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Investigation of individuals' perception of pet adoption and the effect of animal criteria on adoption

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ABSTRACT

Pet adoption is the assumption of full responsibility for an animal. Social preferences directly affect the adoption rate and preference. The main channels used in adoption are shelters, breeders, neighbors and friends with pets, but there is no precise data on how and why an animal is preferred when adopting an animal from a shelter. The main purpose of the study is to determine the adoption perception and preference parameters of individuals who adopt animals from shelters. Three hundred four participants were included in the study who adopted cats or dogs from the shelter between June 2023 and January 2024. 26.6% of the individuals included in the study were male, 73.4% were female, and proportionally, the age range in which the highest number of adoptions occurred was over 45 years old with 33%. In addition, it was determined that 18.2% of the individuals were between the ages of 18-25, 18.2% between 26-35 and 21.9% between 26-45, and 43.1% of them owned cats and 56.9% owned dogs. While the rate of cat adoption was higher among women, men preferred dog adoption. As a result of the study, it was revealed that the feeling of pity was dominant due to the poor health status of the adopted animals and this situation affected the adoption behavior of women. Although fear / excitement / nervousness behaviors are exhibited in the first encounter, it differs from other studies in terms of adoption. It was revealed that the training of shelter staff is a key point in adoption.

Bireylerin evcil hayvan sahiplenme algısı ve hayvan kriterlerinin sahiplenme üzerindeki etkisinin incelenmesi

ÖZET

Evcil hayvan sahiplenme, bir hayvanın tüm sorumluluğunun üstlenilmesidir. Sosyal tercihler, sahiplenme oranını ve tercihini doğrudan etkilemektedir. Hayvan sahiplenmede kullanılan başlıca kanallar barınaklar, yetiştiriciler, komşular ve evcil hayvanı olan arkadaşlardır ancak barınaktan hayvan sahiplenirken bir hayvanın nasıl ve neden tercih edildiğine dair kesin bir veri bulunmamaktadır. Çalışmanın temel amacı, barınaklardan hayvan sahiplenilen bireylerin sahiplenme algısı ve tercih parametrelerini belirlemektir. Çalışmaya Haziran 2023 - Ocak 2024 tarihleri arasında barınaktan kedi veya köpek sahiplenilen 344 katılımcı dahil edilmiştir. Çalışmaya dahil edilen bireylerin %26,6'sı erkek, %73,4'ü kadındır ve oransal olarak en fazla sahiplenmenin gerçekleştiği yaş aralığı %33 ile 45 yaş üstüdür. Ayrıca bireylerin %18,2'sinin 18-25, %18,2'sinin 26-35 ve %21,9'unun 26-45 yaş aralığında olduğu ve %43,1'inin kedi, %56,9'unun köpek sahibi olduğu belirlendi. Kadınlar arasında kedi sahiplenme oranı daha yüksekken, erkekler köpek sahiplenmeyi tercih etmiştir. Yapılan çalışma sonucunda sahiplenilen hayvanların sağlık durumlarının kötü olması nedeniyle acıma duygusunun baskın olduğu ve bu durumun kadınların sahiplenme davranışını etkilediği ortaya çıkmıştır. İlk karşılaşmada korku/heyecan/sinirlilik davranışları sergilense de sahiplenme açısından diğer çalışmalardan farklılık göstermektedir. Barınak personelinin eğitiminin sahiplenmede kilit nokta olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır.

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1. Introduction

For many years, countless families have shared their homes with many cats and dogs and have formed close emotional bonds with them. The human meaning of pet ownership is to make them feel at serenity and to keep them company. In addition, adoption is known to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression in humans. Moreover, under proper training and discipline, these animals show their loyalty to protect and obey their owners, with whom they live in symbiosis (1).

Pet adoption is the assumption of full responsibility for an animal. Adopting a living being is a sensitive issue that cannot be simplified, and we are obligated to provide the love, trust, and patience it deserves. Today, the main channels used for adoption are shelters, breeders, neighbors, or friends with pets (2). Significant increases in the pet population have left animal shelters across the country with the challenge of finding solutions to increase adoption rates (3). According to the Humane Society of the United States, adoption not only gives the animal a second chance but also helps to provide better conditions for the remaining animals by reducing shelter costs (4, 5).

Studies evaluating anthropological literature reviews support that social preferences affect ownership. In addition, increasing disposable income, attitude change, and urbanization have significantly increased pet ownership in Turkey, Brazil, China and Thailand (6). In recent years, it has been observed that the cat population has increased considerably in many countries, and the number of cats living as pets in the USA is higher than the number of pet dogs (7).

In the United States, an estimated 3.2 million animals are adopted from animal shelters annually and the adoption rate is increasing yearly (8). Although most owners report high levels of satisfaction with their newly adopted animals (9, 10). It is known that a significant proportion of adopted animals are returned to shelters for various reasons (11). Although there are studies investigating the change in the bond between humans and animal in animals left in shelters in the USA (12, 13) there is no clear data on how and why an animal is preferred when adopting an animal from a shelter. However, it is known that various factors affect the choice of a cat or a dog in pet adoption. In Turkey, there is no study on the abandonment or adoption behavior of individuals.

The primary objective of the study is to determine the preference parameters of individuals who adopt animals from shelters. The secondary aim of the study is to determine the reasons for the preference for shelter animals and the animal behaviors and characteristics that play a role in the selection process and to reveal the importance of information collection methods.

2. Material and Methods

This study was supported by the Ondokuz Mayıs University Scientific Research Project with the code PYO.VET.1908.23.003.

Study Population

The questionnaire applications were completed online by individuals who were adopted from the shelter between June 2023 and January 2024. The questionnaire consisted of 7 questions, including four questions to determine the reason for pet preference, what the reaction was at the first encounter, and from whom the necessary information about the animals was obtained, and three questions containing the demographic information of the pet adopter. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and the questionnaire was filled out after the adoption to ensure that it did not affect adoption behavior. Individuals who adopted more than one pet were asked to complete a questionnaire for only last adopted pet.

Question Categories

Question 1. What is the most important reason for choosing your pet friend?

Category	Examples of Answers
Behaviour	"The way its behaviour towards me"
Appearance	"Physical appearance"
Temperament	"It's character" "being energetic and playful"
A feeling of pity/Health status	"It needed us." "It needed a home." "Compassion"
For child/Family friendly	"My children needed to learn compassion"
Being friends	"Being friends" "the death of my life mate"

Question 2. What are the Other Important Factors in Choosing Your Pet Friend?

Category	Examples of Answers
Appearance	"Physical Appearance (colour, breed, size, coat, body shape, appearance, expression, posture)"
Temperament	"Being playful" "Having a calm temperament"
A feeling of pity/Health status	"Health status" "Unclaimed for a long time" "I adopted it out of pity"
For child/Family friendly	"For child"
Being friends	"To be my friends"

Question 3. How did your pet friend react the first time you met it?

Category	Examples of Answers
Approach/Contact	"It came into our laps, kissed my wife's chin." "It endeared itself by running and jumping" "It licked my hands"
Excitement/Enjoyment	"Very joyful" "very happy" "amazement and joy"
Irritability/Response	"It behaved aggressively" "hissed"
Fear/Anxiety	"Scared" "It got scared and didn't come to us for a while." "It was a bit nervous because it was so small."
Bashful/ Abstention	"Stayed away" "withdrawn" "at first it was unfamiliar, then got used to it"

Question 4. What is the source of information that influences you in choosing your pet friend?

Category	Examples of Answers
Shelter Staff	"Shelter" "Shelter Staff"
Close Friends	"Close Friends"
Social Media/Internet	"Social Media" "Internet advertisement"
Breeder/Petshop	"Breeder" "Petshop"

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses of the data were performed in the IBM SPSS v24 program. Statistical analyses of categorical data between gender and species were evaluated with a chi-square test. And also, One-sample Chi-squared test of goodness-of-fit was applied to evaluate the compatibility of categorical data with the theoretical (expected) distribution. The expected distribution was determined according to the equal frequency assumption. Descriptive statistics were presented as frequency and percentage. Statistical significance was accepted as $p < 0.05$.

3. Results

A total of 304 participants were included in the questionnaire, and those who left any data blank (n=3) and those who could not be categorized (n=3) were excluded from the study, and evaluations were made on 298 participants. The responses to the survey questions are summarised in Table 1. It was found that 26.6% (n=79) of the respondents were male, 73.4% (n=297) were female, and the age range with the highest rate of adoption was 33% (n=98) over 45 years of age. It was determined that 18.2% (n=54) of the participants were 18-25 years old, 18.2% (n=54) were 26-35 years old and 21.9% (n=65) were 36-45 years old. Regarding the type of animal adopted, it was determined that 43.1% (n=128) of the respondents adopted cats and 56.9% (n=169) adopted dogs, while cat adoption was higher in women, men preferred to adopt dogs.

While the most important reason for adopting animals from the shelter was pity for animals and poor health, it was determined that this situation was higher in women than men. The second most important reason people prefer their pets is the expectation of a friend, poor health, and pity. It was seen that the need for animals in need of care surpassed other preferences (Table 2a).

Table 1: Anket cevaplarına göre pet tercihlerinin kadın ve erkek dağılımı.

Table 1: Gender distribution of pet preferences according to survey responses.

		Pet Preference		
	Frequency (%)	Man Frequency (%)	Woman Frequency (%)	
Cat	128 (43.1)	25 (31.6) ^{Ax}	103 (47.2) ^B	P<0.05
Dog	169 (56.9)	54 (68.4) ^y	115 (52.8)	

A, B: Refers to the difference between the column percentages in the same row ($p<0.05$). x, y: means the difference between the column percentages in the same column ($p<0.05$).

When asked about their first reactions to the newly adopted animals, 105 (35.4%) people reported fear and uneasiness, 88 (29.6%) reported excitement and joy, and 53 (17.8%) reported that contact with the animal was effective in adoption. It was observed that the first information about the adopted pets was received from the shelter staff at a high rate (68.4%) (Table 2b).

Table 2a: Anket sorularına verilen cevapların frekansları ve istatistiksel anlamlılıkları.

Table 2a: Frequencies and statistical significance of the answers given to the survey questions.

Question 1. What do you think is the most important reason for choosing your pet friend?				
Category	Frequency (%)	Man Frequency (%)	Woman Frequency (%)	
Behaviour	16 (5.4)	4 (5.1)	12 (5.5)	
Appearance	17 (5.7)	7 (8.9)	10 (4.6)	
Temperament	29 (9.8)	12 (15.2)	17 (7.8)	
A feeling of pity/Health status	220 (74.1)*	50 (63.3) ^A	170 (78.0) ^B	P<0.05
For child/Family friendly	5 (1.7)	2 (2.5)	3 (1.4)	
Being friends	10 (3.4)	4 (5.1)	6 (2.8)	

A,B: It expresses the difference between the column percentages in the same row ($p<0.05$). Frequency with an asterisk (*) in the same column for each question title expresses the difference between the percentages of total frequency distributions ($p<0.05$).

Table 2b: Anket sorularına verilen cevapların frekansları ve istatistiksel anlamlılıkları.

Table 2b: *Frequencies and statistical significance of the answers given to the survey questions.*

Question 2. What are the other important factors in choosing your pet friend?	
Category	Frequency (%)
Appearance	9 (3)
Temperament	8(2.7)
A feeling of pity/Health status	86 (29)
For child/Family friendly	46 (15.5)
Being friends	148 (49.8)*
Question 3. What was your reaction when you first met your pet friend?	
Approach/Contact	53 (17.8)
Excitement/Enjoyment	88 (29.6)
Irritability/Response	17 (5.7)
Fear/Anxiety	105 (35.4)
Bashful/ Abstention	34 (11.4)
Question 4. What is your source of information that influenced you to choose your pet friend?	
Shelter Staff	203 (68.4)*
Close Friends	21 (7.1)
Social Media/Internet	45 (15.2)
Breeder/Petshop	28 (9.4)

Frequency with an asterisk () in the same column for each question title expresses the difference between the percentages of total frequency distributions ($p < 0.05$).*

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to reveal the preferences of individuals in adoptions made from animal shelters/nurseries, which are based on rehabilitating stray animals and protecting public health as well as animal health. Cat adoption rates are reportedly higher than other domestic animals worldwide (14). It is seen that dogs are more common in populations in animal shelters due to reasons such as the fact that cats are better adapted to the street individually, and their home care and costs are more affordable than dogs (15). These characteristics of cats also reduce their abandonment rates compared to dogs. These data explain why dogs were adopted more from shelters in this study. In addition, it is known that male individuals prioritize appearance and breed qualities in dog preference. This situation can be accepted as normal due to the diversity of different sizes, breeds, and purposes (protection, hunting, companionship). In women, it is seen that emotional attachment (pity, possessiveness, protection) plays a role in adoption. In the study, it was revealed that the feeling of pity was predominant due to the poor health status of the adopted animals, and this situation affected the adoption behaviour of women.

A study determined that the rate of adoption from the shelter was 4.8%, 23.7% from the street, and 37.1% from pet shops in total adoption ($n=704$). In the same study, when the reason for adoption was investigated, it was revealed that the majority, 72.6%, adopted a dog 'because I like it' and 7.2% adopted a dog 'because of loneliness and friendship'. As a general finding, those who want to adopt a dog prefer breeders and pet shops, while those who wish to adopt a cat prefer shelters (16). This is because dogs can be used for relatively qualified/educated jobs such as protection, hunting, and guarding. The fact that shelters in our country have a dog-dominated population explains individuals' high rate of dog adoption (17). According to Hirschman (18), one reason for adoption is that pets are perceived as siblings, family members, or friends and associated with people. In the results obtained from the study, the fact that the animal adopted from the shelter has a high expectation of 'being a friend' and that these animals are

approached with a feeling of pity reveals that individuals exhibit adoption behaviour with a sense of empathy. In addition, considering that the people who show the most adoption behaviour are over 45 years old, the high expectations of pity and friendship (19) show that the feeling of empathy and pity for shelter animals is intense in society. While communication and physical appearance come to the fore in the first contact when adopting a cat or dog, stray animals have recently become a problem, and the subsequent culling discourses have increased the adoption rate of animals confined to shelters with a sense of pity.

Across species and age groups, the most important reasons for adoption are the physical appearance of the animal, its social behaviour with its relatives, and personality. A related study determined a positive correlation between contact, play, or greeting/voicing behaviours and adoption in the first encounter between the individual and the animal (20). However, this study differs from other studies in that adoption is shaped, although fear/excitement/nervousness behaviours are exhibited in the first encounter.

It has been reported that the information about the animal conveyed by the staff or volunteer is generally more effective in adoption than the data on the cage cards and that the health and temperament information of the animal is also important. That interaction with the animal is more valuable than seeing it in its kennel or cage (20). Related studies show that the shelter staff mainly obtains information about the animals to be adopted (21). For this reason, shelter personnel positively affect the adoption rates by recognizing the adopted animals and providing sufficient and qualified information about them. In addition, these personnel are the only individuals who will evaluate the suitability of the family to be adopted, as well as the adopters. Although most animal owners report a high level of satisfaction with their newly adopted animals (9, 10), it is known that a significant portion of the adopted animals are returned to shelters for various reasons. Behavioural and health problems rank high among the reasons for abandonment (11), and it is important to convey these situations to the prospective owners correctly and to shape the adoption by establishing a connection with different parameters other than just appearance or pity feelings, in order to prevent possible abandonment. For this reason, factors such as the fact that the shelter personnel from whom the first information is received have sufficient knowledge about domestic animals and have a good command of breed characteristics will increase the possibility of animal adoption from shelters. In the study conducted, it was revealed that the information about the adopted animals mainly (68.4%) was received from the shelter staff; therefore, as stated above, the shelter staff is the key point in adoption.

Legal culling decisions regarding stray animals and dogs have become a problem that is increasing daily and disturbing society (22, 23). As a result, it is important to prevent abandonment, increase adoption from animal shelters, and make correct potential owner-pet matches for the welfare of pets and society. The results obtained from this study can be used to create better matches in shelters, prioritize shelter resources and staff training, determine the temperament of animals, match them with suitable families, and increase potential adoption. In addition, simple training techniques can be developed to ensure that animals in the shelter exhibit adopter-friendly behaviours, which can lead to stronger bonds between the owner and the animal.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Authors' Contributions

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Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the HADYEK- Local Ethics Committee for Animal Experiments office of Ondokuz Mayıs University with 24.02.2023/2023-4 approval number.

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