of pet animals.

2.1. *Defining the human-animal bond*

The human-animal bond is the central lens through which the value of companion animals can be studied and interpreted. At the base of the pyramid, it is a dynamic and reciprocal relationship that shapes the emotional, psychological, and physical well-being of both human and animal (Beck and Katcher, 1996; Fine, 2015). Rather than being a static or universal connection, this connection arises from the interaction of biology, social learning, cultural traditions, and personal life experiences. Serpell (2002) and Turner (2017) highlighted the heterogeneous nature of the bond, which manifests differently across species, temperaments, and owners. Dogs and cats especially stand out well for being unique to engage with all kinds of humans, with their long history of domestication and their evolved communicative function towards humans. Neurobiologically, oxytocin-mediated feedback loops in interaction between humans and dogs have shown that connections between the two are not only symbolic but based on shared affective and physiological processes (Nagasawa et al., 2015).

Table 1: Theoretical frameworks explaining owners' valuation of pet animals

Theoretical perspective	Core premise	Application to pet value	Key references
Attachment theory	Pets serve as attachment figures providing security and comfort	Explains emotional closeness, grief, and caregiving intensity	Julius et al. (2013); Kurdek (2008)
Anthropomorphism theory	Owners attribute human traits to animals	Enhances emotional bonding and moral concern	Serpell (2002); Turner (2017)
Biophilia hypothesis	Humans have innate affinity toward living beings	Explains stress reduction and emotional calm	Kellert and Wilson (1995); Uvnäs-Moberg et al. (2015)
Social support theory	Pets act as sources of perceived social support	Explains loneliness reduction and emotional buffering	Brooks et al. (2018); McConnell et al. (2011)
Social capital theory	Pets facilitate social interaction	Explains community engagement benefits	Wood et al. (2005)
Consumer identity theory	Consumption reflects identity and values	Explains economic investment in pets	Dotson and Hyatt (2008)

Collectively, these insights demonstrate that, beyond companionship, the human-animal bond comprises a relational framework that bridges biology and culture. To understand how this bond translates into emotional meaning and personal value, psychological theories of attachment may be of some use.

2.2. Attachment theory and emotional security

Attachment theory is one of the most powerful psychological perspectives on the significance of pets for life, from the emotional and psychological aspects of their pets that can bring meaning to the person caring for it. Bowlby (1988) developed this framework to describe the connections between infants and caregivers, and has subsequently been modified to represent human-animal relationships. Owners of pets often recognize their animals as attachment figures, that is, objects of comfort, proximity, and emotional security (Beetz et al., 2012; Kurdek, 2008).

Studies showed that companion animals, specifically dogs, display behaviours aligned with the principles of attachment such as seeking to remain close during stressful interactions or using the owner as an emotionally available refuge in unfamiliar surroundings (Nagasawa et al., 2015; Solomon et al., 2019). For people, this interdependent relationship leads to feelings of need and value that strengthen the sense of self-worth, emotional regulation, and psychological stability. Pets, then, are dependable sources of emotional support and unconditional acceptance. Perhaps most importantly, attachment to pets does not stand in for, or in negation of, human relationships.

There is evidence that robust relationships with animals may also function alongside effective social bonds, increasing resilience and confidence (McConnell et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2005). This is counterbalanced by deficit-based perspectives that place pet attachment as an alternative

to isolation, but it is, in fact, an asset in the context of a fuller social network. Attachment theory emphasizes the emotional depth of the human-animal bond in this way. To truly understand how owners perceive and value those relationships, we also need to reflect on anthropomorphism, the inclination to view animals through human-like lenses.

2.3. Anthropomorphism as a cognitive and valuational mechanism

Owners construct value and meaning from their pets based on anthropomorphism (the perception of animals as possessing human emotions, intentions, or personalities), and this is a key mechanism (Serpell, 2002). Humans foster empathy, moral concern, and relational depth by viewing animals through familiar social and emotional lenses (Herzog, 2010).

Psychologically, it acts as a “cognitive bridge” that enables social connection and meaning-making. It stems from a basic human urge for sociality and predictability (Epley et al., 2007). When a dog's behaviour is regarded as empathic or a cat's behaviour as intentional, the animal is drawn into the human moral circle and acquires a sense of personhood that promotes attachment.

Research across pet welfare has consistently indicated that anthropomorphism correlates with stronger bonding and caregiving relationships, as well as greater emotional and financial investment in the welfare of a pet (Bennett and Rohlf, 2007; Hawkins and Williams, 2017). On a broader economic level, anthropomorphizing owners are more likely to engage in premium consumption practices (Dotson and Hyatt, 2008), ranging from healthcare to nutrition and lifestyle services.

At the same time, researchers warn of overreach. Over-anthropomorphizing can lead to the imposition of human-centric expectations that challenge species-specific needs.

Yet, under moderate circumstances, it plays a positive role by increasing empathy, deepening care, and upholding responsible practice (Turner, 2017).

In consequence, anthropomorphism completes it at an aggregate level: it shows what emotional, moral, and economic values are now actively created in present-day pet ownership. Alongside attachment theory and solid biological substrates, it illustrates the multiple pathways by which people come to regard animals not only as companions but also as kin.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL VALUE OF PETS

The multidimensional nature of owners' valuation of pets, spanning emotional, psychological, social, behavioural, and economic domains, is synthesised in Figure 1 and Table 2.



Figure 1: Multidimension value of pets

3.1. Emotional support, social support and well-being

Emotional support consistently stands out as one of owners' primary reasons for valuing pets. Companion animals serve as a stable, nonjudgmental presence with whom to associate, establish routines, and remain emotionally grounded, particularly during times of stress, loneliness, or life transition (Brooks et al., 2018; McConnell et al., 2011). Using social support theory as a foundation, pets act as perceived sources of social and emotional support that buffer against the psychological impact of everyday stressors and major life challenges.

Several empirical studies have shown that pet parents and pet owners have higher self-esteem, decreased loneliness, and enhanced positive affect compared to non-owners, though these findings differ in strength across populations and study designs (Garrity et al., 1989; McConnell et al., 2011; Mueller et al., 2018). McConnell et al. (2011) demonstrated, perhaps surprisingly, that pets may be like friends and even siblings in terms of perceived social support. This demonstrates that for some, pets are not just extra help but rather a primary source of psychological support.

For a person who lives alone (or has few friends), pets are often important social anchors. That caregiving routine such as feeding, walking, grooming gives daily life structure and purpose in what psychologists call behavioural activation. This is most relevant for those suffering from depressive symptoms, because it causes them to get out into the real world and encourages a sense of achievement (or responsibility).

Table 2: Key dimensions of owners' value of pet animals identified in the literature

Dimension of value	Description	Representative Sources
Emotional value	Emotional attachment, companionship, affection, and unconditional support provided by pets	Hart (2014); Beetz et al. (2012); McConnell et al. (2011); Serpell (1996)
Psychological well-being	Reduction in loneliness, stress buffering, emotional regulation, and coping support	Brooks et al. (2018); Mueller et al. (2018); Stern et al. (2013)
Social value	Facilitation of social interaction, social capital, and community engagement	Westgarth et al. (2014); Wood et al. (2005)
Familial and symbolic value	Perception of pets as family members, children, or close companions	Charles (2014); Cohen (2002); Walsh (2009)
Identity and self-concept	Pets as extensions of owner identity, values, and lifestyle	Dotson and Hyatt (2008); Herzog (2010)
Behavioural and routine value	Structuring daily routines, caregiving responsibility, and purposeful activity	Mueller et al. (2018); Schulz and Eden (2016)
Physical health facilitation	Indirect promotion of physical activity and stress reduction	Toohey and Rock (2011); Westgarth et al. (2014)
Economic value	Willingness to invest in veterinary care, nutrition, insurance, and pet services	Dotson and Hyatt (2008); Herzog (2010)

Note: Dimensions overlap conceptually and operate interactively rather than independently.

The psychological advantage of pets in this respect, then, has emotional and psychosocial value in that it can break cycles of rumination and social withdrawal while providing emotional support. Together, these findings illustrate the ways in which pets also help us with everyday life. Their functions are broader than that, offering endurance and stability in the presence of more severe mental health issues.

3.2. *Mental health, resilience and ontological security*

Numerous studies have explored and demonstrated the potential for pets to help those coping with mental health challenges. The role of companion animals in enhancing emotional regulation, resilience, and perceived stability in the context of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other chronic conditions has been described in systematic reviews (Brooks et al., 2018; Stern et al., 2013). Pet-based therapeutic effects are nonverbal rather than direct; pets influence us indirectly through ritual structure, emotional connection, and nonjudgmental, continuous friendship.

Brooks et al. (2018) coined the term ontological security to describe how pets offer continuity, predictability, and order to the lives of those who experience psychological instability. For persons with serious mental disorders, pets were portrayed as the most stable and enduring relationship, offering emotional safety and a stigma-free environment. This relational stabilization reinforces a positive identity that is not limited by illness or marginalization.

The therapeutic value of pets is particularly evident in trauma recovery. Service animals' ability to support symptom management is a well-documented factor in the decrease of hyperarousal among military veterans, contributing to an increase in an individual's perceived safety. (Stern et al., 2013). Having a dog enables a form of shared vigilance, such as noticing someone walking or going to dinner, instead of constantly keeping an eye on everything in the environment. That calming effect helps shape the mental model of a pet as a partner in coping and recovery (rather than a comforting, passive receiver of care and support). In this way, pets are resilient: they provide continuity and solace, a place where individuals can find stability, which is key to addressing trauma and stigma. Yet, as with any deep relationship, such bonds also bring vulnerability.

3.3. *Attachment, emotional vulnerability and psychological cost*

Strong emotional bonds with pets can create deep psychological benefits but are not without risks. Attachment to animals can cause intense grief and emotional distress following pet loss, with feelings often described as comparable to losing a close human relationship (Fine, 2015; Walsh, 2009). This depth of grief underscores the intensity of emotional investment in pets and highlights

the dual nature of their value: as sources of comfort and as potential sources of emotional pain.

Caregiving roles can also introduce strain. Owners of aging, chronically ill, or behaviourally challenging animals may suffer stress, emotional exhaustion, and financial hardship (Herzog, 2010). These impediments complicate explanations of the apparently uniform benefits of pet ownership, highlighting the importance of balanced, contextually dependent interpretation of psychological effects. In larger and more longitudinal studies, small or variable mental health gains following pet ownership may be documented inconsistently, thus emphasizing the need for methodological rigor and consideration of individual differences in measuring psychological implications (Purewal et al., 2017; Toohey and Rock, 2011).

As such, the psychological and emotional worth of pets is best analysed in view of a complex interplay of positive and negative consequences. Pets benefit physical, psychological, and emotional well-being, resilience, and emotional security, but this is a double-edged sword, contributing to both emotional responsibilities and potential risks that determine how pets are cared for and valued by owners.

4. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF PET VALUE

4.1. *Pets as family members and moral subjects*

Among the most consistent findings across the literature is the rising trend of owners who see pets not as property but as family. Companion animals are more frequently referred to using kinship terms and are integrated into familial rituals, occasions, and routines that convey their higher level of relational status within the family (Cohen, 2002; Walsh, 2009). This kind of family context is largely a function of sociocultural development, smaller household sizes, deferred parenthood, and increased forms of emotional individualism, all of which have tended to make animals more significant in the home, serving as sites of intimacy and continuity. (Charles, 2014).

Viewing pets as family alters core moral obligations for their owners. Decisions about healthcare, nutrition, housing, and even end-of-life care are considered through relational and ethical lenses rather than purely economic ones (Fine, 2015; Herzog, 2010). This transition challenges the legal and economic categorization of animals as property; however, it emphasizes the moral aspects of pet value. Here, value is not just about love but also about long-term responsibility, caregiving, and ethical choices.

These changes collectively demonstrate how pets have migrated from the periphery to the heart of domestic life. Their influence is even more important in society beyond the home, shaping the very social fabric of communities.

4.2. *Pets, social capital and community engagement*

In addition to homes, pets play a significant role in social capital and community integration. Dogs, in particular, are social catalysts that provoke inter-relational behaviours in public spaces. Wood et al. (2005) referred to the role of pets as “social lubricants,” noting that engaging in casual activities, including walking dogs, enhances neighbourhood connectivity, confidence, and casual social interaction. Cross-sectionally, these experiences are low-pressure and meaningful among people of various ages, social classes, and ethnic groups.

Further evidence suggests that dog ownership is related to increased presence in the neighbourhood, an increased sense of safety, and an increased sense of belonging and cohesiveness (Westgarth et al., 2014). In urban settings where social isolation has emerged as a problem of increasing global concern, pets act as “bridging” social capital, helping to make connections between people who otherwise might be disconnected. The value of pets goes beyond individual quality of life and includes social benefits, further supporting the vigour and robustness of local communities (Mueller et al., 2018). For this reason, pets serve not only as members of the household but also as a form of social cohesion in wider societies. Their value is relational, extending outward from the private sphere into the public domain.

4.3. *Symbolic value, consumer identity and cultural expression*

Pets are also referred to with iconic importance in today’s consumer culture. Ownership increasingly reflects lifestyle choices, ethical commitments, and social positioning, with pets becoming extensions of identity and worldview (Dotson and Hyatt, 2008). Decisions are made around the choices of breed, adoption versus purchase, and what to eat, such as organic food, specialized treatments, or pet-friendly travel, which function as symbolic signals that reflect a person’s identity in moral terms. For example, rescue and adoption cultures have transformed pets into visible symbols of compassion and social responsibility, lending animals further symbolic and moral value within society. This symbolic elevation has driven massive growth and “premiumization” in the pet care sector, with owners coming to perceive spending on high-quality products and services not as discretionary but as ethical commitments.

The economic value of pet goods cannot, in that sense, be segregated from their social and symbolic significance. Pets are at once family members, moral subjects, and cultural expressions of identity, reflecting the intimate, communal, and symbolic elements of human-animal relations.

5. BIOLOGICAL, PHYSICAL AND BEHAVIOURAL PATHWAYS OF PET VALUE

5.1. *Physical activity and health-related behaviours*

The physical health benefits of pet ownership are also

mixed. Early observational research demonstrated decreases in cardiovascular risk and improved survival through pet ownership (Garrity et al., 1989). However, retrospective reviews and meta-analyses revealed methodological shortcomings and substantial heterogeneity in their findings, leading to conflicting conclusions (Toohey and Rock, 2011). In recent years, attention has shifted from direct cause-and-effect relationships to indirect behavioural links.

Owning a dog, in particular, is significantly related to higher levels of physical activity through daily walking and outdoor activities (Westgarth et al., 2014). These behavioural modifications are associated with improved daily structure, mobility, and perceived quality of life, although they do not lead to physiological improvements (Mueller et al., 2018). In this sense, pets serve not as medical interventions but as enablers of healthier, more active routines.

5.2. *Biophilia, stress regulation and physiological mechanisms*

The biophilia hypothesis proposes that humans have evolved to be emotionally connected with and responsive to other creatures (Kellert and Wilson, 1995). Experimental and clinical studies lend support to this conclusion, claiming that human-animal interactions reduce stress indicators including cortisol, blood pressure, and heart rate (Beetz et al., 2012; Uvnäs-Moberg et al., 2015).

The oxytocin-gaze loop is one of the most successful biologically based explanations for the human-animal bond. Nagasawa et al. (2015) found that mutual gaze between dogs and their owners induced oxytocin release in each, following mother-infant bonding mechanisms. This neurobiological feedback loop indicates that interspecies bonding relies on well-established mammalian bonding schemes.

As informative as these results are, academics are also wary of overgeneralizing. Experimental and longitudinal studies will continue to be needed to determine causation and refine the extent of these effects (Toohey and Rock, 2011). In concert, biological and behavioural pathways reveal how pets affect health and well-being indirectly through habits, stress regulation, and specialized bonding mechanisms, all of which are mediated by biology. Their value, however, goes beyond biology, influencing consumer behaviour and cultural economies.

6. ECONOMIC AND CONSUMER DIMENSIONS OF PET VALUE

Consumer behaviour is highly influenced by emotional attachment to pets. Owners who consider their pets to be family members exhibit a higher tendency to pay for high-end food, advanced veterinary care, insurance, and lifestyle services (Dotson and Hyatt, 2008). Such expenditures seldom arise from utility alone; they reflect moral obligation, identity expression, and a sense of

responsibility associated with that of a dependent being (Herzog, 2010). By transforming emotional and symbolic value into economic value, the global pet care industry is booming. Spending on pets is increasingly reframed not as discretionary consumption but as an ethical extension of caregiving. The marketplace, too, reflects the elevation of companion animals' social status in contemporary culture.

7. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

The human-animal interaction (HAI) literature, despite the generally positive narratives about pets, comes with considerable methodological criticism. Most studies rely on cross-sectional designs, self-selected samples, and/or self-reported measures, with limited causal inference (Purewal et al., 2017; Toohey and Rock, 2011). Herzog (2010) described the "pet effect" in a famous paper criticizing publication bias and insufficient control for confounding variables, including socioeconomic status and personality traits. Large-scale longitudinal studies have derived more nuanced conclusions, showing that when confounders are controlled for, health benefits may diminish or disappear. Further, caregiving burdens-especially for aging or chronically ill pets-can have a negative impact on owners' mental health, adding stress, anticipatory grief, and financial strain. Future research should adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural designs, standardized measures of attachment and well-being, as well as integration of animal welfare perspectives. Only then can scholarship reflect the reciprocal and dynamic nature of the human-animal bond.

8. CONCLUSION

The valuation of pet animals was multidimensional, relational, and socially constructed. Pets provided emotional support, social connection, identity affirmation, and behavioural regulation. While evidence for direct physical health benefits was mixed, their emotional, social, and symbolic significance was consistently recognised. Pets enriched human life across emotional, social, and economic dimensions. Understanding pet value required integrating biological, psychological, social, and cultural perspectives. Companion animals were central in modern households, warranting continued attention in social science, veterinary medicine, and public health research.

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