

A Booklet

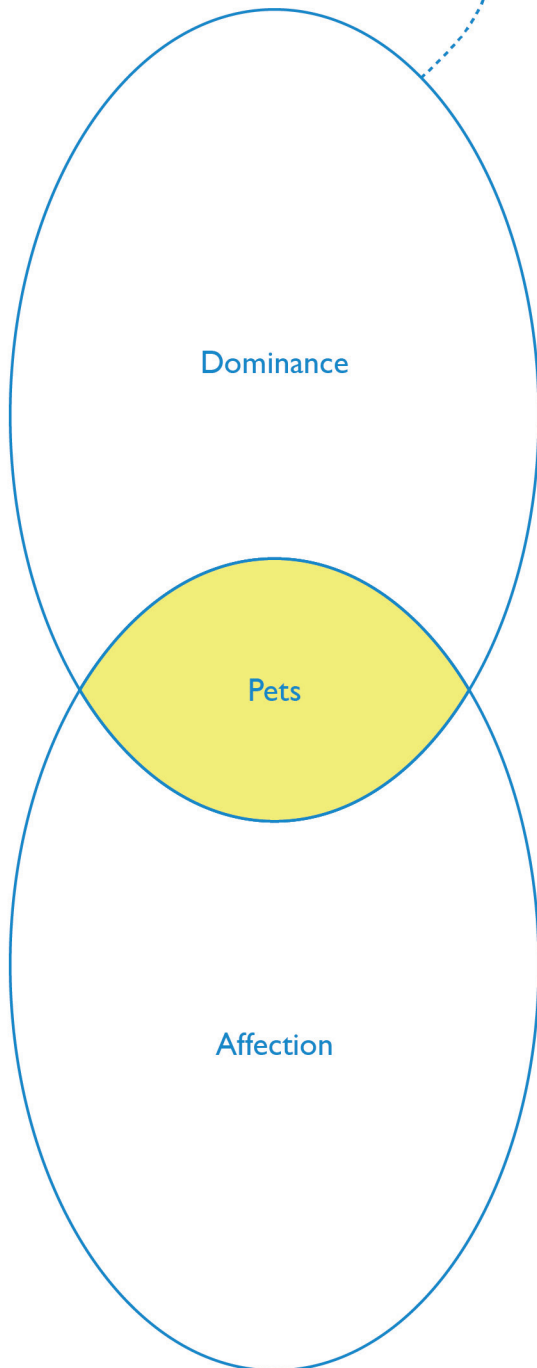
The Commodification
of Pet(hood)

OUR LOVE CAN BE A MIXED BAG



OUR
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One way of
looking



“Dominance may be combined with affection, and what it produces is the pet.”

Tuan (1984), J Nast (2015)

Humans and animals have coexisted since the beginning of time; however, the concept of *pets* is a relatively recent one. While dogs have been domesticated for years, *pethood* arose as a distinct concept in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when a distinction was made between farm and home animals. Today, it is estimated that 17.2 million (60%) of UK households own pets, of which 36% are dogs .

This relationship is one that has been investigated extensively; the “human: benefits of having a pet - physical and mental health, stress reduction, child surrogacy, reduced loneliness and so on - are hardly new concepts. However today, in a post-industrial and hyper-commodified culture, these relationships need to be re-examined and re-contextualized. Understanding how people perceive (the function of) pets can help us better understand not only human-animal relationships but people themselves.

Introduction

Is it a depressing oversimplification to consider human-pet relationships in post-industry places as an embodiment of alienation (loneliness, aloneness etc.)? What is the intensity and extent to which we invest in our pets, and what are the circuits of commodity in which our practices manifest?

Consider:

pet perfumes
couture, housing
pet cafés, diners
spas, parks
beaches, pet
airlines, hotels,
cemeteries and
therapists.

J Nast (2015)



Dolce & Gabbana
£83.00

Dog Fragrance

But wait, what about capitalism's relentless tendency to turn everything into a commodity? ¹

No

Are pets a *commodity* and/ or are they being *commodified*?

Yes

But how?

Through an industry that breeds, sells and provides goods, services and experiences for them.

Using pets as an outward display of success, wealth etc.

Buying, selling and displaying pets as extensions and expressions of human identity and self-worth. Pierce (2023)

How do pets (dogs) become a status symbol?

¹ Kuttner (2023) provides us with a handy list of sectors of the economy and society which are commodified and the few that are not. Commodification is not to be confused with privatization.



According to (Plemons, 2009), it is not enough to simply purchase an outrageously expensive item to gain social status: conspicuous consumption¹ must also include taste and distinction. For wealth and prestige to be conveyed successfully, the following four components must be present: choice, capacity, knowledge and visibility.

² Conspicuous consumption, introduced in Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), describes the practice of acquiring symbols of wealth to demonstrate social prestige, such that they signal recognition or social differentiation (Zimmer, 2021)

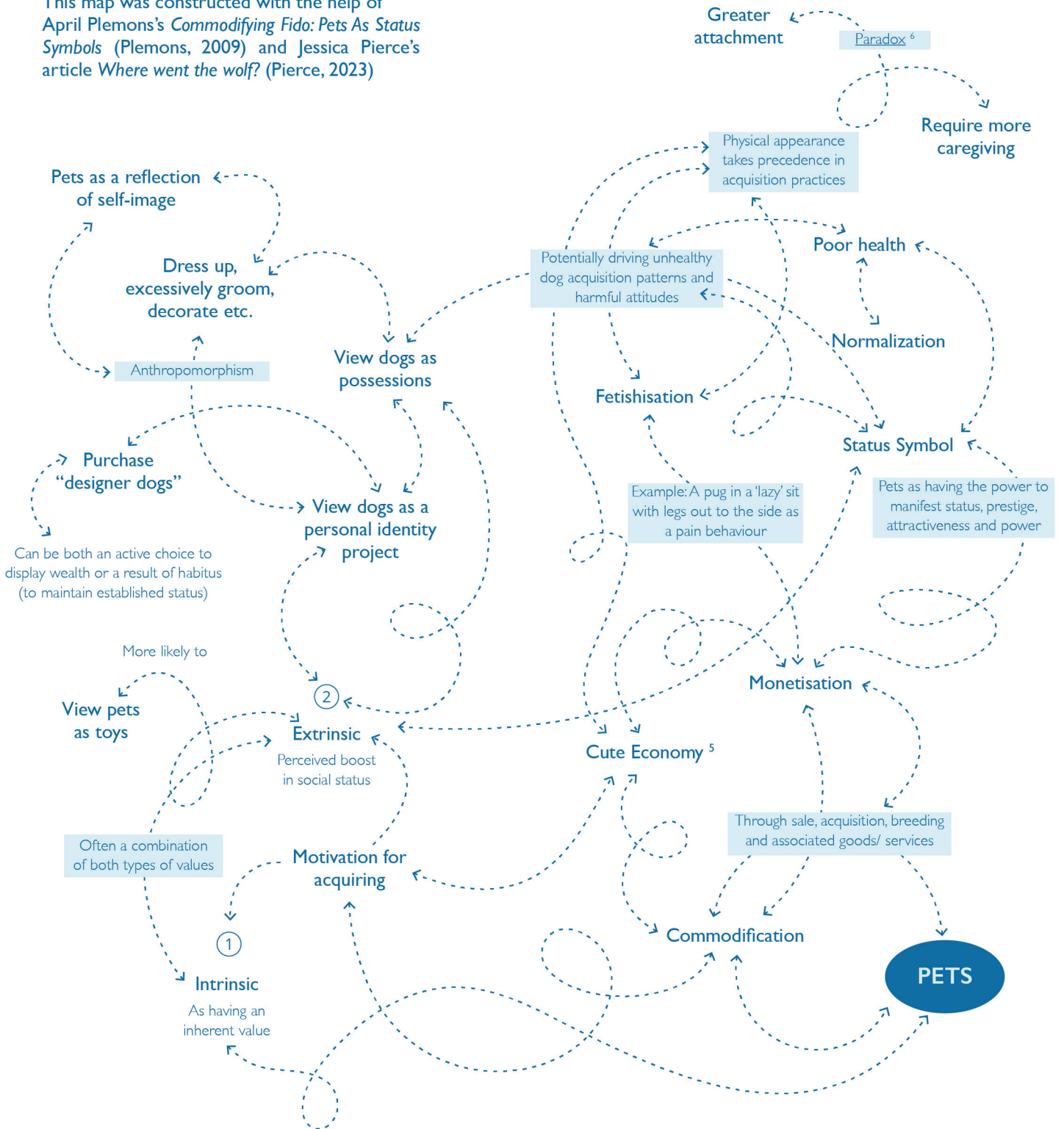
³ Status symbol refers to items purchased during the process of conspicuous consumption (Zimmer, 2021) - here the term is used to refer to a "successful" display of wealth or a consumption pattern of upward social mobility, as described by Plemons, 2009.

⁴ It is interesting to note here the illusion of consumer culture - one that assures universal availability or accessibility of coveted items, while simultaneously promising consumers the capacity to be socially superior by choice or distinction. (Plemons, 2009) (Warde 1997)

Conditions of Symbolizing Status

The Big Map of Commodification, Fetishisation & Status Symbols

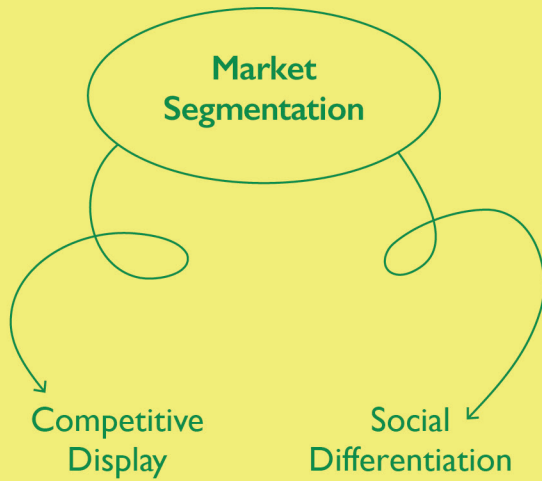
This map was constructed with the help of April Plemons's *Commodifying Fido: Pets As Status Symbols* (Plemons, 2009) and Jessica Pierce's article *Where went the wolf?* (Pierce, 2023)



5 The Cute Economy, as described by Meese (2014) exists primarily on social media and consists of "cute" photos of animals or pets - it is a billion dollar that can lead to the successful monetisation of a dog's cuteness (Pierce, 2023)

6 Paradoxically, a part of the appeal of cute small dogs may be their helplessness and disability. Acquiring dogs with poor health may be a deliberate choice as they require greater caregiving which elicits greater feelings of attachment ("Aww, how cute!") (Pierce, 2023).

Embodiments



dry, wet, semi-wet, moist, beef, steak, chicken, duck, rabbit, venison, seared ahi tuna, mahi-mahi; for: shiny coat, seniors, puppies, gastrointestinal issues, organic, high protein, low-fat, strong bones, weight maintenance, joint therapy, omega rich, vegan etc.

This industry or market is worth £4.1 billion⁷

Deliberate purchase of expensive and specialized goods

Symbolic signal of wealth and status
Status via consumption, i.e. a consumption pattern or behaviour that broadcast a message of cultural capital

“pet owners are able to convey prestige and wealth, even in the basic necessities - pet food.”

Plemons (2009)



Orijen Tundra & Small Breed Puppy
£34.99 for 2kg | with raw lamb, venison, duck and fish ingredients
£26.99 for 1.8kg | with raw chicken, salmon, turkey, hake and herring

In March 2018, a class-action lawsuit was filed against Champion Petfoods, the maker of “premium” pet food brands Orijen and Acana. The lawsuit accused the company of “negligent, reckless” practices, false advertising and “failing to disclose the presence of heavy metals and toxins” in its pet foods. The case is still making it’s way through the legal system. (Baker, 2019)

Embodiments

gifts, accessories and luxury items given to the pet become symbols of social prestige.

While these goods may benefit or be enjoyed by the pet, visible methods of conspicuous consumption signal social distinction and status.



Nathalie Knauf's £650,000 diamond and paraiba choker



①



②



③



1. The world's most expensive dog collar by Amour Amour, close to worth £2.5 million
2. Louis Vuitton's Dog Carrier, £2,700
3. Christian Louboutin's Loubicollar, £285

“...ostentatious and unique pieces are reserved for only the most privileged and high status members of a group; the commodity allows exclusivity and exception.”

Plemons (2009)

Embodiments



*The rarer
the puppy,
the higher
the price!*

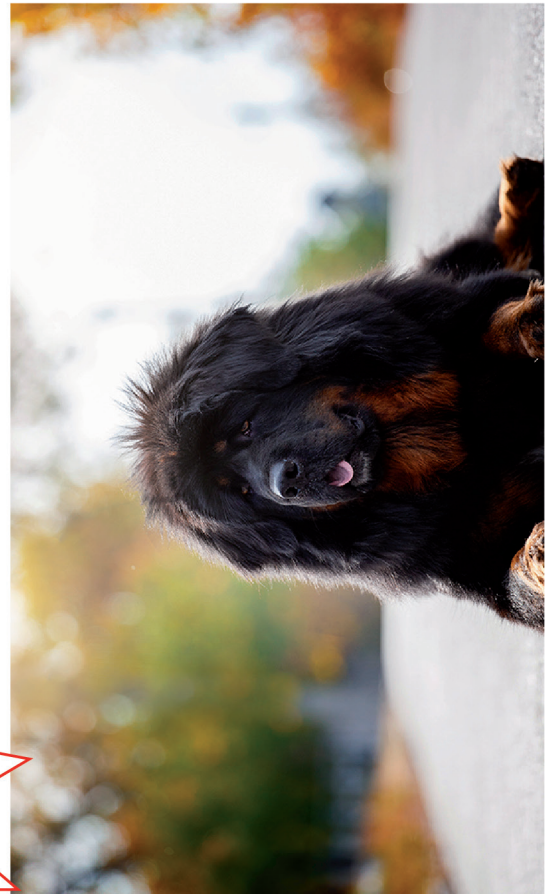
Rottweiler

*Strong, intelligent and protective,
developed as guard dogs*

In Russia, Rottweilers became a well known status symbol and came to be known as “the mafia’s favourite breed”, representing wealth and elitism. “Having a serious and expensive guard dog means you have something serious and expensive to guard.” (Koenig, 1996)

Designer dogs fulfil the rules of commodity as they function as both a pet or companion, while still providing prestige, status and wealth.

“Hybrids” are created for aesthetic and superficial reasons and is transformed into a highly fetishized and desired item, that is available to a select few (Plemons, 2009)



Tibetan Mastif

Reserved, independent and intelligent

One of the world’s most expensive breeds, the Tibetan Mastif was seen as a symbol of extreme wealth - at the height of which, a puppy was sold for \$1.9 million in 2014. However by following year, the market for Tibetan Mastiffs became “oversaturated” and many buyers who initially sought the breed for status realized they were unprepared for practical realities of owning these huge, independent dogs. (Ladd, 2024)

i.e. Conclusion

This project originated with a book of David Hockney's paintings, *Dog Days*, which contained a set of warm and delightful paintings of Hockney's two pets (best friends) - Stanley and Boogie. What grew from there was an elaborate examination of the commodification of pethood, i.e., the way pets are situated in systems of consumption, display, and status.

Undoubtedly, the motivations for pet ownership are complex - composed often of both affection and extrinsic factors. However, within a consumerist culture, it becomes important to ask: what are the sociological factors that affect pet care? And how can the intrinsic worth of animals be affected by these factors? (Think: lifestyle, status, aspirations). Through examining luxury items and "designer breeds," we can question how love and ownership often intersect in capitalist economies.

Drawing from Hockney's *Dog Days* (no pun intended), we can begin to find a visual language that can resist this commodification. Hockney's loving portraits of his dachshunds celebrate companionship with little objectification. These present a strong contrast to highly commercialized objects that act as signals of social status instead of symbols of care - from Louis Vuitton dog carriers to diamond studded necklaces.

By reflecting on the position of non-human life in a culture of commodification and ownership, we can re-establish pethood in reciprocal and empathetic ways. There's no doubt that we love our pets abundantly, but we can certainly do better; to quote Jessica Pierce: "Our love can be a mixed bag."

So what was
the point of
all of this?

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Louis Vuitton
Dog Bed Trunk

£10,700

Gucci Nylon
Pet Rain Coat

£665