

EXOTIC, DISTINCTIVE AND LOVED: “UNCONVENTIONAL PETS” IN THE CITY OF SÃO PAULO – BRAZIL

EXÓTICOS, DISTINTOS E AMADOS: “PETS NÃO CONVENCIONAIS” NA CIDADE DE SÃO PAULO – BRASIL

EXÓTICAS, DISTINTIVAS Y QUERIDAS: “MASCOTAS NO CONVENCIONALES” EN LA CIUDAD DE SÃO PAULO – BRASIL

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to reflect on the so-called “exotic” or “unconventional” pets and their ability to evoke social distinction. Based on Human-Animal Studies, studies on distinction, market data and field research in two specialized pet shops in the city of São Paulo, we seek to understand the relationship between consumption, animals and affection. We infer that the distinctive trait lies less in the possession and more in the sensitivity to “like” such pets.

KEYWORDS: Pet. Exoticism. Taste. Distinction.

RESUMO: O objetivo deste artigo é refletir sobre os chamados “pets exóticos” ou “não convencionais” e sua capacidade de evocar distinção social. Embasados nos Human-Animal Studies, nos estudos sobre distinção, em dados do mercado e pesquisa de campo em duas pet shops especializadas na cidade de São Paulo, buscamos compreender a relação entre consumo, animais e afetos. Inferimos que o traço distintivo está menos na posse e mais na sensibilidade para “gostar” de tais mascotes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Animal de estimação. Pet. Exotismo. Gosto. Distinção.

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RESUMEN: *El objetivo de este artículo es reflexionar sobre las mascotas llamadas “exóticas” o “no convencionales” y su capacidad para evocar distinción social. Con base en Human-Animal Studies, estudios de distinción, datos de mercado e investigación de campo en dos tiendas especializadas de mascotas de la ciudad de São Paulo, buscamos comprender la relación entre consumo, animales y afectos. Deducimos que el rasgo distintivo está menos en la posesión y más en la sensibilidad a “gustar” tales mascotas.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Mascotas. Pet. Exotismo. Gusto. Distinción.*

Introduction

It is possible to affirm that, since the second half of the 20th century – especially from the 1980s onward – there has been an intensification of questioning across various fields of knowledge regarding the concept of the Human, anthropocentrism, and Humanism itself. These issues stem from the social, political, and cultural transformations generally known as postmodernity. Critiques concerning the definition and boundaries of humanity and its relationship with the environment and other living beings have gained increasing presence in science, art, economics, spirituality, law, and politics, with significant repercussions on daily relationships within contemporary Western societies (Franco, 2021; Lewgoy e Segata, 2017).

In the social sciences, domestic animals have been used to question the notion of human exceptionalism within a broader ecological system and to criticize the current relationships among human animals, non-human animals, and other living beings – relations that hold specific regional, historical, and cultural characteristics (Haraway, 2021). The aim of this article is to reflect on so-called “non-conventional pets” and their capacity to evoke social distinction. Grounded in Human-Animal Studies, distinction theory, market data, and field research conducted in two specialized pet shops in São Paulo, we seek to understand the relationship between consumption, animals, and affections.

Consciousness and Affections

Research on interactions between human animals and non-human animals – or “other-than-human” animals (Fausto, 2020) – is commonly situated in the interdisciplinary field known as Human-Animal Studies¹. Within this field, non-human

¹ This is an academically established field internationally and already well-developed in Brazil, with Working Groups in the congresses of the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in

animals are understood as agents and instigators of social relationships that shape realities in which humans do not always exercise or possess sovereignty (Fausto, 2020; Osório, 2015). Thus, beyond the constantly created and recreated social representations of animals, the focus lies on the relationships between human and non-human² agents and their various interactions, wherein the rigid division between them is at times challenged and at other times reinforced – revealing new possibilities for interactions with the environment, as well as prompting the humanization of certain animals while simultaneously contributing to the animalization of specific social groups (Carman, 2017).

In this regard, the Darwinian revolution remains one of the main paradigms of rupture. More than dismantling the view of the divine exceptionalism of the human being and placing it within the order of nature (rather than the religious cosmos) under scientific logic, Darwin attributed to animals several feelings previously understood as uniquely human. Even though the naturalist's intention was to demonstrate that affections are also part of animal evolution, his arguments contributed to the humanization of animals as much as to the animalization of humans. From that point onward, science acknowledged that animals possess mental capacities such as discernment, perception, intelligence, and emotions – even if in different degrees or qualities (Carvalho & Waizbort, 2008).

This represented a significant rupture with the Cartesian view which, since the 17th century, held that animals in general (including mammals) had no feelings because they lacked a soul – expressed through rational consciousness – and were therefore incapable of feeling pain or pleasure. Their facial expressions, moans, cries, and bodily contractions were considered merely mechanical reflexes resulting from the flow of air in their machine-like organism (Fausto, 2020). In his 1872 book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin asserted that human emotions derive from the evolutionary development of affections already present in some animals. This opened a path for understanding what, from the last quarter of the 20th century onward, would come to be known as sentience.

Sentience refers to the animal's capacity to feel emotions and sensations while simultaneously perceiving the world around it and responding intentionally to such stimuli (Ritvo, 2000). The discussion on sentience is part of the broader interdisciplinary debate on animal consciousness – its definitions, boundaries, and ethical implications – and serves as the foundation for legislation and legal disputes regarding animal rights. It also supports critiques of certain scientific practices,

Social Sciences (ANPOCS), the Brazilian Sociological Society (SBS), and the Brazilian Anthropological Association (ABA), in addition to dossiers and articles published in relevant scientific journals.

² From this point forward, solely for stylistic consistency and textual fluency, the terms used will be “humans” (for human animals) and “animals” (for non-human animals).

such as vivisection³ and the use of animals in testing and experiments. The very term “sentience” has increasingly been criticized for serving merely to preserve the human-animal distinction, avoiding the assertion that animals are conscious beings (Ritvo, 2000). As such, the term appears to be giving way to new interpretations of consciousness – even within neuroscience – where, in 2012, a group of scientists in the United Kingdom signed the so-called Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness in Human and Non-Human Animals (Low, 2012), which included both vertebrate and invertebrate animals in its scope.

But Darwin’s analysis was part of a broader movement of changing sensibilities toward nature and animals that had already been underway in Europe since the 16th century. According to historian Keith Thomas (2010), Europeans’ relationship – particularly that of the English – with the so-called “natural world” gradually changed toward viewing flora and fauna as deserving of care, affection, and philosophical reflection. Some domestic animals, in particular, underwent a profound shift in their connection with humans: dogs and cats (primarily, though not exclusively) moved from fields and yards into the interior of homes, transitioning from utilitarian beings to recipients of affection.

These animals shifted from being merely domestic to companions, and then to pets. This means that they acquired intrinsic value, regardless of any utility. Still, according to the historian, three characteristics differentiate pets from animals in general: being allowed indoors, having a personal and individualized name, and not being used as food (Thomas, 2010).

This shift in attitudes and sensibilities was also accompanied by both religious discourse and material transformations. According to Spanish historian Arturo Morgado García (2017), Europeans’ views on animals from the Middle Ages to the present can be divided into three stages. The first is the “symbolic view,” predominant in medieval times, in which reflection on animals was inseparable from a magical-spiritual – and primarily moral – worldview: animals represented human virtues or vices, and knowledge about them was as much fable as it was a disposition of their material, spiritual, and moral attributes.

The second is the “positivist view,” beginning roughly in the 16th century and lasting until the 18th century, during which a process of disenchantment regarding animals took place. At the same time, animals became objects of scientific epistemology, not only motivating modern classification systems but also contributing to the very emergence of scientific practice. The third phase is the “affective view,” which emerged in the 19th century and continues to this day – a perspective that will be explored in more detail later.

³ The practice of cutting open a live animal for scientific study for experimental or didactic purposes.

A fundamental element in this transformation was the shift in religious perspective. Christian theology during the Middle Ages insisted on a radical separation between humans and “beasts,” based primarily on an interpretation of the biblical book of Genesis that positioned humans as superior and the ultimate stewards of Earth (Thomas, 2010). Any spiritual closeness between these two “natures” (human and animal) was perceived as a form of cosmic disorder.

Even so, pigs, sheep, cows, oxen, goats, and chickens were not merely sources of food, clothing, and tools; they participated in the same cosmogony. For rural medieval European communities, animals were companions in labor and entertainment (though often subject to violent and harmful practices). They were seen as capable of experiencing the same joys, responsibilities, and punishments – and could even be accused and judged for allegedly casting spells or intentionally harming people or land. This demonstrates that the physical and spiritual boundaries between these beings were far more ambiguous and permeable than they are today.

While it is within the field of Judeo-Christian religiosity that the conception of animals as inferior to humans and existing to serve them is developed, it is also within Christianity that the idea of non-human beings – particularly animals – as deserving of respect and care begins to flourish, especially from the 16th century onward (though Saint Francis of Assisi had already advocated this view in the 13th century). As Thomas (2010) notes, with the Reformation, a new way of perceiving animals from a religious standpoint begins – albeit discreetly. From “beasts,” they become “children of God,” possessing their own capacity for empathy and deserving of the faithful’s benevolence. Avoiding cruelty to animals and educating them came to be seen not only as a mark of civility but also of spiritual and philosophical growth.

By encouraging new moral perceptions and actively participating in the development of science, the relationship between humans and animals generated not only epistemological and emotional changes but also material transformations in daily life. For example, in the 19th century, animals such as horses, oxen, and even dogs began to be socially perceived as laborers alongside human workers, and thus also deserving of protection and rights (Hribal, 2007). Another example is the increasing presence of mechanized transport (trains, trams, and later automobiles) in the early 20th century, partly due to the resistance of draft animals to the new urban environments of large cities – including São Paulo (Aprobato Filho, 2007).

From Darwin’s research to the emergence of numerous animal protection societies, from religion to politics, and including art and philosophy, the 19th century marked the beginning of what Morgado Garcia, as previously mentioned, called the “affective view” of animals. This view gave rise not only to a new sensitivity toward

domestic animals or a specific affection for them, but to a unique “love” directed at certain pets – those we now refer to simply as “pets.”

Families and Pets

According to Sandoe, Palmer, Corr, and Serpell (2015), in many human societies across most of the globe and throughout much of history, maintaining close (though not necessarily friendly) relationships between humans and domestic animals has been, and continues to be, quite common. The case of European societies during the Middle Ages and early Modern Age – with their strict (and frequently unsuccessful) attempts to separate these beings – appears to have been the exception rather than the rule. It was likely the habit of the indigenous peoples of the American continent to keep pets that influenced Europeans. According to Thomas (2010), there are already reports of changes in this European pattern since the 17th century, with accounts of nobles owning animals (particularly dogs, but also birds and later cats from the 18th century onward) that, beyond being domestic, began to receive special affection and dedicated attention, thus creating a unique bond.

Although in rural environments and among workers who dealt directly with working and livestock animals, affection between humans and animals was never absent, it remained subordinated to the logic of utility. However, it was within courts and more urbanized settings – among people who did not coexist with labor animals and had better financial conditions – that an emotional connection developed toward some animals that, like their owners, did not need to work. In this way, domestic animals became “companions” and subsequently “pets.” It is important to consider that this human devotion, both historically and today, is directed toward certain individuals, not the entire species; owning an animal does not necessarily mean feeling “love” for it. As Abonizio and Baptista (2016, p. 19, our translation) remind us, “Loving an animal is not the same as loving its entire species, much less all the species classified within that category.”

Especially from modernity onward, with the rise of the bourgeoisie, there was an expansion within the middle class – not of proximity to animals (which was already common) – but of a specific appreciation for certain animals. The more urban groups destroy and distance themselves from nature, seeing it as an “inexhaustible resource” and an obstacle to progress, the more sympathy and emotional attachment grow toward certain animals, specifically those that are more urban, medium-sized, and small-sized, and that can be kept in increasingly smaller living spaces.

From the 19th century, alongside the consolidation of the “affective view” of human-animal relationships, what historian Kathleen Kete calls “the domestication

of the beast”⁴ (1994; p. 39, our translation). According to Kete, the development of a bourgeois sensitivity and culture is inseparable from this new sentimentality toward animals and the habits of care and breeding (petkeeping) that come with it. As with popular classes, the utility of dogs as guardians of homes was unquestioned, but it was now invested with new meanings: dogs defended families, protected the boundaries between home and street, taught children values such as loyalty and altruism – serving as moral compasses – and inspired a wide range of cultural productions that validated the new bourgeois empathy:

The keeping of pets came to express bourgeois modernity in many significant ways. [...] [such keeping] in the 19th century became not only an example of bourgeois life [...], but the invention of a medium, a means of communication: it was the way the bourgeoisie spoke about themselves (Kete, 1994, p. 40, our translation).

According to Sandoe, Palmer, Corr, and Serpell (2015), this shift in social emotionality is inseparable from certain changes in practical and urban customs related to animals, especially three: 1) controlled reproduction and breeding (especially of dogs), leading to the creation of kennels and Kennel Clubs, which operate with aristocratic and eugenic logics that persist today; 2) from the 20th century onward, the control of pets’ diets through monitoring and surveillance of the production, distribution, and consumption of animal-specific foods, no longer homemade but industrially produced feed; and 3) animal training (again, primarily dogs) beyond domestic or entertainment purposes, for military or police activities, assistance to people with disabilities, rescue operations, therapy, and sports. According to the authors, these changes have led since the 20th century to transformations not only in the daily lives of animals but also in the lifestyles of humans regarding care, diet, and physical activity, with “owners” increasingly referred to as “guardians.”

During this process, the exchange of affection between humans and their pets began to be interpreted increasingly in terms of a specific feeling: love. Especially from the 20th century onward, emic readings of interactions with dogs and cats (and in some cases, even birds and reptiles) began to focus on these animals’ inexhaustible capacity for love. Expressions such as “true love,” “unconditional love,” or “pure love” are frequently used to describe the bond between pets and their guardians (Abonizio & Baptista, 2016). In other words, an entirely idealized form of love. Although “animal love” is a broadly accepted concept among guardians, as shown by various studies (Charles, 2014), the subject remains highly

⁴ All translations are by the author.

controversial in human and natural sciences. As we have seen, not only are the boundaries and definitions of what can be considered “human,” “animal,” and “consciousness” evolving, but what may or may not be called love is also subject to debate (Milligan 2014).

In this regard, another brief historical consideration is worthwhile: the Cynic philosophers of Ancient Greece, with notable representatives such as Diogenes of Sinope (404–323 B.C.) and Hipparchia of Maroneia⁵ (350–280 B.C.), derived the name of their school – Cynics – from the Greek term for “dog”: *kynikos*. These thinkers advocated a natural life inseparable from the needs of the physical body and openly criticized the customs and values of the Greek Polis. Their critical philosophy manifested in habits such as owning no possessions, sleeping outdoors, engaging in public sex, eating only when hungry, and always being completely frank in relationships and speech. Being associated with street dogs, they adopted the name of their philosophy accordingly. Dogs represented detachment, indifference, the ability to live with little, conduct free from concern about others’ judgment, and loyalty to their freedom (Aggio, 2023).

The important point in this example is that dogs were not seen as sources of love. Diogenes (known as “the dog”) and Hipparchia (called “the bitch”) regarded these animals as possessing sincerity, loyalty, faithfulness, and patience – but not affection. For many centuries, these were the characteristics used to identify such beings, since loyalty or faithfulness were not interpreted as unconditional love. It is only from modernity onward, within bourgeois culture, that dogs (and a few other animals) came to be seen as affectionate.

Thus, the keeping of pets (in the sense not only of breeding but also educating and caring for them) became a structural part of bourgeois lifestyle and developed alongside the formation of the bourgeois family itself. Even at this stage, despite intensified emotional investment, the animal was viewed as “of” the family – that is, its utilitarian and proprietary character was not separated from the feelings directed toward it (Kete, 1994).

During this process, two elements proved fundamental to the development of relationships with pets: anthropomorphization (and humanization) and infantilization. Within the home, cats and dogs were thought of in human terms – that is, as possessing the same personalities, feelings, attitudes, and desires as people. This led to human-like actions such as giving them typical human names, assigning gender (e.g., putting bows or ties on them to indicate “boys or girls”), dressing them in clothes and accessories, or celebrating their birthdays. Similarly, animals were treated like children – both in the way humans spoke to and trained them, and through dedicated clothing, decorated spaces, or even accessories such as baby

⁵ Considered the first female philosopher of Western Antiquity.

strollers. It is as if, in their guardians' eyes, the animals never mature; although their biological condition ages, their personality remains eternally childlike (Greenebaum, 2004).

However, it is only from the late 20th century onward, as a consequence of sociocultural changes – especially due to deregulation of economic structures, new family organizations, and, of course, the intensification of affection between humans and their pets (the “dog love,” in Marjorie Garber’s terms (2000)) – that a new social configuration arises: the multispecies family (Acero Aguilar, 2019; Sussman, 2016). Already recognized in many countries and in various social spheres (art, science, and law), this family grouping includes humans and animals as members of the same family, which is no longer defined by blood or biological ties (Irvine and Cilia, 2017). In other words, the animal is no longer family property but an active member of it. If formerly the animal was of the family and later in the family, today the animal is the family.

In the 19th century, pets were portrayed by the press as caricatured and comical members of the bourgeois family. Today, such animals are presented naturally and respectfully, and laughter at their family and cultural belonging is seen as offensive, insensitive, and ignorant. Still, it is important to remember that this is both a reality and a form of propaganda. The same multispecies kinship can, under certain circumstances, abandon the animal or replace it with another. Moreover, being part of the family means participating in its dynamics, whether caring or violent. Animal abandonment and mistreatment in Brazil coexist alongside growing affection⁶.

So many and such profound changes in scientific, religious, philosophical, and artistic fields – with direct consequences on the social, familial, and personal lives of human-pet relationships – gave rise in the postmodern West to a new type of animal; one that not only keeps company but is a companion; that is not only cherished but loved and supposedly reciprocates love without the demands of contemporary relationships; that belongs to a species different from humans yet is family. We are talking about the “pet.” But, as Abonizio and Baptista (2016) clarify, it is necessary to understand the pet not as an animal in itself but as a relationship between an animal and one (or more) human guardian, mediated by the market.

I believe this historical section, despite its length, was necessary so we can clearly understand that, although it is a long-term process, in contemporary times it acquires unique characteristics better understood in comparison to previous periods. After all, “Being a pet now is not the same as being a pet in 1800” (Fudge, 2014, p. 107, our translation).

⁶ Available at: <https://institutomvc.org.br/site/index.php/2024/04/04/indice-de-abandono-no-brasil/>. Accessed in: May 7, 2025.

Markets and Affections

The shift in sensitivity toward animals was not isolated from new social contexts and changes. According to Colin Campbell (2001), the development of an original form of emotionality, which he termed the “romantic ethic,” is inseparable from the formation of bourgeois sensibility and the establishment of consumerism. Thus, the capitalist ethos can only develop thanks to the concomitant growth of feelings linked to the market – that is, affectivity as a driver of business. For sociologist Eva Illouz, emotions are both commodities and the central resource to be stimulated and exploited in contemporary capitalism. In the case of pets, both affection and dedication have paved the way for one of the most prosperous sectors of the current “affective capitalism” (Illouz, 2011): the Pet Market.

The contemporary pet is intrinsically linked to the commerce of products, services, and experiences that grow exponentially, in which love between humans and animals transcends not only species boundaries but also many consumption barriers. There is a whole world of goods and activities – such as retail pet trade, veterinary medicines, pet food, boarding, grooming, among others – that presuppose and encourage a “more humanized care”: natural meals, daycare centers, specialized laundries, spas, parties, funeral services, health plans, dog walkers and sitters, as well as pet-friendly versions of establishments, foods, etc. (SEBRAE, 2024).

Obtaining information about pets in Brazil is not easy, whether at the governmental level (federal, state, or municipal), through associations, or through private companies. Government data are not consolidated in a single, easily accessible location, and many are outdated. In the private sector, associations and companies publish more or less complete reports to the public, often without clearly citing the data sources. In fact, many of these reports are promotional brochures with data on the pet market. When the research is conducted by the company itself, either the report is not accessible to the general public, or, when it reaches the media, the methodology or even the year of publication is often not disclosed.

Some reports present data completely contradictory to others – for example, one may claim that most pet guardians live in houses while another states apartments; some indicate owners belong to classes A and B, others to classes C and D. Some refer to the “pet sector” or “pet market,” while others use “pet industry,” without clarifying when these terms are synonymous or have distinct meanings. It is common for these reports, brochures, or studies available online to cite each other. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this article, we found some relevant information in these materials.

Regarding the pet population, we can rely on IBGE. The “National Health Survey (PNS)” of 2019 reported that there are 34.4 million Brazilian households with at least one dog or cat present (IBGE, 2020). SEBRAE’s 2024 report “My

Business in Numbers – Panorama of the PET Market in 2024” presents data from ABINPET (Brazilian Association of the Pet Products Industry) stating that, in 2022, Brazil had a pet population of 167.6 million (source: Euromonitor). Although this material provides extensive information about the profile of companies and consumers in the Pet Sector⁷, it does not present absolute figures (for example, market revenue in year X), only percentages indicating increases or decreases. In micro and small businesses – which constitute 98% of the sector and predominate in employment – 2023 saw 40.78% male hires and 59.22% female. Furthermore, the pet market is predominantly female, with women being the majority as entrepreneurs, consumers, and caregivers (SEBRAE, 2024).

The “2024 Market Data” from ABINPET and the Instituto Pet Brasil state that Brazil’s pet population in 2023 was 160.9 million (source no longer Euromonitor, but Instituto Pet Brasil). This is 6.7 million fewer than the previous year reported by SEBRAE. Nonetheless, both materials claim that the pet population increased. According to the 2022 IBGE Census, the total number of children aged up to 14 years in the country is 40.1 million – that is, there are more pets than children in Brazil.

Continuing with the 2024 Market Data, the revenue of the Brazilian Pet Market in 2023 was R\$ 68.7 billion. Global retail sales revenue in the pet sector was approximately US\$ 197.7 billion in 2023 (ABINPET & Instituto Pet Brasil, 2024, p. 5). Revenue from the Brazilian Pet Industry (including feed, accessories, and medicines) in 2023, according to another 2024 report titled “Brazil Pet Market,” was R\$ 47.01 billion. The Pet Sector, according to the Association’s website, generated 77 billion reais in 2024, continuing an annual growth trend. Despite difficulties finding precise and consensual numbers, the important point is that these data illustrate how vast the industry/market/sector is in Brazil. All recent reports agree that Brazil is the third country with the largest pet population in the world, behind only the United States and China.

As we have seen, the pet is also a market, and the emotional expenditure on the world’s third-largest pet population also means Brazil is the third-largest pet market globally (4.9% in 2022) (ABINPET/Instituto Pet Brasil⁸, 2024). This Brazilian affective specificity has been internationally recognized, such as by the multinational market research company IPSOS, which in 2018, in a publication on “cultural intelligence,” highlighted the Brazilian characteristic of pets being seen not only as family members but also as symbols of status, wealth, and values such as hierarchy⁹.

⁷ “The pet sector is the segment of agribusiness related to the development of breeding, production and marketing activities for pets” (ABINPET & Instituto Pet Brasil, 2024, p. 3, our translation).

⁸ In the publication Mercado Pet Brasil, only from ABINPET and also from 2024, the figure is slightly different: 9.5%.

⁹ See: <https://www.ipsos.com/en/cultural-intelligence/top-dogs>.

Despite the strong perception of pets as family members in Latin America¹⁰, Brazil shows particularly high figures. According to the RADAR PET 2020 survey, conducted by the Comissão de Animais de Companhia – COMAC, a branch of the Sindicato Nacional da Indústria de Produtos para Saúde Animal – SINDAN, 95% of dog owners and 96% of cat owners agree with the statements: “The health of my dog/cat is as important as **the health of a family member**” and “for 95% of respondents, **the health of the pet is as important as that of the family**” (Radar Pet, 2020, p. 26-32, bold in the original, our translation). The COMAC Yearbook 2022, reporting on how guardians view their pets, found the highest responses were “Like my child” (31% of dog owners and 27% of cat owners) and “Like a family member” (28% of dog owners and 26% of cat owners) (COMAC, 2022, p. 25, our translation).

The latest SINDAN yearbook states that according to the RADAR PET 2023 survey, “there was a slight consolidation of the pet as a family member, from 77% to 78% in the case of dogs and from 71% to 72% among cats” (SINDAN, 2024; p. 73). However, shortly after, on page 75 of the same document, it is shown in a table that in 2023, 29% of dog guardians and 25% of cat guardians saw them as family members, also citing RADAR PET 2023 as the data source (SINDAN, 2024). This reveals a discrepancy of 49% and 47%, respectively. Thus, although increased affection for pets is a Western trend, in 21st-century Brazil, it acquires a particularly pronounced expression.

Exotics and Distinctive Pets

Regarding the municipality of São Paulo, information is also difficult to find, imprecise, or outdated. According to communication from the Municipal Health Secretariat, received in February 2025 via the São Paulo City Hall’s Electronic Information System for Citizens (e-SIC), “the estimate is that there is a total of 2,684,771 domestic animals domiciled in urban areas, comprising 1,874,601 dogs and 810,170 cats, according to a study published by ISA-Capital 2015.” No information was provided on other species.

Concerning pet businesses, the city with the highest number of companies, products, and services does not present much public data (governmental or private). SEBRAE (2024; p. 70), citing the Federal Revenue Service, reports only that there are 65,423 active companies involved in “veterinary activities, retail trade of animals, veterinary medicines, pet food and accessories, and lodging and grooming services”

¹⁰ Available at: <https://www.worldanimalprotection.es/noticias-y-blogs/noticias/latinoamericanos-el-95-ven-sus-mascotas-como-hijos-o-parte-de-sus-familias/#:~:text=Un%20sondeo%20hecho%20por%20World,menos%2C%20parte%20de%20su%20familia>. Accessed in: May 7, 2025.

in the state of São Paulo. Even the Union of Employees in Pet Shops, Kennels, Training Schools for Domestic Animals, Veterinary Clinics, Veterinary Hospitals, and Hotels for Domestic Animals of the State of São Paulo (SINDPETSHOP – SP)¹¹ does not provide figures.

Field research identified two main stores, operated by different companies, that sell “exotic pets”¹² or “non-conventional” pets in the city. Both are spacious (one is almost twice the size of the other), well-lit, and employ on average seven to twelve employees (considered medium-sized Pet Shops according to ABINPET), mostly young women. They are almost always friendly and well-informed about the specificities and care requirements of each animal. The establishments are located in two middle-to-upper-class neighborhoods in the West Zone of the capital, known for being modern, attractive areas with intense cultural and commercial activity, subject to strong real estate speculation, and featuring a very high Human Development Index. The clientele is predominantly young adults and teenagers. When families arrive, they are also young, usually with children.

The animals for sale include snakes (such as the Amazon Rainbow Boa¹³ or the Ball Python Jigsaw¹⁴), reptiles (such as the Leopard Gecko¹⁵ or the Bearded Dragon¹⁶), birds (such as the Congo African Grey Parrot¹⁷ or the Sulphur-crested Cockatoo¹⁸), mammals (such as ferrets¹⁹ or chinchillas²⁰), and insects (such as Madagascar hissing cockroaches²¹). Both stores are licensed by IBAMA and provide the necessary certificates and documents, thereby legalizing the animals for purchase and ownership, since some of these species are considered threatened or at risk of extinction²². The stores’ decor evokes a wild environment, full of plants, and the loud sounds of the birds create an almost safari-like atmosphere of adventure and discovery.

Ornamental fish and birds occupy an interesting position. Fish, sold in only one of the stores, represent the majority of domestic animals worldwide (ABINPET, 2024) and belong to their own market segment, the aquarium trade, in which a

¹¹ Available at: <https://sindpetshop.org.br/>. Accessed in: May 7, 2025.

¹² Also known in international literature as “New Companion Animals” (Velden, 2019).

¹³ Average price R\$ 5,000.00. Values may vary according to the region and the animal's characteristics, such as age, size, and coloring, among others. This applies to all the animals mentioned here. The figures given here are an estimate based on consultations in stores and on websites and should not be taken as precise figures. They are all average values. Prices collected on January 27, 2025.

¹⁴ R\$ 16,000.00.

¹⁵ R\$ 1,800.00.

¹⁶ Also known as the Bearded Dragon: R\$ 3,800.00.

¹⁷ R\$ 18,000.00.

¹⁸ R\$ 35,000.00.

¹⁹ R\$ 9,000.00.

²⁰ R\$ 700.00.

²¹ R\$ 20.00.

²² The Green Iguana (R\$4,000.00), although highly sought after in Brazil, has been banned from sale in the state of São Paulo by court decision since 2008.

small 31.5-liter saltwater aquarium (30 x 35 x 30 cm) can cost on average R\$ 1,200 without fish (whose prices can range from R\$ 50 to R\$ 1,600) and excluding maintenance costs. Birds, on the other hand, are sold in both stores and, despite being the second largest population of pets in Brazil (ABINPET, 2024), are rarely found in common pet shops, with their market for products and services being much smaller than that of dogs and cats. The studied stores sell only wild ornamental²³ and exotic birds (those not native to our country). Small and medium-sized rodents, live or frozen²⁴, are also sold as food for reptiles.

For the maintenance and care of such animals, in addition to expenses with food, medicine, and specific equipment, it is important to understand the habits and characteristics of the animals, thus preventing death due to neglect or ignorance by the guardian, since many become more fragile than normal when living outside their natural habitat. To this end, the stores encourage buyers to take courses (offered by partner companies), and one of them provides small free guides with care instructions. Likewise, social media videos present tips on how to care for and interact with these pets.

For an ideal experience with such unconventional animals, it is expected that guardians invest effort not only in dedication to the pets but also in studying them. In other words, an investment in specific knowledge about these animals is anticipated, which presupposes that guardians already possess the habit of study – a practice indicative of high cultural capital.

According to ABINPET data, the “luxury segment” in Brazil accounts for only 1% of the sector’s revenue²⁵; at the same time, all indicators cited here confirm that the breeding and sale of “reptiles and small mammals” are increasing. Commonly, animals sold in these stores, excluding birds, fall into these categories. The luxury segment is presented as products (clothing, collars, beds, bowls, and carriers made by famous brands) or services (spa, acupuncture, beauty salons, items, massages, hot tub baths, therapies with essential oils, etc.). The sale and materials for maintaining such animals are not included in this segment.

Thus, two conclusions arise. First, the luxury segment of the pet market has nothing to do with the “world of luxury” studied by Renato Ortiz (2019), where objects and experiences form a circuit of globalized symbolic goods that guarantee status and reinforce social boundaries within a hyper-restricted field. Second, that these new pets – reptiles and small mammals (including here also hard-to-acquire birds) – belong neither to the “segment” nor to the “universe” of luxury.

However, considering two fundamental elements of that universe – difficult access (due to high costs) and rarity (small numbers of available animals and difficult

²³ A Hyacinth Macaw has an average value of R\$ 120,000.

²⁴ Prices range from R\$5.00 to R\$500.00.

²⁵ Available at: <https://abinpet.org.br/informacoes-gerais-do-setor/>. Accessed in: May 7, 2025.

maintenance) – we can assert that the exotic pet market may also confer a certain type of distinction. Not that owning and breeding these animals is part of the “world of the wealthy” researched by Ortiz (far from it), but that, according to this market’s own logic, owning them “is not for everyone.”

According to IBAMA, exotic animals are those that do not belong to the native fauna of a given region. However, in “non-conventional” pet stores, many animals are from Brazil’s wild fauna and do not originate from foreign regions, such as the Tiger Turtle²⁶, the Toco Toucan²⁷ and the Teiú lizard²⁸. Although they also claim to have native wild animals, the marketing emphasis always seems to stress the “exotic.” This shows that the meaning of “exotic” used in this market is not geographical or biological, but rooted in colonial eccentricity. Exotic pets are those uncommon, strange, or extravagant – i.e., rare, less accessible, and very distant from the taste that recognizes only common dogs and cats as legitimate pets.

There is already extensive literature on the relationship between exotic animals, ostentation, and colonialism (Belozeroskaya, 2006). Since Antiquity, through the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and up to the 18th century, ownership of exotic animals was a privilege of the few. Hunting, transporting, trading, housing, and maintaining such beings involved hundreds of people charging for their services without any guarantee that the animals would adapt or survive. The larger, more unusual, and fiercer the animals, the more valuable they were. And the more valuable and special, the better suited they were to represent the power of a king, the eccentricity of a noble, or the authority of an institution. Ownership of these beings brought the entire universe of associated symbols into the concrete world of aesthetic ornaments and power and inequality relations (Jiménez, 2009).

Whether in the political spectacle of private “menageries” until the 18th century or in the public entertainment of zoological gardens, circuses, and fairs in the 19th century, exotic animals were demonstrations of economic, political, and even spiritual power. Still, rhinoceroses, crocodiles, hippos, and tigers were excluded from the process of animal sentimentalization. Dogs, cats, and birds were prioritized due to their size and ease of domestication, adapting to modern urban life. “As always, some animals were more equal than others” (Ritvo, 2007, p. 120, our translation).

Here, it is important to highlight two points. First, the trade of exotic animals found its major drivers in colonialism and capitalism. Whether for purposes of ostentation, study, entertainment, or preservation, this business has consolidated to the present day, both legally and illegally, with Brazil currently considered one of the largest illegal exporters of wild animals in the world (Velden, 2019). Second,

²⁶ R\$ 400.00.

²⁷ R\$ 33,000.00.

²⁸ R\$ 3,500.00.

during the development of capitalism, when court dogs and cats began to receive differentiated care and special attention, this attitude was seen as “exotic” for the time, and the relationship with them was also used to demarcate social boundaries and hierarchies.

Veblen, in 1899, already reflected on the ownership of domestic animals without productive purposes as having an honorific character and as an example of conspicuous consumption. Criticizing the rising and unproductive “leisure class,” he noted a hierarchy between dogs and cats. Although both were useful, the former – despite being “the dirtiest of domestic animals and having the most repugnant habits” (Veblen, 1985, p. 66) – thanks to their subservient and idolatrous nature, when well cared for, could become beautiful and satisfy the human propensity for domination, something the cat eschews. At no point does the author perceive love in this relationship.

Thus, we see that among aristocratic and later bourgeois circles, sensitivity toward animals was developed alongside an “elite sensitivity” that expressed compassion for animals as a sign of sophistication and distinction, helping to forge social hierarchies. As Thomas states:

The reason for this distinction was essentially social. Dogs differed in status because their owners did. [...] By around 1800, all the symptoms of an obsession with domestic animals were already evident. Pets were often better fed than servants. [...] Just as today’s legacies to cat shelters, concern for animal welfare could be an alternative to charity, rather than a form of it (Thomas, 2010, p. 150-263, our translation).

In pioneering work, Samantha Brasil Calmon de Oliveira (2006) revealed how distinction, as analyzed by Bourdieu, appears in all its complexity in current dog championships and exhibitions, where breeds, pedigrees, kennels, handlers, and guardians constantly compete for status and recognition, in which love for dogs is inseparable from the reputation conferred to their guardians. Thus, as historians, social scientists, economists, and advertisers show, the association of pet ownership with status and hierarchy, and of exotic animals with prestigious eccentricity, is well documented. Whether as symbol, metaphor, extension of self, honorific ornament, or identity marker, the animal and the “taste” for it are inseparable from consumption and the subject’s position in social space.

According to Bourdieu (2013), social space (which should not be confused with physical space, although it often materializes in it) is constituted by the set of different social fields (economic, religious, political, academic, etc.) in which the subject is positioned at a given moment in life. Fields are relatively autonomous social subspaces that have their own dynamics and rules and serve as arenas for

struggles over power and legitimacy both within and across fields. Position in the field is defined (and altered) by the accumulation or loss of capital, the main forms of which are economic, cultural, and social capital, with their sum constituting symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2007). Thus, all social space is also a symbolic space and a place of symbolic struggles.

If we extrapolate the concept of social space to reflect on the research in question, the “social space of pets” can be thought of as composed of certain animals, guardians, and perhaps the main agent – a market that heavily invests in products²⁹ and services whose strong connection among the three vertices is the investment in affection. Expressions and terms such as “we love,” “darlings,” “cuties,” “loves,” “passion,” “passionate” (referring to reptiles and small mammals), and “friendly” (referring to the Madagascar cockroach), frequent in social media and promotional materials from the stores, were not found in field conversations, either from sellers or buyers³⁰. The most common expressions were “interest,” “easy company,” “practicality,” and even “addiction³¹.” However, the discourse of affective language, the main marketing strategy, is increasingly part of the symbolic space of “non-conventional pets.” Scientific articles in the consumption field take animal love as given (Holbrook & Woodside, 2008). “Love” seems to be the keyword of the pet market.

Hirschman (1994) had already reflected on the hierarchy of pets, considering reptiles and cold-blooded animals at the lowest level of affection, precisely because they were not anthropomorphized. Currently, with the elevation of such animals to the category of pets, one of the studied stores presents online photos of its lizards wearing hats, clothes, and even Halloween costumes. Belk (1996), in the same period, argued that the expression “companion animal” was more in vogue than “pet,” since the latter alluded to objectification. Both authors, in classic texts on the relationship among animals, consumption, and status, evoke one of the most important themes of Bourdieusian sociology: social classifications.

According to Bourdieu, society is hierarchized and at the same time justifies and legitimizes its hierarchization through its classifications. Classification systems allow for the creation, organization, and judgment of symbolic and material spaces in which social differences are transformed into inequalities through a logic of distinction (Bourdieu, 2007). This logic, which is always the result of a social, i.e., collective, process, presents itself as something natural rather than an exercise of domination. Thus, the most effective classifications are those that arise

²⁹ Animals are included here because, as commodities, they are still outside the affective relationship that characterizes the pet.

³⁰ International literature records such affective expressions (Shukhova & Macmillan, 2020).

³¹ An expression commonly used, in a complimentary way, for the constant consumption associated with identity, for example, in the tattoo industry.

from what is considered the most individual, intimate, and disinterested value: personal taste.

Through the habitus – i.e., the social incorporated by the subject's life trajectory, serving as a predisposition for their practices, values, and judgments – and according to their position within a given social field, taste can reproduce and produce meanings, reiterate and innovate judgments, customs, and attitudes, helping to establish lifestyles. Thus, every expression of taste, beyond being an exercise in classification, is also a struggle for values seen as legitimate and a positioning within the field. Every struggle for classification is a symbolic struggle. Classifications, in seeking to attribute merit to certain cultural expressions (while devaluing others), mobilize not only ideas and qualities but also emotions and actions (Bourdieu, 2007; 2020).

In this way, the classification of certain reptiles, amphibians, rodents, and insects as “pets” – that is, animals toward which there is a specific affective relationship mediated by the market (Abonizio & Baptista, 2016) – demonstrates the effort to legitimize a particular cultural expression in which distinction goes beyond the obvious possession of economic capital to buy and maintain such beings, but is found in the very alteration of sensitivity toward them. After all, who can propose and sustain this classification? To fight for the legitimization of reptiles and insects as pets requires symbolic capital capable of expanding the notion of “pet” to include animals that until then were (and still are for many) seen as repulsive, dirty, and unaffectionate:

The name is thus one of those important properties around which symbolic capital is constituted, because all representations cling to it; it is not the name itself that is at stake, but the name as the bearer of a whole historical series of representations (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 114, our translation).

Bourdieu (1983) showed us how the discourse of taste also uses the language of love. Liking/loving a watch, an animal, or art is to realize the encounter between values (so deeply ingrained that they are barely conscious) and an “object” that is the concrete manifestation of the subject's expectations. In this way, tastes change not because there is an offer to which demand adapts (or vice versa), but because power relations and conflicts within a given field change, altering both classifications and what can be classified, causing supply and demand to change mutually.

In this process, certain goods and values that once delimited social boundaries come to be seen as worn out because they have become porous, ambiguous, or indistinct, weakening the capacity for hierarchical differentiation. Thus, both emerging and established groups feel the need to reintroduce the rare into the sphere of what has then become common (Bourdieu, 1983). We could say that it is necessary to introduce the exotic into the sphere of the ordinary.

Maria Celeste Mira and Edison Bertoncelo (2019), in an article presenting debates about the pertinence of Bourdieu’s notion of distinction, show us how today distinction lies more in how some cultural product is consumed than in what product is consumed. Following this reasoning, we can argue that the capacity to like boas and bearded dragons (or at least admire them), intentionally share one’s residence with them, and dedicate time and attention to their care expresses a classificatory habitus currently seen as uncommon as the animals themselves. The experience of living with and consuming the exotic already includes a distinction. Here, the exotic and distinctive aspect is not only the “unconventional animal” but also the appreciation for such beings.

Final considerations

The taste for exotic pets seems to be justified less by the rhetoric of reciprocal love than by beauty and eccentricity. Exotic pets are not loyal, companionable, or sincere; they are rare, unusual, exceptional, little accessible, and singular. The expression of love for them, although found more in advertising than in the mouths of consumers, belongs to the same social space where physical stores, digital environments, and guardians coexist.

Although the term “love” for non-conventional animals still appears little in the research (except in market discourses, where it is constant), the term “taste” (for them) is constant. Such taste materializes in consumption, which combines economic and cultural capital to generate symbolic capital. The maintenance of such beings, with their terrariums, odors, temperatures, and specific precautions, requires spaces and care that, at first, only make sense in harmony with certain lifestyles in which refusal of the obvious is a distinctive mark.

Affection for pets can only develop within a specific symbolic and social space, even when this affection crosses, always in its own ways, various social classes. The classification of “pet” for exotic animals both organizes and produces the logic of an alteration of affection for reptiles and insects that is not intelligible (nor accessible) to most people, demonstrating the rarity not only of the animal but of the sensibility to create and admire these animals. Such classification aims to legitimize this distinction. Certain pedigreed breeds of dogs and cats, as symbols of elite (economic and cultural) status, already possess recognition of status and prestige for themselves and their guardians. The question posed is: will snakes and cockroaches also enter this select hall?

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