

COMMODIFYING FIDO: PETS AS STATUS SYMBOLS

A Thesis

by

APRIL M. PLEMONS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

August 2008

Major Subject: Sociology

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ABSTRACT

Commodifying Fido: Pets as Status Symbols. (August 2008)

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How are pets being used as status symbols to display social position and wealth? This paper seeks to theoretically examine pet owners and their use of animals to convey a message of social status, position and wealth. This will be done through an application of theoretical constructs by Veblen, Marx, and Bourdieu and applications to concepts of consumerism, status, commodities and distinction. While the human-animal relationship has been investigated in terms of the human benefits of physical and mental health, stress reduction, child surrogacy, loneliness reduction and more, there have been fewer investigations of pets as social status symbols.

This thesis creates a more inclusive theoretical approach to commodities being used as status symbols. After a historical look at how the function of pets has evolved in relation to humans, the more inclusive theory is applied to real world examples of pets in modern affluent societies such as pet luxury items, designer breeds, market segmentation, and mass availability of those products.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Humane Society estimates there are over 78 million dogs in 39% of all American households (2008). Two-thirds of American households have pets while only one-third have children (Gettleman, 2008). American pet owners spent almost twenty billion dollars on pet food alone last year (APPMA, 2008), while only typically spending fourteen billion on baby food and baby formula *combined* (Nielsen, 2008). The function of a companion animal has evolved from hunting partner, to nuclear family component, to best friend, and now to commodity to help one accrue social status. It is difficult turn on the television or open a magazine today without seeing a \$1,500 puppy sitting in a \$3,000 designer purse. The wealthy, celebrities, and those of high social standing are increasing spending on their pets exponentially on goods such as designer pet furniture, expensive custom breeds, diamond encrusted collars, and spa treatments worth several hundred dollars. Doga (doggie yoga), lavish pet birthday bashes, and fashionable accessories seem to serve the needs of the owner rather than the pet. During the 1950's, people were trying to "keep up with the Joneses" in fear of being the last to get their hands on the latest product; today, this is no longer the case (Schor, 9). The goal now is to upstage the Joneses in hopes of displaying your social position.¹

This thesis follows the journal style of the *American Sociological Review*.

Veblen stated dogs were the "nearly ideal tokens of wealth and the owner's capacity to waste large amounts of economic resources" (Veblen, v.) because they served almost no useful function. Are pets now being used as status symbols to display social position and wealth? This paper seeks to theoretically examine pet owners and how they use animals to convey a message of social status, position and wealth. This will be done using concepts by Veblen, Marx, and Bourdieu and creating applying their concepts to consumerism, status and distinction.

In order to address issues of status value, some specific arguments need to be assessed. Are pets being commodified? If so, are these commodified pets fetishized, and if so does this increase the chances of them being conspicuously consumed? How do these pet owners know what goods will be successful in conveying the message of status, and how do they know to properly display them? Investigating objects or commodities used as social status indicators involves first exploring and understanding these underlying concepts and arguments. Using theoretical constructs, I will begin with examining how the function of pets for humans has evolved over time.

The human-pet relationship has been studied for reasons such as health and therapeutic benefits, stress reduction, child surrogacy, and loneliness reduction. However, the sociology of pets is important because *how* people

perceive the function of their pets tells us about the humans themselves and the relationships they develop. Others may employ a psychological, physiological, or economic perspective to study pets as commodities, but research of this nature can provide valuable knowledge to the field of sociology.

This paper can contribute to the sociological subdivision of culture and broader consumer behavior literature. The population of pet owners is currently just above 71.1 million households according to the APPMA (2008), and the subculture that commodifies their pets and uses them as status symbols is apparent and growing exponentially. Using a more inclusive theoretical argument to assess commodity consumption for status seeking purposes, it will help examine pet owners through a cultural lens. Secondly, this study will expand consumer sociology. In addition, much of consumer sociology's theories, research and literature are focused on production. While the production of consumer products is essential, consumer behavior, motivation and manner of product utilization is just as important. This thesis will add to both the fields of culture and consumerism in sociology.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

Using concepts created by Thorstein Veblen in *Theory of the Leisure Class*, Karl Marx in *Capital*, Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: a Social Critique of Judgment and Taste*, and others, this thesis discusses conspicuous consumption, commodity fetishism and distinction on consumerism and status. This section introduces those ideas but I leave their limitations and my plan to piece them together for a later section.

Consumption, Goods and Consumer Behavior

Literature on consumption typically focuses on the production of goods and has only recently focused on the function they serve to the purchaser. Additionally, there is a lack of consensus on the basic definition of consumption; however, Alan Warde offers one that is simple and direct in his book, "Consumption, Food and Taste". He defines consumption as, "who obtains what services or goods, under what conditions are those services delivered and to what use are they put" (19). Consumption is a social activity and one which the intent, initial purchase, and use of the good are all based on society's relative perception of the purchaser. The function of those goods is relative because of the social context in which their interests are being played out (Jhally, 6).

Modern, affluent societies are placing increasingly more importance on the social comparison of consumption and its process rather than the basic

utility of the object being consumed (Schor, 108). In *Capital*, Marx defines a good or commodity as "first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise of example from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference... every useful thing is a whole composed of many properties; it can therefore be useful in various ways" (Tucker, 303). The process of consumption, or consumption behavior, was seen by Bourdieu as means "whereby social classes display their 'cultural capital' and their place in a hierarchical system of social distinction" (Warde, 10).

He finds consumption behavior may be generated by one's habitus (set of cultural dispositions embedded in our social situations) or class position, however, it appears that one's motivation to consume is more likely to be influenced by the individual's desires to display wealth, status and social position. While class largely determines one's ability to consume in a particular capacity, the process of consumption and its motivation are not bound by one's class or rank. Traditionally, these consumer desires have been prompted by exposure to the possessions and lifestyles of a reference group, a comparison groups located nearby in the social hierarchy (Schor, 27). Consumption is no longer primarily centering on utility and function of the good first and its

symbolic meaning second; instead, goods are primarily used to emulate higher classes and impress our status on others and its utility is an afterthought.

Modernity and Interaction

In pre-modern societies, people belonged to much more intimate and close-knit groups. Today, the world is much more urban and industrialized which causes those social bonds and networks to become farther apart and more delicate. Our next door neighbors were our friends and social support system, while now they are merely the people who live in your geographic area. Close, intimate groups like those in pre-modern times, had the benefit of not needing to broadcast their status, prestige, class and social position; they already had this immediate knowledge of members' standings and wealth. However, modernity has strained those ties and caused it's members to disperse farther away from the central community in more ways than just geographically; without society's members being privy to the details of our lives like before, we must now publicize our status and wealth through tangible goods and commodities. We must generate new forms of displaying information about ourselves and communicating with others. These new impersonal measures are playing a far more significant role, and our communication networks have multiplied dramatically. Mason finds individuals must learn to create and respond to signals from a far wider circle than ever before (102). These signals are more

commonly transmitted and presented through commodities, services, and status symbols in Western societies.

Commodity Fetishism and Status Symbols

"As a society gets richer and more goods are available to a wider group of people, so the average standard also rises and the level of satisfaction remains stable" (Jhally, 13). In order to keep up with the rising standard of status in society, many use such tactics as conspicuous or vicarious consumption. Sut Jhally (26) says the fetishism of commodities refers "precisely to the relationship between people and products and to the relation between use value and exchange value".

While Marx's speaks of consumption in terms of materials used in production and commodities in relation to their labor and use value, he explicitly addressed society's obsession with goods. His commodity fetishism term states that goods are given intrinsic meaning and symbolic power; these powers are not inherent to the object, but rather, they are created *for* them by society. This fetishism makes us believe a particular product or service contains the power and ability to manifest status, prestige, attractiveness, and distinction from other members. Through the process of socialization, fetishism "consists of seeing the meaning of things as an inherent part of their physical existence, when in fact that meaning is created by their integration into a system of

meaning" in society (Jhally, 29). Commodity fetishism is a socially constructed illusion created in relation to the products.

A common symbolic meaning, or sign-value, of particular goods today is one of status. Certain objects are coveted for their social-symbolic value which places the consumer in a particular social circle (Warde, 198). This ever-widening circle in which consumers are reflexively interacting is made up several points of reference. While individuals and consumer culture as a whole simultaneously influence the creation of most symbolic values and interpretations, there can be no doubt that media is becoming an increasingly larger source of their conception. Media shows the role that commodities *could* play in our lives, even though they may not be attainable by everyone who is exposed to them (Jhally, 18). It has helped to vertically stretch out our reference groups and "inflate our sense of what is normal" (Schor, 81). Each symbolic meaning may originate from different sources, but the power that those signs hold to convey an intended message is considerable.

Conspicuous Consumption

"Conspicuous consumption is concerned primarily with the ostentatious display of wealth motivated by a desire to impress others with the ability to pay particularly high prices for prestigious products" (Mason, viii); this behavior would allow one to buy their way into a higher social stratum. In a sense, wealth

alone is a sufficient reason to award status as long as the wealth is displayed through commodity consumption and competitive display. It can be defined as the "ostentatious display of goods and services which are both expensive and highly valued by others and provides the individual with an alternative path to social prestige in any society which recognizes wealth as a major determinant of status" (Mason, 7). The goal of the consumer is to show the ability to waste money – the more expensive the product, the better. In these affluent societies, it is extremely gratifying to be able to possess more than others, especially our neighbors. Marx provides a brilliant illustration of this idea in *Capital*:

A house may be large or small; as long as the surrounding houses are equally small, it satisfies all social demands for a dwelling. But let a palace arise beside the little house and it shrinks from a little house to a hut... if the neighboring palace grows to an equal or even greater extent, the occupant of the relatively small house will feel more and more uncomfortable, dissatisfied and cramped within its four walls.... Our desires and pleasures spring from society. We measure them, therefore, by society and not by the objects which serve for their satisfaction. Because they are of a social nature, they are of a relative nature (32-33).

Spending habits and emulation become the means to obtain acceptance within those particular categories. Yet, one cannot simply consume wealthy objects; the goods must be visible by those we wish to receive this impression management. It is extremely important in conspicuous consumption that goods be visible to those being emulated so to demonstrate one's own pecuniary standing.

It is important to note that there two different ways in which conspicuous consumption and display can be directed: horizontally and vertically.

Horizontally directed consumption seeks to maintain or achieve social status within one's own group, and vertically directed consumption seeks to secure recognition and prestige from higher groups (Mason, 23). The modern consumer may either seek to secure gains from others within his own social status group, or he may seek to gain status from members of a group which he aspires to belong.

Hines aptly notes that Veblen's theory "allowed for people to choose the consumption groups to which they wished to belong, but he generally assumed that there was but a single ladder of status advancement. Today we have a multidimensional matrix of taste and status on which we can climb in many directions and in which high and low culture intersect in unexpected ways" (158). He believed vertical social advancement was a certain effect of ostentatious display; not only is acceptance into higher groups not guaranteed, but he failed to realize that members can seek status in many directions other than vertically. This critique of Veblen's conspicuous consumption theory is central to this thesis, and therefore, Bourdieu's notions of distinction and taste need examination. It is an unrealistic assumption to believe that simply mimicking the behaviors of a prestigious or dominant class will be awarded

with membership; the goal of gaining status within one's own membership group requires much different methods than attempting to acquire stature in an aspirant or reference group, and will be addressed in the next section.

Distinction and Taste

The status seeking consumer who consumes conspicuously to increase his social position must face the problem of legitimacy or else risk being seen as a fraud. The concept of taste is based on the idea that objects have meanings, and that people who share taste can agree on the meaning, even multiple and often contradictory meanings (Hines, 144). Bourdieu contends that we should think of consumption as a battlefield in which taste is created through cultural capital. Cultural capital can be defined as "the process whereby those with other bases of power have attempted to legitimate their own taste as good taste and thereby further justify their own superiority by proclaiming themselves deserving and worthy of distinction" (Warde, 114).

Each class perpetuates and attempts to maintain their status and distinction throughout the generations which causes a systematic and socially embedded hierarchy of legitimacy and taste. This helps to create one's habitus, or set of dispositions based on personal experiences, lifestyle, social and economic positions. Habitus is "the mental schema that individuals use to process subjectively the objective world around them" (Schor, 29); through it,

socially constructed tastes become natural and part of who we are. These dispositions provide the basis of that person's judgments, practices, behaviors, and their system of symbolic meanings. The lower groups accept the dominant group's taste as legitimate and worthy, and therefore, strive to emulate it in their attempts to belong to the upper crust. Through this process, the upper social stratum has directly influenced what is defined as legitimate taste for *all* classes; this cyclical behavior helps to solidify the social hierarchies.

Choice or Habitus?

The most obvious difference between Bourdieu and Veblen has to do with the psychological aspects of class distancing (Schor, 220). Veblen status seekers are far more conscious of their goal. They are completely aware that they are using conspicuous consumption to gain status; their motivation for displaying wealth and indulgent consumerism is transparent. He states:

[The standard] is an ideal of consumption that lies just beyond our reach, or to reach which requires some stain. The motive is emulation – the stimulus of an invidious comparison which prompts us to outdo those with whom we are in the habit of classing ourselves.... Each class envies and emulates the class next above it on the social scale (Veblen, 103).

However, Bourdieu proposes that taste has become naturalized and individuals are not as conscious of the class implications of their choices. Their consumer behaviors and consumption patterns are due more to their habitus and lifestyle than a sentient action. He explains:

The habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions... That is why an agent's whole set of practices are both systematic, inasmuch as they are the product of the application of identical schemes... The practices of all agents of the same class, over the stylistic affinity which makes each of them a metaphor of any of the others to the fact that they are the product of transfers of the same schemes of action from one field to another... It is found in all the properties and property with which individuals and groups surround themselves, and in the practices in which they manifest their distinction, only because it is in the systematic unity of the habitus, the unifying, generative principle of all practices (170-172).

While the motivation or stimulus may be driven by a desire for class distinction, the response is not entirely based in free choice.

Regardless of whether or not the consumer is aware, it does not explain what is going on in the consumer's head. We cannot say if they are aware of their consumer patterns, and we can infer nothing about their feelings (Schor, 53). Without sampling individuals in the marketplace about their background and lifestyle, we have no idea if their actions stem from habitus or a conscious decision to appeal to a higher social class. It seems impossible to be able to determine the exact point where habitus and lifestyle stop influencing the consumer and conscious, goal driven desires begin; therefore, we will only focus on consumerism based only on choice.

3. A MORE INCLUSIVE APPROACH

Many studies on the human-pet relationship focus on self-expression or identity, but there are also studies which focus on pets as child surrogates, decreasing loneliness or stress in single adults or the elderly, health benefits, anthropomorphism, sources of bereavement, and life-course training (Beck and Katcher, 1983; Johnson and Rule, 1991; Ory and Goldberg, 1983; Suthers-McCabe, 2001; Sable, 1995; Margolies, 1999; Richang, Na, and Headey, 2005; Goldmeier, 1986; Albert and Bulcroft, 1988; and Zasloff and Kidd, 1994). Yet many of their perspectives and findings are too reductionist in their views. Much of consumption literature finds consumer behavior patterns are attributed to identity, personal image or self expression, so there is need for expansion in other areas. Moreover, "self identity is examined with little reference to its inseparable counterpart, social identification, which is partially misunderstood" and underdeveloped (Warde, 197). Other literature focuses on "massification", mass culture, or media as hypnotizing or manipulating consumers into purchasing particular goods (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1979; Macdonald, 1957). Culture industries dupe society by "increasingly feeding anodyne cultural products to consumers who receive [the manipulations] in private and passively accept them" (Warde, 17). This seems to doubt any rationality or free thinking by consumers and assumes society lacks the intelligence to make their own judgments (Gans, 1999; Kellner, 1995; Fiske, 1987).

[Symbolic systems] are complex, fluid, and polysemic... Consumers are not passive recipients of symbolic associations. They can appropriate the meanings that advertisers hope to connect to products, changing them to fit their own lifestyles. Second, the symbolic system operates in a more complex fashion than as a trickle from rich down to poor (Schor, 41).

Schor and others accurately underscore the fact that while consumers may be influenced by media and culture industries, they are free to use previously created symbolic associations or create their own meanings (Hall, 1981). Also, those symbols (of status or otherwise) are not bound to flow from top to bottom; they can move freely horizontally or vertically across reference and membership groups.

Veblen correctly observed that consuming conspicuously is an effective method of conveying a message of status, wealth and prestige; however, he claimed the only requirement of the purchase is that it need be expensive and wasteful. He explains:

Prowess and exploit may still remain the basis of award of the highest popular esteem, although the possession of wealth has become the basis of commonplace reputability and of a blameless social standing... The human proclivity to ostentation, reinforced by sentiments of goodfellowship, leads them to spend freely in those directions which will best serve [the valued opinion of others]... In order to effectively mend the consumer's good fame it must be an expenditure of superfluities. In order to be reputable, it must be wasteful. No merit would accrue from the consumption of the bare necessities of life (29, 90-97).

While that may necessary, it is not sufficient. Conspicuous consumption literature states the rich spend conspicuously as a kind of personal advertisement to secure a place in the social hierarchy (Schor, 8) and thus

beginning a trickle down process. Not only are consumption patterns multidirectional, but simply purchasing an outrageously expensive item is not enough to gain stature; you must consume the right *kind* of items. Merely purchasing items that the majority of society does not have access to will not exclusively procure prestige; they must possess the correct symbolic meaning and distinction. When attempting to gain status through consumption, Veblen's theory is not enough; taste and distinction *must be* included. Furthermore, it seems society would be not be as quick to use vicarious display without our obsession with commodities. Marx's commodity fetishism allows people to believe certain goods contain the magical power to award recognition through their purchase and display. A more comprehensive approach including *all three* theorists would be more appropriate. Rather than using a narrower lens to study status symbols, we should be using a broader and more inclusive process which interlaces their three concepts.

In my approach to commodities as status symbols, I believe four components must be present: choice, capacity, knowledge, and visibility. Below I provide a brief description of why each must be present in order for one to successfully convey a message of wealth and prestige. Furthermore, the duality of commodities being consumed must possess just the right balance of utility and conspicuousness in order to be successful; commodities cannot be one

extreme or the other less the consumer risk jeopardizing legitimacy². Finally, it is incredibly important to address reference groups. Membership versus aspirant groups decides whether you are competing to impress within your own group or trying to gain access to an aspirant group. This is significant because it determines who you should emulate, how you should proceed, and the likelihood of success.

CHOICE. A person who attempts to gain status through commodities makes a conscious choice to emulate others in hopes of gaining acceptance and prestige. This is a result of what Veblen calls "invidious comparison" whereby a person grades their own value and legitimacy (in a moral and aesthetic sense) by how he believes others will judge him in relation to his worth (Veblen, 34). The status seeker is actively and consciously making the choice to display his wealth and social position through the competitive display of commodities. If no conscious decision is made and status is accrued by goods *without* invidious comparison, it is likely the result of one's habitus. The consumer is only reproducing what he has been socialized to do; it is maintaining a lifestyle and

¹ Goods used for status seekers must possess a delicate balance of both function and ostentatious display; they must display both utility and conspicuousness to be effective. If they are purely functional, the consumer will not gain prestige because it lacks a sense of being wasteful and lavishness. If the commodity is seen by the group as purely flamboyant and serving no function or utility, it is perceived as a frivolous and doubts the legitimacy and knowledge of the consumer.

status that has long been established, not attempting to advance the social hierarchy.

CAPACITY/ABILITY. "The display of wealth has to be big enough not only to impress those members of the target audience at or below the wealth or income norm of the group, but also those individuals whose wealth is above the norm and whose opinions are deferred to by other group members" (Mason, 30). The successful status seeker must be able to cross the economic divide between his own membership group and the group which he is attempting to gain access or status. Without the capacity to conspicuously consume and afford the commodities to display, the consumer does not have the necessary means to an end. "The power conferred by wealth affords a motive to accumulate" (Veblen, 32), and Mason agrees that accumulate wealth is necessary to finance one's status aspirations (11). Not only must the consumer have the financial ability to possess the suitable commodities, but he must also possess the capacity to gain consensus of approval and acceptance from the group being emulated. Access to such pecuniary ability and conspicuous consumption is greatly increased or decreased depending on one's habitus and social class. Unfortunately, "consumer culture fosters the illusion that coveted items are universally available and accessible while simultaneously promising purchasers the capacity through proper choice to render themselves superior to others" (Warde, 107).

KNOWLEDGE. As previously noted, Veblen's argument of conspicuous consumption is only credible if the person knows *what* to buy and how to display it. Simply purchasing a wasteful and expensive item is not enough to gain prestige if the consumer does not display a commodity which is viewed by the other members as having high social symbolic value; one must be "highly skilled in aesthetic appreciation" in order to be viewed as credible and legitimate (Warde, 36). Without the knowledge of the "right" goods to purchase, all other efforts will be fruitless. The status seeker must somehow gain the correct knowledge of what commodities to consume and display; this is usually accomplished by observing another social stratum or taken directly from an "expert" within the group. However, "once these practices are adopted by a large number of people they become less attractive; universal availability misses a key aspect of the logic of consumer society which is that its most appealing items must be elusive in order to function as a social marker of distinction" (Warde, 108). The consumer must then have the knowledge to be able to discern between old status symbols and the new. Yet, obtaining access to such knowledge often varies depending on financial capacity.

VISIBILITY. Because leisure and wealth are often intangible, many seek out valuable items as marks of their status which sets off a never ending competition (Hines, 157). If the consumer has chosen to attain status through conspicuous consumption, and is aware of what commodities to buy, all efforts

will be wasted if the goods are not visibly displayed. "In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence" (Veblen, 41). The only way the audience can receive the intended message is if the commodities are seen and the symbolic meaning is interpreted; otherwise, all efforts to claim social rank and position will have been in vain.

Warde adds:

An impression of social superiority as Veblen argued can partly be achieved simply through the purchase and display of very expensive goods but this will always remain a strategy open only to the rich. However, symbolic differentiation can also be achieved through the wielding and manipulating of symbols that are not deemed exclusive simply by their cost, but by their association with the good taste of knowledgeable or influential social groups (98).

Reference Groups

Reference groups are only quickly referenced by each theorist, but are important to address when discussing status seeking behaviors. Veblen notes that "value is not from owning the possessions, but the prepotency of being able to own these goods over other people within the community" (29). It is essential to know if one is using vertical or horizontally directed consumption because it reveals whether one is competing for status in his own membership group or if he is attempting to gain prestige in an aspirant group. In addition, in order for the consumer to get the knowledge of what to consume, he must know which

reference groups to emulate--as well as knowing which groups to display those commodities to. Mason notes:

The motivations and ambitions of each member of the community will in large part determine the nonmembership groups to which he or she will aspire and a significant part of their social and economic behavior will inevitably reflect a concern to gain the recognition of such groups. Conspicuous consumption will be motivated not by social class distinctions but by how effective such consumption is seen to be in gaining the approval or membership of aspirant groups to which the individual refers (24).

Of course, while some critics might lay the blame on media and mass culture, it seems consumer desires are more influenced by those which we compare our goals and standards – our reference groups.

As previously stated, Veblen explicitly notes conspicuous consumption provides "reputable standing in the community" (29) by the ability to quantifiably excel others, but does this mean *all* others? First, while he did not specify, this attempt at social prestige could only be successful when trying to transcend others within your *own* membership group; the consumer who appeals to an aspirant group will try mimicking and emulation to gain access to the group, rather than outdo those in his own membership group. Second, the status seeker needs to know to whom the message is directed – the membership or aspirant groups. He must be able to convey the message of prestige in a manner which is easily identifiable and visible to those in the target group.

Reference groups also play a large part in the process of distinction exhibition. In determining the *right kind* of items to purchase and display in status seeking behaviors such as conspicuous consumption, the consumer must be cognizant of their target group or members. The goods which transmit a level of distinction in one's own membership group will not necessarily represent distinction in an aspirant group and vice versa. Rules of a particular group must be "obeyed fairly strictly because it is the definitive system of aesthetic preferences or judgments which symbolizes membership" (Warde, 185). Approximating the standards of authenticity in the wrong group will cast doubt on the consumer and call into question their legitimacy and belonging. You must be able to "adopt an identifiable and admired set of practices which are perceived as common to a style group" or risk not being successful in acquiring recognition by the members (Warde, 185).

Finally, reference groups help determine which commodities are fetishized. Looking back to the quote from *Capital*, the person with the smaller hut will only feel threatened or pressured if the neighbor with the bigger house is in his membership group. Once that person raises the bar, it raises the social standard within that entire membership group. However, if the bigger house was constructed in a neighborhood of a higher social stratum in which the person did not belong, he would only feel the need to upgrade his own house if it was in an aspirant group which he *wanted* to belong. Schor explains we are

"continually comparing our own lifestyle and possessions to those of a select group of people we respect and want to be like" (Schor, 4). Mason elaborates on the difference between membership and aspirant groups as:

Membership groups are associations which a person necessarily or voluntarily belongs and which impose a set of norms regarding the behavior of members. Aspirant groups are ones which the person may wish to belong but of which he is currently not a member. The motivations and ambitions of each member of the community will in large part determine the nonmembership groups to which he or she will aspire and a significant part of their social and economic behavior will inevitably reflect a concern to gain the recognition of such groups. (24).

Our membership groups usually are made up of those with equal social status and background, but if we aspire to belong in another group (an aspirant group) then it changes our perceptions, attitudes, desires, and the lens through which we evaluate our lives.

4. DISCUSSION

The Evolution of Pets as Commodities

Humans and dogs have coexisted in varying ways going back tens of thousands of years. The earliest man and the feral canines had a reciprocal, symbiotic, and peaceful relationship as the packs would follow closely behind the nomads to feed off remains of the dead and food. Man and dog adopted each other in a mutual association after about 6,000 B.C. when humans began using dogs for hunting and warfare (Mery, 1968). Dogs served a utilitarian function for humans; they served a purpose. They pulled sleds, carried game and animal skins, and eventually were used in hunting. In these terms, dogs were used as tools, perceived as inanimate devices. Around the Bronze Age, the relationship evolved into one of interdependence and appreciation. The animals no longer needed to fend for themselves or hunt for food, and in return, they provided vital assistance to men. Dogs protected and shepherded stock, warned humans of danger, assisted in hunting food, and became fierce assailants in warfare. The Egyptians used dogs as temple guards and the Persians as "defenders of man" (Mery, 33). In Eastern Asia, smaller "sleeve dogs" were bred to hide in the sleeves of kings' robes and trained to attack at any sign of human threat. Essentially, dogs had evolved from mere devices of utilization to valued creatures of service.

The Christian era to the Middle Ages continued to expand the areas of service provided by dogs. They guarded churches, licked wounds of the sick or dying, and increased man's dependence on them for hunting game (Mery, 51). However, it was the Renaissance period when the dogs' purpose and function changed for a third time; dogs were becoming companions. For the first time in recorded history, men were taking care of their dog's health and well-being, and the first books on animal medicine were written. They provided entertainment through trained performance and provided sport such as fighting and match hunting. It wasn't until the 15th century when dogs became "fashionable" as pets. They were prized for their superior pedigree and breeding for the wealthy, and the smaller "lap dogs" were adorned by women. In the 17th century, Mery notes:

In the drawing rooms, lap-dogs became all the rage. Their hair was cropped or crimped, dressed in the style of the day, perfumed, fondled; and men sighed or laughed at the idea that Pugs, Papillons, and Maltese dogs, those living toys so fawned upon, could run like mad... or mingle their yapping with the deafening baying of hounds (62).

This was the earliest use of pets as a display of wealth and status, but it was a method available only to the rich. A respectable pedigree required extensive breeding and was incredibly expensive; this craze was bolstered by the creation of dog shows in the mid-1800s. At the same time, the common dogs of middle and lower classes continued to offer services for hunting, shepherding, and protection.

The last century has presented an incredibly fast-paced evolution for the function of dogs in affluent societies, particularly in America. Around the mid-1900s, dogs became the picture perfect addition to the nuclear family – husband, wife, two kids, and a dog. While portraying an image of the complete family unit, for some the dog was used as a method of teaching children about the life course and often considered as a family member. Pedigree was much less important, and the dogs typically lived outside (often with their own doghouses). Towards the end of the century, dogs truly were becoming "man's best friend". They were riding in cars, accompanying people in recreational activities, allowed pure emotional attachments, and moved from the backyard to sharing the master's bed. Breed and pedigree emphasis has skyrocketed, and today, dogs are increasingly serving the function of accruing status for the owner through commodification and conspicuous consumption.

In Russia, Rottweilers are a symbol of status because they show the owner's ability to pay for an expensive breed and distinction in their choice. While they are instructed to guard the house and protect the owner, the dogs are largely about the image of prestige. Having a serious and expensive guard dog means you have something serious and expensive to guard; it is a mark of distinction and social differentiation (Koenig, 2008). In 2006, Americans spent nearly \$45 billion on their pets in a "recession-resistant" pet industry (Gettleman, 2008). Custom dog breeds are expensive, conspicuous purchases as well as their

carefully chosen, status-seeking accessories and luxury items. Pets, a newly fetishized commodity, have been given powers that are believed to reward the owner with prestige, status, and acceptance. Lavish accessories and costly breeds show an ability to waste money and resources, as well as the cultural capital to purchase the correct items. The act of choosing to competitively and ostentatiously display these goods reflects the consumer's desire to gain social position and acknowledgement. Buying a \$2,500 Yorkipoo and publicly parading it around town in a \$1,700 Parklane carrier is an example of commodified pets as status symbols (Luxist, 2008). Pets are fetishized commodities with a perfect balance of utility and ostentation; their accessories are conspicuously consumed, competitively displayed, and carefully chosen. As revealed in a later section, these methods are becoming more readily available to the masses.

Market Segmentation

Pet owners are able to convey prestige and wealth, even in the basic necessities—pet food. The pet food industry has become so segmented and specialized that it provides an abundance of opportunities for competitive display and social differentiation. Market segmentation can be defined as "a heterogeneous market... [with a] number of smaller homogenous markets in response to differing product preferences among important market segments" (Jhally, 125). Instead of attempting to create an entire new market or product,

companies seek to diversify and increase concentrations within a mass market that is already booming.

In the mid-1900's, dog food was available in dry and wet form and was only beginning to imitate the flavors and appearance of human food. Today, pet food can be dry, wet, semi-wet, moist, and every flavor from beef, steak, chicken, duck, rabbit, venison, and even seared ahi tuna or mahi-mahi. They also claim to provide health benefits other than sustenance such as shiny coat, specialized for seniors, nutrition for puppies, gastrointestinal, organic, high protein, low-fat, strong bones, weight maintenance, joint therapy, omega rich, vegan, and breed specific. What this shows is a diversification and segmented concentration within the pet food industry worth over fourteen billion dollars per year. Moreover, the price differential allows an added mark of distinction and status. A pet owner makes a choice to purchase the more expensive brand of canned pet food that promises a shiny coat rather the basic dry pet food that's main function is to provide nourishment for the animal. It demonstrates the consumer can show distinction and cultural capital by deliberately purchasing the more expensive and specialized goods. Market segmentation can also be seen now in the pet pharmaceutical industry; in a market is growing exponentially, the concentrated areas offer medication for depression, obesity, diet pills, pain, and sleep disorders, as well as beef-flavored separation anxiety medication (Gettleman, 2008).

Market segmentation allows for consumers, or pet owners, to accrue status via consumption because it provides distinction and social distancing through the purchase of specialized commodities. The conscious choice to buy the pet food that not only costs more, but the superfluous qualities and label metonymical link the product to wealth or superficiality. For example, the canned cat food Fancy Feast often encourages people to think about the gorgeous, purebred feline with a jeweled collar on the counter eating out of a crystal dish that is chimed with a silver spoon. The owner is choosing to consume a product that is a symbolic signal of wealth and status, rather than a dry, generic brand cat food that serves the function of simply feeding the animal.

Public consumption behaviors such as these broadcast a message of cultural capital; they show not only the ability to afford the more expensive brands, but also the ability to discern between acceptable and unacceptable goods to gain status in particular reference groups. Again, the rule of commodity duality applies; the products must contain the just right delicate balance of utility and superflousness. If the pet food was simply the generic brand which provided nutrients, it would not be prestigious. If the pet food was completely gratuitous and served no real function in nourishing the pet, it would not be able to award status. However, with just the right combination of

the two components, the consumer is able to conspicuously consume and gain social position in the aspirant groups of his choice.

Pet Luxury Items

There is hardly a better competitive display method to gain status among aspirant groups in the pet world than brandishing ostentatious luxury items and accessories. Some items show only a slight mark of distinction above the rest, while others reveal an unapologetic attempt to be accepted into the upper ranks of the social hierarchy within those groups. Centuries ago, kings and warriors would show affection for their pets by having them fashionably groomed; other times they would honor them with a personalized collar to show proud ownership of an exquisite animal. Even into the 1800's and 1900's, the acceptable method of showing adoration or ownership was a collar or a treat (most likely a bone or table scraps). Yet, the most recent phenomenon in pet ownership has begun to drift from traditional reason to one of duality; the owner seeks to give gifts of accessories or luxury items to the pet as well use them to gain social prestige. In owning a designer breed and/or lavishing it in plush toys, accessories, comforts, and services, that person is sending a message to others in his membership and aspirant groups that he is not one of the masses – he is separate or above. Yes, the goods may benefit or be enjoyed by the pet, but the objective of *consumption* is rather to put social distance between himself and the others in his group through the highly visible method of conspicuous

consumption and distinction. The consumer is making a conscious choice to separate himself from the average member and either excel in his own group or try to gain status in an aspirant group. The pet, along with all its luxuries, is now serving the function of a commodity that is a social indicator of status, wealth, and cultural capital rather than the functions of previous years.

Not only are the actual fetishized pets becoming social indicators, so are their activities and accessories. Today's selection of pet friendly services and accommodations exceeds boarding kennels many would expect to find – they are extravagant, costly, and loaded with extraneous perks. Before, owners would have the pet stay at a veterinarian's office, boarding facility, with a friend or family member, or have an in-home "sitter". Now, not only are many ordinary, mainstream hotels allowing pets to stay in the rooms with the owner, but those who are willing to pay more than necessary get to enjoy showering their pets with amenities and prestigious services. Walt Disney World will soon be opening a pet resort with luxury suites that offer "pampering services ranging from ice cream treats to bedtime stories" as well as nature hikes and playgroups (Walt Disney World News, 2007). Wag Hotels offers luxury suits and two story "cat condos" with plasma televisions, high-brow art such as paintings and classical music, and exotic fish tanks to entertain them; they provide services such as indoor swimming, evening strolls, business walks, massages and spas including blueberry facial scrubs (Wag Hotels, 2008). Other

pet hotels and resorts have DVD/VCR players and an extensive video library, chandeliers, climate-controlled naps on orthopedic beds and Egyptian cotton sheets, personal trainers, rooftop parks, custom meals, and even a geriatrics area (Coder, 2008). These activities and accommodations allow pet owners to brazenly show other groups their knowledge of status-worthy items and fashionable goods and services. These highly visible choices in consumption behavior show the ability to purchase expensive products as well know the right *kind* of things to gain prestige.

Pet owners, especially in America, not only shower their animals with pretentious services, but they also attempt to increase social position through animal apparel, jewelry, and fashions. Bloomberg (2008) reported a dog collar worn by the Duke of Windsor's pet pug would be sold for \$3,000; it even had a tag that read "I Belong to the Duke of Windsor". Thinking about the four components of commodities as status symbols, the owner is *choosing* to conspicuously consume such an expensive collar in order to demonstrate wealth and cultural capital. The fact that it was owned by the Duke of Windsor allows *knowledge* or distinction because it is an item that helps show social distance because the "masses" could not readily possess it, nor do they have the *capacity* to afford such a rare item. Not only is the silver-plated collar highly *visible* on the dog and able to be seen by aspirant group members, but if there is any doubt of its uniqueness, the tag screams the message "I Belong to the Duke of Windsor"

so everyone will be clear that it is an extraordinary commodity being consumed by the status-worthy pet owner.

While the Duke of Windsor dog collar may seem a bit extreme, it pales in comparison to the dog jewelry line from I Love Dogs, Inc. Their slogan is "Indulgence has been taken to new heights", and their luxury pet items are clear examples of conspicuous consumption and status-seeking consumer behavior (Ilovedogdiamonds.com, 2008). They use phrases such as "exotic", "exquisite", and "class of its own" to describe their line of diamond dog collars. The collection containing five models, titled La Collection de Bijoux, all have French names which implies highbrow culture and distinction. The three less expensive models (Cheri, L'Etoile, and Jeune Cheri) are made of ostrich and crocodile leather, and are described as "exotic", "sparkling", "precious", "stylish", "fine delicacy", "brilliant", "takes your breath away", and "catches attention" (2008). Such illustrative and suggestive adjectives reassure the consumer that yes, these items *will* bring you prestige and status through their sheer lavishness and price that others cannot afford. These fetishized commodities which pet owners believe possess the magical powers of honor and prestige range from \$280,000 to \$380,000 and contain up to 600 diamonds each totaling 25 carats (2008). A final level of superiority over others in the membership or aspirant group is that each is a limited edition piece with only eight pieces for each of the three models; this creates an image of differentiation by the idea that only a select few "special"

members in a group can own those pieces. The message is that these ostentatious and unique pieces are reserved for only the most privileged and high status members of a group; the commodity allows exclusivity and exception. These extravagant collars may be ostentatious (and even brazenly pretentious), but they *still* satisfy the rule of duality. Yes, they are ridiculously expensive, but they also serve a function; they possess utility in that they are still a dog collar to which the owner can attach a leash and control their pet.

The final two pieces of fine jewelry in La Collection de Bijoux offer quite an illuminating example of pet luxury items. The second most expensive piece, the Amour de la Mer, is not a limited edition item, but its cost is much higher than the previous three with its stunning price of \$480,000. I Love Dogs, Inc. describes it as "unique", "glorious", "elegant", and "impressive" (2008). It is the only piece in the collection with a precious stone (an 8.5 carat sapphire pendant) and contains over 600 diamonds; the description states it is made of "exquisite ostrich leather... one of the most expensive leathers in the world... [that] brings a classic elegance to the collar" (2008). These collars openly encourage conspicuous and vicarious consumption through their taglines, as well as the slogan "indulgence taken to new heights".



Figure 1: Amour Amour dog collar

The final piece which has been awarded the "most expensive dog collar in the world" by Luxist (2008) and others, is the Amour Amour necklace seen in Figure 1³. Like the Amour de la Mer piece, it is not a limited edition product, but its exclusivity and prestige comes with the whopping price tag of \$1.8 million

³ Copyright permission for this photo courtesy of I Love Dogs, Inc. ©

dollars. I Love Dogs, Inc. describes it as "striking", "stunning", "amazing", and "one-of-a-kind". They advertise the collar as having a "graceful chandelier design" that is made of "the brilliant white luster of platinum – a rare and pure metal" and uses crocodile leather which is among the "most sought after exotic skins in the world" (2008). It is made with a 7 carat diamond centerpiece and over 1600 diamonds totaling 52 carats in all; they boast it is the "most exquisite dog collar" and "only the best will do" (2008). Like with the other collars in La Collection de Bijoux, it obeys the rule of commodity duality in that it contains both ostentation and utility. The consumer *chooses* to conspicuously consume these diamond necklaces in hopes communicating *distinction* and cultural capital to others in the group. The outrageous price clearly suggests the *capacity* to pay for expensive items, and its flashy presence and sheer size make it easily *visible* so that members will be sure to receive the intended message of status.

Pet owners not only splurge on expensive costumes and jewelry or accessories for their pets, but they are now showing social distance through other means as well. "Puppy Purses" and dog carriers have become status symbols in the world of the wealthy and celebrities who use them as chance to sport designer labels; designer bags, of course, indicate distinction and affluence. Gucci, Prada, Coach, Vuitton and many others are adding additional lines to their collection for "pet totes". For a pet owner who chooses to conspicuously and vicariously consume in hopes of gaining social status within

a membership group or appealing to an aspirant group, the pet bag must exceed the norm and show differentiation and the *right* kind of extravagance. For example, the Parklane Platinum Dog Carrier which is made of "ultra-soft lambskin", is the "Ferreri of dog carriers", and is available for \$1,700 (Weston, 2007). Purchasing a dog carrier so expensive and carefully crafted signifies not only the pure capacity to waste money on conspicuous commodities, but it also provides a prime opportunity to be competitively displayed. A purebred puppy in a \$1,700 designer carrier dangling from the arm of a pet owner in public presents a perfect illustration of a person seeking status through commodities — their pets. Recalling Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, consumers believe these bags and accessories possess the power and ability to award status, prestige, social recognition, and even acceptance by members of an aspirant group if the attempt is successful.

Now that Fido has vacationed, had a therapeutic massage and facial, and is sitting in a designer bag wearing a diamond collar, he gets to come home to the comforts of luxury. Pet owners are continuously raising the standard in respect to pet furnishings. La Petite Maison (1999) offers custom luxury doghouses such as French chateaus, Swiss chalets with European architecture, and will even create a reproduction of your own house in any pet size. Doghouses come with double-pane and bay windows to allow extra light, shutters and balconies, electricity, air conditioning and heating, custom

wallpaper, custom roofs such as copper, and even your choice of flooring such as hardwood, carpet, marble, and linoleum (Barlow, 2008). The Interior Designer will create the perfect luxury doghouse to match any budget; the current model being created has a tentative price tag of \$50,000, but there is no limit for a customer who wants to spend more. The houses, which come with landscaping, are meant to be positioned outside the home for public display and for all to see. Being highly *visible*, it is a social indicator of status, distinction, and social distance from the masses. The consumer *chooses* to show their *ability* to afford lavish goods in a grandiose manner.

Custom doghouses for outside dogs are incredibly expensive, but so is furnishing for an inside dog like those in Figures 2 and 3.



Figure 2: "Queen's Obsession" Dog bed

Gone are the days when Fido slept on the floor; today 69% of pet owners allow their pets to sleep in the bed (Gettleman, 2008). But, how would that accrue social status if it is not highly visible and does not display conspicuous consumption? Pet owners have managed to commodify and fetishize this as well. Dog beds can range anywhere from \$49 to \$900, but for the consumer looking to gain social prestige and position, these products are not good enough. Instead, they can hire the "Dog Designer" to create a custom dog bed for \$12,500 (Molle Tache, 2008).



Figure 3: Molle Tache Express Dog Bed

You can "capture the character of your dog, your relationship and your life together in a collection of unique furniture" while at the same time vicariously consuming commodities in hopes of climbing the social ladder. If the \$12,500 service is not prestigious enough, the pet owner can purchase the Queen's Obsession Dog Bed for \$18,500 or the Molle Tache Express Dog Bed for \$28,500 as seen in Figure 2⁴ and Figure 3⁵. Again, the decadent furniture must conform to the rule of commodity duality; it must be both expensive and functional, and

³ Photos courtesy of Mike Spears, The Dog Designer® Molle Tache, LLC.

⁴ Photos courtesy of Mike Spears, The Dog Designer® Molle Tache, LLC.

it does. If these products do *not* respect the delicate balance, they will not be seen as items with the *right* distinction and credibility. For example, Neuticles are a patented testicular implant for pets who have been neutered and the owners desire to "restore their pets to anatomical preciseness" (Brady and Palmeri, 2007). It will not convey a message of distinction and status because even at almost \$1,000 per pair, they lack the right kind of functionality and ostentation. Furthermore, the components of commodities as status symbols must be present: choice, knowledge, capacity/ability, and visibility.

Designer Mutts and Custom Breeds

Segmentation and commodification can be found when examining not only pet food, accessories and luxury items, but also the breeds themselves. Consumers can literally pick and choose the features and characteristics they prefer while attempting to eliminate the ones they don't. The act of creating or choosing a "designer mutt" or designer pet mimics the selection process of sperm donors for their particular height, eye color and favorite hobby; you can create a checklist of desired traits by essentially compartmentalizing the animal and removing all value in order to construct a custom pet from chosen parts via virtual assembly line. From different breeds, you can design a "perfect" pet no matter the combination; a white, long and fine-haired, hypoallergenic, small dog with short legs and stocky frame or a large, tan dog with coarse hair, and sleek, elegant frame – the possibilities are endless. In order to do this, the commodified

pets must be reduced to mere parts to satisfy the consumer's every whim and desire, no matter how superficial. Much like buying a car not for the function or love of a drive in the country, but because of the paint color, bucket seats and sunroof. No longer is the puppy chosen for its functionality, or even the connection that is made when it looks into your eyes. Puppies are being bred specifically to satisfy a shallow, superficial desire for status – and at an outrageous price.

Demand for designer puppies has increased exponentially; "the American Canine Hybrid Club, the designer dog world's answer to the American Kennel Club, says it's registering 500 new litters a month, more than double the number in 2004" and demand for Pugles (a hybrid of a Pug and Beagle) has tripled (Gamerman, 2005). Prices can reach several thousand dollars more than a purebred puppy because the hybrid must be a product of *two different* purebred parents. The average price of a designer puppy is about \$2,500, but some Morkies (hybrid of a Maltese and Yorkshire Terrier) can fetch \$5,000; Doodleman Pinschers (a hybrid of a Poodle and Doberman Pinscher), like many other cross-breeds, have waitlists of a year or longer (Gamerman, 2005). These prices show a clear example of conspicuous consumption; the pets are commodities that are bought vicariously so that they may illustrate the pure *ability* to afford items that are much more expensive than the rest. They are status markers of those who have the disposable wealth to buy them, have the

knowledge and cultural capital to choose the "right" breed, and they are competitively displayed (*highly visible*). The fact that certain puppies have waitlists indicates a high demand, but more importantly, prestige over the masses because they lack access to the product. The breeder, by proxy, is given power because they have the discretion as to who obtains the coveted commodity (or puppy), and the consumer accrues status because they possess a highly fetishized and desired item that is not available to everyone.

The idea of crossing specific breeds for various reasons is nothing new; however, creating hybrids for completely aesthetic and superficial reasons is a more recent phenomenon. Over the past few centuries, cross-breeding for genetic and utilitarian purposes readily occurred, but today the focus seems to center more on fashion and distinction. Bonham (2005) states, "Aren't those dogs mutts? Yes, technically, they are, but they're mutts with special pedigrees." The most popular, numerous, and well-known hybrid dog is the Labradoodle--a Labrador Retriever and Poodle mix. The initial purpose of creating this breed was to provide a better service dog to physically and mentally challenged persons who may also have allergy problems. Service dog groups such as Canine Companions for Independence bred Golden Retrievers and Labrador Retrievers to develop a "more tractable" guide dog that had the positive characteristics of both breeds, and the Labradoodles provided a service dog with an open coat that was "less like to trigger an allergic reaction than the Labrador

Retriever's double coat" (Bonham, 2005). However, the more recent hybrids are a result of pure aesthetic preference: a shinier coat, shorter legs, smaller size, color or coat pattern, curly or straight hair, "baby-like" features, or floppier ears. Other reasons include less shedding or being hypoallergenic, except most people are actually allergic to the saliva or pet dander, not the actual hair, so there is little benefit. The most popular cross-breeds are the Labradoodles, Cockapoos (Cocker Spaniel x Poodle), Pugles, and Yorkipoos (Yorkshire Terrier x Poodle), but the combination possibilities are endless. Most designer dogs have Poodle in them because of their relatively shed-free single coat and the fact that they come in three sizes (Toy, Mini, and Standard); other popular hybrids are as follows, in no particular order:

Goldendoodles (Golden Retriever x Poodle)

Peekapoos (Pekingese x Poodle)

Morkies (Maltese x Yorkshire Terrier)

Maltipoos (Maltese x Poodle)

Schnoodles (Schnauzer x Poodle)

Bassadoodles (Basset Hound x Poodle)

Border Collie Terriers (Border Collie x Jack Russell Terrier)

Border Shepherds (Border Collie x German Shepherd)

Alaskan Huskies (Siberian Husky x Alaskan Malamute x Lurcher)

Scandinavian Hounds (English Setter x German Shorthair Pointer)

Dorgis (Dachshunds x Pembroke Corgi)

Bagels (Beagle x Bassett Hound)

Bull Boxers (Beagle x Bassett Hound)

Chihchons (Chihuahuas x Bichons Frises)

...and even Wolf hybrids (Bonham, 2005)

Commodifying Fido for use as a symbol of status means the pet must be reduced to and perceived as a commodity with the power to send a message of prestige and differentiation, and the message must then be successfully interpreted by others in the membership or aspirant group. In order for the message to be sent and received effectively, the four components of commodities as status symbols must be present. Designer mutts are actively and consciously chosen by the consumer to be used as social status indicators; it is unlikely these actions are in response to habitus because this is a fairly recent phenomenon and not one that has had enough time to become established in one's lifestyle. Secondly, the conspicuously consumed canines show a clear *ability*, as Veblen state, to "waste money". Not only does the person opt out of getting a free puppy or one from the local shelter, they choose to buy a dog that is above and beyond the standard. Instead paying \$500 for a purebred puppy, they *choose* to push the boundaries of social norms and pay several thousands of dollars. Additionally, they purchase a puppy that is in limited supply and high

demand which suggests they have the *knowledge* of which specific breeds and methods will provide differentiation from others in their membership group or acceptance in an aspirant group. Finally, these breeds are unique and draw attention, such as the fluffy Poodle with the distinctive Yorkie markings as seen in Figure 4⁶. They are paraded in public, ostentatiously displayed at every opportunity, and draw attention to whenever the owner brags about the hot new commodity they just bought.

⁵ Photo courtesy of Rolling Meadows Puppies.



Figure 4: "Greta" the Yorkipoo

Even without the efforts to draw attention from the owner, the puppies are noticed for having highly recognizable traits from two distinct breeds. This helps the status seeker attempt gain prestige because it is increasing the likelihood of *visibility*. While some might argue that they serve no function except one of fashion, this is not true.

Designer dogs abide by the rules of commodity duality because while they are clearly ostentatious, they also serve the function of a pet or companion animal. Pets are not limited to merely one function, but the clever status seekers discovered a new use for these pets (in addition to being companion animals) is one that can help gain them access to an aspirant group or prestige and clout in a membership group. "The history of any (AKC) breeds is that of a specific objective, to be used for working, hunting, or herding. These breeds are being created largely as a fashion, a response to eccentric needs" Tremayne, 2005).

These hybrids are bred based on highly visibly *aesthetic* characteristics; crossbreeds based on utility do not follow the rule of commodity duality and therefore are not successful as status symbols. For example, Labradoodles bred to increase the utility and abilities of service dogs are not ostentatious and are created purely for functional use much like mine detection dogs. Mine detection dogs, or MDD, are manipulated or selectively bred to increase functionality and efficiency. McLean (2001) states, "If characteristics or standards of MDD's can be agreed upon, then it should be possible to produce a breed that offered them.... For example a short coat in hot countries and wiry coat in wet countries... Particular features can be controlled with a simple genetic switch." The cross-breeding programs hope to create a breed that provides the most assistance in these dangerous jobs with such characteristics as a wide pointed snout, tolerance for repetitive actions, focused with a high motivation for work, ability to move

at a slow pace for sustained periods, tolerance for local environments, resistance to local diseases, and natural fitness" (McLean, 2007). In cases such as these, cross-breeding methods are used to create breeds with the highest level of use and functionality possible; none of the focus is on aesthetics or any superficial and highly visible trait. McLean (2001) argues, "If border collies make better sheep dogs because of a history of selection of characteristics that are desirable in a sheep dog, then a programme of selection for the characteristics desirable in an MDD should have the same effect." Unfortunately, the recent fascination with designer mutts has eluded such a functional aim.

"General practitioners will be seeing more of these intentional crossbred dogs in their offices, fueled by the need to 'outdo the Joneses,'" and others in their membership group (Tremayne, 2005). There is also the hipness factor and how society tends to emulate the "leisure" class or those of higher social status. "Actors Jake Gyllenhaal and Uma Thurman have been photographed with each of their Puggles. Jessica Simpson carries her Maltipoo in a Louis Vuitton dog carrier" (Gamerman, 2005). They are telling society what is "in" and fashionable, so others seeking acceptance by those groups mimic their actions. Gamerman concludes:

Breeders are getting organized, enlisting genetics experts to testify that their crosses are becoming true breeds of their own and lobbying the American Kennel Club with letters and emails pushing to get official status. Some are enforcing stricter rules about reproduction. The

Cockapoo Club of America has launched its first ever registry, asking owners to make the Cocker Spaniel/poodle mixes official by keeping "detailed breeding records that will be able to stand the scrutiny required" (2005).

As these trends gain more popularity, those consumers begin to demand legitimacy. "Now that pricey 'designer' dogs ... are trotting into homes around the country, their owners are demanding entree into the canine elite -- and getting pushed out like junkyard dogs at a society ball" (Gamerman, 2005). Legitimate or not, this trend is here to stay.

Mass Availability: The Elite and Pretenders

Conspicuous consumption and the use of commodities as status symbols are not behaviors exclusive to those in the upper crust, or even those who aspire to belong to it. Status-seeking consumer behavior is seen in literally *every* social stratum and every socioeconomic group; a class never gives up all luxuries. Social indicators exist on all levels of the hierarchy, and their uses are the same no matter which membership group the consumer belongs. In fact, commodifying pets and their use as status symbols is becoming more frequent with the increased access to mass goods; this allows those at the lower levels of social ladder to increase their chances of vertical mobility. Luxury pet items and services such as the ones already discussed are breaking through class barriers and becoming available to the masses. Now the lower groups can imitate the upper classes, or *any* of their aspirant groups, by using products that mirror

their extravagant counterparts. This increases the chance of successfully gaining access to aspirant groups by pretending to own the "real thing".

Lifestyle marketing from manufacturers and retailers target those hoping to ascend the social ladder through commodities; through the "magic of plastic, anyone can buy designer things at the trendiest retail shop or at outlet prices" (Schor, 5). People can literally *fake* their way into aspirant groups or rise in their membership groups through bogus products. Consider a much less expensive example of this phenomenon, fake Tupperware parties, as noted by Schor:

The buyer almost certainly knows the product is not real on account of its low price and prefers or can only afford the status component, not the full quality. Whether the audience can tell is another story (56).

The consumer is getting the status and recognition in the aspirant groups without paying the high price that others pay, even if it means a lesser quality. Without spending as much money, the status-seeker still reaps the same benefits as those who spend more money on the "real thing". Emulating those higher in their groups brings them recognition at a cheaper price which means it is a method available to more people.

"Just as all fashion trickles down, so canine chic has hit the working masses" (Koenig, 1996). Instead of getting a blueberry facial at a luxurious pet hotel, owners can purchase a do-it-yourself doggie spa from a discount retailer. The consumer can still brag about the treatment and gain status, while saving money at the same time. While the Amour Amour may have a 1.8 million dollar

price tag, there are other options for lower status group members. Instead of sporting a collar with real ruby or diamond studs, they can buy an imitation jeweled leather collars for \$24 from Target or the "Circle T Diamond Stud Collar" for about \$17, or 0.00001%--literally one hundred-thousandth of a percent. For an even more unique faux-diamond collar, the status seeker can buy the "Create-a-Collar" from Petsmart for about \$7; it comes with rhinestone charms and studs in the kit so the consumer can create a cheaper version of its \$300,000 counterparts.

The juggernaut discount retailer, Wal-mart, has proven to be a trusty accomplice for the "pretenders". It offers look-a-like designer pet clothing, jeweled collars and leashes, and silver plated and custom feeders all for under ten dollars. Instead of the \$1,700 Yellow Parklane Carrier, the low income status seeker can fake their way into aspirant groups with Fashion Pet Carriers, that come in several chic and trendy colors, for less than \$25. Instead of spending several thousands of dollars on a custom designed dog house like the elite or trendsetters, Target offers a Mini-Mansion, a Chalet, and a Log Home while Petsmart offers a Country Estate, all for under \$200. Even doggie furniture, once only found in wealthy homes, is becoming widely available to the masses who want to take the shortcut into aspirant groups. Dog furniture, such as the Cowboy Chaise or Flair Chair that would normally be several thousands of dollars from the Dog Designer, have comparable imitations at discount retail

chains. The Cleopatra Chaise and the Fantasy Furniture line from Target are incredibly similar pieces of furniture that can help accrue prestige for the status-seeker at a bargain price of under \$200. The Nap of Luxury Bed at Wal-mart and the Royal Bed line from Target can fetch the owner an ostentatious pet bed for just under \$100. Essentially, products are becoming more accessible for the lower income groups who *choose* to conspicuously consume status gains. For a cheaper price, they can pretend to be in a particular membership group. It allows the *capacity or ability* aspect of the four components to be faked, while still *choosing* the right *kind* of products to *visibly* display.

"Faking" it into a desired group does not only apply to products and services, it applies to the dog itself. The *New York Times* article describes a Russian sewing-factory worker who had only recently gained "material improvements" during the last five years that claims, "I have a two-room apartment, a 600-square-meter dacha, a car and even a Rottweiler" (Koenig, 1996). Being able to keep a dog, no matter the pedigree, "casts the owner above the common lot. In parks, it may mix with the dogs of real rich people and no one can tell the difference. It hints at an imaginary opulence" (Koenig, 1996).

Furthermore, if a status-seeker did not have the means to purchase a "legitimate" designer mutt, they cross-breed two purebred dogs themselves that do not have prestigious pedigrees, and none would be the wiser. Not only are the products becoming more accessible for the consumer, so is the knowledge of

what to buy. For less than ten dollars, they can buy the book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Designer Dogs*. It provides a history of the breeds, as well as they are created, how to care for them, and what health problems to avoid (Bonham, 2005). *Modern Dog Magazine* targets a higher income, higher educated, and urban demographic and provides fashion tips, photos of celebrities with their pets, and hot new luxury "must-haves". However, like many other forms of media and literature, it is now available free online. Anyone seeking knowledge about what is highbrow and lowbrow can obtain this information for no cost. The status-seeker can obtain the correct *knowledge* online, have the *ability* to purchase it at low cost from the local discount retailer, and *choose* to *visibly* and competitively display it in hopes of ascending the particular aspired social ladder.

Savvy, lower income consumers are not limited to only gaining knowledge and cultural capital through their own self-determination and initiative; they are constantly and aggressively being "educated" through mass media and advertising. Warde notes, "The contexts in which products are put most notably in the format of the lifestyle ad, are silent visual guides to expression of social identity. Otherwise one may be puzzled, disconcerted, or appear ignorant" (186). The ubiquitous, predatory advertising culture is constantly feeding images to consumers; they have access to the knowledge of

what is fashionable, whether or not they buy the product or create their own.

Mason furthers by saying:

Mass communication ensures frequent media exposure of the social and economic behavior of all groups and information on relative consumption patterns is therefore readily available, allowing easy access to the detail of taste and quality judgments made by each social class and reference group (110).

Yet, even though it benefits the lower groups who are gaining access to aspirant groups, or at least trying to excel within their own membership group, they must constantly check to make sure they have a still viable product to bring them prestige. If the lower income pet owner temporarily falls behind in knowing what the "right" product is, their legitimacy will be questioned, and status will not be awarded. Jhally sums it up nicely:

When access is not limited and when anyone is able to enjoy it, then overcrowding leads to deterioration in the social value of that beauty. In this situation, there is no social distance between groups and hence no prestige or status in that consumption. Societies based on status ranking are continually producing new groups of socially scarce positional goods (18).

In this case, it is likely that those in the higher social strata will find new ways to distinguish themselves from the masses since the previous method's value has been diluted. Once the new fashion or method catches on and trickles down to the lower classes in mass quantities, be it a new extravagant accessory or superfluous service, the cycle will start over.

5. SUMMARY

The functions pets serve in our lives has evolved over time from one of assistance, to companion and friend, to one of a commodity. In modern affluent societies, they are being used to accrue status and prestige for the owner through conspicuous consumption and distinction. How we use objects or goods and how we come to ontologically define them *is* sociology, and these concepts need to be applied to pets.

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VITA

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