

Title: Understanding the nature of research undertaken by prospective dog owners

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Introduction: Little is known about whether potential owners undertake preparatory research, what advice they look for, or where they look for information, prior to acquiring a dog. There is an urgent need to understand this process so that strategies can be developed to promote responsible acquisition behaviours.

Methodology: A 2019 online survey of current (n=8,050) and potential (n=2,884) dog owners collected quantitative and qualitative data. Additional qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a total of 28 current and potential owners. Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS (v.26) and R (v.3.6.1). Transcribed interviews were coded in NVivo (v.12) utilising inductive thematic analysis.

Main findings: Of the current owners surveyed, just over half stated retrospectively that they had looked for advice or information prior to acquiring their dog (54%, 95% CI [53%, 56%]). Two-thirds of potential owners reported already having looked for information (68%, [66%, 69%]) and a further 14% [12%, 15%] were planning to undertake research. Websites were the most common source of information with three-quarters of current owners citing their use (76% [75%, 77%]). Other popular sources were family/friends (65%, [63%, 66%]), online forums (51%, [50%, 53%]) and books (37%, [36%, 39%]). Similar trends were seen among potential owners. Qualitative data revealed that information was commonly sought about diet, exercise, health, and training. A number of respondents wanted to know how to find responsible breeders. Some found conflicting advice from different sources and did not know which sources to trust.

Principle conclusions and implications for field: For many potential owners, research into various aspects of dog acquisition and ownership is important. Knowing where to look for correct and unbiased advice, particularly online, is of key importance. Findings may be of interest to organisations involved in pet welfare, especially those who provide advice related to dog acquisition.