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New kids on the mall: babyfied dogs as fashionable co-consumers
Annamari Vänskä

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New kids on the mall: babyfied dogs as fashionable co-consumers

Annamari Vänskä

Annamari Vänskä is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow based at Centre for Fashion Studies, Institute for Media Studies, University of Stockholm, Stockholm, Sweden.

Abstract

Purpose – This article is a theoretical investigation about the babyfied dog and the troubled relationship between dogs and parenting in contemporary consumerist culture.

Design/methodology/approach – In the frame of the special theme issue, the focus of the article is on theorising consumption and care in the context of new motherhood. The article analyses why the babyfied and fashionable dog has become so popular and what the human–dog/animal–transgression is about.

Findings – The anthropomorphised animal is an integral part of constructing and understanding the romantic ideal of childhood and childhood innocence. Simultaneously with the modern educational attitude towards pets and animals in general, real animals, especially small lapdogs, have started to replace teddy bears and other plush animals as the dressed-up childlike animal. The tamed and designed animal is not completely an animal anymore and occupies the space between the human and the animal, becoming central to the reconfiguration of the family, childhood, leisure and identity. Currently, as the number of children in families decreases, the babyfied dog is taking the place traditionally reserved for the child.

Research limitations/implications – Even though the findings cannot be generalised, they suggest that more research on the relationship between humans and dogs is needed.

Originality/value – The article makes an original contribution to the theme issue by focusing on the still unusual, yet strongly emerging form of parenting and care of dogs. Doing this, the article challenges ideas about “natural parenting” by arguing that dogs are the latest babies and fashionable co-consumers.

Keywords Fashion, Babyfication of dogs, Consumerism on dogs, Dog-fashion, Dogs, Parenting for dogs

Paper type Research paper

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing.

Karl Marx, *The Capital* (1867)

Vignette 1

I remember, when I was a little girl, one of my favourite novels was Jack London's (1903) *The Call of the Wild*. This is a book inspired by Jack London's experiences during the Klondike Gold Rush in the Yukon Territory of northwest Canada in the nineteenth century. The main character of the novel is Buck, part Saint Bernard and part Scottish shepherd, who transforms from a pampered and civilised dog, from “the sun-kissed Santa Clara Valley” in California, to a wild animal who can survive in the rugged Alaska and becomes a member of a pack of wolves. I remember reading the novel with great intensity, immersed in its world of harsh conditions, reading it in my bed in my room half through the night even though I was supposed to be sleeping. The story, in which Buck is stolen from his loving Californian family, sold to a bunch of brutal people beating him and finally surviving the hellish life and becoming a brave leader, made an everlasting impact on me. I invested

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emotionally in Buck's hardships, and empathised with the cruelty he received from humans and other dogs, hoping for a happy ending. I remember being deeply touched by the way Buck was described as a thinking and feeling creature – it was almost as if he was my dog, and I felt a great need to protect him. This personal memory, as memories so often, may be coloured in retrospect, but I do believe that the intense feeling the book caused in me is genuine. I do not believe that I exaggerate too much if I say that Buck's story made me see the relationship between people and animals in a different light.

The autobiographical memories and emotional attachment to Buck, and to other canine figures such as Lassie after him, have taught me about the emotional responsibility and compassion towards other beings. This is of course the aim of such books, and in a way, my emotions and feelings are constructed by this certain childhood ideology. Books about animals are designed to teach children different things: care, love, compassion and understanding. In this sense, Buck's story is an essential part of children's modern emotional education. Animals – both fictive and real ones – teach about emotional attachment, but also about death and mortality. Animals have the power to create strong memories and embodied feelings which we are expected to carry throughout our lives. Even though Buck's story can be interpreted in many ways, as a morality tale or as a heroic narrative about survival, for me it meant that animals must too be treated with respect.

Vignette 2

I re-lived the strong childhood memories about Buck in winter 2012 when I strolled the corridors of a shopping mall in Oidapa, a popular shopping and entertainment district in Tokyo in Japan. I was looking for shops specialising in children's wear, because I was just on the way to finish my book about children's representation in fashion advertising (Vänskä, 2012). I was ready to give up searching when I saw a row of shops with bright colours and commodities spread out on sales tables outside the shops. Loud and cheerful music accompanied the shoppers as they strolled in and out of the fashionable-looking shops. I went closer, excited to go and have a look on what the Japanese were offering children and their parents this season. As I approached the shops, I was even more surprised when I realised that these shops were not intended to children. Instead, they were shops for dogs, but not just any regular pet shops. I had entered a fashion heaven: a row of specialised shops for dogs' fashions. The shops were filled with racks of dresses, jeans, underwear and party outfits in different colours, designed for our four-legged companions. Shelves after shelves were filled with diapers for puppies and grown-up dogs, shampoos for different coats, jewellery and bling from necklaces to earrings, nail polish, coat dye and different types of foods from Japanese sushi to American birthday cakes.

When I examined all the commodities that were on sale for dogs, I was not at all certain how I felt. My first reaction was amazement, but this feeling soon transformed into a profound disgust. How could anyone subject his or her dog to wearing diapers, clothes or jewellery, let alone dye their coat, polish their nails or pierce their ears? A gaping disjunction seemed to rise between this uncanny world of commodities to dogs and my childhood memories of dogs as smart and capable problem-solvers. These were not the kind of dogs Buck and Lassie had represented to me, but dogs reduced to objects. The dog presented as the baby – the *babyfied dog* – seemed to me so out-of-step, so utterly wrong, in a word: so selfish. It was as if my pure and innocent childhood memories of smart dogs were tainted by this world, where the dog was transformed into an appendix or accessory of its owner. The dog that in my memories had a personality, feelings and thoughts, seemed to have been muted, objectified and stripped bare of its "authentic dogness".

This article is an investigation about the troubled relationship between dogs and parenting in contemporary consumerist culture. In the frame of the special issue, it focuses on consumption and care in the context of new motherhood. It makes an original contribution to the theme by focusing on the still unusual, yet strongly emerging form of parenting and care and challenges ideas about "natural parenting": dogs as the latest babies and

fashionable co-consumers. I aim to answer why the babyfied dog is so shocking? Why does the “original” innocence of dogs become tainted when they are brought into the world of commodities? What is the human–dog/animal–transgression about? And why does fashioning of lapdogs seem so different from the playful practices of childhood?

New consumers?

I started off this article by two vignettes from my own memories and experiences, because they represent, in different and opposing ways, the centrality of the dog in children’s culture and in our increasingly consumerist culture. On one hand, as my personal memories about Jack London’s book point out, the anthropomorphised animal was central in my own childhood similarly as it has been an integral part of constructing and understanding the romantic ideal of childhood and childhood innocence since the late nineteenth century. In a way, this modern ideology of childhood innocence speaks in me through my memories – and in my emotional reaction I had in the face of the dog fashion shops in Tokyo. This ideology has also made me the adult I am today. The animalised children’s culture with toys such as teddy bears has reinforced and highlighted the contrast between the innocent and natural world of childhood and the corrupted and selfish sphere of adulthood (Cross, 2004, p. 54). In contemporary world, this emotional education has largely been transferred from books to live animals. During the twentieth century, real dogs were framed as children’s emotional education. Owning a pet is increasingly considered to influence children’s – and later on adult’s – behaviour towards animals positively (Raupp, 1999; Kidd and Kidd, 1989).

Simultaneously with the modern educational attitude towards pets and animals in general, real animals, especially small lapdogs, have now started to replace teddy bears and other plush animals as the dressed-up childlike animal. This shift has its roots in the nineteenth century when dogs and their puppies first gained the status of a *pet* or a *companion animal* – i.e. were differentiated from wild and production animals (Cross, 2004, p. 54). When children’s toy industry produced the anthropomorphised plush animals, the new science of breeding produced the pedigree household pet (Ruvinsky and Sampson, 2001). The tamed and designed animal was not completely an animal anymore and occupied the space between the human and the animal, becoming central to the reconfiguration of the family, childhood, leisure and identity. It is important to note that the domesticated pet dog’s animality is problematic: even though the evolutionary history of the domestic dog, the *Canis familiaris*, reaches as far as to 12,000–14,000 years back, the history of the modern bred dogs is much shorter. Most contemporary breeds’ origins are only a couple of hundred of years old (Ruvinsky and Sampson, 2001).

In other words, the history of the anthropomorphised toy dog and the history of the modern pedigree dog go hand-in-hand. They are both the products – and effects – of the modern commodity culture. Whereas the toy animals became the central components in the construction of modern childhood, the pedigree family pet started to symbolise love and care between the members of the family, and dogs from different breeds were fused with symbolic meaning about the identity of the owner. The household pet, separated from the production animals, received the status as the newest family member, as symbol of the owner’s identity, class and wealth (Franklin, 1999). This development only increased during the twentieth century, when companion animals, especially dogs, were integrated in the ideal middle-class family life. In Sweden in 2010, for example, there were about 730,000 dogs, of which approximately 70 per cent were pedigrees registered in the Swedish Kennel Club (Malm, 2010, p. 9). In addition, in Finland in 2012, about 41 per cent of all Finnish households either had a dog or a cat[1], and in 2013, the Finnish Kennel Club reported that the amount of pedigree dogs is now bigger than ever before[2]. The increase in the number of companion animals has also increased services and commodities offered for them. For example, a recent article in the daily Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* chronicled about a “pet ambulance”. If a dog (or any other animal for that matter) is in need of medical care,

the ambulance comes and picks up the animal for a check-up in a near-by animal hospital (Oskarsson, 2012, pp. 14-15).

The history of the companion animal is clearly reforming at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Advertising is taking advantage of the dog's centrality in consumers' lives and their emotional attachment to them. Research shows that if an advertisement has a dog in it, it is likely to be remembered and associated with more positive connotations than an ad that does not have a dog in it (Lancendorfer *et al.*, 2007). Ambulances for pets as well as the vignette from a Tokyo pet fashion store are but a few examples of the growing service industry aimed at animals. The ambulance takes care of a dog with arthritis, and the babyfied lapdog can be dressed fashionably, like a little child. In the world of dog fashion, "babyishness" and "childlikeness" seem to have been transformed into generalised visual signs, with which to enhance the dogs' cuteness and humanness. This is symptomatic: it suggests that the dog is not wholly a dog or animal anymore, it is something – or someone – occupying the space in-between the human and the animal. As an effect of this spatial or categorical change, another, more mental change has also occurred. Many dogs have their own Facebook profiles and they are not referred to as "it" but as "she" or "he", depending on the dog's biological gender. Nowadays all companion dogs have an individual name – in fact, in 2012 in Finland, the dogs received their first official name-day calendar (Saarelma, 2011).

All this implies that the dog – and the human – has entered a new phase of transformation. Dog seems to be in a process where the family pet is coming closer to being a person with rights and understanding of what is human seems to be widening. As I see it, the growing amount of consumer goods and services for dogs is indicative of this change – and of this, the fashionable outfits for dogs perhaps the most visible, tangible and growing trend of the 2000s. In some cases, the personified dog is also starting to replace the human/baby/child altogether, becoming the surrogate child and thereby the surrogate consumer (Mosteller, 2008). If one reflects the history where the former watchdog becomes a pedigree family member and a fashionable co-consumer, it is not far-fetched to say that this story is nothing short of a great success narrative of breeding and contemporary capitalism.

Babyfication of dogs

How does the pet market look like, then, and what do the babyfied dogs wear? A brief look at the supply in pet shops shows that the new-born family member is marketed and sold everything between heaven and earth. Various diets are the minimum requirement as are medical services, dental care and insurances. A more advanced dog-parent brings her or his dog to a day-care centre, gym, beauty parlour and spa – and leaves it to a dog hotel if she or he is to travel places where the canine pal is not welcomed. In fact, many sources have proposed that consumerism and spending on pets has become a burgeoning multi-billion business. In the USA, for example, consumerism on pets reached 34 billion dollars and 21 billion dollars in Western Europe in 2004 (Bettany and Daly, 2006, p. 409). Since then, indulgence on pets has only increased and has even been predicted to be one of the key consumption trends throughout the 2000s (Bettany and Daly, 2006, p. 409; see also *Business Insights*, 2005). Pet keeping has opened new profitable markets for fashion brands, which aim to satisfy the human-dog needs as well as they possibly can. This has also led to calculations about pet consumerism and sustainability. A recent study estimated, for example, that two large dogs such as German shepherds consume more resources than an average Bangladeshi or Tajik, and two medium-sized dogs such as Border collies consume more than the average resident of Haiti or Malawi consumes in a year (Vale and Vale, 2009). These results indicate that especially in the Western world, dogs are not necessarily co-consumers but rather serious consumers themselves.

While children's fashion has become an established part of fashion industry and the seasonal changes of fashion cycle (Vänskä, 2012), the world of little dogs has become the latest spot where fashion aims at spreading out. Illustrative of this new trend are such

celebrity dogs as Maltipoo Daisy, the lapdog of the reality TV-star Jessica Simpson; Bit Bit, a Chihuahua owned by the pop-singer Britney Spears; or Cinderella, the Yorkshire Terrier of Paris Hilton. Media coverage has told us that Maltipoo Daisy travels extravagantly: in a 1,400-dollar Louis Vuitton carrier bag, whereas Bit Bit's accessories have included, for example, a diamond-encrusted collar and a leash worth 100,000 dollars (Bettany and Daly, 2006, p. 409). Cinderella, on the other hand, has her own mansion, a miniature replica of Hilton's own home in Beverly Hills, filled with miniature versions of Hilton's furniture[3]. Pets also have their own fashion weeks, where they model the latest news of the dog fashion world from collars to fur coats (Foltyn, 2013, pp. 53-66)[4]. Kin and brand are increasingly tied in a profitable embrace.

A close look at the fashionable clothing shows that they follow the same patterns, colourings and designs as clothes designed for little children. There are more conservative and grown-up looks such as pullovers with Burberry tartan, or oilskins by Barbour. But there are also pink dresses, underwear with bows and laces and leather jackets and hoodies for more streetwise dogs. Dog fashions differ from clothes designed for children only in their cut, other than this, dog clothes accentuate signs of gender, race (!) and class familiar from the human world of fashion. It is telling how straightforwardly these visual signs have trickled from one species to another. Bitches – or should I say *girl dogs* – wear pink and frilly dresses, whereas males – *boy dogs* – are sold black leather jackets or jeans. It is evident that the signs of childhood are a very profitable business for the fashion industry. Fashion aims at cultivating ever more perfect creatures out of babies and dogs. Breeding reaches from the world of dogs to the world of fashion: as dogs are bred to be more baby-like, children are bred to be consumers that are more adult-like.

When I wondered about the need to dress the dog, my Japanese friends explained that clothing was the means to cover the dog's so-called "natural nudity" (Wilson, 2012, p. 85-92). Other striking examples of the blurring of the human-animal boundary were buggies: dogs in Tokyo and elsewhere do not necessarily walk. Rather, they sit in prams specifically designed for them. In a similar vein, many dogs also relieve themselves in diapers and try on their fashionable outfits in dog fitting rooms. In addition, when the beloved dog dies, it will be provided with a traditional Japanese funeral and buried in pet cemetery (Buerk, 2012) (Plates 1-3).

Plate 1 Fashionable clothing for lapdogs are sold in specialist boutiques in Tokyo



Source: Photograph: Annamari Vänskä

Plate 2 I was explained that in Tokyo, children walk and dogs sit in buggies**Source:** Photograph: Annamari Vänskä**Plate 3** Cute underwear for dogs**Source:** Photograph: Annamari Vänskä

Even if consumerism on dogs would seem an extreme Japanese phenomenon, this is not the case. Same outfits, goods and services can be found all around the Western world. The whole phenomenon of dog consumerism highlights many of the trends that have been implemented in the Western consumerist culture during the last decade or so.

Objectification or emancipation?

What does this trend of babyfication of dogs signify? How should it be interpreted? Is it merely a sign of oppression of dogs? Indeed, it is not hard to see the clothed dog as a primary example of the ways in which humans objectify other species. Especially little dogs seem to be in fashion now, and they are treated as nice accessories. When the trend of the

most fashionable dogs changes, the dogs are tossed away like disposable clothes, and end up in animal rescue homes where most of them are put to death.

However, this is not the only way to understand dog fashions. Rather, it is a token of many things: a sign of the inventive ways capitalism is known to transform any sphere of life into business and cash flow. It is also a sign of new kind of motherhood defined through consumerism and work. In fact, when I was visiting Tokyo and talked about this phenomenon with friends, I was given the following explanation: the conservative nature of the Japanese gender system (Evans, 2012). In Japan, many women are still expected to leave work and become housewives when they marry. Many highly educated women, however, do not want this anymore. Thus, instead of getting married and having children, some women choose their careers and acquire dogs. For them, the dog functions as a symbol of a woman's independency and emancipation (Petersson, 2012, p. 14-15). For them, the consumer culture provides with a way to buy into the world of mothering and parenting instead of actually having the baby and having to leave work.

The humanisation and commodification of the animal world presents these women with new frontiers for spending and caring. In this sense, to be a mother to a dog does not necessarily differ from the way in which one is a mother to a child: in consumerist culture, they are both potentially "*total consumer experience[s]*, involving full immersion in the market and active engagement with diverse practices of consumption" (Thomson *et al.*, 2011, p. 198). Or, in the words by Paris Hilton:

I love and treat my puppies as if they were my own children. I have to admit, I may have spoiled them a little too much. But how can I not? Just look at those sweet lil' faces, they deserve to be treated like my lil' prince and princesses:) I love my babies[5].

There are also couples that take a dog instead of having children. Some Japanese experts have explained that the reasoning here is that neither of the spouses wants to have children because it is simply too expensive: children's education and day-care are extremely costly and bigger flats or houses out of reach for many. Fingers are also pointing towards the workforce; according to some Japanese doctors, heterosexual couples are simply too tired to even consider having sex after work, and instead acquire a lapdog (Buerk, 2012). If the news coverage is to be believed, the babyfied lapdog represents, in a rather peculiar way, a relief from social constraints Japanese women face in the public sphere, as it also shows that life dedicated solely to work is a rather effective method of contraception for heterosexual couples in Japan. This implies that more studies are needed to analyse whether and how the babyfied (lap)dog represents a means to resist the heteronormative gender system, troubling ideas about naturalness of mothering and parenting more generally.

It can also be asked what are the limits of this kind of motherhood and parenting? Whose needs are being satisfied? And what does this phenomenon mean in terms of parenting, work and education? If the new understanding of motherhood and parenting extend to the structures of work and education, should the babyfied dog be regarded as a sign of a new social and political moment, where not only motherhood and parenting but also market and the state and their meanings are re-negotiated?

Extended selves and reconfigurations of human–animal relationship

Consumerism targeted at dogs suggests how lively and efficient contemporary capitalism is. Markets and fashion industry search ever-new territories and shape the already-conquered spheres of life into signs that can easily be attached to new things and phenomena. Media coverage of fashions to dogs underlines that dogs work as marketers, ambassadors and distributors of high fashion and luxurious consumption. This moulds understanding of the dog, the human and their mutual relationship. The little lapdog dressed in fashionable outfit functions as a model and ideal to dogs and reformulates the traditional understanding of the animal. Fashionable items also shape understanding that

a dog has a right to her/his own style. It seems clear that consumer culture functions as a form of guidance, permeating deeper and deeper into the world of dog ownership, mothering and parenting. Consumerism on dogs is one of the spheres where motherhood, parenting and coupledness are re-imagined alongside dog ownership, where the lapdog functions as a representation which enables the fantasising of ideal family life and coupledness, and where humanness and animality are actively re-imagined and performed.

Commodities for dogs exemplify how children and dogs', and human and animals' worlds intertwine (Derry, 2003, pp. 48-102; Haraway, 2007, pp. 45-67). Some have argued that this kind of entwining shows how the post-industrial commodity domains of desire function: the dog as the Veblenian surrogate consumer signifies relations that emerge from the fragmentation of self, family and community (Nast, 2005). Another interpretation sees the babyfied dog as an extended self of its owner: as possession that is used to construct a sense of one's self and identity (Holbrook *et al.*, 2001; Zwick and Dholakia, 2006). This is, in my interpretation, the way in which the celebrity lapdogs are represented in the media: as arenas where lavish consumption is at its most conspicuous. Here the dog can be seen as an instrument for showing off wealth. However, things can also be interpreted as means to show care: the more the dog-parent spends on their beloved Chihuahuas, the more they show how much they care about them.

This means that the babyfied dog can be an attempt to understand and negotiate the interspecies relationship between the dog and her/his owner (Holbrook *et al.*, 2001). Consumer practices of mothers and parents of human babies have been explained in terms of creating intimacy between the child and her caretakers (Thomson *et al.*, 2011, p. 201). Fashionable items bought for children have been interpreted as signs of care, and how well the child is being taken care of (Vänskä, 2012). In the human sphere, the baby is regarded as "the first commodity" or even a "product" due to new reproductive technologies and things their becoming parents purchase for them before birth (Thomson *et al.*, 2011, p. 202). The "baby things" function as potent performatives: they have the power to transform subjects to parental subjects. In other words, babyfied dog fashions re-construct the dog owners as parents, and the dog as the integral part of the family.

Buying commodities to the dog renders the owner something more than just an owner. The dog fashion market seems to acknowledge and profit from the modern emotional investment on animals in general by expanding the things available to them. The dog fashion market provides an expanding field of new products and their promotion. The logic of niche marketing for the babyfied dog has come up with most imaginable, specialised and extraordinary commodities to appeal to a specific consumer group. This implies that the dog fashions are a manifestation of the inherently ambivalent relationship between the dog and the human. The babyfied dog who is offered a plethora of consumer goods and consumer practices signals an attempt to make sense of the nature of the relationship between the human and the animal (Sanders and Hirschman, 1996).

The cultural theorist and philosopher Donna Haraway has especially devolved these ideas. She claims that we should think about the animal in different terms than what we are used to. First, the dog should not be referred to as "pet" but rather, as the *figure of companion-species*. This concept refers to the idea of re-negotiating the relationship human/animal, as it also explains the complexity of cultural binaries (Haraway, 2003, pp. 301-307).

Haraway's thoughts resonate with my own childhood memories about the Buck as a smart figure, and they also explain my discomfort when I first encountered the world of dog fashions in Tokyo. Her work helps theorise and challenge those cultural binaries that we tend to take for granted – for example, the one we have established between humans and animals. The babyfied dog works to change the human–dog relation, but why stop there? Shouldn't it also open up new ways to think about other animals – those, for example, that are currently conceptualised as "production animals"? Consumerism on dogs highlights

the processes of categorisation, and how categorical boundaries can be questioned. Even if indulgence on dogs is a definite sign of the increased commodification of dog owning and parenthood, referring to the ways in which both are made into commercial endeavours, lapdog fashions are also powerful political tools. They represent an aim to live an equal life and do parenting without children – but also, an aim to show that the human–animal hierarchy is out-dated. At its best, babyfication of dogs and consumer market for dogs may represent a deeper change in the animal–human relationship – one that has already changed the man/woman relationship and the adult/child relationship before.

Notes

1. www.if.fi/web/fi/tietoafista/ajankohtaista/pages/suomessaonnoinmiljoonakissantaikoiranomistavaataloutta.aspx
2. www.kennelliitto.fi/Fi/kennelliitto/uutiset/2013/20130117_koirabuumi_jatkuu_suomessa.htm
3. www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1191579/Its-dogs-life-Beverly-Hills-style-Paris-Hilton-reveals-pampered-pooches-kennel-mansion.html
4. See also www.petfashionweek.com/
5. www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1191579/Its-dogs-life-Beverly-Hills-style-Paris-Hilton-reveals-pampered-pooches-kennel-mansion.html

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About the author

Annamari Vänskä works as the Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Fashion Studies at Stockholm University. She is expert in visual studies, fashion studies, childhood studies and visual consumption. Annamari Vänskä can be contacted at: annamari.vanska@ims.su.se

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