PETS AS SOCIAL SELF EXTENSIONS -A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AMONG SUBCULTURES OF DOG OWNERS

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ABSTRACT

In this study the purpose was to explore how the construct of extended self gets interpretations in different subcultures of dog owners. For this, an analysis of five dog owners representing different subcultures was conducted. The dog owners were labelled as "a city dog owner"," a working dog owner", "two home dog owners" and "a hunting dog owner". These dog owners participated in a focus group supplemented by collages. Three aspect pairs of the construct of extended self, personal and social, symbolic and functional as well as control and attachment, were separated in analysis. It was found out that different aspects were highlighted in different subcultures. Moreover, aspects of the construct seemed to get variable interpretations in different subcultures. Also, it could be claimed that in different subcultures dogs could be seen more as self-extensions than in others. Findings indicate that the meanings related to pets are constructed socially.

It is often noticed that pets and their owners resemble each others. In today's society matching pairs of pets and their owners can be seen more and more because of the growing interest directed to pets. The number of pets is increasing, as well as new species of pets are coming into our homes. Moreover, consumers are willing to spend significant amounts of their resources, money and time, to their pets. This can be seen for example in growing number of possible avocations to have with pets, in multiple types of pet products and services available.

In academic research this resemblance between the owner and a pet has been approached by the construct of extended self (Belk 1988.). When pets are seen as self extensions, consumers adopt animals' traits, behaviours, and appearance and project their own personality onto the animal (Beck & Katcher 1983, p. 253; Savishinsky 1986, p. 120-121). This has been recognized in consumer behaviour research as well as in studies concerning human-animal interaction in other disciplines.

It has been found out that the construct of extended self seems to contain some even opposing yet simultaneously present aspects. In particular, three aspect pairs have seemed to be important especially when the construct is related to pets. Besides they have come up in consumer behaviour literature, they are also found in studies concerning human-animal interaction in other disciplines. First, even though the construct of extended self refers to consumer's self-concept and *personality*, it is also highly *social* by nature. Second, consumers have both *symbolic* and *functional* roles for their possessions that are regarded as extended self. Third, though consumers seem to form close emotional *attachment* to possessions, especially to pets, it still seems to be that *control* over and by

those possessions is an important element when an object is viewed as extended self. (Jyrinki & Leipämaa-Leskinen forthcoming.)

In this paper, it is aimed to take the perspective of social aspect of the construct of extended self. This is done through the lenses where subcultures of different dog owners are separated. Different subcultures are represented by five dog owners, *"a city dog owner"*,*" a working dog owner"*, *"two home dog owners"* and *"a hunting dog owner"*. These dog owners stand for different subcultures that may be found among dog owners. It is asked whether the construct of extended self gets different interpretations in different subcultures: are different aspects of extended self highlighted and do the meanings of aspects vary. This would indicate that the meanings related to seeing pets as extended self are created in social interaction with other pet owners.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how the construct of extended self gets interpretations in different subcultures of dog owners. In this study, pet consumption refers to basically anything consumers do with their pets, not just buying products to pets but also for example nurturing their pets (cf. Arnould, Price & Zinkhan 2002, p. 5-6). To answer to the research purpose a qualitative analysis is conducted. This is done by focus groups supplementing collage technique. This method as well as data is described more in detail in the following section. After that the actual analysis of three aspects pairs of pets as extended self together with the research findings is presented. Last, in the concluding chapter, summary of the findings and future research is proposed.

METHODS AND DATA

In order to grasp a deep understanding about consumers seeing their pets as extended self focus groups supplemented by collages was conducted (cf. Zaltman 1997; Christensen & Olson 2002; Costa, Schoolmeester, Dekker & Jongen 2003). Especially, the social interaction necessarily present in focus groups (cf. Madriz 2000) was a significant part of the research interest. One focus group consisting of five dog owners was analysed for the purposes of the present paper.

In focus groups, participants built collages of pictures they saw somehow describing their relationship to their pets. Then, these collages were used as a basis of group discussions. After building collages of relationships with their pets, participants were asked to attach pictures of actual products they use for their pets. This was then used as basis for discussion of reasons and ways certain products were chosen and used. Thus, when gathering the data questions about extended self were not asked directly, rather the data is analysed through the lenses of seeing pets as extended self.

Participants are used as case examples of subcultures that can be connected to dog owners. These subcultures are presented here purposefully a bit provocative and stereotypical way in order to create differences between participants. There can be found differences even though all of the participants were 20- to 26-years old university students attending to the basic course of consumer behaviour in the University of

Vaasa. As found previously in a quantitative analysis (Jyrinki & Leipämaa-Leskinen forthcoming) in the differences of seeing pets as extended self economic and socio-demographic variables are not of importance, instead dog breed and activities taken with the dog are expected to play a role. For this reason, the sample is seen relevant to the research purpose. Next is presented a short description about each of the five participants that are used here for the basis of analysis.

Saga: an owner of a Chihuahua dog. She represents here a *"city dog owner",* both because of her choice of a small dog and because she was living in the centre of Vaasa. Moreover, she seemed to pay attention to outlooks, both herself and her dog's.

Eeva: a student living together with her boyfriend. She owns a young Belgian Shepherd Dog with which she is aiming to competitions in working dog sports. She represents *"a working dog owner"*.

Ari: a student living in cohabitation. He is an owner of a Labrador Retriever and he represents here *"a home dog owner"*, because he does not take any particular activities with his dog.

Markus: an owner of two dachshunds. He belongs also to *"home dog owners"* even though, he reported that his dogs are also used for hunting. However, it seemed that mostly his dogs were for companion.

Harri: *"a hunting dog owner".* He owns Swedish Elkhound and Norwegian Elkhound Grey, which were both used just for active hunting. He lived by his parents in a commune near Vaasa.

ANALYSING THE ASPECTS OF EXTENDED SELF AMONG SUBCULTURES OF DOG OWNERS

In the following section three aspects pairs of the construct of extended self (personal and social, symbolic and functional as well as control and attachment) are analysed with the connection to empirical findings. This is done especially from the perspective of subcultures of dog owners. Empirical analysis is presented in italic in order to make distinction between theory and research findings.

Personal and Social Aspects

The construct of extended self can be seen including both personal and social aspects. Indeed, Belk (1996, p. 127) found out that pet owners claimed their pets to fit to their personalities, lifestyles and families, which as such reflects personal and social aspects.

Pets can mirror owners' *personalities* and traits, both positive and negative (Belk 1996, p. 128). It is even stated that human's choice of an animal is itself a definition of a self. A pet could be compared to a hair style or clothing. (Savishinsky 1983, p. 120.) *In the empirical data, Markus, as owner of home dogs, two dachshunds, chose two pictures, a fly and a pile of pillows to describe both his dogs characteristics and his own too. He said that these pictures delineate not only his dogs, but also two sides of his own*

character. The other side is always buzzing around (a fly) and the other is just lying behind lazy and old (a pile of pillows).

It is claimed that pets are seen as us, because a pet is a representation of ourselves as infants. The pet is seen as self as long as an infant is no longer part of nature and not yet trained to live in adult society. (Beck & Katcher 1983, p. 88.) In this role, the animal represents the id of its owner (Hirschman 1994, p. 618). Consumers, as adult human beings must control his/her doings and beings very closely, but pets can freely express emotions that might be forbidden for human beings (Beck & Katcher 1983, p. 89; Savishinsky 1983, p. 120). *For example, Ari, a home dog owner reported that his dog is doing things just to annoy people. According to his view, his dog likes to play with people and do things purposefully wrong. It seemed as if he would like to do similar things himself.* Accordingly, when consumers are mourning for the lost pet they are mourning besides the pet, also because of their lost childish nature. Similarly, when consumers are mothering their pets they would be mothering themselves. (Beck & Katcher 1983, p. 90; Belk 1988, p. 144.)

Moreover, animals have been seen as vehicles for narcissistic love, thus they are used to express love to oneself. It could be seen that animals have so little personality of their own that pet owner could project attributes he chooses to the pet without contradiction. Indeed, when we are talking about the love the pets offer, we are talking about our feelings, not pets' feelings. All pets may be used narcissistic ways, but interesting examples are exotic animals, like snakes or wildcats. (Beck & Katcher 1983, p. 92-95.) *In the empirical data, Saga, the city dog owner, reported that she wanted to buy things for her Chihuahua from Stockman and it was very important to her to buy food of good quality and be sure that food is not fattening. Of all the participants' she was the only one who used regularly clothes for her dog. This implied that for her the dog's outlook played a big role.*

Like this latter example shows, self is expressed in different levels; we don't exist only as individuals but also in collectivities (Belk 1988, p. 152). There are different ways of expressing and defining *social* group memberships through consumption possessions. It is seen that self derives from actor's social interactions in the ongoing process of self definition (Sanders 1990, p. 662). As Solomon (1990, p. 68) says, this discussion "helps us to move toward the embrace of phenomenological individual who actively *uses* goods to construct and maintain his/her social reality". Thus, possessions are used in order to extend the social self.

As expected, most of the participants reported that they dogs belong to some social group of their own. Interestingly, these can be interpreted as reflecting their subcultures. Saga said that her Chihuahua is the pet of all of her friends and family, they all carry toys and its favourite, cheese for it. Eeva said that she bought the dog this "tough" in order it to be very good in avocations. Thus, with the help of her dog, she could belong into the group of working dog devotees. However, for her and her common-law husband, the Belgian Shepherd Dog was their baby; she even said that the most important meaning for her dog was being their family member. Similarly, both Ari and Markus, home dog owners, said that their dogs were their

family members or children. However, for Harri the dogs were not pets, but for use. The social group he identified himself by his dog was more of a hunting group, he would not go to the forest without his dogs.

Symbolic and Functional Aspects

Besides personal and social aspects, the construct of extended self can be seen as symbolic and functional. Symbolically pets are expressions of consumers' identities and functionally they are consumers' appendages (Belk 1996, p. 128). Objects extend consumers not only symbolically helping them *being* something desired but also literally by giving possibilities of *doing* things that they couldn't otherwise do. These two functions are integrally related to *having* these possessions that enable us being and doing the desired. (Belk 1988, p. 145-146.)

First, concerning *symbolic* nature of the construct, it is found out that in several cultures either owners are named after their animals or pets' names reflect owner's wishes to be identified. For example aggressive, humorous or literary names communicate pet owners individual or class values. By this way, pet owners indirectly label themselves by naming their pets. (Savishinsky 1983, p. 119-120; Solomon 1990, p. 69.) *In this study, dogs' names were not studied. Still, it could be seen that most of the participants attached symbolic aspects to their dogs. Indeed, the division of participants into these groups could be seen itself based on symbolic aspects. For example, labelling Saga's, the owner of Chihuahua, as city dog owner is probably the most evident case.*

Second, pets literally aid consumers to do certain things, which gives pets *functional* roles. Before cars, horses were largely used as equipment for transportation and travelling, and horses also helped in hunting and farm activities (Hirschman 1994, p. 618). Nowadays, animals can still have many functional properties; especially dogs have several functions as such. Dogs are used to protect consumer's homes, find bombs and drugs, they serve as companion to handicapped or guide for deaf and blind, and they assist in instructing children and are helpful in therapy for elderly and infirm people. *Functional aspect of their dogs was especially evident for Eeva and Harri, who both had an avocation with their dogs. However, symbolic and functional aspects could be seen as highly intertwined: not just helping Eeva to go for training, her Belgium Shepherd Dog helps her to identify with the group of working dog owners. The dog itself tells a story of an active dog person.*

These aspects appear also in different emotions pets seem to create to consumers. Pet owners may feel proud about their dog, cat or horse when it wins in a competition. Similarly, criticism directed to consumer's pet might cause shame when it is deserved and anger when it isn't. (Belk 1996, p. 127; Sanders 1990, p. 665-666; Solomon 1990, p. 68.) Consumers empathize strongly with their animals' pain, and they feel that their pets empathize with them when they are sad. Moreover, losing a pet animal has been compared to loosing an arm or a leg. (Belk 1996, p. 128.) *For example, both home dog owners, Ari and Markus reported that whole gamut of emotions is related in dog-owning. Sometimes the dogs annoy*

their owners and sometimes the dogs make them laugh. Moreover, Harri compared his own and his dogs feelings when they are hunting, there is a light contradiction of both thrill and rest. He expected that the dog would feel the same emotions as himself, even though not experiencing them exactly similarly.

Control and Attachment Aspects

Finally, control and attachment can be seen as aspects of the extended self construct. First, *control* over and by objects is seen to result in feelings that relates objects to consumer's identity (Belk 1988, p. 140-141; 1989, p. 130). Control over pets could be shown in several ways, for example consumers seem to want dress and groom their pets according to their own wishes, wish to train their pets to obey them and show mastery over a pet by birth control or neutering a pet (Belk 1996, p. 132-133). *This was exactly evident in research sample; evidently different ways to control one's dogs were highlighted to different participants. Saga wanted to have an impact on her dog's outlook. Eeva and Harri wanted to control their dogs by training them to do well sports. However, Markus and Ari did not seem to have any particular wishes to control their dogs, instead it seemed as if they wanted to keep their animals' natural character.*

On the other hand, pets seem to control consumers' lives too. Pets need never-ending attention and care on a daily basis, they may be messy and may do damage to our homes or even family members, and despite time demands, consumers spend enormous amounts of money to their pets (Belk 1996, p. 125; Voith 1981). *Especially, Eeva reported that her dog made a lot of damage in their home. Still, she said that the lost of time and money is secondary compared to what she gains from the dog. In sum, nearly all of the participants reported that owning a dog is time- and money-consuming, and it is often related to the feelings of harm.*

Second, distinction between an object having just mnemonic value and an object reflecting pet owner's extended self could be made according the type of *attachment*. In order to an object to be extended self, consumer should have emotional, not just functional attachment towards it. (Belk 1989, p. 130.) Indeed, being closely attached to one's pets is seen to imply seeing animal as a part of self. By this way animal could be seen that much part of self that consumers couldn't imagine living without it. This would be realised especially when pet owners have extreme troubles getting over of the lost of a pet. One test for this non-rational attachment would be when pet owner is not willing to substitute a pet by a functional equivalent. (Belk 1996, p. 126.) *In this context it could be claimed that Harri probably does not see his dogs, at least not strongly as a part of himself, because the dog's value is very much of a utilitarian for him. Moreover, the gamut of emotions that dogs seem to create to their owners, as described in previous section, could also be examples of attachment dog owners have towards their dogs.*

CONCLUSIONS

In this study five different dog owners were analysed in order to reveal whether the construct of extended self gets different interpretations in different subcultures of dog owners. This appeared to be the case, because different aspects of the construct of extended self were highlighted in different participants. Moreover, it could be interpreted that the meanings of aspects were ambiguous. Indeed, this comparative analysis revealed that three aspect pairs have actually more varied meanings in different subcultures. Summary of varied meanings attached to dogs is presented in table 1.

It was found out that all the dog owners used their dogs as definitions of themselves somehow. Dogs may represent their owners' different personal sides, or even two sides like in the case of Markus. However, in personal aspect different things were important for different participants, thus highlighted in different subcultures. For example it could be interpreted that dogs were a way to express narcissistic love in the case of Saga, the city dog owner and in the case of Eeva, the working dog owner. Indeed, these two subcultures are highly social by nature. The childish self was emphasised for Ari, a home dog owner, which way of owning a dog is on the contrary more domestic and private by nature.

As expected, it was found that all participants have social connection by their dogs, even if the subculture they are belonging is very different. In previous research (e.g. Beck & Katcher 1983; Voith 1981) it is found out that most of the dog owners see their dogs as family members. This was true also in this study, only one of the participants, the hunter, Harri, did not see his dog as a family member. However, in future research it could be taken into deeper consideration what is exactly meant in seeing pet as a family member (cf. Cohen 2002). In this research it could be already found indications that the meaning of seeing pet as a family member is not the same across participants. Similarly, the discussion between symbolic and functional aspects of pet owning could be addressed in more detail. It could be seen that these two aspects are highly interrelated that it may not even be reasonable to distinguish between these two. Moreover, one of the most interesting discussions is how consumers are willing to bear some much trouble and harm from their dogs. In previous research (Voith 1981) this has been explained exactly by attachment pet owners have towards their pets. So, also here the interrelation between aspects could be of interest.

This study shows preliminary results of the ways the construct of extended self gets interpretations across subcultures. Eeva, the working dog owner, seemed to relate most diverse meanings to her dog; nearly all aspects of extended self were highlighted in her collage and interview. This is line with the findings of our previous study (Jyrinki & Leipämaa-Leskinen forthcoming), where it was found out that, working dog owners were among those that most often saw their pets as extended self. In Saga's, the city dog owners', answers social and visible aspects of extended self were emphasised. On the contrary to Harri's, hunting dog owner's view, where the functional role of the dog was most highlighted. This is also in line with the findings of our exploratory study (Jyrinki & Leipämaa-Leskinen

forthcoming), where it was found out that Spitz and Primitive Type Dogs are not seen that often as their owners self extensions. However, according to Belk (1989, p. 130) the concept of extended self should be seen more relative than absolute. So, it could be claimed that Harri or other "hunters" are inclined to see their dogs less as extended self than the others. Moreover, the two home dog owners, Ari and Markus, emphasised nearly similar aspects of extended self construct, which in turn confirms the idea that meanings related to one's pet are constructed in that specific subculture.

Table 1: Aspects of extended self in connection with subcultures represented by five dog owners.

Personal:	**Saga (city dog)**	**Eeva (working dog)**	**Ari (home dog)**	**Harri (hunting dog)**	**Markus (home dog)**
definition of self	x	x	x	x	x
childish self			x		
narcissistic love	x	x			
Social:					
family member	x	x	x		x
friend	x	x			
avocation		x		x	
Symbolic	x	x	x	x	x
Functional		x		x	
Control over:					
outlooks	x	x			
behaviour		x		x	
Control by:					
time	x	x	x	x	x
money		x			
harm		x	x		x
Attachment	x	x	x		x

In this study, it was studied meanings that are related in seeing dogs as extended self. In future, it could be studied whether the stereotypical finding that self extension is especially evident for men, who own large, aggressive male dogs (Beck & Katcher 1983, p. 253; Hirschman 1994, p. 620; Savishinsky 1983, p. 120), is confirmed. Moreover, it could be studied whether a phenomenon labelled *persona perception*, which means that consumers attach companion animals' personalities to those of the animals' human owners (cf. Hirschman 1994, p. 621) plays a role here. In addition, also other pets besides dogs should be studied.

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