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Tails of animal attraction: Incorporating the feline into the family

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Abstract

Increased urbanization and female employment have led to the cat overtaking the dog as the companion animal of preference. However, this article looks beyond lifestyle changes as reasons for the popularity of the cat. The article explores the emotional consumer-socialization process involving the incorporation of the cat into the family. Subjective personal introspection (SPI) and supporting vignettes of female humans in their families (all of which were high-involvement owners) explore the hows and whys of feline incorporation. The study identifies several categories of incorporation. The findings suggest that this complex process involves many factors — namely, consumer socialization, intergenerational influence, brand loyalty, commitment, near-instant loyalty, immediacy, distress, anthropomorphism, and nostalgia. These factors underpin the intimacy and care the human–feline relationship expresses. The ability for humans and cats to bond in a way that fosters emotional intimacy can be considered one of the purest forms of relationships.

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Keywords: Human–animal bonding; Cat; Brand loyalty; Consumer socialization; Intergenerational influences; Pure relationship

“Come in,” she said, “I’ll give you shelter from the storm.”
Bob Dylan (1975)

1. Introduction

Domesticated cats have been in human company between 3000 and 5000 years (Case, 2003). Malek (1993) highlights the progress of the cat in Egyptian religion as quite remarkable and unusual, with its subsequent rise in popularity to surpass that of any other animal, elevated to the position of the sacred. In Christian times, worship changed violently to hatred as the Christian church named cats as animals of the Devil and companions to witches (Serpell, 2000).

The love–hate relationship toward the cat in modern society may stem from this historical dichotomy. While many people love, care for, and respect the cat, others consider it sly and devious. However, this article focuses purely on those who consider the cat as a significant being.

2. Literature review

Today, remaining prejudice against cats is diminishing (O’Farrell and Neville, 1994), and appreciation of the cat is once again rising. Recent times (1996–2006) have witnessed an increase in pet cats, now outnumbering pet dogs. Today, there are 91 million in the U.S.A. (American Pet Products Manufacturer’s Association, 2005). Increasing urbanization and female employment led to the cat becoming the companion animal of preference. Cats’ greater independence and ease of care, compared to the dog, play a great part in this trend (Pet Food Manufacturer’s Association, 2005).

This article looks beyond lifestyle changes as reasons for the popularity of the cat and explores the emotional consumer-socialization process in the incorporation of the cat into high-involvement families. Hirschman (1994) highlights the importance of this process in terms of companion-animal consumption behavior.

3. The incorporation of the cat

In urban environments where feline-assisted rodent control and cat-worship services with spiritual rites are uncommon, the relevant question becomes: how and why do people acquire

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cats? The reasons why people desire cats deeply affect their incorporation process.

Psychological research shows that people acquire companion animals for a variety of reasons. Humans in need of psychiatric help are at the extreme level of incorporation; some members of this acquiring segment hoard large numbers of animals, even to the severe compromise of the animals' welfare (Frost, 2000; Lockwood and Cassidy, 1988; Patronek, 1999). However, this type of incorporation is in the minority. Hirschman (1994) divides the roles animals play in people's lives into two categories: animals as objects/products and animals as companions. Although Hirschman (1994) looks at the roles these animals play once in the home, the actual incorporation process itself is a consequence of a diverse set of circumstances that are catalytic factors in the actual choice and decision making relative to the incorporation process.

Limited research looks at the feline acquisition process and the accompanying reasons for this preferred choice. Podberscek and Blackshaw (1988) report that people acquire pet cats unintentionally — for example, as presents or through inheritance — and purposely for reasons such as companionship, aesthetics, rodent control, and playmates for children. However, it appears that purposeful acquisition most often occurs for companionship reasons. For example, Rochlitz et al. (1996) report that companionship (45% of those in study) is the greatest reason people want a cat. Additionally, Zasloff and Kidd (1994) find that after practical reasons, the most common reasons for wanting a cat include the appeal of the cat's affectionate and loving nature and the fact that cats provide companionship. Podberscek and Blackshaw (1988) suggest that the most common reasons for liking and choosing a cat are personality and appearance. Companionship therefore appears to be a common impetus toward acquiring cats, with personality and appearance being possible reasons for choosing cats over other companion animals. However, these studies do not investigate in any emotional depth or detail what makes the cat such a special companion, nor do they investigate in any depth the incorporation process.

4. The cat as a companion

As Beck and Katcher (1996:6), suggest “pets do not just substitute for human relationships; they complement and add to them, giving a special and unique dimension to human life.” Companion animals play many roles in the lives of consumers (Belk, 1996; Holbrook, 1996; Stephens and Hill, 1996). Indeed, Hirschman (1994:623) emphasizes the multiple roles that companion animals play in human life. An emergent theme in her study (pertinent in this study) “was that consumers who had been socialized to care for a particular type of pet as children often continued to seek out that same type of pet throughout their lives.” Hirschman extends this thought further to argue that “With the incorporation of the pet into the family, an enduring type of human–animal socialization may occur: essentially, the children in such homes come to view the people-plus-animals family structure as normal and right.” This view stresses that childhood socialization is central to the formation of lifelong

animal-companion consumption patterns, creating a socio-historical grounding and lineage of the self. Indeed, Ward (1974:2) defines consumer socialization as “processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace.” In the case of the companion animal, these skills, knowledge, and attitudes relate to the behavior and husbandry of the companion animal and the consequent bi-directional emotional relationship.

In addition to childhood socialization, anthropomorphism roles often assist an animal as a companion (Messent and Serpell, 1981; Serpell, 1986), where humans often imbue their companion animals with human qualities, as does neoteny (the breeding-based maintenance of juvenile characteristics). These human characteristics have the effects of prolonging impulses toward nurturing and care-giving long past the infancy cycle (Serpell, 1986). Leach (1964) suggests that pets form a mediating category between humans and animals, with dogs and cats being the most humanized and anthropomorphized. Voith (1985) finds, in a survey of 800 cat owners, that 59% said that they talked to their cat “as a child” at least sometimes and that 37% talked to it as a child all the time. By anthropomorphizing, the consumer believes the animal to have the human ability of understanding conversation.

Interestingly, more cat owners (58%) than dog owners (45%) said that they talked to their pet about important matters at least once a month, suggesting that cats are viewed as more perceptive or understanding. Certainly, Zasloff and Kidd (1994) find that many people believe their cat senses their emotional ups and downs and, by extension, is considered a family member in relation to hearing important emotional matters. This area will be explored further in what follows.

Psychologists and sociologists show extensive interest in examining the nature of the human–animal bond (Beck and Katcher, 1996; Karsh and Turner, 1988; Loyer-Carlson, 1992; Sussman, 1985; Tuan, 1984). However, only recent consumer research considers the relationship between consumer and companion animal, mainly in the areas of owner's consumption experiences (Hirschman, 1994; Stephens and Hill, 1996); the roles of pets in humans' daily lives (Holbrook, 1997); and the disposition of animal companions (Stephens and Hill, 1996). Although Holbrook et al. (2001) focus on the key aspects of animal companionship, there is a paucity of research pertaining to the incorporation of companion animals. The area of intergenerational influence on the positive outcomes of feline incorporation into the family unit is a key focus of this article. More specifically, Moschis (1985) expresses the need to study the influence of the family in the context of specific dyads, focusing on specific pairs and the directions of influence within those pairs. In addition, John (1999) suggests that individual relationships would offer episodes of greater influence with regard to consumer socialization than would general family characteristics. Childers and Rao (1992) note that the effect of family in the socialization of offspring includes an impact on the individual's attitudes and values.

These findings indicate that private necessities attract the greatest amount of intergenerational transfer. John (1999) builds on Childers and Rao's conceptualization by viewing consumer

socialization as a developmental process that evolves through the human lifecycle but involves more than the incorporation of knowledge and skills related to the consumer role. The learning and adoption of motives and values pertaining to consumption activities are also included. Supporting this, [Ward et al. \(1977\)](#) suggest that parents often expect their children to learn through observation as opposed to purposive consumer training. In keeping with these studies, this article concentrates mainly on the mother–daughter dyad as a model to examine the intergenerational transfer of brand loyalty as a key measure of consumer socialization. This issue is examined in relation to feline-consumption behavior in high-involvement individuals. [Allen's \(2002:516\)](#) FLAG framework suggests that the “realization of perfect fit during this in situ encounter is shaped by social and historical factors incorporated in the consumer and embedded in the object of choice.” The intimacy afforded through these elaborated meanings feeds a relationship culture.

5. Method

This article explores the incorporation process and the emotional human–animal bond underlying cat consumption. The study uses a phenomenological approach for data gathering ([Thompson et al., 1989](#)), which draws on the personally lived experiences of the informants. Interpretive enquiries provide insights into this field of research ([Belk, 1996](#); [Holbrook, 1997](#); [Holbrook et al., 2001](#); [Stephens and Hill, 1996](#)). This article also pursues a self-reflective focus that draws on aspects of self-interpretation ([Sudnow, 1978](#)) that others call “Autoethnography” ([Sanders, 1990b](#)) or “Subjective Personal Introspection” (SPI) ([Holbrook, 1995](#)).

Drawing on [Hirschman's \(1994\)](#) discussion of child socialization to companion animals affecting later pet choice, only informants who had been socialized with cats as children were selected to investigate this phenomenon. Personal stories, self-reflections, and vignettes were gathered on the informants' ‘high-involvement’ consumption experiences with the incorporation of the cat into the family. Informants were asked to write down any personal experiences of acquiring cats, and this was the only direction given in order to allow free expression of this consumption behavior. These informants — all closely related to the co-authors — consisted mainly of mother-and-daughter family dyads, with one example of a mother–son dyad. All informants had been socialized to cats during childhood. Current consumer-socialization studies tend to focus on mother–daughter dyads ([Mandrik et al., 2005](#); [Moore, Wilkie and Lutz, 2002](#)), and this article draws on this perspective to explore the phenomenon of intergenerational similarity using parent and offspring. Additionally, there are 3.5 times more female than male cat owners in the UK ([McNicholas, 2006](#)); so the sample reflects that gender representation, as well.

6. Findings

Our findings suggest that the incorporation process was a complex and varied one that fell into categories labeled “Stray Tails”; “Premeditated Tails”; “Tails of Rearing”; “Tails of Feline

Choice”; and “The Left-Behind Tail.” Underlying these categories were several emergent themes, one being intimacy and care. The intimacy and care discussed in this article borrow heavily from [Beck and Katcher's \(1996:90\)](#) definition: “Intimacy is the feeling of closeness, absorption, affection, and mutual sensitivity that must be reflected from one person to another. Intimacy is almost the essence of companionship.” In addition, the findings suggest that the incorporation process is heavily influenced by the intergenerational consumer-socialization process and the cultural contexts of the study (Irish/Scottish perspective). Since cat-related consumption is essentially within the home environment, familial influence on the brand should be strong. Indeed, the focus on mother–daughter dyads from essentially nuclear families shows that brand loyalty is strengthened as a result of intergenerational influences — namely, the mother's. Intergenerationally influenced consumer socialization is shown to achieve that a habitus is socially and historically shaped (cf. [Holt, 1997](#)). [Allen's \(2002\)](#) FLAG framework addresses this phenomenon by acknowledging that these factors are incorporated in the consumer and embedded in the object of choice — in this case, the cats. The concept of near-instant loyalty, however, is illustrated in “The Left-Behind Tail,” where socio-emotional factors initiate attachment, with brand loyalty being established, even in the absence of intergenerational influences of consumer socialization.

7. Stray Tails

For some consumers, the immediacy of the situation — rather than the planned intention to consume a companion animal — affects cat incorporation. For example: “The decision was immediate and completely involuntary; it was coming home with me.” Here, Hilary (49-year-old, co-author) is describing Nectarine, a kitten found abandoned, emaciated, and — as later discovered — deaf. “Out from under a car came the smallest bundle of matted fluff; initially, I didn't know what it was; but it sounded very distressed, and it came over to me.” At age twenty-three, this was the informant's first individual decision regarding the incorporation of a cat. Former incorporations had been made within the nuclear family. The consequence of childhood socialization to cats allowed the informant to understand the urgency of the situation and the obvious need to act accordingly. [Feldmann \(1979:18\)](#) believes that “A pet spontaneously exhibits emotions and natural functions and lives nearly in accord with natural biological rhythms... These expressions of life help keep pet owners in touch with basic, universal aspects of human animality.” Nectarine spontaneously conveyed her emotions and natural survival instinct by exhibiting distress at abandonment, just as any child would have. The immersion and interaction with cats throughout one's socialization process equips that person with the necessary skills to exhibit particular consumption behavior when faced with behaviors and emotions in the cat that are so universal to animality. The later knowledge that Nectarine was completely deaf served to further reinforce the initial intimacy and commitment.

Anthropomorphism was common to the incorporation process, specifically in the area of language: “I never stopped

talking to her, and I believe she understood everything I said.” Supporting the work of Voith (1985) and Zasloff and Kidd (1994), Hilary used human language to communicate with Nectarine, believing that Nectarine had the ability, unique to humans, to understand complex speech. This suggests that, perhaps at even this early stage of incorporation before the cat had entered the home environment, it was beginning to be considered part of the family. Already, it had been assigned human features, which is likely to be a solid basis for a human–animal relationship of care and intimacy.

Beck and Katcher’s (1996:90) definition of intimacy includes the need for “feelings of closeness” and “mutual sensitivity.” The addition of language to the relationship (even though anthropomorphized), in situations that need sensitivity, is likely to accelerate these feelings of intimacy. The kitten vocalizing its distress at abandonment and the informant continually speaking to the kitten have created an element of mutual sensitivity. In addition, Hilary recalls that “over time, interacting with each other, we developed a means of communicating with hand signals and ritualized behavior that became part of our daily lives, strengthened the bonds between us, and provided Nectarine with a family of intimacy and care.”

Swidge was found as a distressed and abandoned kitten, wandering the streets, by Rosemary (73-year-old mother to Hilary): “I heard the plaintive cries behind me and on turning saw the smallest black and white kitten following me.” The kitten’s owner was found a week later and Rosemary went with the intention of returning the kitten to its owner: “I remember putting her into the cat carrier and taking her with me; but she was upset, so I didn’t take her into the owner’s house with me but went alone.” Rosemary viewed the owner’s home and felt the conditions were totally unsuitable for a cat—a cage in the back garden. The owner agreed to allow the kitten to stay with Rosemary: “On the journey home again, Swidge purred non-stop; I knew she was happy, and I felt justified in my actions.” The relief Rosemary felt to be welcoming the kitten to a home that could cater to its essential needs was vocalized, in the informant’s eyes, by both members of this relationship. Once again, part of the intimacy shared by human and cat appears to be strengthened by anthropomorphizing in general and by believing that the animal is saying and vocalizing its imagined thoughts in particular. Rosemary believed that the kitten’s purring was its way of communicating its relief.

8. Premeditated Tails

Fleah and Purrins were purposely sought. Mairghread (52-year-old mother to Sarah) specifically wanted two ginger male kittens and waited until she could find these. The period of waiting was irrelevant to the specific goal or need. The strength of childhood socialization on incorporation is once again evident: “I’ve always had cats, always. Life is not life without a cat companion. We had at least one cat in the family all through my childhood and adolescent years.” However, in this case the influence of childhood socialization is taken to a deeper, more specific level. The informant’s primary childhood experiences of cats were with ones whose color included ginger — spe-

cifically, a ginger-and-white cat — and, additionally, her childhood was filled with stories of ginger cats: “There was always a hankering though for another ginger cat; they’re special. I can’t tell you why, but I KNOW they just ARE. Perhaps it is my childhood diet of ‘Orlando the marmalade cat stories’; perhaps they crept into my psyche and slept there. They are just a subconscious but whispering purr inside me.” The appearance, in particular the color of cats experienced in childhood, could be the determining factor that influenced her premeditated desires of obtaining ginger cats in adult life (Fournier, 1998). When immediacy and distress are not the main determinants, other features such as personality and appearance influence incorporation. According to Podberscek and Blackshaw (1988), appearance, personality, and breed are the commonest reasons for choosing and liking a cat. The question therefore emerges, “Why are these characteristics preferred?” Further research is needed to investigate whether childhood socialization to particular breeds, colors, sizes, sex, and personalities of cats influences cat preference in adulthood and whether this socialization must be to living cats or simply to factors such as images, stories, and frequent sightings.

For the case of Mairghread, the importance of this nostalgic element (Goulding, 2002) to the incorporation process has become so much a part of the self (Belk, 1996) as to make her feel incomplete without such additions to the family (Hirschman, 1994): “In April, last year, my elderly parents got two ginger kittens from a friend and neighbor whose lovely marmalade cat Moffat had a litter of six, with two being ginger boys. How I wanted them, how I lusted after them!” Mairghread also highlights the importance of her new ginger cats “laid back but chatty personalities” in her relationship with them. As in the “Stray Tails,” anthropomorphism in the area of language is evident.

9. Tails of Rearing

The following personal experience is unique in that it spans the previously discussed categories — both “Stray Tails” and “Premeditated Tails.” Sarah (25-year-old, daughter of Mairghread), after spending much time working closely with an animal rescue shelter, decided that she wanted to hand-rear an abandoned kitten. After she had waited a few weeks, Woody — a kitten rejected by his mother — was brought into the animal rescue shelter at approximately one week old and was then hand-reared by the informant. Interestingly, the premeditation that was witnessed in Mairghread is also seen in her daughter Sarah, as was the method of acquiring strays seen in Rosemary also evidenced in her daughter Hilary. The incorporation processes experienced in childhood socialization could influence one’s chosen methods of incorporation to obtain a cat in later life. However, further investigation is needed.

“I had grown up with cats in my family all my life but had never had one I could truly call mine. Woody filled that place. How better could one get to know cat behavior and grow a loving relationship with a cat than to rear it?” In this case, Sarah purposely sought out the immediacy and distress factors that so often end in incorporation. People will often do this in the form

of acquiring cats from rescue shelters but to bring a cat into the family setting from an age where it does not hold the independence that cats are so famous for, but rather is largely dependent, is less usual. When one considers pets as part of one's self, it is usually related in a metaphorical sense (Belk, 1996), but nurturing in its real sense is achieved here with an intimacy and care reserved only for human–human relationships, in particular, the raising of children: “Woody arrived at the shelter because he had been abandoned by his most-likely feral mother. At this point, my role as human mother took place.” Again, the maternal role is clearly shown, as is the immediacy of the situation. The unusual situation of very early human socialization, in addition to a human fulfilling the feline mother's role, allowed Woody and Sarah to develop a deeper emotional and physical bond than is usually exhibited in post-weaned acquired companion animals.

Woody's story holds a certain amount of pride for its “human mother” (Sanders, 1990a,b), which can be equated with the pride a mother feels in bringing up her human children: “I remember feeling the achievement at this time that Woody was growing up and his rearing process was a success.”

The process of hand rearing a kitten has been shown to be one of intense emotionality for the human. Indeed, O'Farrell and Neville (1994) highlight that hand-reared animals are often felt to be special. This takes the human–feline bond to another level where the process of incorporation becomes not only a period of care, love, and companionship but a period of intense nurturing and immense dependence that leads to a mutual need for each other: “I pined for him desperately ... so much so that I changed my living arrangements so that he could stay for good.” As Giddens (1992:75) emphasizes, “Where large areas of a person's life are no longer set by pre-existing patterns and habits, the individual is continually obliged to negotiate options. Moreover — and this is crucial — such choices are not just ‘external’ or marginal aspects of the individual's attitudes, but define who the individual ‘is.’ In other words, lifestyle choices are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of the self.” In this case, Woody was so much a part of the informant that she could not let go at the end of the rearing period and allow the kitten to be adopted into another home. Her whole way of living was changed to accommodate the kitten, now so heavily involved as part of her family.

10. Tails of Feline Choice

In all the vignettes, the human ultimately decides in favor of the cat entering the family group. However, for Hilary (49-year-old female), the following situation was unique in two senses. First, the element of human choice was removed; second, unlike her previous incorporations of a cat, the situation did not demand immediate action but rather evolved over a period of three months: “Baby, a cat in full health, with a home (just over the wall) became a regular visitor to my home, only later to become an established member.” Specifically, “My ‘twin’ cats ... Poppy and Peach (whose only link was that they arrived as strays at the same time and were approximately the same age) ... flew down the garden, and all were smiling at each other and at me. Poppy

and Peach seemed to be saying ‘look whom we've brought home, our new friend.’” Again, anthropomorphism in the form of language is directed toward the already-established feline family members. At this stage, the process of incorporating a new cat has already begun between feline and human. If the existing feline members of the family (considered extremely important by their high-involvement owners) are intent on the cat coming home with them, the human members would be unlikely to refuse. Smiling, a signal of human happiness is attributed to the existing cats through anthropomorphism, signaling that the family respondent is already happy with Baby's choice to enter her home.

This element of feline choice highlights the cat's independence, which no other companion animal shares. Indeed, Caras (1989:83) describes “the essence of being a cat” as “being selective.” No other companion animal has the potential ability to come and go from the family home as it desires. The fact that the cat chooses to stay in a household, sometimes leaving another household to join its present one, is likely to be an important factor in what makes cats so special and the bond between owner and cat so strong.

This is certainly so in the case of Hilary and her family, where this new cat became very special and central to family life: “Baby, as he later became known, has become the family treasure.” The importance of being actively chosen by the companion animal has contributed to a near-instant loyalty (Ehrenberg and Goodhardt, 2001) and has encouraged the level of intimacy and care lavished on this new family member: “Certainly, all family members — including the other companion-animal members — have changed their everyday behavior to accommodate Baby.” The special degree of socio-emotional commitment in this particular human–animal bond is not an uncommon aspect of these informants “tails.” In addition, the socio-historical factors at play make Allen's (2002) FLAG framework all the more realistic as the basis for potentially constructing a positive consumption experience (Arnould and Price, 1993; Zaltman, 2000).

11. The Left-Behind Tail

In contrast to other studies, this article has focused primarily on the desirable outcomes of the socialization process. Nonetheless, one illustrative example takes account of uncontrollable events that entail undesirable outcomes such as de-incorporation. This de-incorporation process resulted from movement to another country for employment by Stephen (46-year-old male, brother to Hilary). Uncertainty regarding work and living conditions forced Stephen to find a suitable home for his cat Cous-Cous (8-year-old female tabby): “I needed to go to work but I couldn't take her with me when I didn't know where I'd be living.” Stephen's inability to provide a secure, stable home for his closest companion was emotionally traumatic: “If I could not have found her a suitable home, then I would not have gone. It was too distressing. Cous-Cous has always been here for me through all my bad times and good.”

The task of finding Cous-Cous a home as nearly perfect as possible (Allen, 2002) fell to Stephen's sister Hilary, who has a

network of companion-animal lovers. A neighbor, Brian (male in his sixties), was approached as a potential “surrogate father.” Brian had no prior consumer socialization with this particular breed of companion animal, though he had provided a loving home for three dogs from the local dog shelter during his married life. Only as a consequence of his wife’s declining health had Brian felt he could no longer care for other canine companions. His caring nature and close similarities to Stephen in his attitudes to music and lifestyle made him a strong contender for this adoptive role. After a series of talks with Brian, Stephen felt happy enough to give up Cous-Cous physically but not emotionally. Hilary had to move Cous-Cous to her new home, as Stephen was not emotionally capable of doing so: “I couldn’t say goodbye to her; I had to ask Hilary to take her over for me. She would only have known if I looked into her face.”

An instant relationship formed between Brian and Cous-Cous, exhibiting near-instant loyalty ([Ehrenberg and Goodhardt, 2001](#)). These near-instant high levels of intimacy and commitment, experienced in this new relationship, mirror those usually found in long-term relationships ([Grönroos, 1996](#)). Brian constantly thanks Hilary for the gift of Cous-Cous: “that little girl has been such a treasure to me; I don’t know what I would have done without her. She never leaves my side.” The concept of near-instant loyalty appears heightened in terms of the socio-emotional factors projected from human to companion animal. In the absence of intergenerational influencers or consumer socialization with this specific breed of companion animal, Brian was able to establish a relationship in its full sense with Cous-Cous. This positive outcome has not only eased the emotional distress experienced by Stephen but has given Brian new and rewarding consumption experiences.

12. Discussion

By exploring the mother–daughter dyad, the findings reflect a culturally entrenched gender ideology toward “consumer socialization” and to brands or, in this case, to species or breeds. Since women in relationships feel empowered, they emerge as key agents of social change. [Jacoby and Chestnut \(1978\)](#) focus on the positively held, long-term, intense relationships born out of brand loyalty and, in relation to this study, its direct influence on intergenerational consumer socialization. As [Morgan and Hunt \(1994\)](#) point out, this loyalty is not without commitment and trust; but as [Ehrenberg and Goodhardt \(2001\)](#) suggest, loyalty need not be the slow evolutionary process but can be “nearly instant” in relation to experiencing new brands. This near-instant loyalty is a dominant theme underlying the various “tails” described here, but is perhaps most obvious in the context of Brian, who had had no previous socialization with the particular “brand” in question. However, Brian is no less capable of forming a relationship based on intimacy and care than the other informants, who reflect a socio-historical consumer socialization grounded in intergenerational influence. Socio-emotional factors are of particular significance in Brian’s ability to become fully immersed in the new relationship.

In addition to the benefits humans gain from involvement with a preferred brand, as [Fox \(1990:170\)](#) highlights, we note the benefits

to the animal itself when incorporated into a family showing intimacy and care. The incorporation of the companion animal as a family member should “entail not only love, but also respect and understanding. Animals should be given equal and fair consideration, and were not created for our own exclusive enjoyment; rather they have interests and a life of their own.” The companion animal is viewed as entitled to basic human rights ([Belk, 1996](#)) and thereby becomes a family member in its own right.

This partnership between human and animal is equal in nature and draws heavily on the emotional bonding usually considered to exist only in human-to-human relationships. As discussed previously, intimacy is the essence of companionship — but intimacy in another form: “the pure relationship” is increasingly sought in personal life and, as such, fits the contexts under consideration. [Jamieson \(1999:477\)](#) considers the pure relationship as one that “involves opening out to each other, enjoying each other’s unique qualities, and sustaining trust through mutual disclosure.” In the case of the human–cat bond, there are several unique qualities within the cat that allow for an intimacy not often exhibited in relationships with other companion animals. First, intimacy is greatly enhanced by touch, and the cat’s soft fur invites this type of contact. Additionally, the cat is an animal known to rub against people — an extremely important factor as the cat chooses to touch, rather than it being a one-sided affair. Due to their modest size and notable athletic ability, cats will jump onto laps, sleep in owner’s beds, and allow themselves to be picked up and carried, often in a manner similar to a child. Finally, by jumping on furniture, cats can bring themselves to the owners’ eye level — often touching the face of the human, a gesture usually reserved for only the most intimate of relationships. The mutual disclosure highlighted in the “pure” human–cat bond is likely to be enhanced through the use of anthropomorphic language. [Giddens \(1991:6\)](#) extends this thought: “A pure relationship is one in which external criteria have become dissolved... the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver. In the context of the pure relationship, trust can be mobilized only by a process of mutual disclosure.”

Finally, close attention to detail clearly reveals these consumption experiences as extremely important life episodes that are greatly influenced by intergenerational socialization, leading to a kind of brand loyalty. The vividness with which informants recall the events suggests that they were chosen as a consequence of cognitive and emotional involvement. The incorporation process demonstrates that, even at the early stages of a relationship, the central role that companion animals will ultimately play as cherished family members in the lives of their owners is unquestionably realized.

In the main, this article explores the positive process of incorporating companion animals into the home and the effect of intergenerational influences on the consumer-socialization process. Additionally, it offers a brief “tail” that focuses on reasons why the de-incorporation process occurs, highlighting possible areas of concern, though findings in relation to this area are limited. Future research should explore this negative aspect of the human–animal bond and should examine the effects of such a relationship breakdown.

13. Conclusion

The different categories of incorporation “tails” that this article explores add to the under-researched cultural knowledge surrounding the human–cat relationship of felines with high-involvement owners. The key concepts of consumer socialization, intergenerational influence, brand loyalty, commitment, near-instant loyalty, anthropomorphism, and nostalgia heavily influence the incorporation process of the feline companion animal into the family. The specific mother–daughter and mother–son dyads illustrated in this article show that socio-emotional factors such as immediacy and distress play a heightened role in the near-instant bonding process. The concept of near-instant loyalty in relation to high-involvement owners is evidenced in these “tails,” but was also manifested in a situation where intergenerational influence and consumer socialization were not factors in the incorporation process. Humans often acquire a cat as a fully-fledged family member, and the ability for humans and cats to bond in such a way that both derive emotional intimacy from the union is one of the purest forms of relationship among God’s creatures.

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