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Does Your Dog Really Want a Trip to the Beauty Parlor?

Extreme dog grooming and pet day spas reflect the humanization of pets.

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*This guest post was written by Dr. Kathy Shepherd Stolley. An applied sociologist at Virginia Wesleyan University, she is co-editor of the forthcoming book *Animals and Ourselves: Essays on Connections and Blurred Boundaries*.*



Source: Photo by damedeeso 123RF

Recently, Lola, a Golden Retriever and poodle mix, became a viral Internet sensation after a visit to a groomer. Lola's appointment was for a routine fur and nail trim, and teeth and ear cleaning. However, the dog came away with an injury on her underside from a close cut that required a vet visit, and only partially groomed according to her human, Graziella Puleo.

The naturally buff-toned Lola was also considerably more colorful after leaving her spa grooming than when she went in, sporting shaved neon green

eyebrows and tail and neon pink ears. [Salon owner Raquel Adams said](#) that she added the color because Lola was "missing something." The intent was to "beautify" the dog and make Puleo happy. [Puleo was not happy](#), equating that beautification to something more akin to a clown. Lola's photos landed on social media, and the rest, as they say, is Internet history.

Lola's unintentional celebrity status from her unique coif and color may seem, at a quick read, to be just an odd or amusing or irksome story depending on one's perspective, largely centered on standards of animal grooming and client service. Considered in a wider context, however, Lola's predicament can be viewed as a point in the long history of human modification of other animal bodies to fit human tastes or preferences.



Source: Photo by 32941848 123RF

These modifications serve, in effect, to differentiate human and animals. We selectively breed dogs with physical traits that humans find cute (think teacup-size pups or very wrinkly Shar-peis) or to compete for “Best in Show,” but not always with the dog’s best interest at heart. An example, those adorable little flat-faced dogs like pugs can have breathing problems requiring surgical correction for relief. We crop some breed’s ears and tails because of tradition. We de-claw cats to protect our furniture (although that practice is largely falling out of favor). These examples also nod to just how institutionalized such practices are. Most have become so commonplace that they largely continue, often with little critical notice, until something like Lola’s neon highlights catches our [attention](#).

You Might Enjoy A Day Spa, But Does Your Dog?

Our human approaches to animals, and correspondingly the ways in which we modify animal bodies, are evolving. We are increasingly humanizing the companion animals in our lives, identifying adored [pets](#) as family members who we see as being a lot like us. [We even give them human-sounding names](#). Max and Bella have trended among the top monikers for both dogs and cats in recent years. Reasons theorized for this humanization of pets vary, from increasing percentages of “furkids” living in single and childfree households to [increasingly effective flea treatments](#) that make rooming with a furry animal more comfortable for all involved.

Whatever the factors, this humanization lens shifts focus to similarities between and humans and animals, and the modification of animal bodies shifts in new ways that were previously reserved for humans. So, the thinking goes, if we humans enjoy spa days, our canines might as well. On Lola’s spa day, she had her nails and hair done, or as a human spa client might have experienced, a mani/pedi and a cut and color. “Beautifying” the dog was no longer defined as making sure she looked like a dog, but by adding some distinctly non-dog highlights (at least as far as natural dog colors go).

Spas are big business for pampered animals, just as they are for human clientele, garnering column space in outlets as venerable as [The New York Times](#). Customized menus of services range from widely advertised “pawdicures,” to indulgent fruit-based facials, to therapeutic massage. Dogs can de-[stress](#) with some “doga” (aka yoga in the human version), aromatherapy, and a visit with their therapist. If humans can order it at a spa, a dog probably can too. According to [American Pet Products Association data](#), such services make up a \$6+ billion portion of the more than \$70 billion we spend annually on our pets when food, vet care, supplies, and other purchases are tallied.

The World of Extreme Dog Grooming.

Beyond the spa, a niche form of dog grooming has ditched the basic bath and brush out for more unique looks in the form of extreme grooming competitions. Armed with pet-safe dyes, scissors, blow dryers, decorative accouterments, and an abundance of [creativity](#), extreme groomers transform dogs into colorful, decidedly non-dog-appearing creatures in these events. Disney characters. Flamingoes and birds galore. Lions, and tigers, and bears. Various wildlife. Mythical creatures. And more. Extreme groomers are limited only by their imaginations and the amount of



Source: Photo by Lebovox CC

dog and fur they have to work with. Poodles, whose natural fur lends itself well to styling, are often the preferred breed. The groomers, many of whom see their beloved dogs largely as children, enjoy showcasing them and are quick to share with any critics that their dogs enjoy their make-overs and the [bonding](#) time the pair experience. Extreme grooming competitions have even been likened to child beauty pageants. Now featured at some high profile events for groomers, extreme grooming competitions have grown in popularity (see [here](#) and [here](#).) And they are the subject of their own documentary, [Well Groomed](#).

Canine Beauty Pageants?

In the world of dog beauty, it is not just rainbow poodles that get to strut their stuff for accolades. Canine beauty competitions generally held to support animal-related charities, give dogs the opportunity to show off their “natural” beauty. Although these

pageant participants might just walk on a leash in the hopes of getting adopted from a shelter, some contestants get to compete in categories that sound more traditionally human than pup. The 2019 [Hamptons Barking Beauty Pageant](#) held in Westhampton Beach, New York saw dogs competing in activewear, glamorwear, and talent categories as well as vying to be dubbed most photogenic, all for a charitable cause. Overall winner Lil' Baby Bun Bun, an adorable black and white barker who bested the field of nearly 30 other contestants, took home the award for Congenial Canine as well. Also in the name of charity and beauty - beautiful fashion that is - Chihuahuas Princess Meghan Barkle and Harry Prince of Tails stole the show at the 2019 New York Pet Fashion Show by arriving in a tiny white carriage for their ["Royal Pup-tial Wedding."](#) Endeavoring to find homes for rescue dogs, the pet fashion show touts the slogan "Adopt a Little New Yorker Today!"

Blurring the Boundaries

Evolutions in the human-pet relationship shed light on how we think about other species and raise interesting ethical issues. As we humanize those companion animals more and more, we treat them in increasingly humanized terms. I am personally reminded of this every evening at dinnertime when my Labrador retriever chows down on canned dog food fashioned after grandmother's hearty stew, then curls up on his own comfy foam bed where he drifts off to sleep, snoring as old dogs do, nearby the shelf of family photos that, of course, includes him. In his picture, he's sporting his red bandana and yellow tag – the "uniform" for his "job" as a certified [therapy](#) dog. In the days when he used to make regular therapy visits to a local hospital, the facility also required he display his own official photo id badge as a member of the hospital's volunteer roster and provided him paw-signed notes for greeting guests. We want our pets to have comfort, health, and lives of beauty just as we want those things for any other family member, so we seek to improve them and their lives accordingly. A result is blurring of the human-animal boundaries that treat and modify animal bodies in many ways previously reserved as human. While there is no evidence that a dog needs or wants neon highlights, designer glamorwear, a blueberry facial, or faux grandmother's stew to be a happy dog, those things do seem to variously please some dog-loving humans.

In an oversimplification, one might say that we modify their animal-ness in seeking to find outlets for our humanness. What this means for humans and animals alike continues to be part of the ongoing evolution of our relationships with the companion animal in our lives.

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