Guest Editors' Introduction: Involvement with Animals as Consumer Experience

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Ambivalence is one of the central themes running through the literature focused on human relationships with nonhuman animals. This ambivalence hinges on the dominant dichotomy in our culture which casts animals as either objects to be used or beings to be interacted with. As objects, animals are killed for sport, eaten as food, bought and sold as consumer goods, and used as equipment in scientific experiments. As individual beings, animals are loved, provided with medical care, interacted with as friends, and incorporated into the home as members of the family. To a considerable degree this object/being dichotomy is a key theme running through the articles in this special issue of Society and Animals.

Given that the authors of the included papers are active in the field of consumer research or sociologists concerned with marketing and leisure activities, one might reasonably expect to find discussions that cast animals predominantly as consumer products, the focal point of ancillary consumption, or accoutrements to leisure activities. This would likely be the case were the authors conventional consumer researchers or typically positivistic sociologists. While such consumer behavior related terms such as "product involvement" and "dispossession" are used at times, these papers demonstrate the relatively recent (in the case of consumer research) and ongoingly oppositional (in the case of sociology) emphasis on interpretive analyses grounded in intimate involvement with the people and phenomena of interest.

The "interpretive revolution" began in consumer research around the mid-1980s with the publication of several seminal papers dealing with semiotics (Holbrook & Grayson, 1986; Mick, 1986), projective techniques (Rook, 1985), and anthropological methods (Hirschman, 1985). These qualitative approaches to data-gathering and interpretation had rarely been utilized in the field prior to that time, because consumer researchers had relied primarily upon laboratory experiments and large-scale surveys to generate data and test hypotheses.
The entry of interpretivism brought with it not only novel methodologies, but initiated a general questioning of the positivistic tenets underlying the discipline and the topics upon which consumer researchers chose to focus their attention. Prior to the mid-1980s, consumer researchers had plied their trade by focusing primarily upon topics having strategic value to marketers. For example, extensive investigations were undertaken of consumers’ responses to the advertising, pricing, packaging, and distribution of products. These studies were conducted with the intention of assisting marketers to formulate more effective strategies for attracting consumers. Interpretivists challenged this pro-marketing orientation by introducing values more consistent with those found in conventional academic sociology or anthropology. That is, they emphasized that researchers should conduct inquiries that help to achieve understanding and improvement of the human condition rather than assist business in its efforts to manipulate consumers. Thus, not only methodology but also political philosophy often distinguish interpretive consumer researchers from their positivist colleagues (Bristor & Fischer, 1993; Hirschman, 1993).

The decade of the 1980s also produced a paradigmatic challenge to traditional consumer research conceptions regarding the nature of consumption. Arising as it had as a stepchild of marketing, consumer research had focused initially on the tangible goods being sold in the marketplace. This was modified during the 1970s to incorporate the marketing of services such as air travel and restaurant meals, as well. However, in 1982 two articles (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) challenged this product-oriented focus and argued instead for directing attention primarily upon the consumer’s experience of consumption. Termed the “experiential approach,” this paradigm has been substantially broadened over the last decade and a half to now include both existentialist and phenomenological orientations to consumption (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989; 1990). These revisions and extensions of the study of consumption are reflected in the papers included in this collection.

**Methodological Commonalities**

All of the papers here share a basic premise; social reality is composed of cultural “webs of meaning” (Geertz, 1973) which are creatively shared, shaped, and represented. Since this lived interpersonal reality is the foundation upon which everyday actions are grounded, an adequate understanding of human behavior must begin, therefore, with an exploration of how people define the situations, selves, and others that compose the social worlds they inhabit. This goal, in turn, is best