

Mechanisms of Pet Engagement in the Formation and Strengthening of Urban Social Support Networks: A Sociological Investigation

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Abstract: In today's urban landscape, an increasing number of residents are embracing pet ownership. The social support networks established through pets can effectively address issues of isolation and social disconnection within corresponding communities, bolstering individuals' sense of identity and belonging, and contributing to the strengthening of social support networks. This paper employs field research methods, conducting interviews with pet owners in a community in Chang'an District, Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, as well as on various social media platforms. The aim is to explore the mechanisms through which pets function within urban social support network

1. Introduction

Pets, as companions to humans, have a long history. With economic growth and improved living standards, the variety of pets has significantly increased. Statistics show that, in just four years until 2002, the number of pets in the United States increased by a staggering 366 million^[1]. In 2004, there were 417,000 registered pet dogs in Beijing, a number that soared to over 1 million in 2006. The surge in pet ownership has made activities like walking dogs or cats a common sight in the corners of major cities, and interactions facilitated by pets as social mediators are becoming increasingly prevalent.

Pets are often seen as a direct source of companionship and support for their owners. Pet ownership has been shown to have significant positive effects on human health, including reducing the risk of heart disease, lowering blood pressure, increasing physical activity, providing emotional support, enhancing overall well-being, and strengthening psychological resilience in the face of adversity. Moreover, in the relatively impersonal realm of urban living, pets, acting as benign social catalysts, significantly facilitate human social interactions. Numerous studies have indicated that dog walkers, for instance, have more opportunities for social contact than those who walk alone, and pets can serve as conversation starters among strangers in environments like parks. So, how do pets, as benign catalysts, influence interpersonal interactions and the establishment and promotion of social support networks?

Therefore, this paper aims to describe and explore the current state of benign interactions between people mediated by pets and how pets, as social catalysts, can be used to build and strengthen social support networks, providing practical support for promoting the smooth functioning of society.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research on Interpersonal Communication and Social Support Networks

2.1.1 Research Related to Theories of Interpersonal Communication

Social exchange theory, pioneered by Peter Blau, Emerson, and Homans, applies economic concepts to sociology. This theory focuses on mutual exchanges and reciprocal relationships in people's social lives. Peter Blau's social exchange theory asserts that the fundamental characteristic of interpersonal interactions is reciprocity. Human interaction is a process of satisfying self-needs within the framework of interdependence with others. Starting from the exchange theory of communication activities, one can fully explain the motivations behind interpersonal interactions and the phenomenon of interpersonal attraction.

Urban interaction theory originated in communication studies but can be traced back to the Chicago School of Sociology, represented by Georg Simmel. Simmel believed that urban interactions were filled with rational emotions, and complete societies could only be formed when media affected the relationships between individuals. Robert E. Park, on the other hand, believed that city dwellers lacked traditional emotions, and individuals had no opportunity to understand their positions within the entire city. This led to personal chaos and spiritual collapse. Therefore, Park pessimistically summarized rational interactions as interest-based interactions.

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Social support refers to the provision of material and spiritual assistance to vulnerable groups by social support networks without compensation. Social support theory generally believes that the larger an individual's social support network, the better they can cope with challenges posed by various pressures.

2.1.2 Research on Social Support Networks

Social support networks are a branch of social support theory. Scholars such as Li Qiang^{[7][9]} and He Zhaoping^[10] argue that social support should be defined as various forms of unpaid assistance and services provided to vulnerable groups by various social forms or the positive effects obtained by individuals through social connections, which can alleviate psychological stress, relieve tension, and enhance social adaptability, among other benefits. Social support includes both formal and informal support, often emphasizing reciprocity in social exchanges. Social support networks refer to the social networks through which individuals can obtain various forms of support (such as financial, emotional, and friendship support), which helps reduce dissatisfaction with social inequality, alleviate social conflicts, enhance individual risk resistance, and contribute to maintaining social stability. Current research on social support networks focuses on the flow and backflow of resources within these networks^[5], the role of resources in receiving social support, and how the overall structure of social support networks influences social support, as well as the measurement of social support networks.

2.2. Research on Pets as Social Mediators

Studying benign interactions between people and the establishment of social support networks through pets holds significant research value. McConnell AR^[2] suggests that the social support provided by pets complements the social support offered by human resources, as pet ownership offers robust social support for meeting social needs^[3]. Wood L^[4] has more comprehensive conclusions in this research area, considering pets as valuable channels for understanding others, tangible forms of social support, powerful protective factors for community friendships and personal well-being, and neutral, safe opportunities for dialogue in social interactions. Pets can effectively address issues of isolation and social disconnection, thus contributing to the strengthening of social support networks^[6].

2.3. Literature Review Summary

Foreign scholars have made significant achievements in humanities and social science theories related to social interaction and interpersonal communication, forming relevant theories on interpersonal interaction and social support networks, providing a solid theoretical foundation for this paper. Domestic scholars have also conducted research on interpersonal interaction patterns, interaction patterns, and communication behaviors from

various perspectives. However, most studies view interpersonal interactions as negative, suggesting that urban interactions are gradually becoming less warm. Moreover, most research in China focuses on social support from a theoretical perspective, with limited exploration from other theoretical angles on how to enhance the construction of social support networks.

In the field of research on pets as social mediators, foreign research on their relationship with sociology has progressed more rapidly than in China. Current research in China primarily focuses on epidemiology and medical aspects of pets, with more literature reviews and commentary articles than academic research. Sociological studies on the role of pets remain relatively scarce^[8].

3. Research Content and Methods

This paper primarily focuses on a community in the southern suburbs of ChangAn District, Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, and online pet exchange platforms. It examines pet owners as the primary subjects of study, with a focus on their current interpersonal interactions and social support status. The goal is to explore the social support networks formed through pet-mediated interpersonal interactions and their mechanisms.

This research predominantly employs interview methods and participant observation, supplemented by literature description methods, to analyze and summarize the interview results theoretically.

4. Conducting the Investigation

4.1. Selection of Survey Subjects

The main research location for this paper is a community in ChangAn District, Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province. The community has a complex composition of residents (with no obvious group characteristics), featuring a variety of professions, age groups, and social classes. Upon observation, it was noted that there are many pet owners in the community, with residents forming their own pet groups. The community has designated times for walking dogs and cats, which are from 6:00 AM to 9:00 AM and 8:00 PM to 10:00 PM, respectively. During these times, pet owners commonly gather for outings, primarily along the community's main roads and lawn areas. In addition to offline visits, online interviews were conducted with super-topic bloggers on pet-related topics. The content of these interviews was consistent with the offline interviews. (Super-topics are unofficial online organizations formed by netizens with similar interests, and people of different genders, ages, and professions can voluntarily join, breaking geographical limitations and expanding the scope of research.)

4.2. Commencement of the Investigation Phase

Due to the complex classification of research subjects in this paper, a flexible approach involving participant observation and interviews was adopted. For the first

category of interviewees, detailed observations were made during the dog-walking hours in the community from August 2nd to August 5th, 2022. This identified the primary spaces where interviewees frequently gathered for pet dog activities. Formal interviews were then conducted from August 6th to August 10th, 2022, with a total of 10 offline interviews and 7 online interviews using the community's WeChat pet group.

For the second category of interviewees, while conducting offline research, investigators also read posts and asked questions on various social media platforms. After obtaining consent, online interviews were conducted with pet bloggers through private messages, totaling 13 online interviews.

5. Mechanisms by Which Pets Contribute to the Formation of Urban Social Support Networks

Social support encompasses formal and informal assistance and help. It is not merely a one-way form of care or assistance; in most cases, it involves social exchange. Social support networks, as a beneficial supplement to the social security system, help alleviate people's dissatisfaction with social injustices, mitigate various social conflicts, enhance individual risk resilience, and contribute to maintaining social stability. Pet owners have a broad range of social contacts, transcending occupational, blood, and geographical boundaries, forming a new type of interest-based network under the emerging situation. Among the 30 interviewees, 25 mentioned that they would strike up conversations with strangers because of their pets. Nearly 90% of the interviewees reported that they were not familiar with other community residents when they first moved into the community. However, they got to know many people through their pets, which facilitated the formation of friendships on both sides. Pets, as bonds, no longer exist only in face-to-face communication. Pet enthusiasts establish clubs, online gathering places, and organize various activities such as offline meetings. The similarity in pet interests attracts people to each other, and interpersonal interactions facilitated by pets involve the exchange of emotions, evaluations, information, and tangible support.

Based on literature reading and data research, this paper categorizes social support into four types:

Informational Support: Referring to beneficial or helpful information that individuals can obtain during interactions, such as location or product information.

Tangible Support: Involving practical actions or physical items of assistance, like purchasing items or providing pet care.

Emotional Support: Meeting emotional needs of individuals during interactions, such as sharing feelings, venting, and providing a listening ear.

Appraisal Support: A more abstract form of support than the previous three, which involves individuals feeling accepted, acknowledged, or appreciated during interactions, satisfying their self-esteem.

5.1. Informational Support Provided by Pets to Social Support Networks

In this survey, 50% of the interviewees mentioned that they had received or provided informational support during their interactions with other pet owners. Informational support, being the shallowest form of support, is relatively common in social interactions. For example, the owner of a pet dog named Cindy, interviewed offline, said, "When we greet a dog we don't know for the first time, besides exchanging the dog's name, we also ask where they usually play in the community. If the conversation goes smoothly, we might inquire about what snacks their small dog usually eats at home and where they buy them." Similar cases also exist in the communication between various pet bloggers on online platforms. In the pet forums observed in this paper, there is a dedicated section in the forum's sticky posts where pet owners from all over the country can share their pet-raising experiences. These posts include recommendations for good products, common diseases in pets, exotic pet hospitals in various provinces and cities, and honorary doctors, all of which constitute informational support provided by pets as connecting bonds.

5.2. Tangible Support Provided by Pets to Social Support Networks

Sociologist Lin Nan pointed out that in the operation of social support networks, people gain additional resources by using resources from direct and indirect relationships. Pet owners get to know many other pet owners through communities, networks, and other means, and they exchange resources through social interactions, thereby gaining support. Here, resources specifically refer to tangible, not spiritual or advisory, resources. Tangible support goes beyond informational support in terms of depth. For instance, the owner of the cat Tim stated, "Actually, when you get to know each other well, there are many places to interact. Adding each other on WeChat is very convenient. Sometimes, if someone's cat needs to buy cat supplies, a few of us will place an order together. When I go on a business trip, I'll directly leave my cat at their place. Sometimes, on weekends, we'll drive into the mountains together. We don't bring our cats because it's not very convenient." Cases like Tim's mom, who became close friends with someone because of their cats, are numerous. This shows that pets serve as positive bonds in interpersonal relationships, and the pet enthusiast community, which initially served as an entertainment group for the masses, is also constantly evolving.

5.3. Emotional Support Provided by Pets to Social Support Networks

Emotional support mainly involves understanding, confiding, and empathizing with each other during interactions. People often seek emotional support more than instrumental or tangible support, and pet bonds play a significant role in providing emotional support. During

the survey, it was observed that, whether offline or online, when the interaction relationship reached a certain level of familiarity, if one party needed emotional support or advice, they would seek emotional support from others, and the other party would provide emotional support in return, such as being a good listener. The owner of Doggy said, "I remember that day when our Doggy couldn't make it through due to canine distemper and passed away at the hospital. At that time, my world really darkened. Once, I ran into the parent of Snow (a dog) at the supermarket, and to console me, they brought Snow to play with me and would often call me to chat and help ease my mood. Everyone in the group found out and would frequently send messages to comfort me. It was through this that I gradually emerged from the shadow of losing psychological dependence. I'm really thankful to those who provided me with emotional support."

Interactions between individuals in urban settings often take on a unique form of non-personal, emotionally uncharged interactions. However, within the emotional support provided by pets, we frequently observe that the communication between pet owners extends beyond mere discussions about pets. While offering emotional value, it helps individuals grappling with emotional turmoil to overcome their struggles, enhances mutual fondness, and fosters deeper friendships. This transformation allows this relationship, from being strangers to becoming familiar, to evolve into more profound and extensive dimensions.

5.4. Appraisal Support Provided by Pets to Social Support Networks

Appraisal support is the psychological journey that individuals seeking to integrate into a collective group undergo, feeling accepted and acknowledged by that group. It is only when a medium affects the mutual influence between people that a complete society is formed, thereby creating a complete social support network. The larger an individual's social support network is, the better they can cope with the challenges posed by various pressures. Therefore, as a crucial component in constructing social support networks, appraisal support allows inter-actors to feel affirmed and appreciated by other community members, leading to satisfaction in terms of self-esteem and promoting further positive integration.

In the comments section of the social media topic #Golden-bear#, investigators came across a post: "Today, I spent half a month's living expenses on buying a new habitat for my pet, and I spent an afternoon decorating it. But when I saw Bear (the pet) happily playing around in the sawdust, I instantly felt that it was all worth it." The post was accompanied by a heartwarming photo of the pet's new den. In the comments on Weibo, netizens responded with comments like "Wow! It's so beautiful; can you send me the link?" and "You've really transformed from a beginner to an expert!" The original poster then replied to all the comments, saying, "Thank you all for your praise. Friends who need links to good products can just message me directly!" This Weibo user

often shares various experience posts in the topic, engaging in friendly conversations with other members.

6. Conclusion

Based on the interview results of this study, almost all interviewees indicated that they had formed some level of friendship through their pets. Pets serve as a beneficial channel for understanding others and are a tangible form of social support. As the bonds created by pets deepen, the levels of social support provided by both parties in their interactions continue to increase. Pets, as important sources of social support networks, can transcend blood, geographical, and occupational boundaries, forming subtle relationships that bridge different ages and personalities. This makes the bond-based pet social support network more solid than other types of support networks. The social support network established through pets effectively addresses issues of isolation and social disconnection within specific segments, enhances individuals' sense of identity and belonging to society, and contributes to the further strengthening of social support networks. A well-established social support network serves as a strong protective factor for community friendships and individual life satisfaction, while also providing a neutral and safe platform for dialogue in social interactions.

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