

Farewell to Fido: Pet Owners' Commitment and Relinquishment of Companion Animals

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Abstract The current research predicts commitment and relinquishment of companion animals by applying psychological theory on close relationships. In this novel application to pet owners in general (Study 1) and dog owners specifically (Study 2), commitment and relinquishment intentions were predicted to be a function of owner satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternative animals. In both studies, pet owners reported their commitment to their animal, satisfaction, investment size, quality of alternative animals, as well as relinquishment intentions. Study 1 revealed that commitment was related to satisfaction and investment size, but not quality of alternative animals. Study 2 revealed that dog owners' commitment and relinquishment intentions were related to satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives. Implications for animal welfare are discussed.

Keywords: *commitment, companion animals, relinquishment, satisfaction, investment size, quality of alternatives*

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1. Farewell to Fido

Pet Owners' Commitment and Relinquishment of Companion Animals

Many pet owners form a special bond with their companion animals (Walsh, 2009). Some consider their animals to be their best friend, lifelong companion, or even a member of their family (Blouin, 2013). Some people form such a close bond with their animals that they mention them as survivors in their obituaries (Wilson, Netting, Turner, & Olsen, 2013). As a result of this close bond, pet owners experience reduced anxiety (Fritz, Farver, Hart, & Kass, 1996), increased social interaction and community involvement (Wood, Giles-Corti, Bulsara, & Bosch, 2007) as well as many other physical and psychological benefits (Crawford, Worsham, & Swineheart, 2006).

Based on these findings, it is not surprising that people would choose to maintain a close bond with their pet. However, this is often not the case. Within the United States, approximately six to eight million dogs and cats are placed in animal shelters every single year (Humane Society of the United States, 2013). Many of these relinquished animals were given away or abandoned by their previous owners (New, Salman, King, Scarlett, Kass, & Hutchison, 2000). Why are some pet owners committed to their companion animals while others are not?

Several studies have assessed people's reasons for relinquishing companion animals. These reasons often focus on characteristics of the animals, external factors, or personal reasons of the pet owner. For instance, specific

qualities in companion animals, such as aggression, are often cited as reasons for relinquishment (Salman, New, Scarlett, Kass, Ruch-Gallie, & Hetts, 1998). Additionally, external factors, such as economic hardship (Weng & Hart, 2012) or relocation (New, Salman, Scarlett, Kass, Vaughn, Scherr, & Kelch, 1999) have been suggested to lead to an animal's relinquishment. Finally, relinquishment of animals may be due to personal reasons of the pet owner. A pet owner may relinquish ownership of an animal because he or she is allergic or has insufficient time to spend with the animal (Scarlett, Salman, New, & Kass, 1999).

As illustrated above, several studies have documented and described reasons pet owners choose to relinquish companion animals. However, none of these studies have used the nature of the pet owner and animal relationship to predict commitment to companion animals. The current research fills this gap in the literature by drawing upon psychological research on close relationships (Rusbult, 1980). Specifically, pet owners' commitment to their companion animals may be explained by the same psychological factors used to explain people's commitment to their social relationships—satisfaction, investment size, and perceived quality of alternatives.

1.1. Commitment within Close Relationships

One of the classic findings within close relationships is that people are most committed when they are highly satisfied with a relationship, when they have invested a great deal in a relationship, and when they perceive other potential relationship partners as lower quality than their current partner (Rusbult, 1983). Simply put, commitment

is a function of satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives. To explain the degree to which people are committed to close relationships, it is helpful to understand the three predictors of satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives. Satisfaction is a person's subjective evaluation of the positivity or negativity associated with being in a relationship. Investment size is the amount of resources, such as time or money, which are attached to a relationship. Finally, quality of alternatives is the perception that being in a relationship with someone else, or no one at all, is more advantageous than being in a relationship with a current partner.

Within the field of psychology, satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives have predicted people's commitment across thousands of studies (see Le & Agnew, 2003 for meta-analysis). Furthermore, this well-established finding has been applied to many different areas. For instance, satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives have been applied to predict people's commitment to romantic relationships (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), employees' commitment to their current jobs (Rusbult & Farrell, 1983) and even television viewers' commitment to their favorite television shows (Branch, Wilson, & Agnew, 2013). In the current research, I hypothesized that these factors can also be applied to predict pet owners' commitment to their companion animals.

1.2. Current Research

Across two studies, the current research applied psychological theory on close relationships to pet owners. In Study 1, commitment and relinquishment intentions were predicted in a broad sample of pet owners (e.g., dog owners, cat owners, bird owners). Whereas in Study 2, commitment and relinquishment intentions were predicted in a sample of dog owners specifically. Across both studies, I hypothesized that pet owners' commitment to their companion animals is a function of how satisfied they are with their animal, how much they have invested in their animal, and how they perceive the quality of alternative animals. Within this hypothesis, there are three unique predictions. First, pet owners that are satisfied with their companion animal (i.e., those who report positive feelings toward having a pet) will be more committed than pet owners that are unsatisfied. Second, pet owners that have invested a great deal into their companion animal (e.g., training, medical expenses) will be more committed than pet owners that have invested little. Third, pet owners that perceive alternatives to pet ownership as appealing (i.e., those who believe it would be better to have another animal or none at all) will be less committed than pet owners who perceived alternatives as unappealing.

In addition to understanding the factors that predict pet owners' commitment, a second aim of the current research is to better understand pet owners' intentions to relinquish ownership of their animals. For instance, do people who intend to drop a cat off at an animal shelter, give a bird away to a friend, or abandon a dog in a public area differ in their satisfaction, investment size, or quality of alternatives? Again, I predicted that pet owners who intend to relinquish ownership will report being less satisfied, less invested, and perceive alternative pets as higher quality as compared to people who would not relinquish a pet.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

Participants. Participants (N = 100) were pet owners throughout the United States. All participants were recruited online from Amazon's Mechanical Turk ($M_{\text{age}} = 30.6$ years). Participants from Mechanical Turk are well-suited for the current study because they represent a diverse and high-quality sample (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) of pet owners. As remuneration, participants received a small monetary incentive (\$0.26). In regard to demographic information, more males (n = 54) participated in the study than females (n = 45), with one participant choosing not to identify his or her gender. The sample was 77% White, 9% Asian, 7% Black, and 5% Hispanic. On average, participants owned 2.3 companion animals. Specific type of pets owned can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Type of companion animals listed by pet owners

Companion Animal ¹	Frequency
Single pet	
Dog	40
Cat	28
Fish	3
Other ²	3
Two pets	
Dog and Cat	13
Dog and Other	6
Three or more pets	7

Notes: ¹Companion animals listed in the sample include: Bird, Cat, Chicken, Dog, Fish, Frog, Gecko, Guinea pig, Hamster, Horse, Rabbit, and Turtle. ²Other category includes companion animals who received fewer than three responses.

Materials. The materials used to measure pet owners' satisfaction, investment size, quality of alternatives, and commitment were adapted from scales originally used to measure these variables with inromantic relationships (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). All of the original references to relationships between romantic partners were changed to reference the relationship between pet owner and companion animal. Examples of specific changes between the original and modified version of the scales are highlighted below. The modified scales are shown in Appendix A.

Satisfaction. Pet owners' satisfaction was assessed by five items adapted from a satisfaction scale originally used to assess the positive evaluations people experience within romantic relationships (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). For instance, the item "I feel satisfied with my relationship with my romantic partner" was changed to "I feel satisfied with my relationship with my pet." For each item, participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a statement on a nine-point response scale (0 - *Not at all agree*, 4 - *Agree somewhat*, 8 - *Agree completely*). The modified satisfaction scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, $\alpha = .90$.

Investment Size. The degree to which pet owners' resources are attached to their pet was assessed using a modified version of a five-item investment size scale, originally used to measure investment within romantic relationships (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). For example, the item, "I feel very involved in my relationship with my romantic partner – like I have put a great deal

into it” was changed to “I feel very involved in my relationship with my pet – like I have put a great deal into it.” Participants indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a nine-point response scale (0 - *Not at all agree*, 4 – *Agree somewhat*, 8 - *Agree completely*). The modified investment size scale also demonstrated acceptable reliability, $\alpha = .84$.

Quality of Alternatives. Pet owners’ perceptions regarding the benefit of having a different pet, or no pet at all, were assessed using a five-item modified version of a quality of alternatives scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Original items focusing on alternatives to romantic relationships were changed to assess people’s perceptions regarding alternatives to pet ownership. For instance, the item, “If I weren’t dating my current partner, I would do fine – I would find another appealing person to date” was changed to “If I didn’t own my current pet, I would do fine – I would find another pet to own.” Participants again indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a nine-point response scale (0 - *Not at all agree*, 4 – *Agree somewhat*, 8 - *Agree completely*). The modified quality of alternatives scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, $\alpha = .77$.

Commitment. Pet owners’ commitment to their pet was assessed using a seven-item modified version of a commitment scale, originally used to assess the extent to which romantic couples are dedicated to their relationship (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). For instance, the item, “I feel very attached to my partner – very strongly linked to him or her” was changed to “I feel very attached to my pet – very strongly linked to him or her.” Participants again indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a nine-point response scale (0 - *Not at all agree*, 4 – *Agree somewhat*, 8 - *Agree completely*). The modified commitment scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, $\alpha = .80$.

Intention to Relinquish. Pet owners’ intentions to relinquish ownership of their pet was assessed via a single item. Participants were asked to indicate via a “Yes” or “No” response whether they had ever seriously considered giving their pet away.

2.2. Procedure

Online participants were presented with a survey link, hosted via Qualtrics survey software, at Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. As incentive for completing the IRB approved survey, participants received a small amount of money which was applied towards their Amazon.com order (see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). The survey was presented to participants as a “Pet Survey” in which they would answer several questions regarding their attitudes towards a pet that they currently own. Only current pet owners were asked to participate. Participants who owned more than one animal were asked to complete the survey regarding the animal they felt most comfortable answering about. Participants chose the animal they felt most comfortable answering about to ensure quality of the responses.

After providing informed consent, participants completed the modified satisfaction, investment size, quality of alternatives, and commitment scales. Each scale was presented on a separate web page which participants accessed via a “Next page” button. Afterwards, participants

indicated their intention to relinquish ownership of their pet.

At the end of the survey, participants answered several demographic questions. Specifically, participants identified their age, gender, ethnicity, U.S. state in which they lived, as well as the number and type of pets they currently own. Then, participants were thoroughly debriefed. Participants were made aware of the study hypotheses and importance of their participation. They were also provided with the contact information of the principal investigator and encouraged to ask any follow-up questions if needed. All participants completed the survey on the same day, December 3rd, 2013.

2.3. Results

Negatively worded questions were reverse-scored as needed. Then, composite scores were created for the satisfaction, investment size, quality of alternatives, and commitment scales by averaging participant responses for each scale, respectively. Larger scores represent more satisfaction, greater investment size, more favorable perceptions of alternatives, and greater commitment, respectively.

Commitment to Companion Animals. The zero-order correlations between satisfaction, investment size, quality of alternatives, and commitment are located in Table 2. Amultiple regression was used to test whether pet owners’ commitment to their companion animals was a function of satisfaction, investment size, and pet owners’ perceptions of the quality of alternative animals. Satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives were simultaneously entered as predictors. As seen in Table 3, satisfaction was a significant predictor of commitment. Investment size reached a marginal level of significance as a predictor, $p = .058$. Quality of alternatives, however, did not significantly predict commitment.

Table 2. Zero-Order Correlations between Satisfaction, Investment size, Quality of alternatives, and Commitment

Measure	1	2	3	4
1. Commitment	1.00			
2. Satisfaction	.56**	1.00		
3. Investment Size	.47**	.60**	1.00	
4. Quality of Alternatives	-.12	-.05	-.07	1.00

Notes: Results are based on a sample size of 100 participants. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3. Satisfaction, Investment Size, and Quality of Alternatives as Predictors of Commitment to Companion Animals

Variable	Commitment			
	B	SE B	β	95% CI
Constant	3.71	0.59		[2.54, 4.89]
Satisfaction	0.39	0.09	.44**	[.21, .58]
Investment Size	0.15	0.08	.20 [†]	[-.01, .30]
Quality of Alternatives	-0.07	0.07	-.08	[-.20, -.07]
R ²	.35			
F	17.06**			

Notes: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. [†] $p < .06$.

Relinquishment of Companion Animals. Of the 100 pet owners in the sample, 14 indicated that they had seriously considered relinquishing ownership of their companion animals. Of the pet owners who had seriously considered relinquishment, six owned dogs exclusively

(four of which had two dogs), four owned cats exclusively, and four had multiple pets consisting of dogs and cats. Pet owners who expressed intention to relinquish ownership of their animals were compared to those who do not intend to relinquish ownership in regard to their satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives. Independent samples *t*-tests were used to make these comparisons.

Multiple logistic regression was not used given the multicollinearity between satisfaction and investment size. As seen in Table 4, pet owners who intend to relinquish ownership were significantly less satisfied and invested in their animals than those who did not intend to relinquish ownership. Quality of alternatives did not differ in regard to pet owners' relinquishment intention.

Table 4. Satisfaction, Investment Size, and Quality of Alternatives as a Function of Relinquishment Intention

Variable	Intend to Relinquish		Do Not Intend to Relinquish		<i>t</i> (98)	<i>d</i>	95% CI
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Satisfaction	5.47	1.87	6.66	1.26	3.04**	.74	[0.41, 1.96]
Investment Size	4.27	2.22	5.24	1.57	2.02*	.50	[0.02, 1.93]
Quality of Alternatives	4.77	1.22	4.29	1.56	-1.10	.34	[-1.35, 0.39]

Notes: **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. Levene's test for homogeneity of variance was violated for the satisfaction comparison. An analysis assuming unequal variances revealed that pet owners who intend to relinquish ownership were still significantly less satisfied than pet owners who do not intend to relinquish ownership, *t*(14.98) = 2.30, *p* < .05.

3. Study 2

Study 1 provided initial support that psychological theory on close relationships can be used to predict pet owners' commitment and relinquishment intentions. However, Study 1 was limited by the broad array of pet owners included in the sample. Some participants completed the survey in regard to their pet dog, cat, fish, or even turtle. Given the differences between types of companion animals and their pet owner interactions, the pattern of results related to commitment and relinquishment intentions may also differ. Therefore, Study 2 addresses this limitation by recruiting a large sample of the most common type of pet owner found in Study 1 – dog owners.

Additionally, Study 1 was limited in its assessment of previous, but not current or future, relinquishment intentions. Study 2 addresses this limitation by asking dog owners about their previous relinquishment behavior, current relinquishment intentions, as well as the possibility of relinquishing their dog in the future.

3.1. Method

Participants. Participants (*N* = 344) were dog owners throughout the United States. All participants were recruited online from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (*M*_{age} = 34.9 years). As in Study 1, participants received a small monetary as incentive to participate. In regard to demographic information, the sample consisted of 154 men, 183 women, and seven participants chose not to identify their gender. The sample was 74% White, 8% Hispanic, 7% Asian, and 6% Black. On average, participants owned 2.5 companion animals including at least one dog.

Materials. The materials used in Study 2 were the same materials used in Study 1. Participants completed the four scales of satisfaction, investment size, quality of alternatives, and commitment. To remind participants to answer each question about their dog specifically, the word "pet" was substituted for the word "dog" for each item. See Appendix B for the dog version of each scale.

Satisfaction. Dog owners' satisfaction was assessed by five items. An example item is, "I feel satisfied with my relationship with my dog." For each item, participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed

with a statement on a nine-point response scale (0 - *Not at all agree*, 4 - *Agree somewhat*, 8 - *Agree completely*). The satisfaction scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, $\alpha = .90$.

Investment Size. The degree to which dog owners' resources are attached to their dog was assessed using a five-item investment size scale. An example item is, "I feel very involved in my relationship with my dog – like I have put a great deal into it." Participants indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a nine-point response scale (0 - *Not at all agree*, 4 - *Agree somewhat*, 8 - *Agree completely*). The investment size scale also demonstrated acceptable reliability, $\alpha = .79$.

Quality of Alternatives. Dog owners' perceptions regarding the benefit of having a different pet, or no dog at all, were assessed using a five-item quality of alternatives scale. An example item is, "If I didn't own my current dog, I would do fine – I would find another dog to own." Participants again indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a nine-point response scale (0 - *Not at all agree*, 4 - *Agree somewhat*, 8 - *Agree completely*). The quality of alternatives scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, $\alpha = .80$.

Commitment. Dog owners' commitment to their dog was assessed using a seven-item scale. An example item is, "I feel very attached to my dog – very strongly linked to him or her." Participants again indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a nine-point response scale (0 - *Not at all agree*, 4 - *Agree somewhat*, 8 - *Agree completely*). The commitment scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, $\alpha = .81$.

Relinquishment Behavior and Intentions. Two items assessed relinquishment behavior and two items assessed relinquishment intentions. In regard to behavior, one item identified whether dog owners had recently relinquished ownership of their dog, "Have you recently given away your dog?" The second behavior item identified whether participants had ever relinquished ownership, "Have you ever given a dog away (even if it was a long time ago)?" In regard to intentions, one item identified whether dog owners are currently intending to relinquishment ownership, "Are you currently thinking about giving your dog away?" The second intention item identified whether participants could foresee intending to give their dog away in the future, "If the conditions were right, could you ever

see yourself giving your dog away?" All responses were made using a Yes or No response scale.

3.2. Procedure

As in Study 1, online participants were presented with a survey link, hosted via Qualtrics survey software, at Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. The survey was presented to participants as a “Dog Survey” for people who currently own a dog or had recently given their dog away. After providing informed consent, participants completed the satisfaction, investment size, quality of alternatives, and commitment scales. Afterwards, participants indicated their relinquishment behavior and intentions.

At the end of the survey, participants answered several demographic questions which included their age, gender, ethnicity, U.S. state in which they lived, as well as the number and type of pets they currently own. Then, participants were thoroughly debriefed. Participants were made aware of the study hypotheses and importance of their participation. They were also provided with the contact information of the principal investigator and encouraged to ask any follow-up questions if needed. Participants completed the survey between August 8th and 19th, 2014.

3.3. Results

As in Study 1, negatively worded questions were reverse-scored as needed. Then, composite scores were created for the satisfaction, investment size, quality of alternatives, and commitment scales by averaging participant responses for each scale, respectively. Larger scores represent more satisfaction, greater investment size, more favorable perceptions of alternatives, and greater commitment, respectively.

Commitment to Dogs. The zero-order correlations between satisfaction, investment size, quality of alternatives, and commitment are located in Table 5. As predicted, dog owners’ commitment was positively correlated with satisfaction and investment size, and negatively correlated with perceptions of alternatives. Stated differently, dog owners’ commitment was greater when their satisfaction and investment size were high and their perceptions of the attractiveness of alternative pets were low. In follow-up analyses, a multiple regression was used to test whether pet owners’ commitment to their companion animals was a function of satisfaction, investment size, and pet owners’ perceptions of the quality of alternative animals. Satisfaction, investment size, and

quality of alternatives were simultaneously entered as predictors of commitment. As seen in Table 6, results revealed that satisfaction and quality of alternatives were significant predictors of commitment. However, investment size did not significantly predict commitment.

Table 5. Zero-Order Correlations between Dog Owners’ Satisfaction, Investment size, Quality of alternatives, and Commitment

Measure	1	2	3	4
1. Commitment	1.00			
2. Satisfaction	.71***	1.00		
3. Investment Size	.44***	.60***	1.00	
4. Quality of Alternatives	-.40***	-.23***	-.18**	1.00

Notes: Results are based on a sample size of 338 participants who completed the four scales. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 6. Satisfaction, Investment Size, and Quality of Alternatives as Predictors of Commitment to Dogs

Variable	Commitment			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	95% CI
Constant	3.83	0.33		[3.17, 4.48]
Satisfaction	0.59	0.05	.63***	[.51, .68]
Investment Size	0.03	0.04	.04	[-.04, .10]
Quality of Alternatives	-0.16	0.03	-.22***	[-.21, -.10]
R^2	.55			
<i>F</i>	135.08***			

Notes: *** $p < .001$.

Relinquishment Behavior and Intentions. As mentioned previously, four items were used to assess dog owners’ relinquishment behavior and intentions. In regard to relinquishment behavior, approximately 1% of the sample has recently relinquished ownership of their dog. However, 21% of the sample had relinquished ownership in the past. Furthermore, this number may be a low approximation because 7% of the sample declined to answer the question of previous relinquishment behavior. If participants declined to answer for self-presentational concerns (i.e., they did not want to admit this negative behavior about themselves), then relinquishment behavior may indeed be greater than reported. In regard to current relinquishment intentions, only 1% of the sample was currently considering relinquishing ownership. However, 8% of the sample would consider relinquishment in the future. Given the small number of participants who reported recently relinquishing ownership or currently intending to, follow-up analyses were not conducted for these questions.

Table 7. Satisfaction, Investment Size, and Quality of Alternatives as a Function of Previous Relinquishment Behavior and Future Relinquishment Intentions

Variable	Has Previously Relinquished Ownership		Has Not Previously Relinquished Ownership		$t(318)^{A,B}$	<i>d</i>	95% CI
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Satisfaction	7.72	1.36	7.53	1.32	1.06	0.13	[-0.16, 0.54]
Investment Size	6.08	1.79	6.29	1.55	-0.94	0.13	[-0.63, 0.22]
Quality of Alternatives	4.17	1.78	4.32	1.75	-0.64	0.08	[-0.61, 0.31]
	Would Relinquish Ownership in the Future		Would Not Relinquish Ownership in the Future				
Satisfaction	5.84	2.00	7.70	1.14	-4.78***	1.14	[-2.67, -1.06]
Investment Size	4.95	1.74	6.33	1.55	-4.40***	0.84	[-2.00, -0.76]
Quality of Alternatives	5.20	1.21	4.18	1.72	-4.03***	0.69	[0.51, 1.54]

Notes: *** $p < .01$. ^ALevene’s test for homogeneity of variance was not violated for satisfaction, investment size, or quality of alternatives. ^BThe degrees of freedom for investment size and quality of alternatives is 317 because one participant completed the satisfaction items but skipped the investment size and quality of alternative items. ^CSatisfaction and quality of alternatives violated Levene’s test for homogeneity of variance. Therefore, the degrees of freedom for satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternative are 27.51, 331, and 35.98, respectively.

In follow-up analyses, people that had relinquished ownership previously or would consider doing so in the future were compared to people that had not relinquished ownership previously or would not consider doing so in the future, in regard to their satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives. A series of independent sample *t*-tests were used. Results are reported in Table 7. In regard to previous relinquishment behavior, those that had, as compared to those that had not, relinquished ownership previously did not differ in regard to their current satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives. Stated differently, satisfaction, investment, and perceptions of alternatives to one's current dog were unrelated to previous relinquishment behavior. However, significant differences emerged in regard to future relinquishment intentions. Dog owners who considered relinquishing ownership in the future, as compared to those that did not, were less satisfied and less invested in their current dog. Dog owners who considered relinquishing ownership in the future, as compared to those that did not, also perceived the quality of alternatives to not being a dog owner as more attractive.

3.4. Discussion

The current research applies psychological theory on close relationships to predict pet owners' commitment to their companion animals. In general, the results support this novel application. In Study 1, pet owners' commitment and relinquishment intentions was a function of satisfaction and investment size, but not quality of alternatives. However, participants in Study 1 indicated their commitment and relinquishment intentions in regard to a broad array of pets (e.g., dogs, cats, birds, turtles). Presumably, pet owners' commitment may depend on the type of pet they own. Therefore, Study 2 eliminated this confound by assessing commitment and relinquishment intentions of dog owners specifically.

Results from Study 2 again supported the hypothesis. Dog owners' commitment was related to dog owners' satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives. That is, dog owners are most committed when they are highly satisfied, invested, and when they perceive alternatives to being a dog owner as unattractive. This pattern of results also emerged in regard to dog owners' intentions to relinquish ownership in the future. Dog owners who envision themselves relinquishing ownership in the future, as compared to those that do not, are less satisfied, less invested, and more attracted to the alternatives to dog ownership. It is worth noting that perceptions of alternatives predicted commitment for dog owners (Study 2) but not pet owners in general (Study 1). This difference may be due to the ease of adding a second pet (e.g., a cat or bird) in addition to a dog.

3.5. Strengths and Limitations

Studies 1 and 2 are the first to offer evidence that the nature of the pet owner and companion animal relationship is related to commitment and relinquishment. As described previously, numerous studies have asked why pet owners relinquish ownership of their companion animals (see Kwan & Bain, 2013). However, no study has applied psychological theory on close relationships to explain why some pet owners were more committed to

their animals than others. The current study filled this gap in the literature by bridging psychological theory and animal welfare science.

In the current research, several psychological variables were measured to determine the relationship between commitment, satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives. Therefore, a survey method assessing relationships among variables was most appropriate. Despite its appropriateness, there are limitations of survey and correlational research that warrant discussion. First, it is plausible that participants lied about their commitment and relinquishment intentions to maintain a positive view about themselves as a pet owner. The survey design tried to reduce participant lying by emphasizing anonymity and confidentiality of responses. However, future studies that directly observe pet owner behavior, rather than relying on self-report, may be a useful avenue for future research. Second, a limitation of all correlational research is its inability to determine causal relationships. According to previous research within psychology, satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives affects commitment (Rusbult, 1980). However, the current study cannot make this claim because of its correlational design. One may argue that commitment causes people to be satisfied, invested, and perceive alternatives as low quality. The current research alone cannot rule out this rival interpretation.

On a theoretical note, the current research applies psychological theory on close relationships between two humans to relationships between one pet owner and a companion animal. Therefore, the concepts of commitment, satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives may differ in ways that warrant discussion. For instance, commitment within a romantic relationship is bidirectional. The decision to dissolve the relationship (i.e., breakup) can be initiated by either person. In a pet owner relationship, the decision to dissolve the relationship lies with the pet owner. Additionally, the type of investments in romantic and pet owner relationships may also differ. Investments within romantic relationships may involve time, children, and a mortgage. However, a pet owner's investment may involve time, cost of vaccinations, but not shared children or finances. Finally, quality of alternatives can also differ between romantic and pet owner relationships. In romantic relationships, alternatives to being in a relationship may include choosing to be single or replacing one's current partner with someone else. For pet owners, the option of no longer being a pet owner is present. However, pet owners also have the option of adding a second pet rather than replacing the current pet. In romantic relationships, people are unlikely to add instead of replace a partner.

3.6. Future Directions and Implications

This novel research sparks several directions for future study. The most logical extension is in regard to the study of animal relinquishment behavior. The current findings are useful to the extent to which intentions to relinquish a companion animal are related to actual relinquishment behavior. Presumably, relinquishment intentions predict relinquishment behavior (Fishbein & Azjen, 1975); however, this is an empirical question that was not addressed in the current study.

Future studies may also involve inter disciplinary collaboration between psychology and animal welfare science. Psychological theory and its research methodology can help explain why pet owners relinquish, abandon, or abuse their companion animals (see Shore, 2005; Pagani, Robustelli, & Ascione, 2010). Conversely, animal welfare science can guide psychology's efforts to apply itself to meaningful areas. As a result, animal welfare science may broaden and build current theories within psychology.

The current findings may be especially useful for pet owners and people involved with the adoption of relinquished animals. In regard to pet owners, satisfaction and investment size may foster commitment to a companion animal. Indeed, research on close relationships suggests that increasing satisfaction and investments leads to increased commitment (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, 1983). Therefore, engaging in activities that facilitate satisfaction and investment may lead to greater pet owner commitment. Additionally, a pet owner may choose to invest in an animal, such as a cat, by buying toys or treats or spending time playing. Such activities that are conducive to satisfaction and investment may increase pet owner commitment and thus reduce relinquishment intentions.

Finally, the current findings may also be applicable for people who are involved with the adoption of relinquished animals. People associated with the adoption of animals may choose to contact pet owners who have recently adopted animals and assess their level of satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives. Knowledge about a pet owners' satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives may be useful to identify which pet owners are most likely to relinquish ownership of their animals. If pet owners who are unsatisfied, have invested little, and perceive alternatives to pet ownership as attractive are identified early, then interventions aimed at retention or safe animal relinquishment may be employed.

3.7. Conclusion

For extremely committed pet owners, the idea of relinquishing ownership of a companion animal may be unfathomable. However, pet owners vary in their commitment and some choose to relinquish their animals. To better understand this rare behavior, the current research applies psychological theory on close relationships to pet owners' bond with their companion animals. This research reveals that pet owners' commitment and relinquishment intentions are related to satisfaction, investment size, and the perceived quality of alternatives to owning a companion animal.

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