

PET OWNERSHIP TO THE RESCUE?  
PERCEPTIONS OF BECOMING A PET OWNER  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

By

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic created a time of uncertainty for individuals across the globe. As a result, the pet industry saw an increase in pet ownership as individuals sheltered-in-place. Previous studies have found pets provide companionship and happiness for humans. This study looks at perceptions of acquiring a new pet or companion animal during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study consisted of 12 participants who decided to acquire a new pet or companion animal during the COVID-19 pandemic. Attitudes toward acquiring a pet included feeling less alone and having a companion. Extra time provided by the pandemic presented participants an opportunity to acquire a new pet or companion animal. Participants ranged from 19 to 42 years old. Participants lived in Texas and Oklahoma. A majority of participants lived by themselves within their residing county's city limits.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of time, animals have been fundamental partners for “human survival, health, and healing” (Walsh, 2009a, p. 463). Spiritual traditions and cultural beliefs recognized the positive relationship between humans and animals (Walsh, 2009a).

While some animals were considered only for food and hides, “pets are, uniquely and virtually by definition, not consumable items because we do not eat family members, the beings who share our homes and lives” (Overall, 2017, p. 19). Pets who live as part of the human household are considered to be companion animals (Overall, 2017).

Amiot et al. (2016) stated, “dogs and their owners are therefore an excellent example of the co-evolution that took place between humans and animals” (p. 552). In ancient times, dogs provided loyalty and intelligence giving humans guidance and a guardian (Walsh, 2009a). Co-evolution and the domestic process have made it possible for humans and animals, like dogs, to communicate and connect (Amiot et al., 2016). As agricultural communities were developed, dogs assisted in farming and herding wild animals while cats eliminated threatening rodents (Walsh, 2009a).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mental institutions in England frequently used companion animals with patients (Serpell, 2000). Animal companionship served as a therapeutic treatment (Serpell,

2000). Amiot et al. (2016) claimed companion animals can alter behavior according to human non-verbal cues. Over recent decades, humans have placed more value and respect toward pet companionship (Walsh, 2009a).

Today, there are more companion animals living in households in the United States than there are children (Stone, 2017). According to the American Pet Products Association (2019), the national pet owners survey stated, “67% of United States’ households own a pet, which equates to 84.9 million homes.” A majority of households consider and treat their pets as part of the family (Deng & Swanson, 2015; Mintel Press Team, 2018). Families have indicated the main reason for owning a pet includes “companionship, pleasure, and affection” (Walsh, 2009b, p. 482).

Among current households, millennials and Generation Z create the largest segment of pet ownership as they put more maintenance into their pets than any generation in history (Cullen, 2018). Cullen (2018) who is part of Mintel Press Team (2018), the world’s leading market intelligence agency, concluded gender and marital status impact pet owners’ perceptions of their pets. Perspectives differ as the younger generation delays marriage and allows pets to take the place of children (Cullen, 2018). Cullen (2018) found younger adults view their pets as a protectors or best friends, too. Additionally, Cullen (2018) found pets offer physical health benefits to those aged 55+ as pets help keep them active.

No matter the generation, added pet maintenance cost provides the pet industry’s market with continuous growth as pet owners seek to provide the best life for their animals (Mintel Press Team, 2018). However, younger generations are demanding pet-friendly products as they associate their pets as family members or friends (Cullen, 2018). As pet ownership continues to climb, so does the request for availability with a wide variety of high-end products and services for companion animals (Cullen, 2018).

Companion animals give a sense of “affection, enjoyment, companionship, and distraction to the lives of those with whom they reside” (Wood et al., 2007, p. 43). Studies have shown ownership of companion animals offering “therapeutic, psychological, physiological, and psychosocial benefits” (Wood et al., 2007, p. 43). Friedmann & Son (2009) concluded physiological benefits included lowered blood pressure, serum triglyceride levels, and cholesterol levels. When individuals interact with companion animals, relaxation and bonding increase, and the human immune system becomes stronger (Charnetsky et al., 2004). When humans and pets interact, “research has shown increases in oxytocin, dopamine, and endorphins in both humans and dogs” (Amiot et al., 2016, p. 554).

The bond between humans and pets expands the health and longevity of human life as owners incorporate their personalities into their pets (Deng & Swanson, 2015). Pets can be considered to create more effectiveness at reducing stress than a spouse or friend (Allen et al., 2002). The emotional attachment pets offer helps humans fulfill fundamental needs such as comfort and support (Martens et al., 2016).

Pet therapy is known to improve mental and physical health (Banyan Mental Health, 2020). When the COVID-19 pandemic started impacting the United States, social isolation and sheltering-in-place influenced individuals’ mental health (Vincent et al., 2020). Daily routines were altered, and human interaction was restricted (Vincent et al., 2020). These limiting factors resulted in virtual pet adoptions spiking, and pet ownership increasing as stay-at-home orders were issued (Marks, 2020).

Wall (2020) stated animal shelters across the United States promoted and encouraged pet adoptions. Kavin and Kelly (2020) found an animal shelter in Maryland had 30 pet adoptions in three hours in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. A pet rescue shelter, 2DaRescue, in Arizona, “experienced 30% increase in adoptions and a 100% increase in fosters since the

coronavirus crisis began” (Kavin & Kelly, 2020, p. 18). Additionally, in San Francisco, Kavin and Kelly (2020) found the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals stated, “there’s no question that animals provide incredible comfort and companionship, especially during times of crisis – and they certainly appreciate the attention – so we encourage people to continue to adopt or temporarily foster animals in need” (p. 12).

Pets can provide a sense of comfort during a crisis (Marks, 2020). Wall (2020) reported as individuals began a new normal of working from home and social distancing, pets kept them company and provided entertainment, especially for kids. Banyan Mental Health (2020) claimed some individuals were disconnected and lonely, while others were stressed and anxious. Banyan Mental Health (2020) also indicated pets yield responsibility, which can give an individual a sense of purpose.

### **Demand for Pet Food and Products**

With an increase in pet ownership, the pet food industry reported an increase in sales (Wall, 2020). Casey (2018), with TC Transcontinental Packaging, a company who specializes in packaging, commercial printing, and specialty media across North America, stated, “market wide, Mintel’s forecast calls for moderate growth to continue between 2017 and 2022, with category sales increasing 13 percent to \$27 billion” (p. 2). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the pet food market estimated \$86.7 billion in sales in 2018 (Mintel Press Team, 2018).

The beginning days of the COVID-19 pandemic allowed the pet food industry to see a spike in pet food sales (Phillips-Donaldson, 2020). From March to May 2020, “pet food sales in the U.S. were soaring. For example, for the week ending March 21, 2020, dog food sales grew 54.7% over the same week in 2019, after a 37.5% increase for the week ending March 14. Cat food saw a similar rise, at 52.8% and 38.7% for the respective weeks. That was when the pandemic began spreading throughout the U.S. and people in many parts of the country were

encouraged or ordered to stay home, resulting in panic buying and hoarding” (Phillips-Donaldson, 2020, p. 2-3). Phillips-Donaldson (2020) also found Nielsen’s associate client director stated, “February to March 2020 – online sales of pet food in the U.S. jumped by \$281 million, or more than 51% ... compared to March 2019, pet food e-commerce [in] March rose 77%” (p. 5).

Casey (2018) discovered pet owners are concerned about the type of food they purchase for their pets. When making a purchasing decision, Casey (2018) found packaging and labeling to influence a pet owner’s final purchasing choice.

Casey (2018) claimed pet owners would be willing to sacrifice something for themselves than cut back on spending on their pets. Figure 1 breaks down the important factors of pet food purchasing decisions found by Casey (2018). Emphasis was placed on quality, trusted brands, and freshness, but they also found pet owners are willing to spend more on ‘premium’ brands of pet food (Casey, 2018). Casey (2018) also discovered packaging type and size were the least influential factors when individuals make a purchasing decision.

**Figure 1**

*Factors Influencing Pet Food Purchases by Owners from Casey (2018) as Cited in Watt Global Media (2018).*



As relationships were built between humans and pets during isolation, Wall (2020) stated owners were encouraged to humanize their pets more, which could persuade them to purchase higher-end pet foods and treats. Phillips-Donaldson (2020) reported the pet food industry has already begun to see changes in shopping patterns. If social distancing continues, pet owners could become more comfortable with shopping online instead of visiting brick-and-mortar stores (Phillips-Donaldson, 2020).

Vincent et al. (2020) claimed, “the impact of COVID-19 will not be known for some time” (p. 121). Humans and pets can benefit from interaction between one another (Vincent et al., 2020). Previous research has concluded companion animals have survived pandemics and will help humans work through the coronavirus (Vincent et al., 2020).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Pet ownership in the United States is rising at a consistent rate as 67% of households owned a pet in 2019 compared to 56% in 2016 (American Pet Products Association, 2019; Mintel Press Team, 2018). Pet owners are highly invested in giving their companion animals the best life and placing importance on high-quality, trusted pet food brands (Reus, 2018; Casey, 2018). As individuals sheltered-in-place during the COVID-19 pandemic, the pet industry saw an increase in individuals acquiring a new pet or companion animal (Simpson, 2020; Wall, 2020). Currently, there is little understanding and knowledge of the driving force behind acquiring a new pet or companion animal during the pandemic. Why did individuals decide to acquire a new pet or companion animal during a pandemic? How do they perceive various aspects of owning a pet?

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of individuals who decided to acquire a new pet or companion animal during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the purpose of this study, pet ownership means acquiring a pet, specifically a dog.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Did the COVID-19 pandemic impact participants' decisions to acquire a new pet or companion animal?
2. What factors impacted participants' decisions regarding food choices for their pets?
3. How does acquiring a new pet or companion animal in a pandemic impact participants' lifestyles?

## **Significance of Study**

Companion animals promote good health and well-being for humans (Walsh, 2009a). The Council for Science and Society (1988) stated, "pets provide an outlet for nurturant and care-giving behavior. Through its various gestures of attachment, affiliation, and dependence, it provides its owners with a powerful sense of being valued and needed" (p. 37).

Virués-Ortega and Buela-Casal (2006) concluded pets provide a stress-buffering effect to humans. They also found reports of indirect benefits of pet ownership including physical activity such as exercising the pet, which promotes physical activity, strengthening the owner's health. Additionally, emotional support from a pet can make an individual feel less isolated and lonely (Virués-Ortega & Buela-Casal, 2006).

The COVID-19 pandemic created interest in acquiring a new pet or companion animal (Morgan et al., 2020). Despite current human-pet relationship evidence, little research is available about why individuals decided the COVID-19 pandemic was a reasonable time to acquire a new pet or companion animal (Morgan et al., 2020). Gathering more information about acquiring a new pet or companion animal can help better understand the impact humans and pets have on one another during a crisis (Morgan et al., 2020).

### **Scope of the Study**

The scope of the study was social media users in the United States who decided to acquire a new pet or companion animal during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Assumptions**

The following assumptions were made for this study:

1. Participants would respond honestly about their perceptions and decision about acquiring a new pet or companion animal during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Pets provide a sense of companionship.

### **Limitations**

The following limitations were identified for this study:

1. Only a select number of individuals were included in this study using the snowball sampling method.
2. Phone calls were used to conduct interviews, which eliminated non-verbal communication between the researcher and participants.
3. This study included individuals who decided to acquire a new pet or companion animal during the COVID-19 pandemic.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the literature influencing the framework of this study. Reviewed topics include pet ownership, pet-owner relationship, pet food purchasing decisions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the symbolic interaction theory.

#### **Pet Ownership**

Pet companionship is well-known in today's society as pets play an important role in human households (Vincent et al., 2020). Dogs and cats are the most commonly owned animals (American Pet Products Association, 2019). The American Pet Products Association 2019-2020 national survey found 63.4 million dogs reside in households, while there are only 42.7 million cats (American Pet Products Association, 2019).

As pets are cherished members of the family, pet owners are looking to give their animals the highest-quality life (Mintel Press Team, 2018). Trends within the pet industry change as pet owners demand superior products and high-quality food to give their pets (Mintel Press Team, 2018). Pets provide humans with increased health and longevity, and the same extension can be found for pets (Deng & Swanson, 2015).

Hirschman (1994) claimed there are six reasons for owning a pet. First, he stated animals serve as protection in the owner's environment representing their behavior. Second, pets

may offer aesthetic value, and third, they can act as a status symbols (Hirschman, 1994). Pet can also be exhibited or used as guardians of livestock. Lastly, pets serve as companions for humans (Hirschman, 1994).

Pets can significantly impact human life (Deng and Swanson, 2015). Mintel Press Team (2018) and Cullen (2018) found among the overall human population, the age range of 18 to 34 places the most significance on pet ownership. They concluded millennials are the driving force behind pet ownership, but baby boomers still demand consumer attention. The strong relationship between human and pet places importance on the health and happiness of both (Mintel Press Team, 2018). Long-term pet ownership creates a need for pet-friendly products, which brings the pet food industry to continuously develop new opportunities to engage pet owners in the market (Mintel Press Team, 2018).

Not only are pets accepted for their companionship, but they also provide protection and entertainment, too (Holbrook et al., 2001). Never before have individuals spent more time and money on companion animals (Anonymous, 2008). As pet ownership increases at a consistent rate, the American Pet Products Association (2019) estimates \$99 billion will be spent on pets in 2020. This spending amount gives the industry an advantage as the pet products market satisfies consumer demand of food, treats, and grooming services (Arenofsky, 2017).

### **Pet-Owner Relationship**

The value of a pet-owner relationship is recognized throughout history within different cultures (Walsh, 2009a). According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, the bond between humans and pets is mutually beneficial and influenced “by behaviors essential to health and wellbeing of both. This includes, among other things, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, animals, and the environment” (p. 1).

The human-pet relationship can be described in four ways, according to Belk (1996). These features include “pets as pleasure and problems, pets as extensions of self, pets as members of the family, especially like children, and pets as toys, representing control over nature” (Belk, 1996, p. 461).

Hirschman (1994) claimed owners “project their self-identity onto their pets and in which their pets are seen as extensions of ego and act as a form of self-definition — for example, when a “macho guy” acquires a big, tough dog to assert his masculinity” (p. 461). His approach provides more of an emotional stance of the human-pet relationship.

A pet-owner relationship can positively impact an individual’s mental and physical health (Friedmann & Son, 2009). Companion animals facilitate human companionship, which reduces stress, decreases loneliness and anxiety, and increases physical activity (Friedmann & Son, 2009). Coleman et al. (2008) found dog owners benefit from physical activity when they exercise their dogs. Additionally, there is evidence pets can help lower blood pressure, heart rate, and salivary cortisol levels (Friedmann et al., 1983). Pets can also help in therapeutic ways when assisting with chronically ill patients (Kaminiski et al., 2002). There is still evidence to be determined with animals in a clinical setting, as some studies have conflicting results (Wu, 2018).

Hines (2003) identified it is not unusual for humans to have a stronger relationship with their pets than other human beings. He found individuals who connect more intimately with their pets have greater competence for compassion, empathy, and love.

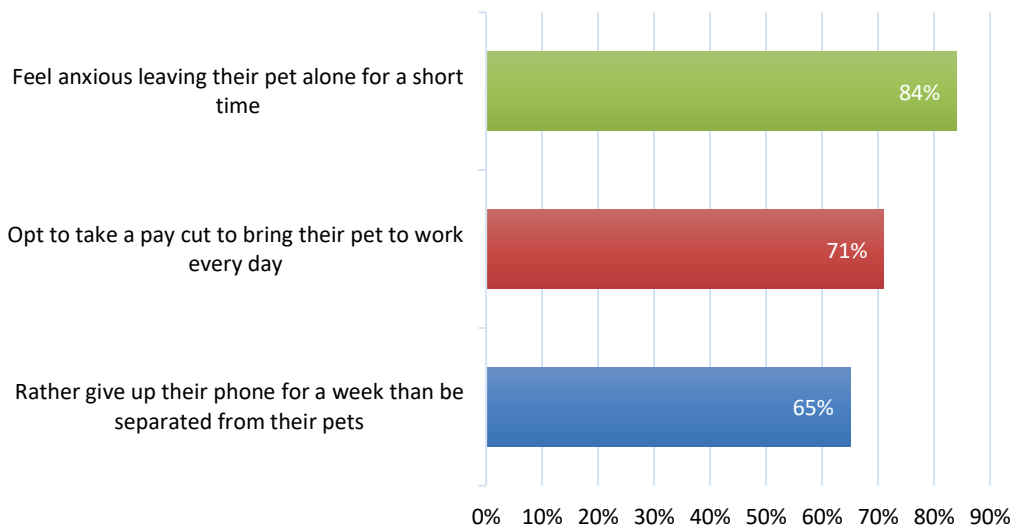
While dogs are the most owned pet, Fox (1981) found four categories of dog-human relationships. They include “object-oriented (with the dog as possession), utilitarian/exploitative (with the dog providing benefits to the human), need-dependency (with the dog as companion or child surrogate), and actualizing (with the dog as a respected significant other)” (p. 458). Like humans, dogs have emotions such as fear, pain, and anxiety (Fox, 1981).

Holbrook et al. (2001) found pets allow humans to embrace memorable experiences. These experiences include an “opportunity to appreciate nature and appreciate wildlife, the opportunity for inspiration and learning, the opportunity to be childlike and playful, the opportunity to be altruistic and nurturant, the opportunity for companionship, caring, comfort, and/or calmness, the opportunity to be a parent, and the opportunity to strengthen bonds with other humans” (Holbrook et al., 2001, p. 2).

According to Wakefield Research (2018), pet owners love their companion animal (see Figure 2). In a sample of 500 United States millennial pet owners, Wakefield Research (2018) determined participants feel anxious when leaving their pets alone for a short time, participants would rather take a pay cut so they could bring their pets to work every day, and participants would give up their phones for a week instead of being separated from their pets (Wakefield Research, 2018).

**Figure 2**

*How Much Individuals Love Their Pets (Wakefield Research, 2018).*



Pet-parenting is replacing traditional parenting of children in millennial households (Carter, 2018; Wakefield Research, 2018). Wakefield Research (2018) determined millennials are delaying marriage, and pets are their starter family. They also learned millennials are incredibly health-conscious, especially since they grew up during heightened safety awareness. Currently, millennials are the driving force to the pet food market as they believe their pets have unique health and nutritional needs (Carter, 2018).

Despite the continuous growth of pet ownership, there is still a lack of research on the bond between humans and pets (Walsh, 2009a). Different studies have noted consistent positive and negative benefits of the human-pet relationship. Still, there are inconsistencies between who first develops the relationship and how the bond affects humans (Walsh, 2009a). There have also been research studies with discrepancies when defining the human-pet relationship (Wu, 2018).

### **Pet Food Purchasing Decisions**

The pet food market's progress is driven by pet ownership (Mintel Press Team, 2018). According to Cullen (2018), the pet food industry was estimated at \$86.7 billion in 2018 and will continue to grow as owners seek exceptional care for their pets.

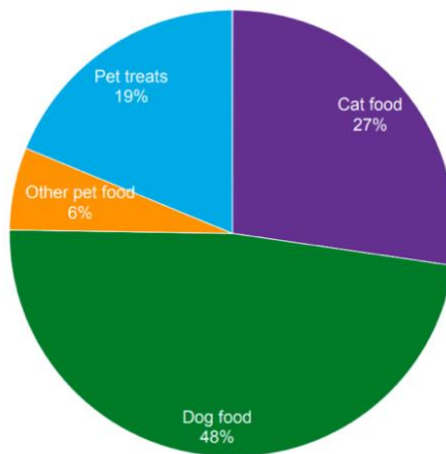
The number of households owning a pet and the number of pets within a household helps dictate the pet food market (Mintel Press Team, 2018). Mintel Press Team (2018) found a modest increase in households owning pets but noticed a trend where households owned one pet. They also determined "smaller dogs continue to become more popular, likely putting downward pressure on dog food sales volume" (Mintel Press Team, 2018, p. 17).

Millennials play a crucial role in pet food sales and are demanding more pet-friendly products (Cullen, 2018). The demand creates new opportunities to develop useful products to catch younger generations' attention (Cullen, 2018).

Figure 3 breaks down the category of pet food sales from Mintel Press Team (2018). Dog food was the most purchased item, while other pet foods were the least purchased item.

**Figure 3**

*Share of Pet Food Sales by Segment (Mintel Press Team, 2018).*



Mintel Press Team (2018) found the United States has the highest per capita spent on pet food and products and the market offers valuable growth opportunities (Kaczorowski, 2019). They also determined natural and clean label ingredients to be preferred by pet owners. Of participants, 88% said they are happy with the brand of pet food they purchase, and 56% claimed they give their pets treats daily (Mintel Press Team, 2018).

The pet food market replicates several human food trends (Mintel Press Team, 2018). Label claims such as premium, organic, and vegetarian are part of the transparency customers are interested in when making purchasing decisions (Mintel Press Team, 2018). Mintel Press Team (2018) reported “more than half of pet food purchasers report that they check the ingredient list when purchasing new pet food or treats, consistent with the rate at which consumers check labels

when purchasing new human foods and a reflection of the care pet owners give to food and treat selection” (p. 35).

Wakefield Research (2018) claimed younger pet owners prefer their pets to mirror their own food interests. With a generation that has been concerned and taught about food safety and label transparency, millennials want the best for their pets (Carter, 2018). Enhanced transparency is one-way pet food companies can reassure owners they are concerned about pet safety (Mintel Press Team, 2018).

Claims such as “Made in the USA” have started to become significant in the pet food market as “pet owners are demanding manufacturers do more to ensure the safety of pet food and treats and will increasingly expect brands to share honest and thorough details on ingredients sourcing and processing (Mintel Press Team, 2018, p. 26). Mintel Press Team (2018) found more pet owners want full disclosure, such as contents and production methods, of pet food ingredients.

Deng and Swanson (2015) found sustainable nutrition influences pet owners when they purchase pet food. As the human population increases and the environment changes, nutritional sustainability is questioned (Deng & Swanson, 2015). Nutritional sustainability provides a safe “and adequate nutrition to maintain health in the population without compromising future generations’ ability to meet their nutritional needs” (Deng & Swanson, 2015, p. 830).

According to Deng and Swanson (2015), pet food is mainly comprised of secondary products of human food. They also stated pet food production focuses on what pet owners believe to be acceptable while still providing cost-effective and palatable diets. The pet food industry continues “to evaluate and improve ingredients and pet food products in regards to pet health ... [and ensure the] pet food system will continue to be a strong and sustainable industry [for] the future” (Deng & Swanson, 2015, p. 831).

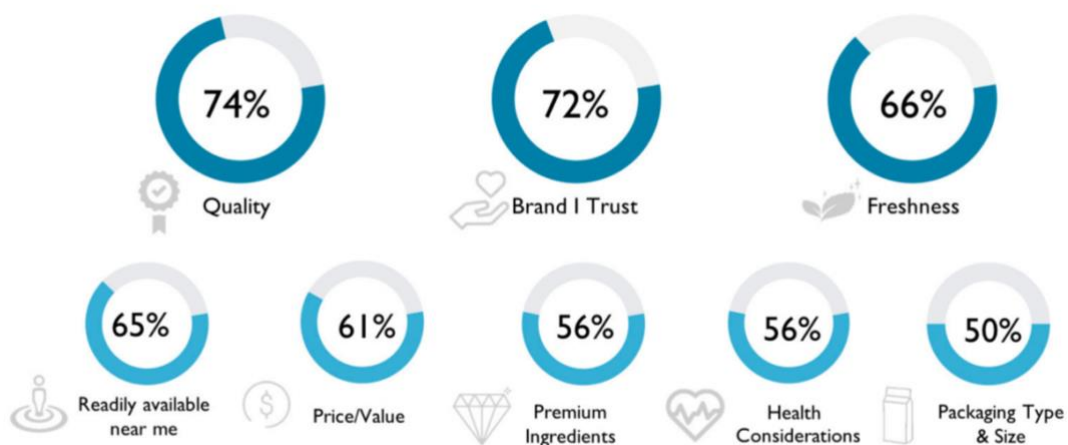
Pet food is imperative, but for many owners, so are pet treats (Mintel Press Team, 2018). Mintel Press Team (2018) observed treats only account for 19% of sales, but during the past five years, pet food companies have seen a spike in the demand for treats. Mintel Press Team (2018) stated, “the idea that treating is a good way to strengthen owner-pet emotional bonds could particularly [motivate younger] pet owners, who are more likely than those 35+ to say that they sometimes give their pets treats because they feel guilty about not giving them enough attention” (p. 11).

According to Mintel Press Team (2018), pet owners have shown extreme interest in making sure they provide their pets with healthy treats. If pet food companies continue to market to pet owners promoting treats as a behavioral incentive for pets and as a way to improve the pet-owner relationship, treats will continue to improve in the market (Mintel Press Team, 2018).

When shopping for pet food, pet owners indicated quality was the most significant factor they look at when making a purchasing decision (Casey, 2018; see Figure 4). Trusted brands and

**Figure 4**

*Factors Influencing Pet Food Purchasing Decisions (Casey, 2018).*





freshness were also two factors highly valued when buying pet food (Casey, 2018). Additionally, availability, price, and ingredients are factors considered when pet owners make purchasing decisions (Casey, 2018).

Casey (2018) determined 23% of participants enjoyed their shopping experience. They claimed millennials “demand a customer-centric shopping experience – one tailored to their wants and needs as a valued customer” (p. 5). Most pet owners were neutral about their pet food purchases. Casey (2018) stated it is easier to sell to pet owners when they are excited about their shopping experience.

Carter (2018) discovered 65% of individuals between the ages of 18 to 39 when purchasing pet food prefer to purchase their pet products online because they can gather more information while comparing reviews and prices. Thankfully, digital marketing helps pet food companies target their message to specific age groups (Carter, 2018).

Lastly, packaging is an essential factor when purchasing pet food as owners look for what best suits their preferences (Casey, 2018). Casey (2018) discovered 48% of participants preferred and purchased medium-sized bags. They also found metal cans are the most common form of pet food packaging. Dry and wet pet food also determine packaging requirements (Casey, 2018). Popular packaging trends also include “resealable packaging, convenient closure options, handles for large food bags, and sustainable, recyclable packaging for environmentally conscious pet owners” (Casey, 2018, p. 2). The pet food industry has seen a purchasing trend with single-serving packages as this allows owners to manage their pet’s weight or meal portion (Casey, 2018).

Pet food is not a one-size-fits-all industry (Casey, 2018). As trends change and the market continues to expand, retail professionals remain innovative when engaging customers, especially as generations demand diverse products (Casey, 2018). Casey (2018) concluded pet owner

expectations will never go away as they continue to humanize their pets. Retailers are focused on ensuring pet owners have an enjoyable experience purchasing food, treats, and products for their animals (Casey, 2018). Whether it is print or digital advertising, the pet industry creates messaging to promote products to all pet owners (Casey, 2018).

### **COVID-19 Pandemic**

During the beginning days of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, fear and anxiety impacted thousands of individuals (Niels, 2020). While some feared for their safety and health, others experienced stress about not having a job or adapting to working from home (Niels, 2020). Medical experts like psychiatrists and psychotherapists began seeing patients from video conferencing calls, trying to answer questions about the new pandemic (Niels, 2020).

Brooks et al. (2020) stated, “quarantine is the separation and restriction of movement of people who have been potentially exposed to a contagious disease to ascertain if they will become unwell, so reducing the risk of them infecting others” (p. 912). They claimed the term is not to be confused with isolation, which occurs when someone has been diagnosed with a contagious disease and is separated from people who are not sick. Quarantine is an uncomfortable experience for most as separation, uncertainty, and boredom can overcome an individual (Brooks et al., 2020).

Niels (2020) found some individuals worried about when the pandemic would surge and who would die. She reported others said nothing had changed in their life and did not worry about the crisis. Medical professionals listened to worried patients and continued to learn about the new disease impacting the globe (Niels, 2020).

Brooks et al. (2020) found five stressors that could happen during the quarantine. First, many were uncertain about how long quarantine would last (Brooks et al., 2020). Secondly, Brooks et al. (2020) found individuals were worried they could potentially contract the COVID-

19 virus. Third, they claimed frustration and boredom consumed individuals as daily routines shifted, and social distancing occurred. Fourth, food and water were limited, while supplies were scarce (Brooks et al., 2020). Lastly, inadequate information, like lack of transparency from government officials, influenced stress during the COVID-19 pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020).

Loneliness was an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic (Trad et al., 2020). According to Trad et al. (2020), “loneliness is the subjective perception of a deficit in social connection; social isolation, in contrast, is an objective measure based on social network size or frequency of social interactions” (p. 2). They determined loneliness has a risk impacting physical and mental health. Additionally, they learned as COVID-19 drastically changed daily routines, and intimate interactions, video conferencing, and social media could help decrease the feeling of loneliness (Trad et al., 2020).

Tull et al. (2020) claimed stay-at-home orders mandated by the COVID-19 pandemic impacted participants' psychological outcomes. They found “being under a stay-at-home order was associated with greater health anxiety, financial worry, and loneliness, consistent with the theorized unintended negative consequences of such orders (Reger et al., 2020) and past research on the psychological consequences of quarantine during a pandemic” (Brooks et al., 2020, p. 289). Stay-at-home orders may increase the potential risk of harm to an individual, over financial worry, stress, and social distancing (Tull et al., 2020).

Participants in Brooks et al. (2020) study proposed finances and continued social distancing were two post-quarantine fears. While participants understood the benefits of quarantine and social isolation, they also stated quarantine might produce adverse, long-term psychological effects (Brooks et al., 2020). Regardless, transparency from the government and medical officials is essential during times of uncertainty to reduce long-term risks (Brooks et al., 2020).

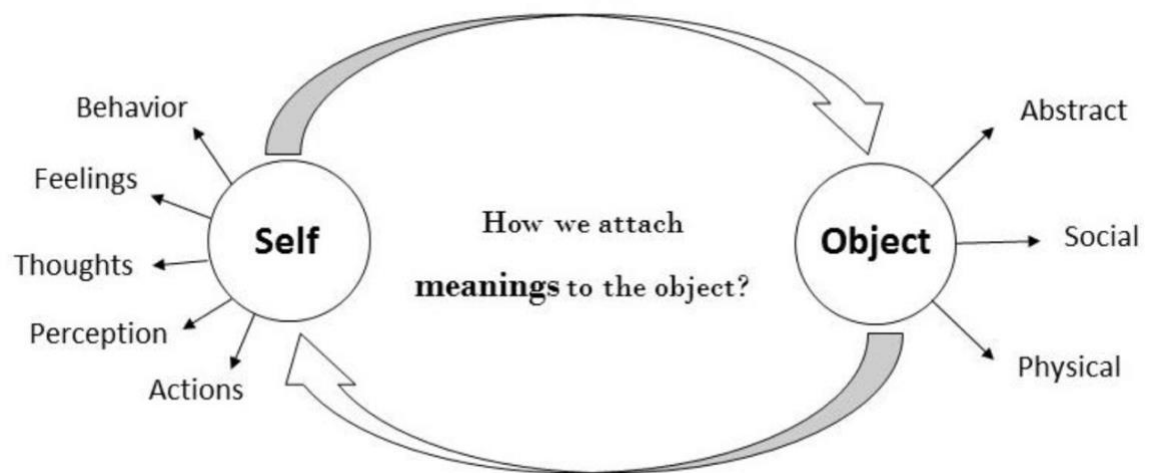
## Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interaction Theory

George Mead's symbolic interaction theory "examines the meanings emerging from the reciprocal interactions of individuals in [a] social environment with other individuals and focuses on the question 'which symbols and meanings emerge from the interaction between people'" (Aksan et al., 2009, p. 902). Mead assumed symbols developed a sense of communication and thinking to humans (Ashworth, 2000). He also focused on how individuals react and rely on symbol interaction in their daily lives (Ashworth, 2000.) Symbols and gestures provide meaning and give humans a standard response as they think and reason (Mead, 1962).

Figure 5 explains the way "self" and "object" act independently, but then they interact and merge together when giving meaning according to Molana and Adams (2019). Schenk and Holman (1980) claimed the symbolic interaction theory to be dynamic as objects give meaning to themselves while individuals give direction according to the evaluation of their perspective. Individuals are responsible for attributing meaning to objects (Schenk & Holman, 1980).

**Figure 5**

*George Mead's Symbolic Interaction Theory (Molana & Adams, 2019).*



Herbert Blumer was the first to use the symbolic interaction term and believed humans form meaning in two ways (Aksan et al., 2009). First, meaning is attributed to objects, events, and phenomenon (Aksan et al., 2009). The second form of meaning is established as a physical attachment is forced upon by events and objects (Aksan et al., 2009). Blumer believed “meaning is a condition that emerges as a result of the interaction of group members and not an intrinsic feature of the object” (Aksan et al., 2009, p. 903).

Blumer gave three core principles of symbolic interaction: meaning, language, and thinking (Aksan et al., 2009). Meaning is the core of human behavior (Aksan et al., 2009). Language provides verbal communication to symbols and thinking changes the way individuals interpret symbols (Aksan et al., 2009). Additionally, Blumer provided three fundamental propositions of symbolic interaction (Aksan et al., 2009). First, humans develop meaning toward things they recognize. Second, meanings are inferred interactions contributed to where the meaning was initially addressed. Lastly, meaning can change based on its interpretation (Aksan et al., 2009).

Alger and Alger (1997) stated symbolic interactionism views individuals as active constructors of the world. They also mentioned individuals can evaluate situations and approaches subjectively through verbal and nonverbal communication. Animals, however, can communicate through gestures, “but there is no indication that they are aware that their own behavior has meaning for other animals. Further, they have no control over their gestures, which are instinctual manifestations” (Alger & Alger, 1997, p. 68; Mead, 1962).

Mead (1962) determined there is a fine line between humans and animals, suggesting animals cannot engage in social interaction because they lack language. Mead (1962) recognized humans “tend to endow our domestic animals with personality, but ... we see there is no place for this sort of importation of the social process into the conduct of the individual. They do not have

the mechanism for it – language. So, we say that they have no personality; they are not responsible for the social situation in which they find themselves” (p. 182).

Cooley (1964) responded to Mead’s symbolic interaction theory by challenging “non-verbal communication, cognitive observational skills, and emotional attachment” (Alger & Alger, 1997, p. 79). Cooley (1964) took a broader approach that incorporated social and motivational dimensions. He stated self-awareness did not solely depend on language. Cooley (1964) believed an infant was capable of social interaction through nonverbal communication and emotional attachment. Cooley’s research sparked other researchers’ interest to incorporate the belief in pets (Alger & Alger, 1997).

Even though Mead claimed animals are incapable of interaction since they lack verbal communication, the symbolic interaction theory helps explain the human-animal bond (Alger & Alger, 1997). Throughout the years, theorists decided to expand the symbolic interaction theory’s assumptions to include verbal and nonverbal communication (Alger & Alger, 1997). Some sociologists believe humans and animals are capable of interacting with one another (Alger & Alger, 1997). Such interaction gives humans a sense of self-worth while providing physical and mental health benefits (Alger & Alger, 1997).

Sanders (1993) studied the behaviors and relationship between dogs and their caretakers, who were either severely disabled or Alzheimer patients. Sanders (1993) found owners gave their dogs humanlike identities. Sanders (1993) stated, “canine companions are effectively involved with their caretakers in routine social exchanges premised on the mutual ability of the interactants to take the role of the other, effectively define the physical and social situation, and adjust their behavior in line with these essential determinations” (p. 22). The adjustment of behavior demonstrates a dog’s ability to reason. The emotional attachment between dogs and owners gives the possibility to the symbolic interaction theory (Sanders, 1993).

Sanders (1993) findings promoted duplication of the study to increase credibility and confirm symbolic interactions between humans and animals. The same symbolic interaction components were found in replicative studies, such as where humans gave their pets an identity impacting their uniqueness (Alger & Alger, 1997).

The physiological and psychological benefits of pet ownership are explained through social support and symbolic interaction (Serpell, 2003). Serpell (2003) found pet owners, especially dog owners, humanize their companion animals to provide a stronger attachment. The bond between pet and owner can provide emotional support, social integration, esteem support, and protection (Serpell, 2003).

Finally, Serpell (2003) discovered the human-animal relationship is unique. He claimed pets interact with humans to provide love, support, and appreciation. Even without verbal communication, pets help define symbolic interaction through social support and emotional attachment (Serpell, 2003).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to give a detailed description of the methods and procedures used in this study. This includes approval by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), researcher subjectivity, methods, data collection, and data analysis.

#### **Institutional Review Board**

Oklahoma State University policy and federal regulations require approval of all research related to human subjects before the researchers can begin investigation. The Oklahoma State University Office of University Research Services and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) review research methods to protect the welfare of human subjects involved in biomedical and behavioral research. The study was reviewed by the OSU IRB and received approval on April 27, 2020. The application number assigned to this study was IRB-20-220 (see Appendix A).

#### **Researcher Subjectivity**

Researcher backgrounds and experiences can impact a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The one connection I had to a pet industry professional was my father, who works in the pet food industry. His expertise gave me a passion for researching pet food packaging, labeling, and pet owner purchasing decisions.



Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I wanted to better understand how individuals viewed pet food packaging and labeling by conducting an eye-tracking study. The eye-tracking study was going to be an in-field study with eye-tracking glasses examining how pet owners looked at packaging and labeling. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted this study. However, I still wanted to keep my focus on pets and purchasing decisions. I decided it was best to conduct a qualitative research study and ask individuals why they decided to acquire a pet during the pandemic as it became apparent pet ownership was on the rise (Kavin & Kelly, 2020; Wall, 2020). I did not own a pet before the pandemic and did not make a pet ownership decision during the pandemic.

I made sure to acknowledge my previous background and experience and tried to not let those impact the research process or the answers participants provided for this study.

## **Methods**

### **Participants and Sample**

For this study, the researcher's goal was to gain 15 interviews using the snowball sampling method to recruit participants. However, after 12 interviews, I was not finding new information, which indicates data saturation (Guest et al., 2006). At this point, data collection ended. Participants were only chosen to be part of this study if they had decided to own a pet during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Vogt (2005) stated the snowball sampling method "is a technique for finding research subjects where one subject gives the researcher the name of another, who in turn, provides the name of a third, and so on" (Cohen & Arieli, 2011, p. 424). This method of sampling is commonly used "to locate, access, and involve people from specific populations in cases where the researcher anticipates difficulties in creating a representative sample of the research population" (Cohen & Arieli, 2011, p. 427). The snowball sampling method is not a common choice of research methodology, but when populations are harder to access, it is the most efficient

way to conduct research (Cohen & Arieli, 2011).

Table 1 provides a description of participants. By way of referral, snowball sampling helps access potential interviewees. Atkinson and Flint (2001) found snowball sampling to be “an informal means of reaching a target population, by creating contacts with a respondent’s circle of acquaintances, can be especially useful if the aim of the study is explorative, qualitative or descriptive” (Cohen & Arieli, 2011, p. 427). The recruitment guide can be found in Appendix B.

### **Interpretive Research**

An interpretive research design using one-on-one interviews guided this study. Whittemore et al. (2001) determined qualitative research “seeks depth over breadth and attempts to learn subtle nuances of life experiences as opposed to aggregate evidence” (p. 524). Qualitative designs give researchers the ability to study participants in their natural setting while giving meaning to the perception studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Creswell and Poth (2018) provided a thorough description of qualitative research, stating:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description an interpretation of the problem, an its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (p. 8)

**Table 1***Description of Participants*

Pseudonym	Description of Participant
Ashley	Generation Z college student whose family has previously owned working dogs, will be moving out of the house and living alone, wanted companionship, bought a Scottish Terrier
Berkley	Millennial with a master's degree who has owned pets before, currently lives alone, has a full-time job, owns an Australian Shepard
Corley	Generation Z newlywed with a full-time job who worked during the early days of the pandemic, owns a miniature poodle
Darin	Millennial with a full-time job who worked during the early days of the pandemic, lives alone in Texas, bought a miniature Australian Shepard
Ellie	Generation Z who lives in Oklahoma with two roommates, commutes to work every day, but will live alone soon after graduation
Finley	Generation Z college student who has owned several pets before, lives with one roommate
George	Generation X lives on a farm outside of residing county city limits with their family, kids helped with caring for new puppy, has previously owned pets
Holly	Millennial college graduate lives with one person, worked during the early days of the pandemic, gifted a Corgie as wedding present
Izzie	Millennial college graduate who lives alone, full-time job who worked from home during quarantine, lives within residing county's city limits
Jordan	Millennial who lives with two roommates within residing county's city limits, has a BSN and owns an Aussie/Heeler mix
Kim	Generation X who lives alone within residing county's city limits, has a master's degree and owns a Corgie
Leslie	Millennial who lives alone, full-time job during quarantine and has a master's degree

There can be circumstances that require quick and minor adjustments, so an initial qualitative research plan “cannot be tightly prescribed [as] all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and begin to collect data” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 44).

Researchers who conduct qualitative research “empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 45). However, this puts more pressure on the researcher as they create conversations and engage participants throughout the research. It is the researcher’s responsibility to make sure participants feel comfortable at all times, and the data collection process is collaborative between the researcher and participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The interview protocol for this study was designed to ask participants a series of questions about their pet ownership decision during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since little research has been conducted about pet ownership decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher wanted to understand what motivated individuals to become pet owners. The interview process was completed using the snowball sampling method. The researcher sought participants based on prior knowledge of those who decided to own a pet during the COVID-19 pandemic and other participants’ recommendations.

### **Interview Design**

This study used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Creswell and Poth (2018) identified interviews as “a social interaction based on a conversation” (p. 163). “Interview questions are often the subquestions in the research study, phrased in a way that interviewees can understand” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 164). While there are different ways to conduct interviews, a one-on-one interview allows the researcher and participant to either be “physically

located in the same room, talking face-to-face using technology, or talking over the phone” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 164).

A series of questions were prepared in advance to collect data for this study, which pertained to the three research questions. Adams (2015) identified semi-structured interviews “conducted conversationally with one respondent at a time ... employs a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up why or how questions” (p. 493). Semi-structured interviews allow participants to express their perspective “in an openly designed interview situation [rather] than in a standard interview or a questionnaire” (Flick, 2009, p. 150).

Open-ended questions allow the participant to answer freely based on their knowledge and perception (Flick, 2009). Follow-up and probing questions help guide in-depth information and saturate the research. Semi-structured interviews let the researcher ask questions in a flexible order, which gives room for personalization (Flick, 2009).

Best practices of semi-structured interviews include identifying participants beforehand, then setting up appointments for interviews; relaxed and engaging interviews are fundamental to make both researchers and participants feel comfortable (Adams, 2015).

Interview questions were designed based on previous research conducted by pet food companies and advertising agencies (Casey, 2018; Cullen, 2018; Mintel Press Team, 2018). Questions were also developed with the COVID-19 pandemic situation in mind.

Credibility of the interview questions was checked by my graduate research committee chair as well as an outside researcher with knowledge of the pet industry, who reviewed the interview protocol and provided feedback. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix C. There were 11 main questions. Two questions were paired with an additional probing question. Four questions were paired with two probing questions. There were five demographic questions at the end of the interview.

Interview questions addressed topics of the COVID-19 pandemic and pet ownership. Pet food purchasing decisions and pet care questions were also asked. Questions were developed to understand why participants decided to seek ownership of a pet during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the researcher wanted to better understand what factors impacted participants' food choices for their pets.

Before the interview began, a participant consent form was read to each participant. The consent form included the purpose of the study, background about the study, the amount of time the study was estimated to take, and how the results of the data would be used. The participant consent form can be found in Appendix D.

The interview protocol followed with the researcher delving into key areas with follow-up and probing questions as warranted. The intent of the probing questions was to allow participants to go in-depth with their perspective about pet ownership, pet food purchasing decisions, and pet care.

### **Data Collection**

Participants were recruited by social media, text message, or phone call. The researcher first reached out to four individuals she knew who had decided to own a pet during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher contacted these individuals via phone call to discuss the study and to set up interview times. When interview times were established, the researcher contacted each individual to interview them about their pet ownership decision during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher asked the participant if he/she could recommend anyone who made a pet ownership decision during the COVID-19 pandemic. These recommendations are how the researcher gained additional participants for this study.

Since the coronavirus limited human interaction, before an interview, the researcher read participants the interview consent form. Each participant gave verbal consent to participate in the study before the interview began.

Interviews were conducted by phone calls due to social distancing and COVID-19. Reliable cell phone service and no distractions were established between the researcher and participants during interviews. No interviews were interrupted. The schedule of interviews began May 12, 2020, and ended June 8, 2020. All interviews were recorded on the researcher's Mac desktop with the Apple's Voice Memos app for internal consistency and accuracy during analysis. Voice recordings were saved to the password-protected computer.

After interviews were conducted, for confidentiality reasons, each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and personal identifying information was removed. Pseudonyms assigned to participants began with a letter of the alphabet (A-L). The pseudonym does not represent the participant's gender. Once interviews were finished, the voice recordings were uploaded to Temi, a professional transcription service, for transcription. After interviews were transcribed and uploaded to the password-protected computer, the researcher checked transcription documents for accuracy. Then, transcription documents were sent to participants for accuracy, which was used as a member check. MAXQDA, a qualitative research software helped the researcher code and find common themes among participant responses. MAXQDA provides "automated searches of text for words, phrases, and co-occurring themes with more accuracy and time efficiency than hand sorting and counting" (D'Andrea et al., 2011, p. 49). The qualitative software allowed any bias to be removed during the analysis process as it enabled the researcher "to interrogate the data set, look for co-occurrences of codes or themes, relationships between codes, and to play with idea in an exploratory fashion" (D'Andrea et al., 2011, p. 49; Lewins & Silver, 2008).

## **Data Analysis**

For this study, the data analysis process began by uploading transcribed interviews to MAXQDA software. Themes were developed after coding and analyzing transcribed interviews.

Glaser's Constant Comparative Method (Glaser, 1965) guided the analysis of this study's data. Glaser (1965) stated the "purpose of the constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis is to generate theory more systematically than allowed by the second approach by using the explicit coding and analytic procedures" (p. 437). However, "it does not forestall the development of theory by adhering completely to the first approach which is designed for provisional testing, not discovering, of hypotheses" (Glaser, 1965, p. 437). Lincoln and Guba (1985) claimed Glaser's (1965) constant comparative method "leads to both descriptive and explanatory categories" (p. 334).

Thematic analysis, "an approach involving the analysis of data in a comparative way for certain topics after case studies, [like an interview], have been done" (Flick, 2009, p. 474) was also used to identify themes within the data. Thematic coding identifies, analyzes, and reports ideas within the data collection (Flick, 2009).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) found trustworthy and reliable qualitative research to include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Their suggested criteria are commonly used to depict the soundness of qualitative research.

### **Credibility**

Credibility involves participants of the study and how they provide an accurate and fair perception of the issue being studied (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participant observations, peer debriefing, triangulation, and member checks are several analysis techniques Guba (1981) suggested using to gain the most credibility.



To ensure credibility, the researcher had the research committee chair as well as an individual familiar with the pet food industry review the interview protocol. When conducting interviews, the researcher made sure to take field notes, which were referred back to when comparing transcribed interviews. Additionally, member checks were used to achieve credibility as the researcher sent participants the transcribed interview for them to review for accuracy.

### **Transferability**

Transferability associates with applicability. While it is important to understand behavior and experiences, the researcher should ensure rich descriptions are provided according to the context of each interview. However, behavior and experiences can add meaning to the context (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability for this study included a detailed description of data collection and analysis where future researchers can repeat this study, or make it transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rich descriptions help future researchers determine if their study was applicable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher provided an in-depth description of all processes associate with this study to help with future research protocols.

### **Dependability**

Dependability includes consistency (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Guba (1981) stated dependability must stabilize the data, “but must make allowance for apparent instabilities arising either because different realities are being tapped or because of instrumental shifts stemming from developing insights on the part of the investigator-as-instrument” (p. 86). Auditing the research process checks for dependability. Audit trails document the research process from start to finish (Flick, 2009). The researcher made sure to take detailed notes while using an audio recorder to create this audit trail. In this study, auditing was done by the

committee chair, who reviewed the methodological process and audit trail. The chair deemed the process sound.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability relates to neutral data and making sure interpretations of the data are not based on the researcher's perspective but grounded in the findings. Confirmability of qualitative research also includes transparency (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, the researcher used an external researcher to review the findings and MAXQDA software to eliminate the human element of determining themes.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

Chapter IV describes the findings of this study as directed by the purpose and research questions. Findings are listed in order of research questions:

1. Did the COVID-19 pandemic impact participants' decisions to acquire a new pet or companion animal?
2. What factors impact participants' decisions regarding food choices for their pets?
3. How does acquiring a new pet or companion animal in a pandemic impact participants' lifestyles?

For this study, the researcher wanted to recruit 15 participants using the snowball sampling method. Participants were only chosen to be part of this study if they decided to own a pet during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 was declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020, by the World Health Organization, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Data collection for this study happened during May and June 2020.

Twelve participants agreed to participate in the study. The researcher had prior knowledge of individuals who made pet ownership decisions during the pandemic and the researcher then asked those participants for recommendations of other people they knew who had

acquired a new pet or companion animal during the pandemic as prospective study participants at the end of the interview. The sample consisted of individuals between the ages of 19 and 42, all of whom acquired a pet during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants ranged from living within residential city limits to living outside of residential city limits. Additionally, there were 11 females and 1 male. Ten participants had owned a pet prior to their pet ownership decision during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**RQ 1: Did the COVID-19 pandemic influence participants' decisions to acquire a new pet or companion animal?**

To understand if the COVID-19 pandemic influenced participants' decisions to acquire a pet, participants were asked why they decided to own a pet during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following themes were generated from participant responses: participants had more time at home as a result of the pandemic, participants were at the right stage of life during the pandemic, participants wanted to feel less alone while living alone during the pandemic, and participants wanted companionship.

***More time at home as a result of the pandemic***

When participants were asked why they decided to acquire a pet during the COVID-19 pandemic, they reported spending more time at home all day as a result of the pandemic, which helped them make their pet ownership decision. Participants noted sheltering-in-place helped with the timing of owning a pet.

Georgia has owned pets since she was a child. Living on a farm also allowed her to always have a pet. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Georgia claimed her family was looking into owning a second dog but wanted to wait until the fall because of time and busy schedules. However, the pandemic gave Georgia's family time to acquire a new pet as she reported:

When the pandemic started and [my family] ended up being at home all day, every day, it worked out better to be able to have a puppy because then we didn't have to, we commute about 30 minutes every day for work. So, trying to figure out how to crate train a puppy was going to be difficult with the commute. With us all being at home, it just worked out really well for us to be able to train the puppy while [she was] still really little.

With sheltering-in-place, Georgia specified being at home allowed her kids to become involved with the pet ownership and training process. Georgia stated:

Our puppy is super sweet. She's a mess. But us being at home, I think helped because we've been home, the kids have been home, so they've been able to be super involved in the process. They're the ones that care for the dog ... like I said, it's worked out really well [and] it's been a lot easier because we were able to be home. The puppy didn't have to be in a crate all day while we were at work. And so, I think it was better probably for her. Because by the time we do go back to work, she will probably be old enough that she could be with the other dog during the day, on our farm, and be fine.

As a newlywed, Corley explained how she and her husband wanted and talked about owning a dog before the pandemic began. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, puppies became locally available for the couple to purchase, so they identified their decision was not based solely on the pandemic. Corley reported:

It helped that we were stuck at home every day, staring at each other, not knowing what to do. That's how I talked [my husband] into it ... I guess in relation to the pandemic, we are at home a lot more in our free time outside of work. And so, it's given us the time to responsibly take care of a pet where I'm not sure we would have been able to otherwise. Like, it sort of forced us to be home with him, whereas I think normally we would have held off a little longer because we're so busy ... I feel like [our pet ownership decision is] a good trial as newlyweds before having kids too, which is an added bonus for sure.

Corley said they knew what they were getting into when acquiring a dog. Their pet ownership decision made staying at home during the COVID-19 pandemic more enjoyable, especially living in a small apartment. When asked if the dog had changed her mood any during the pandemic, she stated, “Yes, I love him. He makes me so happy. I feel like he’s made staying home, like outside of work, 10 times more enjoyable, in our 650 square foot apartment.”

The reason Finley acquired a pet during the pandemic is “because I was moving home, so I thought it would be a good time to actually spend time with [my dog] and train it right.” Finley explained her dog has kept her entertained and has changed her mood by making her happy while sheltering-in-place.

Leslie is an agricultural teacher with a busy schedule during the school year. The pandemic provided her with the best opportunity to acquire a pet. She stated:

I had been wanting one well before the pandemic started, but I decided that this would be the best opportunity to have one, to have him home. And so that I could train him because I would never have this kind of time every again to like get him house trained and kennel trained and all of that kind of stuff.

Leslie explained her extra free time has allowed her to work and play with her dog more often. However, when she runs errands, she has become more aware of time because of her dog.

***Right stage of life happened during the COVID-19 pandemic***

Jordan, who lives with two roommates, had been wanting a dog for a while. When she finally was at a point in life where she could take care of a pet and train it, the pandemic happened. Jordan reported:

[My pet ownership decision] really didn't have anything to do with the pandemic or anything. It was just kind of like the timing of life was just happened to be during the pandemic.

Although Jordan's decision was not based on the pandemic, she stated her dog gave her something to do while being stuck at home during uncertain times. Jordan said her pet ownership experience has been good so far, especially since her dog is easy going and super easy to train.

Holly was in the process of planning a wedding and acquired her pet as a wedding gift. Holly stated, "I grew up with [pets]. I have always wanted a Corgi and surprisingly enough, a family friend gifted us one as our wedding present." Holly said their puppy has made the couple more responsible and helped them enjoy being at home more.

### *Living alone during the COVID-19 pandemic*

Kim, who lives alone, said her life revolves around her dog now. The COVID-19 pandemic helped Kim focus on training her dog as she reported:

I couldn't really decide if it was because of the pandemic or because of everything else going on in my life, you know, just being alone and things like that. But I think that [my pet ownership decision] allowed me to feel comfortable with the time that it would take to get him acclimated to my house and get a little bit of routine with him and actually just leave him out all the time. I had more time to focus on him.

Kim said her dog impacted her lifestyle during the pandemic by bringing her joy and happiness.

Berkley claimed she decided to own a pet during the COVID-19 pandemic because it made her feel less alone. Berkley explained:

I do live by myself and being stuck at home by yourself, especially having to be home 24/7, it can kind of get a little lonely and you can start going stir crazy. It gave me more responsibility and something to do ... [it's also taught me] how to take care of another living thing. You know, I like to think of it as the little motherhood before actual motherhood. It's kind of a steppingstone, so a lot of responsibility that goes into it.

Even though it's not a human, Berkley said it was nice to have a companion at home, especially while living alone.

### *Companionship*

Darin continued to work from the office during the COVID-19 pandemic. Darin's pet ownership decision was based on having a companion during the pandemic. He reported:

[I decided to own a pet] for like a companion. I have friends [here in the town] but needed something else to keep my occupied. [My dog has] made more responsible [and] has made me wake up early ... I'm more eager and happier to get home. Like I want to get home and play with him.

As a result of Darin's pet ownership decision, he said his dog is an excellent companion and has filled the void of being alone.

Ashley's family has owned pets her whole life, especially working dogs. She was in the process of moving during the pandemic. She had wanted a dog and decided to buy one. After researching small- to medium-sized dogs who do not shed and are easy to take care of, she decided a Scottish Terrier breed was the best decision. She reported:

I don't think the coronavirus really affected my decision. I decided to buy a dog because one, I really wanted a dog, and two, I'm moving out of my house soon and I'm going to be living on my own, and companionship is nice. Even though I have a lot of friends, it's nice to have something that's consistently there with you, for sure. Companionship is probably the main reason.

After visiting with her parents about acquiring a pet, Ashley looked forward to the challenge of having something to take care of while living alone. Ashley also stated:

I love dogs. That's part of the reasons why I decided to get one. They make me happy. I love coming home to my dogs. It has made me just joyful all the time.



While working from home and living alone during the COVID-19 pandemic, Izzie reported:

My job went remote during the pandemic. I was bored and in need of companionship. My dog has kept me motivated and busy throughout the day while working at home during COVID. I feel less alone, safe, and happy with my dog at home.

Since graduating from college, Izzie has always lived alone, so she mentioned a pet gives her a friend while being lonely.

Ellie was graduating college soon which is why she acquired a pet during the pandemic.

Ellie reported:

Well, mine really had nothing to do with the pandemic, except for that I'm graduating ... I was going to be out on my own ... And so I really just wanted something, like a companion, to take with me when I was living on my own and [my] dog became available. She wasn't a puppy and it wasn't like I had to potty train or train at all. So, it was just kind of the right deal.

Ellie explained she enjoys coming home to her dog after working all day.

## **RQ 2: What factors impact participants' decisions regarding food choices for their pets?**

To understand what factors impacted participants decisions regarding food choice for their pets, the researcher asked participants their viewpoint on packaging, label claims, and/or price when making pet food purchasing decisions. The following themes were generated from participants' responses, including willingness to spend more money to provide their pets with high-quality food, taking into consideration the type of food the breeder recommended, and reputable pet food.

### *Willingness to spend more money*

When asked if packaging, label claims, and price influenced purchasing decisions,

Berkley reported:

I sometimes consider the price as a factor, but I also am willing to pay a little bit more for better dog food ... I know that dog food is a little more expensive, so I'm not really hesitant on spending a little bit more for a better dog food. I really don't pay attention to labeling much, I just try to go with what I need.

Berkley made her pet food decision based on what her family fed their dogs back home when she was growing up. "I just went with what my mom had always fed our dogs growing up. It's a Purina-based brand, and it was what my parents have always used to feed dogs, so I just went with that."

Ashley reported:

I'm definitely a label person. If something catches my eye, I'm definitely [going to look at it.] I read the label on dog foods now. [However,] I think price does have to do with it, but at the same time, as part of their health, I'd rather pay 10 extra dollars for a bag of dog food and not have health problems down the road, instead of having to pay a thousand dollar [veterinary bill].

Darin stated:

I don't really care what the label says in a way ... I take into consideration my dog's health and would pay a little bit more to make sure he was healthy. I'm not the type to just buy the cheapest bag of dog food.

Ellie reported:

I am still a college student, so price is always going to be a factor, but at the end of the

day, like her health is more important ... And so, I would rather choose the health and contents of the food versus the price of the food. I don't want to get a six-year old dog and her only live until she is seven because of what I was feeding her. And so, the diet of the food is important, too.

***Breeder recommendations***

With dog breeder recommendations being a theme among participant responses, Ashley said she took into consideration what the dog breeder recommended before making any purchasing decision. Ashley reported:

[The breeder has] raised these dogs for a long time, so I will probably go off whatever she tells me. I probably will do some research on the best kind of dog foods for [Scottish Terriers,] too.

Corley said:

We're just feeding him what the breeder was feeding him.

Georgia commented:

When we picked her up, we were given thankfully, you know, the owner had dog food already. So, she gave me like a Ziploc bag, but like two or three days' worth of supply. And I specifically even asked in advance what brand so I could make sure to buy it just so that she wouldn't have that transition. Since it happens to be the puppy version of the brand that we feed our adult dog, so when she becomes old enough, then we'll just transition her into the adult formula.

Holly also said:

[The family who gave us the dog] provided us some food that she'd been eating. I already ordered some [of the same dog food], too.

Leslie stated:

I just fed I got whatever the breeder was feeding. I just asked them for their recommendation and then just continued with what he was already eating.

Jordan reported:

I just kept feeding her whatever the dog breeder was feeding her. So, it wasn't like a big shock to her system moving and changing everything.

***Reputable pet food***

Paying attention to reputable pet food was important to Corley. When asked what key aspects she was concerned with, she mentioned:

[It] makes me feel good because I know [the brand of dog food I have been purchasing] is made locally in the United States. I want reputable food made like around here ... [The dog breed I own has] really sensitive tummies. [I] definitely [had to] do my research about what other people have done, just because, I know there are certain brands of dog feed that [my dog] can and cannot have.

Kim researched the best dog food to feed her puppy before she purchased it. Kim was interested in a higher protein diet while including natural ingredients, paying close attention to grain-free labels. Kim explained:

I don't do grain myself, especially the corn or anything like that. Cause that's what fattens up animals. How I know that, I don't know, [but] that's what my focus was on ... [It] was really hard [to figure out the best diet for him]. I started him off on the Science Diet because that's what [the breeder] had him on. But then after researching, it was just hard to know what's factual and what's not factual.

### ***Market Channel***

To understand where participants purchased their pet food, they were asked where and why they bought their pet food from a certain market channel. The following themes were generated from participant's responses: participants bought pet food from the grocery store because it is convenient, participants bought pet food from a supply store, and participants bought pet food from an online platform.

#### ***Buying pet food from the grocery store because of convenience***

A factor impacting participants' decisions regarding food choices for their pets included purchasing pet food from the grocery store because it was convenient.

When purchasing pet food, Georgia noted she goes to the grocery store two or three times a week, and it's easier to grab pet food there instead of making another trip to a different store.

Georgia stated:

[We] normally [buy our pet food] at Walmart. I haven't done any, like I know you can get stuff online through Amazon and Chewy. I've never done any of those, but I wouldn't say that like for my daily or like usual style groceries, I don't do a lot of online shopping. So, it's just not part of my routine would be the reason why I don't use all my vendors.

And Walmart is where I end up every two to three days... Just because of the convenience factor. I mean, even during the pandemic, Walmart is the one place that I go where I can buy health care stuff, shampoo, and even dog food ... I could get everything I need in one store versus having to make multiple stops.

However, Georgia was surprised by how hard it was to find pet food in the grocery store during the beginning weeks of the pandemic. She explained:

I think it's probably because a lot of people were buying dog food and supply chains I think had just been kind of chaotic. This last time that I went to go buy dog food for her, you couldn't find puppy food. I looked at multiple stores ... I mean, everywhere that we could think of ... It was like the night before we ran out and I bought the only bag of puppy food.

Corley also claimed:

So far, we purchase pet food at United, [a grocery store], because it is more convenient. I know you have the option to purchase food at a regular pet food store and then online. But I am already buying groceries, so that is why it is convenient for me.

Izzie reported:

Honestly, the grocery store is a one-stop-shop. I can buy groceries for me, then grab food for my dog. It is convenient and less hassle. Plus, sometimes I forget I am almost out of pet food and adding dog food to my grocery list is easier than having someone ship it to me.

Ashley stated:

It's super easy to order online, but I am that person who doesn't give myself enough time to order online. Plus, I like seeing it in person, too. I'm like that with a lot of things. I'd rather see it in person than buy online.

Berkley also said:

[I purchase my dog food from] good old Walmart because it is convenient. When I'm getting groceries, I usually need dog food too, and it's just easy.

***Buying pet food from a supply store***

Darin said he currently purchases pet food from Walmart but will switch market channels once Tractor Supply starts carrying the specific brand he needs. Darin explained:

Tractor Supply is in the works of getting the specific one I want. Walmart has it right now. So, I've been going for, I guess for this first bag to Walmart, but I'm going to start

buying from Tractor Supply ... Tractor Supply is a very big time supporter of 4-H, so anytime I can help them or purchase something from them, I try to just because they help us out so much.

Kim also explained:

I purchased here locally at that Yellow City Pet Supplies, but I think I'll probably go to Chewy's. I'm not sure because really the price isn't that much different than the convenience of just being able to get it when I need it.

Jordan reported:

I get my [dog food] from Tractor Supply .... The lady had recommended to get it there. She was feeding a [certain brand] so I don't really know if there anywhere else I can buy it.

Finley bought her dog food from a pet food store. She reported, "I buy my pet food from PetSmart because I needed to buy a bed and toys and other things. And so, it was kind of like a one-stop-shop. I will probably buy it at the feed store or something later on."

Ellie will buy her dog food from a pet supplies store, too. She stated, "I haven't had to purchase dog food [for her yet, since the veterinarian gave me a bag.] But I did look up the specific brand online and they have it at PetCo. So, I will probably just go there because they have it."

### ***Buying pet food online***

Chewy.com is where Leslie was able to order dog food since the COVID-19 pandemic closed down stores. Leslie stated:

I got [my dog food] online and had it shipped to my house through Chewy.com ... [I purchased pet food through Chewy.com] because of the convenience since a lot of stuff was still closed right when I got him so I just couldn't go out and get it ... [However,] like, if I'm out and about in [town] or something, then I'll just run by, you know,

somewhere and pick it up. Honestly, I didn't go searching at the grocery stores for it. I just ordered some stuff online and just it was just easier to ship direct to my door.

An advertisement on social media determined Holly's source of market channel. She explained:

[We] purchased our dog food from Chewy's. I actually got an advertisement through Facebook and Instagram and I clicked on it. Everything seemed cheaper on there because I bought other things for her ... I bet we will end up buying it at the store because just going, you know, every week or whatever, unless it's cheaper, but I haven't compared it much.

### **RQ 3: How does acquiring a new pet or companion animal in a pandemic impact participants' lifestyles?**

The most common theme from participants included how their pets made them feel less alone. The second most common theme was participants reported pets are good companions.

To understand how acquiring a new pet or companion animal in a pandemic impacted a lifestyle, participants were asked to describe the role their pet plays in their life. The following themes were generated from participants' responses including feeling less alone and companionship.

As a college student, Ashley lives alone. When asked to describe the role a pet plays in her life, Ashley said her dog makes her feel less alone. She also reported:

A pet definitely brings joy to your life. [Pets might] not be able to talk, but they speak through their emotions. I feel like if you are living alone, they can make you feel safer. Like there's someone else there with you, even if they are six inches tall.

Ashley claimed she had a lot of friends, but it was nice to have companionship and consistency when alone.



Ellie also said:

It's been a nice, maybe even just a distraction of the rest of the world, because I drive an hour to work every day. And then when I get off work, it's not a quick trip home. And of course, there's always so much stuff to do [after work], but in with pandemic, you never really know what's going to be next world. It's kind of fun to just relax.

Leslie reported:

I think he just makes me feel like a little bit less alone and just having a little companion ... he is just a little buddy ... he brings [me] joy for sure. And just companionship that I needed.

Holly commented:

[When my fiancé] will come home from the farm grumpy about something, he'll play with [the dog] and be all happy ... She's made us, like, I wouldn't say happier, but put us in a better mood when we're in a bad mood.

Corley also stated:

Yes, I would say he makes me feel less alone. That was part of why we got [the dog] is because as a pilot, [my husband] is gone like all the time, especially overnight and stuff. And so, I mean, he weighed seven pounds. I wouldn't say he makes me feel safer, but he definitely doesn't make me feel like I'm sitting alone in our tiny apartment all the time.

Georgia said:

Since she's still a puppy, probably the less alone and just fun ... She's still too little. So, for right now, she's just fun and companionship.

Berkley reported:

I think it's just a good companion. It's the, you know, having someone, it's not someone but something there with you. Um, so you're not alone.

Darin also said:

He doesn't make me feel safe because he is scared of everything. He barks at his own reflection in the stove ... But he's a good companion and fills that void in a way.

Kim reported:

I wouldn't say safe, I mean, I'm having to take him out at the middle of the night, so that's not necessarily safe, but he does like, like I said, he brings joy for sure. And just companionship that I needed.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND DISCUSSION

Chapter V describes conclusions and recommendations as well as provides a discussion based on the findings of this study. Conclusions are discussed by research questions.

#### **RQ 1: Did the COVID-19 pandemic influence participants' decisions to acquire a new pet or companion animal?**

The COVID-19 pandemic did not directly influence participants' decisions to acquire a new pet or companion animal. However, participants indicated the timing of the COVID-19 pandemic helped their decisions to acquire a new pet or companion animal. Based on the themes that emerged from research question one, time, living alone, and companionship were influencing factors when deciding to acquire a new pet or companion animal.

Pre-pandemic normalcy had some participants already deciding to acquire a new pet or companion animal. When participants experienced more time at home during mandated or voluntary social isolation and lockdowns designated by the COVID-19 pandemic, participants were able to spend their extra time focusing on caring for and training their new pets. Morgan et al. (2020) also described timing to be a critical component when acclimating new pets to households during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, Vincent et al. (2020) claimed

sheltering-in-place afforded pet owners with more time to care for their pets.

A majority of the participants lived alone during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants decided acquiring a new pet or companion animal would help to keep them busy and responsible by assuming responsibility for another living thing. Morgan et al. (2020) found similar results, noting a pet or companion animal can decrease the feeling of loneliness at home. Morgan et al. (2020) also noted pet ownership benefits human health during a crisis. Beaton and Wall (2020) described how pets make individuals feel less alone, can combat loneliness, and help alleviate social isolation.

Pet companionship both in general and during events with social implications such as the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic also emerged in the themes from the interviews in this study. Newly acquired pet and companion animals helped to fill a void in their new owners' lives when living alone during the COVID-19 pandemic. Owning a pet made participants feel like someone was constantly there for them. The study's participants were part of younger generations. Dotson and Hyatt (2008) found more recent generations experience a stronger bond from pet companionship because of their observed flexible lifestyles. Additionally, for more recent generational cohort members, companionship bridges the gap between having children and independence (Cullen, 2018).

## **RQ 2: What factors impact participants' decisions regarding food choices for their pets?**

Labeling and price were important factors for participants when making pet food purchasing decisions. Participants are willing to spend more money to ensure their pets have high-quality food. Additionally, convenience plays an important factor in consumers' choice of market channel when purchasing pet food. Participants shopped at the grocery store, a supply store, or online outlet for their pet food.

When examining labels and label claims, participants want reputable pet food and are willing to spend more money when buying pet food. Participants in this study stated they would not be opposed to try different pet food brands, but they want to know they are providing their pets with the best food possible. Casey (2018) found pet owners are willing to spend more money on premium food for their pets. Casey (2018) also determined pet owners place high importance on the quality of pet food when making a purchasing decision.

Participants' primary channel for purchasing pet food is brick and mortar grocery stores because of their convenience and the opportunity to immediately acquire the products. It was noted Casey (2018) found grocery stores are ideal purchasing locations for pet owners. Beaton (2020a) claimed during the COVID-19 pandemic:

It's clear that the omnichannel shopping trend, which has been in play for a while now in all industries, including pet food, is being expanded significantly as consumers do their best to find whatever they need wherever it happens to be available, or however they can get it as social distancing normalizes and various cities and states go on lockdown. (p. 2)

Whether it is the grocery store or online, participants want the easiest and most convenient way to acquire pet food. The top market channel is grocery stores, as participants claim it is easy to purchase pet food since they are buying food for themselves, too (Casey, 2018).

The convenience factor can also be found in an article by Browne (2020), as the growth of the pet food industry:

[is] seeing spending behaviors shift to reflect more hassle-free buying options and more interest in healthy options for their pets that include real, natural ingredients. As pet ownership continues to soar, retailers should capitalize on industry growth by [prioritizing the firm's] competitive advantages and competing from all directions — price, assortment and convenience.

Finally, participants' main market channel was either the grocery store, a supply store, or online outlet. Casey (2018) found the pet food industry has an opportunity to target millennial consumers since they demand a more "customer-centric shopping experience – one tailored to their wants and needs as a valued customer. They are looking for seamlessness, which can be defined as the ability to deliver a consistently personalized, on-brand experience for each individual customer" (p. 5).

**RQ3: How does acquiring a new pet or companion animal in a pandemic impact participants' lifestyles?**

When participants feel alone, pets provide companionship to reduce loneliness. Much like the conclusions in research question one, research question three centered around pets distracting and helping participants adjust to an altered lifestyle based on social distancing and working from home. Based on emerging themes from research question three, participants stated their new pets and companion animal made them feel happiness and joy.

In times of a crisis, participants turned to new pets and companion animals for companionship to bridge the gap of missed human interaction when living alone during social isolation. Trad et al. (2020) determined the COVID-19 pandemic brought loneliness to many individuals as routines were interrupted and human interaction was restricted. Vincent et al. (2020) discovered pets give individuals opportunities to interact with another living thing while in isolation.

Participants indicated happiness and joy were felt when they were in the presence of their pets. Bao and Schreer (2016) found pet owners can attest to higher satisfaction with life when they are around their pets. Additionally, pets make participants feel less alone and can provide a sense of safety (Morgan et al., 2020). According to Morgen et al. (2020), humans and pets are social beings and benefit one another.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, there are multiple future research recommendations for the pet industry and academia.

Pet food industry professionals should look at the consumer decision-making process, especially with the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research would help the pet industry better understand if pet owners are still purchasing pet food from the same market channel, or if they have switched based on social distancing and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding the perceptions of pet owners and their choice of market channel can help pet food industry professionals tailor marketing efforts to target consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Additionally, pet food industry professionals should study how retailers are communicating pet food ordering options during the pandemic, such as ordering online, pick-up in store, or direct delivery.

Future research should also be conducted to target first-time pet owners, specifically those who decided to acquire a new pet or companion animal during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study could aim to understand perceptions of first-time pet owners and their experiences with acquiring a new pet or companion animal.

Additional research could also target the impact of acquiring a pet or companion animal by college students. This can be during or beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have shown pet companionship shows significant mental and physical benefits (Wood et al., 2007). A future research study could better understand the mental and physical benefits to students who interact with Pete's Pet Posse at Oklahoma State University.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, human health was at risk (Brooks et al., 2020). Future research should aim to better understand pet owners' perceptions of pet safety during the COVID-

19 pandemic. The study could determine if pet owners were concerned with their pets' safety and well-being especially as Beaton (2020b) stated:

In addition, the current (as of May 2020) COVID-19 pandemic has everyone – from ingredient suppliers and manufacturers to packaging and retailers – asking how they can guarantee the safety of every person and every product involved in the pet food industry. (p. 2)

Finally, future research should focus on pet food packaging and labeling. Packaging and labeling are critical in the pet food industry (Casey, 2018). This study could include letting pet owners use eye-tracking glasses when they make pet food purchasing decisions. The eye-tracking research would consist of targeting parts of a pet food label or even comparing the packaging against different pet food brands. It would be interesting to find out how individuals view components of pet food packages.

### **Discussion**

After analyzing the data and reviewing conclusions of this study, the researcher was left with many questions and thoughts about the research process as well as future questions that might be out of the scope of the current study. In particular, some thoughts occurred as the researcher went through this process for pet industry professionals and researchers related to training and learning more in-depth information about pet owners.

Pet industry professionals should consider offering a virtual training to first-time pet owners with tips and tricks along with educational materials. This could help professionals share best practices regarding best ownership. In addition, follow-up research could help these practitioners better understand how to enhance pet food and retail choices for individuals who are new to the pet ownership experience.



The COVID-19 pandemic created a time of high-stress and uncertainty (Brooks et. al, 2020; Morgan et al., 2020). When individuals decided to acquire a new pet or companion animal during the COVID-19 pandemic time period, did they think about their long-term pet ownership decisions? When the government allowed business and stores to open up to full capacity and individuals returned to work, did separation anxiety between humans and pets occur? Have owners felt a disconnect with their pets by leaving them at home all day? Did these new pet owners put their pets up for adoption because they could not take care of them anymore as they returned back to work full-time? Will pet owners push for their new pets or companion animals to accompany them when in a public setting? Were pet owners concerned for their pets' safety during the COVID-19 pandemic? What did pet owners do to ensure their pets stayed safe during the pandemic (social-distancing)? Did pet owners change the way they sought veterinary care for their pets? How did in-retail grooming services change for their pets? How concerned were pet owners about the safety of their pets' food since some ingredients are manufactured and distributed from foreign countries? Were pet owners forced to give up animals for adoption because of the pandemic? These are all questions that might not directly relate to the scope of this study but could offer future research opportunities.

At the conclusion of this study, limitations emerged while the researcher drew conclusions based on the analysis. In hindsight, not enough probing questions were asked to allow participants to respond deeper to some interview questions. Additionally, future research should consider more in-depth demographic questions, such as understanding participants' employment status during a pandemic and how the pandemic impacted household finances. Additionally, interview questions regarding various factors of pet food, such as packaging, labeling, market channel, and pricing should be separated to focus specifically on each topic independently.

This study was conducted using interviews to allow participants to give voice to their reasons for acquiring a new pet or companion animal during the COVID-19 pandemic. It would be useful to determine pet owners' feelings behind shopping for pet food during a pandemic, determining what products they have purchased for their pets within the last month, and ranking pet food purchasing decisions during mandated or voluntary lockdowns. The study can help pet industry professionals understand consumer behaviors toward current trends during socially disruptive events such as a pandemic.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A IRB Approval



#### Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: 04/27/2020  
Application Number: IRB-20-220  
Proposal Title: Exploring the perceptions of dog ownership decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic  
  
Principal Investigator: Quay Owen  
Co-Investigator(s):  
Faculty Adviser: DWAYNE CARTMELL  
Project Coordinator:  
Research Assistant(s):  
  
Processed as: Exempt  
Exempt Category:

#### Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

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The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in 45CFR46.

**This study meets criteria in the Revised Common Rule, as well as, one or more of the circumstances for which continuing review is not required. As Principal Investigator of this research, you will be required to submit a status report to the IRB triennially.**

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRBManager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be approved by the IRB. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI, adviser, other research personnel, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any unanticipated and/or adverse events to the IRB Office promptly.
4. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact the IRB Office at 405-744-3377 or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,  
Oklahoma State University IRB

APPENDIX B  
Participant Recruitment

**Call to Action: Social Media**

Have you or someone you know recently adopted a pet during the coronavirus pandemic? If so, would you consider helping me out? With the coronavirus pandemic impacting the nation, animal shelters have been seeing an increase in pet adoptions. As an agricultural communications graduate student at Oklahoma State University, I want to interview individuals who have made the decision to adopt a pet during the pandemic. If you wouldn't mind filling out the form below, I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to reach out to you and to ask some questions about your adoption decision. Thank you in advance for your help!

**Call to Action: Email**

**Sending email address:** [alyssa.q.owen@okstate.edu](mailto:alyssa.q.owen@okstate.edu)

**Subject:** Pet Adoption During the Coronavirus Pandemic Research

Hi there!

My name is Quay Owen; I am an agricultural communications graduate student at Oklahoma State University. I am trying to better understand the perceptions and attitudes toward individuals who have recently adopted a pet during the coronavirus pandemic and am seeking your participation for my study.

I plan to conduct interviews with individuals via phone call or video conference.

For more information or you would like to participate, please contact Quay Owen at [alyssa.q.owen@okstate.edu](mailto:alyssa.q.owen@okstate.edu) to set up an interview.

If you have additional questions, you can contact Quay or Dr. Dwayne Cartmell at [dwayne.cartmell@okstate.edu](mailto:dwayne.cartmell@okstate.edu)

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,

Quay Owen

APPENDIX C  
Interview Protocol

**Introduction**

Hello, my name is Quay Owen, and I received your information from \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. I am working on a study through Oklahoma State University's Department of Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership regarding dog ownership during the coronavirus pandemic. I want to better understand why individuals decided to own a dog during the crisis. Before we begin, I will read over the participant consent form. Please know your identity and responses will be kept confidential. There are not any expected risks to participate in this study, and there will be no cost to you to participate. Do you consent to participate in this study?

**Interview**

Do you have any questions? Do you agree to participate in this study?

- 1.) Have you adopted or owned a pet before? Why or why not?
- 2.) Why did you decided to own a pet during the coronavirus pandemic?
- 3.) How did you seek out information to adopt/purchase your pet?
  - Where did you purchase your pet?
- 4.) How has owning a pet during the coronavirus pandemic impacted your lifestyle?
  - How has owning a pet during the coronavirus pandemic changed your mood?
- 5.) How would you describe your pet ownership experience?
  - Is there anything you would have done differently?
  - Would you consider owning another pet in the future?
- 6.) After owning a pet, can you name a few things you wish you knew now that you didn't know before owning your pet?
- 7.) How did you make the decision on what to feed your pet?



- What key aspects are you concerned about when purchasing pet food such as packaging, label claims, or price?
- How concerned are you about brand loyalty?

8.) Where do you purchase your pet food?

- Why did you decide to purchase your pet food from \_\_\_\_\_?
- Do you think you will change where you purchase pet food after the pandemic?

9.) After owning your pet, did you take your animal to a vet?

- Do you have a vet?
- Would you seek regular check-ups for your pet?

10.) Describe the role your pet plays in your life. (Such as makes you feel less alone or makes you feel safe.)

11.) Please describe your home residency (ex: live within city limits, live outside city limits).

This concludes the questions I have pertaining to your adoption decision. Do you mind if I ask you some demographic questions?

### **Demographics**

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Where do you live?
4. Level of education.
5. How many people live in your house?

### **Conclusion**

Is there anything we haven't discussed that you would like to include?

*Summarize points talked about in the interview.*

Is this an accurate summary of our discussion today?

Do you have anything to add or something you would like clarified?

Do you know of anyone who has recently taken ownership of a pet due to the coronavirus pandemic? Would you recommend I speak with them?

Thank you very much for your time.

APPENDIX D  
Participant Consent Form

**Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership**

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**Participant Consent FORM**

Exploring the Perceptions of Dog Ownership Decisions During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Key Information**

Study Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of individuals who decided to take ownership of a pet during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Major Procedures of the Study: Participants will participate in a video and/or phone interview.

Duration of Participation: 30 minutes

Significant Risks: None

Potential Benefits: This study will inform how individuals made the decision to own a pet during the COVID-19 pandemic. This could benefit participants by improving perceptions of pet ownership during a crisis.

Compensation: None

**Background Information**

You are invited to be in a research study to explore the perceptions of individuals who decided to own a pet during the COVID-19 pandemic. You were selected as a possible participant because you took ownership of a pet during the COVID-19 pandemic. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

**This study is being conducted by:** Quay Owen, department of agricultural education, communications, and leadership, under the direction of Dwayne Cartmell, department of agricultural education communications and leadership.

**Procedures**

**If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:** participate in an interview and answer questions related to your perceptions of pet ownership.

**Participation in the study involves the following time commitment:** 30 minutes

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study.**

There are no known risks associated with this project, which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

There are no direct benefits to you. More broadly, this study may help the researchers learn more about perceptions of pet ownership during a crisis.

**Compensation**

You will receive no payment for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality**

The information you give in the study will be stored anonymously. This means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data in any way. Only the researchers will know that you have participated in the study. The researchers will not be able to remove your data from the dataset once your participation is complete.

We will collect your information through video and/or phone interviews. This information will be stored on a password protected computer. This informed consent form will be kept for three years after the study is complete, and then it will be destroyed. Your data collected as part of this research project, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time. You can skip any questions that make you uncomfortable and can stop the interview at any time.

**Contacts and Questions**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Oklahoma State University has reviewed and approved this study. If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the Principal Investigator at 806-683-5975, [alyssa.q.owen@okstate.edu](mailto:alyssa.q.owen@okstate.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer or would simply like to speak with someone other than the research team about concerns regarding this study, please contact the IRB at (405) 744-3377 or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu). All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential.

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

VITA

ALYSSA QUAY OWEN

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: PET OWNERSHIP TO THE RESCUE? PERCEPTIONS OF BECOMING A  
PET OWNER DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Major Field: Agricultural Communications

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Agricultural  
Communications at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, in July  
2020.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Agricultural  
Communications at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, in May 2018.

Experience:

Employed as a Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Ferguson College of  
Agriculture from June 2018 until May 2020.