The Social Norms of Pet Ownership:
What Makes A Good Pet Owner?

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ABSTRACT:

The research presented in this study investigates the status common household pets have in the home and the regulations society has naturally assigned to pet owners. The primary topics this research paper focuses on are: Pets and financial responsibility, pets being treated like family members and pets’ health and wellbeing. The purpose of this study is to find an answer to what truly makes a good pet owner since pets have become a much more common element of basic families. This research utilizes the responses of 358 survey participants to assess the importance of pets in the home while analyzing the extent of preparedness people feel it is necessary to have to own a pet. The research showed that more than half of the respondents felt that not everyone had the ability to be a good pet owner, while exemplifying that being a good pet owner is situational and predominantly depends on each pet’s individual needs.
INTRODUCTION:

Pet ownership has become increasingly prominent among people of all socioeconomic statuses as the relationships between people and their pets have evolved into a more beneficial codependency for both owner and pet. The once typical dog or cat in the home is now considered a family member, however, a lot of owners struggle to provide adequate care for their fur-children. Many people struggle to receive helpful advice when speaking with others because everyone has differing perspectives on what it means to be a good pet owner. While some rely heavily on regular veterinary care, others apply all their focus to nutrition, exercise or try to ensure a constant state of happiness for their pet. Values of pet ownership vary among culture, family background and socioeconomic status and clashes between pet owners have become much more common as people gain knowledge through different resources. Social media websites and internet forums have become a standard source for advice for pet owners but have also become a breeding ground for disputes on what it means to be a good pet owner.

There are three important components to the research of what it means to be a pet owner: pets are becoming a more valuable part of families, pet owners are reconsidering the ethics regarding pet ownership and the wellbeing of the pet, and finally pet owners face new societal standards and expectations that pet owners face which have become a much more important criteria over the past few years. Besides discussing the major physical and emotional benefits humans acquire from owning a pet,
this study will also be addressing common misconceptions of proper healthcare for pets and the lengths pet owners will take to ensure their companions receive the most outstanding medical treatment. Also, pet expenses reach very high numbers, including food, veterinary care, behavioral training and typical necessities such as treats and toys.

New pet owners usually don’t expect the high costs that accompany adopting or buying a new pet and are often blindsided when contacting different clinics and inquiring about vaccination or surgical charges. As well as the medical standpoint, my research will consider the shared social norms and principles pet owners must adhere to according to other pet owners that surround them. My study will argue that while there are certain responsibilities expected from a pet owner; no amount of money, attention or care makes someone the perfect pet owner according to society because every animal has different needs and wants. Due to the fact that everyone has such specific ideas of what it means to be a flawless pet owner, there will never be a definite conclusion of what it means to be an ideal pet owner especially as society and the social standing of pets will continue to evolve over time.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

How Have Pets Been Humanized?

As pets increasingly become a more important factor in the dynamic of a family in the contemporary U.S., a great deal of research has been done to show the multiple benefits pets have proven to provide to owners, even involving a more human-like
interpretation of pets. This is exemplified in the way people are spending large sums of money on pets, are receiving emotional benefits from pets, and are engaging in traditions and practices revolving around the deaths of their pets and even legal battles. Over sixty percent of households in the United States have one or more pet living with them. Based on the fact that most Americans combined spend over five billion dollars annually just to feed their pet, these animals seem to be a fairly adored and even considered family members since owners are so willing to spend such a large amount of money (Albert and Bulcroft; 1988, Brandes, 2009; Paul and Skiba, 2012). For many people, pets have drastically evolved from simply being animals in a home to achieving the status of a child, offering the similar unconditional love as well as requiring consistent assistance and care. As society has changed and marriage is no longer assumed to be the only form of success in life, there has been a vast need for humans to give and receive love not only to and from their significant others or children but in this case pets.

People in society today of different backgrounds and cultures all create similar bonds with their pets. Certain factors, such as the way a family is structured, affect the likeliness of adoption of a pet. It is often seen that those who feel the need to fill an empty space in their life are more inclined to adopt a pet, as well as empty-nesters, newlyweds, couples without children and single people are the ones to adopt pets in order to fulfill the need to nurture something and feel wanted and needed (Albert and Bulcroft, 1988, p. 544-545). While owning a pet primarily satisfies the need to look after
something that thrives only in a setting of dependency, owning a pet offers a sense of pride and responsibility as well.

Even people of different social status and financial stability who may not have the means or funds to support pets are still accompanied by them and make necessary ends meet. For example, it is common to walk down the streets of a busy city and to find homeless people sleeping with their dogs but not many doubt the wellbeing of the dog. Homeless individuals form a very strong bond with their pets since they offer a sense of security and love in a time when these individuals feel as if they cannot succeed in life (Irvine, 2013). It is important to note that even though homeless people may not have much, they take great pride in their companions and worry about their healthcare, seeking out low-cost/free clinics when their pets are not well (Irvine, 2013). Owning a pet fosters a significant sense of responsibility and boosts self-confidence, not only found in homeless people but non-homeless people as well (Irvine, 2013; Khalid and Naqvi, 2016).

It is essential to recognize that while a common house pet may provide one with multiple emotional benefits and form an extremely strong bond with their family, the work that service animals do is very different. Pets have proven to make such a difference in psychological and physiological health of a human being, that some even qualify to be service dogs and cats with proper training providing comfort in nursing homes and hospitals as well as helping handicapped individuals perform daily activities (Smith,
Johnson and Rolph, 2011). The benefits of being in the presence of a pet is so large that these animals take on certain tasks that a person would usually see a counselor or therapist for. For example, pets can heavily aid in coping with anxiety, and some pets are even trained to sense when their owners will have a panic or anxiety attack. Research has shown as well that pet attachment positively correlated with empathy, clearly indicating that specifically young adults who regularly interact and care for pets have a higher sense of compassion and therefor have an easier time building relationships (Khalid and Naqvi, 2016). Slowly, some pet owners in society have even drifted from calling themselves “owners” to “parents”, exemplifying the evolution of what pets have become in the home.

In a common sense, it is unusual for an adoptee to think about what will happen with their pet’s body when it passes and things like funeral arrangements are not usual, however pets only live for a small fraction of time in a human’s life. While many opt for cremation or burying their beloved friend in a special location, many pet owners turn to official pet cemetery sites which even include gravestones. The use of pet cemeteries has increased and therefor the number of cemeteries has continually risen (Brandes, 2009). The inscriptions of gravestones have evolved from labels such as ‘my pet’ to more personalized engravings, including the pets name and last name, age, occasionally an image and even quirky facts to remember the late pet by (Brandes, 2009). Further examining additional inscriptions on the gravestones, it becomes easy to identify the
cultures, kinships and family traditions these pets were a part of. While paying an extensive amount of money to have their pets buried with a headstone, pets have also been made part of a culture or religion, being remembered through certain bible verses, prayers and proverbs (Albert and Bulcroft, 1988; Brandes, 2009). Drawing attention to these rituals illustrates the love and attachment that pet owners have for their pets.

It is pertinent to acknowledge the impact that pets have on legal documents; animal law has become its own field in instances of divorce and court battles, considering pets more childlike than animal. It has become challenging to find the correct categorization legally for pets in a custody battle since classifying pets the same as young children is not acceptable (Bogdanoski, 2010). While family court usually attempts to equally divide personal belongings, pets are living beings dependent on their owners, therefore, it would be considered inhumane to treat them like an inanimate object by the law. House pets would be unable to live without their owners and have no sense of survival after being domesticated for so long, they rely solely on the decision-making skills of their owners. It is clear that for most, pets have taken on an equally meaningful title as children have, since even those without children are willingly going to custody battles in order to arrive at a fair custody agreement (Albert and Bulcroft, 1988; Bodganoski, 2010). It is very important to remember that while pets provide unlimited amounts of love and support, that their whole life is reliant and revolves around the family they so deeply adore.
How Has Veterinary Care Advanced?

As pets are becoming more meaningful, pet owners now have access to more and better veterinary care. However, it is important to note that as veterinary skills are improving, costs are increasing. It is not unusual for veterinary expenses to reach extraordinarily high values and just like human health care, it is now possible to purchase pet insurance. Surprisingly, medical treatment for animals is almost as advanced as it is for humans; MRIs, stem cell treatment and hip replacements being frequently paid for by pet owners in order to improve the quality of their pet’s life (Paul and Skiba, 2012).

While pet insurance seems like a helpful investment when facing a ten-thousand-dollar bill, just like human health insurance, the battle to be reimbursed is fairly similar to what humans face. However, most pet owners often have no difficulty emptying their savings account for their furry friends if it means they are able to spend a few more years with them.

While most pet owners will spend a lot of money on their pets, it is difficult to constantly have large funds available for all cases of emergency. Due to this, pets are often given up to shelters and euthanized because the costs to care for them are too high. The rate of euthanasia in shelters has decreased over the past years, but the reasons for the return of these unconditionally loving pets are not as drastic as expected. Pet owners often relinquish their rights to the shelter over simple problems such as home life changing, behavioral and medical problems and the costs to find solutions for certain
medical conditions (Lofflin, 2007). There are specific resources offered to people who have had a change in financial stability or adopted a pet without planning correctly, such as low-cost clinics. Low cost clinics provide basic services and advice to pet owners who are unable to attend a regular practice due to the costliness. Owners are often not aware that an obese pet has a higher likeliness to develop chronic disorders that require constant monitoring, veterinary visits and permanent medicinal use (Freeman et al., 2016).

While low-cost clinics offer similar advice and knowledge as general practices, they usually don’t provide the same medical procedures. For instance, even when pet owners receive the same information they still do not care for their pet the same. Obesity in pets often occurs when the importance of healthy body weight for pets is not stressed enough. One of the main ways people access this information is through veterinary clinics, and research has shown that there is no difference in the information given between low-cost clinic and a regular practice in regard to nutrition (Freeman et al., 2016). However, the research results provided also demonstrated a significantly lower body condition score (a visual assessment of a pets muscle/fat ratio) at the low-cost clinics. While low-cost clinics can be beneficial cost wise, they often do not provide specialty procedures, so pet owners are still stuck with high medical bills in emergency situations. Pet owners who emotionally rely on their pets also have a higher chance of
feeling emotionally strained when their pets are not doing well, possibly could die especially if there is a life-saving opportunity that is not affordable.

Very frequently, when owners cannot afford outstanding veterinary care, they choose to euthanize their animals in hopes to prevent any further suffering (Lofflin, 2007, ). This can be interpreted as a very humanistic approach because owners are so involved with their pets emotional and physical well-being. They would prefer to put them out of their misery, instead of exhausting the small amount of energy and health they have left in order to make their passing as peaceful as possible.

Another unknown practice of veterinary care that humans use daily, is consent to treatment. Since animals are unable to make decisions or speak for themselves, their owners are considered next of kin and therefore have the right to make choices for them (Gray et al., 2018). Due to the fact that pets are no longer considered ‘just animals’, their wellbeing and rights are closely compared to human rights and human actions are now applied to pets (Wrye, 2009). This method of consent can almost be considered a form of ethics, heavily relying on the point that animals are entirely dependent on their owners for the care they need. While some research explains the comparison of pets to children, other research emphasizes that the reason humans consider animals as ‘pets’ is because of the societal construct surrounding them (Gray et al., 2018; Wrye, 2009).

While pets are compared to human children there is a loophole in giving them rights in that a veterinarian will never be able to communicate with a pet. Parents are not
owners of children like people are owners of pets, therefor pets are still personal property in all other legal aspects. The only similar legality applied here is the consent requirement itself which is easily denied if pet owners do not have enough money or don’t believe in certain practices (Gray et al., 2018; Felsted and Volk, 2011). With children however, the option to deny is ethically inhumane and heavily frowned upon if a mother denied life-saving medical treatment for their child and also has not signed a ‘do not resuscitate’ order.

**Are Pet Care Resources Used to Their Full Potential?**

If pets are becoming more meaningful and pet care is becoming more specialized, are pet owners using these new resources to their full potential? When pets exhibit symptoms of illness at home most stray away from bringing them to the vet immediately because of the possible price tag attached to this trip. In attempts to see if the sickness will clear up on its own, pet owners often turn to the internet for medical advice in order to find a solution (Oxley et al., 2017). Opening a browser and posting a call for advice on social media is a lot cheaper than visiting the local veterinarian but frequently leaves pet owners with an inaccurate diagnosis and more questions accompanied by multiple people expressing concern for the pet. Pet owners forget that veterinarians pour a lot of time and money into receiving the education that they do and fail to realize that if it was easy enough to diagnose from a website then most clinics and practices would probably go out of business.
In many instances people do not come to realize that their pet could be seriously ill with conditions such as cancer because external symptoms can be hidden until it is too late (Felsted and Volk, 2011). This is a primary reason why annual wellness checks are very important. These checks give a veterinary medical professional the opportunity to examine the pet and address any abnormalities (Felsted and Volk, 2011). Many pet owners find it incredibly unnecessary to make use of preventatives and vaccines but are willing to spend a large sum of money for their pet in cases of emergency. Occasionally, veterinarians will even withhold certain procedures they would usually recommend simply for the sticker shock effect (Felsted and Volk, 2011). Pet owners are often discouraged from bringing their pet to a veterinary clinic due to the division of the medical fields that is now in place.

It is most common to have a primary vet that will examine, do routine surgeries, vaccinate and address baseline problems. However, pets will often be referred to specialty clinics like a cardiologist, oncologist or ophthalmologist for more serious problems. The reason veterinary fields are so divided is similar to the reason why human fields are divided: one would not ask their primary care physician to perform a heart surgery that they are not specialized in.

Another explanation for the steady decrease in veterinary visits is due to the lack of information provided about the importance. It is easy to think that one knows everything when the internet is riddled with medical advice that offers an instant solution
but rarely is it mentioned how important it is for a pet to be physically seen and examined by a doctor in order to find the correct ailment and treatment that may have been missed by the internet (Felsted and Volk, 2011; Oxley et al., 2017). While there is a large field of reasoning for preventative annual care it is important to acknowledge the importance of planning a pet into one’s life when the owner is no longer able to care for them.

It is very prominent for children of the elderly to buy their parents a young pet in order to give them a sense of purpose and company but what is not thought about is the effects of what happen to that pet when the owners pass away (Smith et al., 2011). The life of a pet is completely torn apart when losing one or even both owners, especially when they are given up to a shelter instead of rehomed to another family or relative. There are many ways to ensure that in cases of expected or unexpected death all people are aware that there is a pet in need of care and a home (Beyer, 2018).

Carrying an animal card or having a sign in the door will inform medical staff and all people on scene that the pet no longer has an owner and that arrangements need to be made (Beyer, 2018). It is important for these items to have medical care and veterinary information documented in order to provide proper future care for the animal. (Beyer, 2018). Arrangements prior to death can also be made such as including pets in the owners last will and testament in order to ensure that the pet will be living in a compatible family or equal measures are taken. Caring for a pet after the owner is no longer able to also applies to when the owner has to be moved into a nursing home or is now being
cared for by an aid. If someone is no longer able to even care for themselves on a daily basis then they are most likely unable to provide adequate care for a pet (Smith et al.; 2011).

The gap this paper will specifically focusing on is why pet owners care for their pets despite the large costs and emotional obstacles they could encounter on the way. Pets are a long-term commitment that could last fifteen to twenty years and that commitment can become very expensive along the way. While research on pets and pet owners educates us on how their relationship has changed, how pet care has changed and the steadily increasing costs, only a small amount of scholars have addressed why pet owners care about their pets so much despite the high costs and emotional obstacles they may encounter. To understand this, we need to identify the social norms around pet ownership. Sociology exemplifies that people’s definitions of acceptable and unacceptable often vary in social environments. In this paper, I will add to existing research by recreating the social principles that pet owners experience today.

**METHODOLOGY:**

This study investigates why society has different expectations of what a good pet owner is. I have researched and analyzed people’s experiences of and opinions about owning a pet. The study has also investigated the different ways people care for their pets and the status pets have in the household. The purpose of this is to find out what pet owners’ priorities are and what emotional benefits they receive from pets. The intent
of this study is also to compare and contrast the values of pet owners who come from different social backgrounds. The study is relevant because pets are becoming more common in families and have also achieved a more meaningful title over the past few years. While resources, such as medical care and products in pet stores have improved immensely, many people do not take advantage of these resources.

In this project I have conducted and analyzed a survey, with a participant pool of 358. The survey ensured that all participants are over the age of eighteen, that partakers own or have owned a pet and that they consent to the fact that answers will be used for research purposes. The website also redirected to another screen thanking all possible participants for their time if they do not meet the age and pet owner requirement as well as not consenting. The survey was posted on the social media site Facebook on my own personal account and in discussion groups that are dedicated to the lives of pet owners such as Dogspotting Society (901,481 members) and German Shorthaired Pointer Club (33,937 members).

The survey has multiple basic demographic questions and concentrates primarily on the interactions between owner and pet as well as the care pet owners provide. Consisting of 22 questions, the survey inquired about basic information such as where the respondent lives as well as what kind of pet they have or currently own. The survey then goes on to prompt participants to prioritize certain aspects of pet care from least important to most important, such as vet visits, training, food quality, living space,
exercise and steady income. The survey proceeds to explore the ranking that pets hold in their household by asking about what people do for their pets such as celebrating birthdays and if owners leave music or television on for them. The survey digs deeper by discovering participant’s personal values when presenting them with questions regarding the effect of financial status, family support and if everyone has the ability to be a good pet owner.

The questions in the survey mention multiple factors of pet care that some might consider excessive and others might find absolutely necessary, yet since there is no correct answer it is entirely up to the personal opinion of the survey taker. It is important for the survey questions to display understanding of the entire spectrum of pet care, being that some people treat their pets like property and others treat them like family members. The results from the survey gave me descriptive statistical data that I was able to use as factual support for my argument and even as a refutation of my claim. The survey responses made it possible to compare and contrast responses by age group as well as being able to group together certain responses in relation to others. While this form of data gathering does limit contribution of personal experience to my research this method does give me a broad spectrum of what sort of value people place on different aspects of pet care, making it much easier to categorize and generalize responses in order to make an inference.
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS:

As seen in the literature that I reviewed, there are an extraordinary amount of responsibilities and hurdles that come alongside owning a pet which some people enjoy every minute of, while others could bypass them easily. This section will thoroughly explain the findings of my research which will contribute to my hypothesis that there is no such thing as the perfect pet owner and that priorities and values evolve over time. My findings will be clarified through graphs taken directly from my research in order to visualize the important impacts of the responses given as well as being able to truly see the entirety of differing opinions that exist amongst the pet owner world. This section will be broken down into three components that make up my research: pets and financial responsibility, pets as family members, pets’ health and wellbeing.

Pets and Financial Responsibility

The perfect pet owner does not exist. This is true because the perfect individual does not exist; people change over time and so do their priorities. When asked to assign a number value to steady income and its relationship to good pet ownership (one through five [five = high value and one = low value]), people of different age groups prioritized differently. I hypothesized that people ages 35-50 would prioritize steady income the most because they have experienced a moderate amount of high expenses and financial responsibility throughout life and are better equipped to see how the future
might evolve financially. My hypothesis that the age range of individuals 35-50 value steady income the most is complemented by the analysis of my data (as seen in fig. 1).

![Figure 1 - How do you prioritize the following - mark from not at all important (1) to extremely important (5): Steady Income](image)

On a scale of one to five, where one is not at all important and five is extremely important, participants were asked how important is it for you that a pet owner has steady income. Evaluating the total number of answers to this survey question and sorting them only by age group, I was able to deduce what age group placed the highest value on steady income pertaining to good pet ownership. The percentages shown above are based on what percent of people in that age group answered either four or five, all survey responses of four or five were coded as “high prioritization”. When assessing all of the individual survey responses of four or five, I was able to break down what percent of high prioritization answers came from which age group. 10% of individuals 18-24 put a high prioritization on steady income, 24% of individuals 25-34
put a high prioritization on steady income, 37% of individuals 35-50 put a high prioritization on steady income and 28% of individuals 50 and older put a high prioritization on steady income.

I hypothesized additionally that people who value a steady income the most will also believe that people with low income are worse pet owners. The people who value steady income the most belong within the 35-50 age range, with 37% of the “agree” responses belonging to this age range (see fig. 2).

Additionally, 15% of individuals 18-24 agree that poor financial status makes people worse pet owners, 26% of individuals 25-34 agree that poor financial status makes people worse pet owners and 24% of individuals 50 and above agree that poor financial status makes people worse pet owners (see fig. 2).

![Figure 2 - On a scale 1-5: Do you think financial status has an effect on how good of a pet owner someone is (i.e. less money = worse pet owner)](image-url)
My last hypothesis relating to financial status states that 18-24-year-olds disagree with the statement that people who are dependent on others should not have pets. This can be interpreted in a sense that this age range is the time you usually start to find your independence with support of those around you. A lot of young people are still living with their families or receiving financial assistance from a family support system and creating the image that they are entirely responsible of owning their own pet and providing for it. However, this would not be feasible if every other aspect of their life was dependent on them as well, such as owning a house/apartment and paying all their bills by themselves. This also puts into perspective why 40% of people in the age range of 35-50 agree with the statement above, because participants in this age range may be the ones currently supporting a younger family member that owns a pet and are aware that they are not fully independent.

Pets Being Treated Like Family Members

People treat their pets like children by valuing certain aspects that a parent would for their child. This includes activities, nutrition, social wellbeing and believing that a pet’s dependency on their owner is similar to the way children are reliant on their parents. They also partake in activities that one would usually see people doing with their children such as talking to them daily, taking pictures and videos of them very frequently, scolding/punishing their pet like they would a child at least weekly and planning special outings/playdates for their pets weekly.
When asked how similar a child’s need for their parent is to a pet relying on their owner, the results were almost split completely in half. 50.3% of people answered that a child’s need for their parent is the same to a pet relying on their owner, 45.8% of people answered that a child’s need for their parent is somewhat similar to a pet relying on their owner and 3.9% of people answered that a child’s need for their parent is very different to a pet relying on their owner (see fig. 3).

I provided my respondents with a list of common actions performed by pet owners and asked how often they as individuals performed each one. 100% of people reported talking or singing to their pets 3-4 times per week or more, 52% of respondents reported scolding their pet once per week or more and 80% of respondents reported taking their pet on special outings/playdates once per week or more. Additionally, 70% of respondents celebrate their pets’ birthday, 77% of respondents read the ingredients in
their pet’s food and compare it to other brands and more than half of the respondents have a sitter readily available and a care plan in case of emergency.

When asked to prioritize certain aspects of pet ownership over others, 70% of respondents valued their pet’s health and happiness the most. This 70% is higher than other categories (nutrition, activities, cleanliness, behavior) by a large amount which can be related to pets being treated like children because health and happiness is generally the most wished for future for a child by family members. Health and happiness are valued high for both pets and children.

Pets are treated like family members by owners because majority of the time they are allowed to sleep in bed or in their owners room. When asked where their pet usually sleeps, only a small percentage (10.9%) of respondents answered by saying their pet sleeps outside of their room (either outside, in another room blocked by a baby gate or in a different room on a pet bed). The rest of the respondents replied with various answers all within their own bedroom. These answers include, “in your bed”, “in your room on the floor” or “in a crate”. Specifically, 58.1% of people allow their pets to sleep in bed with them.

My initial thought was that the individuals that let their pet sleep in bed with them would be older because they see their pet as a close and primary companion; something dependent and in need of caretaking that offers support. Of the individuals that answered that their pet sleeps in bed with them (58.1%), 62% were in the age range 35
and above. This high volume of individuals who let their pet sleep in bed with them and are also above age 35 could be related to increased divorce rates, spouses that have possibly passed or children leaving for college.

**Pets’ Health and Wellbeing**

Pets only thrive in correct environments; these environments differ between specific animals. Similar to people, pets come with different moods and different needs to feel comfortable and safe. I started by examining the way that my respondents viewed their preparedness in terms of providing the right environment overall for pet ownership. I asked the question, “Does your current living situation allow you to own a pet?” and gave four different answer options; yes- I think I am in a good place with my pet right now, yes – think I am prepared to adopt/buy a pet where I currently live, no – I want to move before I adopt/buy a pet, and no – I do not think I will be ready anytime soon to get a pet. It is clear, as shown in figure 4, that most people think that not only are they prepared to adopt but that they are in a good place to adopt a pet currently.

Pet owners also care for their pets in different ways, specifically pet owners can be creative in the ways that they provide different aspects of care for their pets. For example, exercise was an aspect of pet ownership that many people valued highly. When asked to rate the importance of daily exercise on a scale from 1 to 5 (5 being highest
most people marked it high. I coded ratings of 4 and 5 as high value and with this in mind 91.6% of respondents put a high value on daily exercise. When juxtaposing this number with the 68.7% who find a home with a yard to be important for their pet (according to the survey question asking respondents to prioritize owning a home with a yard) there seems to be a discrepancy. However, this is not the case; it could be that daily exercise for a pet is performed differently in different households. While some let their pet play in a fenced-in yard, some may do daily walks or hikes, and all can be counted as daily exercise.

Again, when asked to prioritize aspects of pet ownership pertaining to care, 90.8% of respondents answered that they hold high value in their pet being up to date on annual vaccines and check-ups. However, when asked to answer true or false to the
statement “a good pet owner has an emergency fund” only 80.2% said true (as seen in figure 5).

![Figure 5 - True or False: A responsible pet owner has a savings fund for emergencies](image)

It is clear from the 90.8% of respondents who value up to date vaccines and annual check-ups that these individuals would also value their pets overall health. In valuing overall health, one would assume that a high value would also be placed on having an emergency fund set aside for possible large medical expenses for their pet. Again, when juxtaposing these two figures, the 90.8% of individuals who value up to date vaccines and annual check-ups with the 80.2% of individuals who agree that a good pet owner has an emergency fund there is a discrepancy. It is possible that people work into their annual budgets expenses like vaccines and wellness visits, but emergency expenses are difficult to ballpark and so are left out of this calculated budget and not prepared for. Many people have separate accounts to pay for these emergency visits, however I would categorize that under a prepared emergency fund.
When given the statement “a good owner spends money on pet supplies” 47.5% of respondents answered false and 52.5% answered true (see fig. 6).

The question specifies “pet supplies” as food, toys, treats, preventative care and vet visits. The almost equal divide in responses to this question is interesting as I hypothesized that most people would have answered true. This is partially because as a pet owner myself I do find preventatives, food and vet visits essential to my own pets daily life. I also asked respondents to rate nutrition and health (along with a few other categories such as behavior and activities) on a scale from 1 to 5 (5 being most important) and the results were not as surprising. I coded answers of 4 and 5 as being high value and with this scale 325 respondents answered that health was of high importance and 330 respondents answered that nutrition was of high importance (figures 7 and 8).

Given the high importance placed on both nutrition and health one would think that most people would agree that a good owner spends money on pet supplies. The
disparity in answers could be due to the fact in specifying pet supplies I included both toys and treats. Both of these items can be considered non-essential and therefore could cause respondents to answer false.

Figure 7 - How do you prioritize the following - mark from not at all important (1) to extremely important (5): High Quality Food

Figure 8 - How do you prioritize the following - mark from not at all important (1) to extremely important (5): Annual vet visits and vaccines

The last and most encompassing question asked was “Do you think everyone has the ability to be a good pet owner?”. Respondents were given the option to choose
either yes or no, resulting in 56.1% of respondents answering “no” and 43.9% of respondents answering “yes” (as seen in figure 9).

![Pie chart showing survey results](image)

**Figure 9 - Do you think everyone has the ability to be a good pet owner?**

Most people think that they are good pet owners; it would be unusual to find someone openly admit to not caring for their pet properly or giving their pet the life it needs. Essentially, there is no definition of a good pet owner because situations vary, and pets needs can be different. With this being said, generally people know what constitutes a bad pet owner. Throughout this survey, respondents were given the opportunity to show what, to them, makes a good pet owner based on their personal experiences and everyday actions.

Society has a basic standard of what makes an individual a bad pet owner; immediately one would think abuse, neglect and mistreatment. However, the grey area between treating a pet like royalty and treating a pet like garbage is vast and unclear. In this survey I asked respondents where their pets slept and while most people answered
that their pets sleep in bed with them, there were a few people who answered that their pets sleep outside. This is where the standard for good pet ownership can vary because some people call this abuse while others find it natural for an animal, even domesticated, to sleep outside the home. So essentially, when I asked: “do you think everyone has the ability to be a good pet owner?” it is impossible to focus on every detail. Being a good pet owner is subjective, purely based situationally on your pet and your household. Animals have an amazing capacity to adapt and many are happy with the bare minimum, however the bare minimum varies depending on a pet’s specific needs whether physical or emotional.

To emphasize the point that there is no truly good pet owner, it is important to realize that abuse is a subjective term that people interpret differently. While some might think feeding your dog extremely low-quality food is abuse or neglect, others view their dog as lucky to be eating a meal twice per day. Once again, we have a clear understanding of what physical abuse is, but the details become unclear when someone else’s “pet parenting” doesn’t match our own. When compiling all of the responses from my survey, a good pet owner seems to be someone who is financially stable and mature, stays on top of their pet’s health and general care, and goes out of their way to make their pet feel special and comfortable.
CONCLUSION:

The role of pets in the household has slowly but steadily become a more beneficial emotional relationship between both owner and pet. Starting the life of a pet owner is accompanied by stress and high expenses but offers a long-lasting and meaningful companionship that many people value at a high level. This research paper has focused immensely on what it means to be a good pet owner and the “dos and don’ts”, however, the actual findings of the research emphasize that there is not a true definition of a good pet owner. This research is relevant because the status pets have among family members has demonstrated high emotional importance and the number of pets in the household in the United States has increased steadily from 66.5 million (2011) to 74.4 million (2018) according to the AVMA Sourcebook of 2018 (Animal Sheltering, 2019).

After analyzing the findings of my research, I have come to the conclusion that as pet owners, we have a clear understanding of what not to do but do not have very distinct criteria of what we need to do since this varies by household and each individual pet’s needs. The literature analyzed in my literature review gives a very clear understanding of the responsibilities and necessities that come with being a pet owner, however the literature does not explicitly explain the differences between what pet owners could do and should do which essentially is the gap my research fills. My research emphasizes the ambiguity when defining a good pet owner and highlights the fact that what some pet owners might consider necessary others consider optional.
Analyzing the survey responses by age range it became clear that as our lifestyles and life experiences evolve over time so do our priorities and values. My research not only questions people about their own pet care habits but also explores people’s opinions on whether everyone has the ability to be a good pet owner. This survey question is limited in information because it is a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ question, therefore it offers no personal explanation of either answer. However, this leaves room to make conclusions based on answers that respondents gave about themselves; it is therefore presumed that participants who answered ‘no’ believe that the people who fall into the ‘no’ category would not agree with the participant’s answers.

My research and findings heavily focus on the respondent’s prioritizations and values while also often limiting a participant to an ‘either/or’ answer option. This was very beneficial to my research and analysis because I was able to draw general conclusions and make inferences based on true/false questions and rating systems. While this method of data collection may cut my research short on detailed personal experience, I am able to find similarities and differences between the participants pet parenting styles. This research project has prompted me to consider future research that is based more on interviews in order to be able to analyze each individual participant’s opinions and experience.

This research project is significant and essential to be well informed in because pet ownership has become such a normalized lifestyle. However, when not properly
versed in the subject, being a pet owner can easily turn into a nightmare for both pet and owner. Understanding the basics of what being a pet owner entails will increase the chances of an adoption or rescue being successful and lower the rates of surrendering a pet. Essentially, the key part of this research project was to emphasize that there is not a single person on this planet that is the ideal pet owner and that every owner has their own communication of love. However, it is vital to realize that your pet turns you into the best pet owner you can be when adapting and applying yourself to your pets fundamental needs and wants.
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