PetSmart’s “Perfect Toy:” Naturalized portrayals from pet to child to consumer

In the past decade, the pet product industry has spent billions of dollars to help create and reinforce a growing trend in a contemporary population of parents. On the surface level, this group of parents is not greatly different from their traditional counterparts; they use soft comforting tones to “baby” their children and are similarly willing to spend countless dollars on toys. However, one central piece of their parental relationship has changed: the species of child. Two years ago industry giant, PetSmart, dubbed this population “Pet parents” and describes them as individuals who elevate their pets to a new level of familial status.

Human-animal relationships are not a new cultural trend. Humans have been dependent on animals as sources of clothing, food, shelter, tools, companionship, and artistic and religious inspiration since the Paleolithic Period (Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell, 2000). However, the increased number of pets found in American and European households is not marked by growth in working animals who are “earning their keep.” Instead, changing values of domesticated pets center on aspects of the “social relationship with advantages arising from relationship-based concepts such as support and attachment” (p. 209).

According to a U.S. News/CNN survey, “More than 6 in 10 Americans think owning a pet leads to a more satisfying life” (Pet-loving Nation, 1995). Apparently, the changing social values placed on pets brings an increased value of material accessories ascribed to these animals. In 1995 American consumers spent $153 million on their pets (Haran, 1995; Schmelzer, 2005). The same year a Gallup Poll found that 24% of pet owners celebrated their pets' birthdays, 17% of whom gave gifts or birthday cakes (Podberscek, A., Paul, E. S., & Serpell, J. A., 2000). Within ten years, annual pet owner expenditures have now skyrocketed to $34.4 billion (Schmelzer, 2005). Leading the way in this exploding market, is PetSmart, who grossed over

In August of 2005, PetSmart first aired its advertisement, “The Perfect Toy.” The ad models what PetSmart identifies as a “great pet parent,” showing a dachshund’s owner dutifully ridding her dog of its worn-out toy and enthusiastically replacing it with a newer version, purchased at PetSmart. This commercial is a popular example of the ways the pet product industry continuously naturalizes the pet within the role of a human child as well as necessitating the owner’s role as consumer. In order to analyze “The Perfect Toy” this essay will carefully consider (1) societal changes in contemporary “family” structures that tend to place the pet into the role of a child, (2) a scene by scene look at the commercial in order to identify mediated rhetorical techniques which commodify the pet/owner relationship, and (3) implications of these mediated naturalized and commodified relationships. First, I will briefly describe my relationship to this text and approach to the follow critique.

Motives and Approaches

Mirroring Bonnie Dow's attitude towards the rhetorical criticism of television, I concede that my analysis is always informed by my social situation, which is necessarily limited by my personal experiences and perspectives (1996, p. 3). Therefore, I declare that I am a pet owner and regularly refer to myself as “mommy” in my relationship to both my standard poodles and two mixed breed domestic cats. Like many critics in the discipline, I find my criticism is often an attempt to “understand the contradictions in my own responses to cultural products” (p. 18). In other words, as a consumer of the pet product market, I strive to be aware of many ways that pet product media reflects and creates my identity. Finally, I produce this discourse as a tool with which readers may continually interrogate their media-saturated lives.
I approach this text by first situating it culturally. “The Perfect Toy” is certainly not the first rhetorical advertisement from the pet product industry, nor will it be the last. It is precisely because of this banal status that it deserves particular attention. Imagine if this commercial, which concludes with a pet owner swooping her pet, toy in mouth, across a check-out sensor, was shown three decades ago. Viewers might have been alarmed to observe such a tight bond between consumership and the pet/pet owner relationship. However, in 2006, this same scene does not appear to strike many media consumers as odd.

The perpetuated myth that the media simply reflects culture back upon its viewers begs critical minds for a more in-depth look at the web of societal connections that support such assumptions. With the knowledge that this commercial, just a short time ago, would have appeared as alarmingly materialistic, I feel it first necessary to situate this text among the cultural constructs that allow for and enhance its rhetorical power. In fact, the foundation of my analysis rests upon the fluid cultural boundaries of family, relationships between humans and animals, and naturalized media representations of consumership, which allow “The Perfect Toy” its attractive ideological appeal. Each of these constructs constantly inform one another, intersecting to reform what is seen as “normal” in mediated advertisement. Following an initial diagnosis of these intersecting social constructs, I then analyze both the form and message of “The Perfect Toy” and then discuss specific problematic consequences arising from its naturalization of the pet owner as a constant consumer.

**Current Evolutions of the U.S. American Family**

In order to understand the change of the pet’s role in the family, it is helpful to first assess changes in the family demographic within the past few decades. The construct of a family has exemplified fluid boundaries by challenging what are often considered as traditional roles.
Recent demographic changes exhibit two major trends: an increase in single person households, and an increase in the delay of and decision not to have children.

The 2000 U.S. Census states that “One out of every four households is a one-person household” (Simmons & O’Neil, 2001, p. 1). This figure represents a major shift away from more traditional family structures, which place several people together under the same roof. Increasingly valued characteristics such as mobility, independence, and extended life expectancy rates for elderly people play into this trend of single households. These same characteristics not only promote single person families but also households of “empty nesters,” which often only consist of two people. These more common smaller households are becoming prime targets of pet product media.

A second demographic trend shows a decentering of motherhood in women’s lives. According to the US Census Bureau, over the course of fourteen years from 1990 to 2004, statistics show that women who are obtaining higher degrees in education are having fewer children (2006). Many women are marrying later to focus on their careers, and because of this are delaying starting families. According to Kristiansen (2003) of the Houston Business Journal, women are “part of a better educated, stronger, healthier generation. With both contraception and fertility medical technology available, they plan on having babies later in life, following the examples of women such as Joan Lunden, Madonna, and Brooke Shields” (Biological clock ticks). These U.S. American statistics seem to mimic worldwide trends. The United Nations' State of the World's Population (2002) researched the intersections of poverty and education and revealing that educated mothers are averaging fewer children to concentrate a greater amount of resources on each child. These reductionistic trends show a rising population of increasingly educated people having fewer children, who the pet product market sees as prime candidates for
pet ownership.

Although family households might be shrinking, doors still appear to be open to increasing numbers of animal companions. In 2000, Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell conducted a broad survey of pet-owning families and concluded that those with “fewer people had more pets per household” (p. 234). A majority of these pet owners were also “willing to include pets in a category of close human relationships” (p. 212). McLean (2000) states that members of this demographic are perhaps more likely to use pets as an “antidote to anonymity and loneliness,” do to the increased time spent alone in daily life (p. 3). Additionally, Smith (2005) of CNN/Money claims that often populations who have no children living in their home, have both the increased time and wealth to reconsider their personal relationships with their pets. Each of these circumstances keep the family construct in flux. Newer concepts of family consist of households where pets are being placed into roles they might not have been allowed before, specifically filling the role of a child.

Metamorphosis into Anthropomorphism

As pets’ roles shift within the family construct, so do the ways they are addressed, related to, and treated by family members. Most often times this means an increase in the anthropomorphic attributes assigned to pets by their owners. Assigning human traits to animals is not a new characteristic within inter-species relationships. Kennedy (1992) claims that humans act anthropomorphically with other species because this interaction may be useful in attempting to predict and control the behaviors of an animal. Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell concur, stating, “Whether or not an animal actually has the mental states attributed to it, anthropomorphism is often a helpful strategy for explaining patterns of events, and hence increasing the ability to predict future events” (2000, p. 211). Whatever the purpose, pets are receiving more attention for
perceived similarities they share with their human owners.

In 2005, the Economist ran an article that hinted at scientific support behind the myth that humans and their animal companions often do bear physical resemblance to one another. Payne and Jaffe, from the University in Venezuela, claim this myth relies on the “well-established observation that people are more trusting of those who look somewhat like them, presumably because resemblance suggests genetic relatedness” (Love me, love my dog, 2005, p. 80). If Payne and Jaffe's work is truly able to shed scientific light on this phenomenon, it would appear that humans might even be unconsciously relating to their perceived similarity with their pets.

Regardless of any mysterious physical likeness, one of the most noticeable anthropomorphic signs of the pet’s new familial status is indicated by their owner’s verbal communication.

**Communication with Pets**

One of the most overt ways pet owners display their anthropomorphic relationships with their pets is through the communication they share. Three specific models for owner/pet communication are noted below; each offering unique support for the claim that pets are increasingly being viewed as children with in the family. These models exemplify how both pets and children are “spoken for” and addressed with the same verbal characteristics.

Deborah Tannen (2004) researched this type of social interaction in *Talking the Dog: Framing Pets as Interactional Resources in Family Discourse*. Using Bakhtin’s notion of polyvocality, Tannen draws conclusions about contemporary families who mediate their “interpersonal interaction by speaking as, to, or about pet dogs that are present in the interaction” (p. 399). Tannen discusses the act of *ventriloquizing* to describe the “discursive strategy by which a participant speaks in the voice of a nonverbal third party in the presence of that party” (p. 402). In this manner of communication, the owner assumes the thoughts of the pet and speaks
them allowed, just as the pet might, if it had the physical ability to do so. In other words, the nonverbal nature of the pet is precisely used by the family member to vocalize assumed conversation. This behavior is not uncommon with parents and their not-yet-verbal children. In both cases, assumptions are made regarding the pet’s or child’s “inner voice” per se, and the parent vocalizes these assumptions in verbal conversation.

McLean (2000) offers a less overt example of pet/owner communication, in which the owner does not verbally talk for their pet, but instead verbalizes interpretations regarding specific pet behavior. McLean interviewed Gertude Jones, a seventy-six year old woman, widowed for twenty-three years, who lives with a terrier, two cats and five birds. When asked about her relationship with her pets, Jones claims “They love and respect me as I do them. In the morning I go into the bathroom and Kody [the Siamese] gets up on the vanity and puts one hand on each of my shoulders and mooshes either side of my face with his whiskers. He's saying 'Thank you!'” (p. 3). This pet/owner communication operates in more subtle ways than Tannen's ventriloquizing, but relies similarly on the assumed interpretations of the pet owner.

A third similarity that pet/owner and parent/child communication share is a grouping of vocal characteristics. In Americans’ Talk to Dogs: Similarities and Differences With Talk to Infants, Mitchell (2001) explains that talk aimed toward infants and dogs share many similar features, “including a high-pitch register, a low mean length of utterance, high frequencies of grammatically acceptable utterances, present-tense verbs, repetitiveness, and attention-getting devices” (p. 183). In this study, Mitchell observed people playing with their pets for an average of four minutes, during which an average of 208 words were spoken by the pet owner. Of these 208 words, people used “baby talk register in 41% of their utterances” (p. 192).
Regardless of physical resemblance, pets are being naturalized into the role of the family child through similar communication patterns. While communicative interaction marks a shift in the pet’s role within the family structure, it is the increased monetary value attributed to this new role that has the pet product industry so excited. As pets step up the family hierarchy, they are being lavished with humanized products and services, such as extravagant food, clothing, toys, and even holidays, birthday parties, spa treatments, and funerals (McLean, 2000). The communicative research noted above helps to the responsibilities that the pet owners perceive of themselves.

People are now considering themselves caregivers to their pets instead of owners and accordingly, treat their pets as they might their own kind. Such self-imposed, parent-like responsibilities are resulting in an explosion of pet products and services offered, from increased financial investment to healthcare protection. Not surprisingly, a large portion of U.S. American pet owners claim they should be governmentally supported for their increased spending in order to maintain the well being of their companions. In 2002, Advantage, a national flea and tick producer, conducted a nationwide survey, “Pet Census,” which concluded that “two out of three pet owners want to claim their pet as a tax deduction,” due to the raising cost of their pets’ daily needs, medical care, and entertainment (SmartPros, 2002).

*Upgrades in Pet Lifestyles*

As pets being to take on more humanized roles in the family, the lifestyle choices available to them continues to grow exponentially. As previously mentioned, in 2005, pet owners spent 34.4 billion on their animal companions (Schmelzer, 2005). One third of this is spent on feeding pets (McLean, 2000). Major pet stores market dozens of choice pet diets that have sprung up in the past decade. Dogs are targeted as specifically benefiting by this boom with a
rich supply of more naturalistic and organic food products. Mountain Bones, a Canadian based, internationally renown specialty bakery for today's “health-conscious dog,” makes all natural snacks from human-grade ingredients including “real bananas and all-natural peanut butter, vegetable and carob (an alternative to chocolate for dogs),” as well as carrots, spinach, and omega-3’s to flush out antioxidants (Mountain Bones, 2006). Numerous other similar pet product competitors provide an interesting parallel to contemporary trends in human foods, with an increasing market emphasis being placed on “organic” and “natural” foods. However, this food portion of the pet products market still only accounts for one third of total expenditures, leaving 23 billion for good and services unimaginable a few decades ago.

Pet healthcare is quickly becoming a booming industry with the help of contemporary pet owners. Animal hospitals now staff specialized veterinarians who provide heart surgery, brain surgery, as well as kidney dialysis and chemotherapy. McLean (2000) states there are even policy measures to push automobile seat belts for pets. Pet care is turning a holistic eye to the quality of pets’ lives using measures such as acupuncture, Reiki massage, aromatherapy and other natural approaches that mimic contemporary moves in human healthcare. Innovations within the pet healthcare industry very closely trail the human healthcare industry and is overwhelmingly accommodating to pet owners seeking state-of-the-are treatment for their pets (Smith, 2005).

However, there is no piece of this consumer population growing faster than the market for pet lifestyle accessories and services. Pets can now run, swim, ski and even marry while sporting accessories that mimic their human counterparts. Marsh (1998) states that the pet accessories market is about twenty-five percent of the pet products industry. Many common accessories simply accompany the basic needs of pets, such as food and waste elimination, and
have been common place in pet stores for decades. For example, studies show that in the United States, over ninety percent of cat owners have designated food dishes, “47% buy toys for their cats and 30% own a scratching post” (p. 18). Likewise, “nearly all dogs in the United States have leashes: 92% (mostly nylon)” (p. 18). However the market is expanding every year with the addition of watering fountains, treats, backpacks, clothing, photo albums, nail polish, beds, footwear, gates and doors, security systems, and many other items intended to make the pets’ life comfortable and secure. Almost half of dog owners buy toys at least two times a year, “Fifty-six percent have decorative collars, of which 16% are bought yearly and another 27% every one to two years” (p. 19).

Not surprisingly, increases in the pet services market mirror that of the accessories market. Pets are now encountering services often considered as luxury expenditures in their human-companion’s world. These services include day care, spa and health clubs, physical and psychological therapies, home hospice, transportation and relocation, police department protection units, funeral and memorial, rescue and sanctuary organizations, not to mention more traditional services of pet-sitting, walking, and grooming services. A hotel in Austria might even foreshadow the future of this expanding market with its indoor doggie cinema. The theatre shows mostly Lassie films, where patrons claim that their dogs have “a great time” barking at the screen (McLean, 2000).

*Pampered Puppy*, an elite dog product merchandiser, exemplifies this increasing trend. The company’s website hosts everything from advertisements for pearl dog necklaces to discussions of how to properly include your pet in your estate planning. Katrina Herrndorf, owner of Bowhaus, which produces trendy urban dog crates featured on *Pampered Puppy*, says that the past decade has seen an increase in extravagant products because “several people are
getting pets instead of children or at least before they have children” to “fill the void” (McKaig, 2006, p. 1). Not only are pets are looked upon to take a step up in their roles as family members, but they are materialistically rewarded for doing so.

Thus far, strong evidence has been introduced that supports the claim that pets are being naturalized into the role of a family child, which entails a progressively commodified lifestyle. I now turn to ways mediated representations naturalize the pet’s commodified lifestyle, which perpetuates the owner’s ever-important role of consumer.

**Advertising to the Pet Owner**

*Target Audiences and Mediated Ideologies*

Before delving deeply into PetSmart's 2005 ad, “The Perfect Toy,” it is important to consider the basic work of any advertisement: securing consistent consumership. Nearly thirty years ago, Lindblom (1977) and Janowitz (1978) proffered the main objective of advertisements was not simply to sell particular goods, but to persuade its audience that consumption was the only true path to happiness and satisfaction. This theory seems to grow even stronger three decades later as advertisement continues to promote consumption as *the* viable way of life in contemporary society. This promotion takes place in various ways on multiple levels in media; however, one approach seems most appropriate for this study: ideological persuasion.

Much goes into reading an ideological advertisement. The impact is never limited to the content message, but also always communicates both directly and indirectly, judgments, values, and social norms which may or may not have a relationship with the products advertised (Andren, Ericsson, Ohlsson, & Tannsjo, 1978). Bennett (1979) set the stage for this type of advertising with the following descriptions; “Not a claim for a product or a company or an industry or a service, the ideology ad makes a claim for an interest or an idea, especially for a
particular social program or philosophy” (p. 23). The ideological ad operates on several levels simultaneously, selling both a product as well as an identity to the consumer.

Pollay (1986) described the ideological affect as a metaphor of a "distorted mirror," commenting on the many ways ads reflect and transmit cultural ideological values to their viewers. Portrayals of ideology are carefully chosen by advertisers, as to how well they serve the sellers' interests (Pollay and Gallagher, 1990; Wiles, Wiles, & Tjernlund, 1996). Kellner (1995) supports this ideological view stating that a finished advertising product is a result from careful discrimination, “tremendous artistic resources, psychological research, and marketing strategies” which attempt to create an impression that through consumption, can in a real sense, purchase an identity or group membership (p. 250, 248).

Once an identity becomes appealing, it must be set apart from other recognizable social identities. In Social Communication in Advertising: Consumption in the Mediated Marketplace, Leiss, Kline, Jhally, & Botterill (2005) introduce the term “demassification,” as a process by which industries secure consistent consumer reliance through lifestyle targeting (p. 264-5). This means that advertisements often highlight cues that display the way their target audience is a distinctive population from their massive population and demonstrate the target audiences' social status in an appealing manner. By identifying with an ad, the advertiser both broadens and solidifies their target audience membership (Grier & Deshpande, 2001, p. 223). However, Leiss, Kline, Jhally, & Botterill counter common notions that audiences act as passively persuaded consumers in their relationships to the media:

Our study reveals that marketers, product designers, advertisers and media play a considerable role articulating lifestyle orientations. But we also argue that the output of these institutions is powerful not only because audiences are passively overcome by it,
but because individuals actively invest themselves in defining, maintaining, defending, and critiquing the lifestyle constructions offered up by the mediated marketplace. (2005, pp. 266-7)

This theory places the audience member in a role of greater agency over their mediated consumer identity.

According to this brief survey of advertisement criticism, ideological consumption has taken a center seat in our media motivated lives. Advertisers go to great lengths to capture and formulate poignant images of identity and attempt to attach those images to specific consumer products. Audiences are shown these various, specific lifestyles, which they actively chose between at the cash register. Thus, contemporary advertisement emerges as an increasingly important social discourse that indeed shapes the boundaries in which the options for our identities exist. PetSmart has led the way for such ideological advertisement in the pet product industry, particularly envisioned through “The Perfect Toy.”

*PetSmart, Inc.*

Phoenix-based PetSmart is the nation's top pet retailer, owning over eight-hundred stores in North America. According to the PetSmart website, nearly every store is complete with a pet styling salon, staff who offer educational training classes, spaces for local shelters to house adoptable pets, a pet hospital, and the new “PetSmart PetHotel” (PetSmart, 2006). Most recently, in its last ad campaign which features “The Perfect Toy,” the company announced a shift in its brand name from PetsMart to PetSmart. This decision, according to chief marketing officer, Ken Hall, symbolizes an attempt to shift away from its original roots as a “big-box discounter to an identity as a pet specialty store where employees are trained to be pet experts” (Howard, 2005). This campaign pushed the innovative term of “pet parent” to name the population of dedicated
animal owners, committed to their pet's highest quality of life.

Hall also speaks to the identity that PetSmart encourages among its client base; “The whole concept of being a pet parent is that in some cases pets have replaced children. The trends of people waiting longer to be married or having fewer children are creating a dynamic” in which people pamper their “four-legged children, rather than two-legged ones” (Howard, 2005, p. 1).

According to the PetSmart website (2006), at the most basic level, every pet parent enacts the following characteristics:

- **having their pet spayed or neutered**
- **taking their pet to a local veterinarian to maintain vaccinations and learn about preventative pet healthcare**
- **obtaining prior landlord permission before adopting a pet**
- **obtaining all household member's consent to owning a pet**
- **exercising and picking up after one's pet.**

PetSmart works to continually expand the image of their targeted audience, from simply a pet owner to self-identified pet parent who performs loyal consumer practices.

“*The Perfect Toy*”

PetSmarts' thirty-second “The Perfect Toy” advertisement was produced by Leo Burnett in Chicago and released in September of 2005. This ad, along with two others, were produced for the previously mentioned corporate push to popularize the shift PetsMart to PetSmart (Howard, 2005). All three ads end with the same voice-over emphasizing this shift: “That's smart. PetSmart.” However, I have chosen to analyze the “The Perfect Toy” for several reasons. First, I wanted to delve deeply into only one advertisement, allowing for adequate concentration on several ingredients creating the ad's overall appeal and effectiveness. Next, of the three
advertisements, I feel “The Perfect Toy” most readily offers anthropomorphic symbols to insinuate the ways a pet is a child. And finally, I feel this advertisement, through its “real-life” portrayals (as opposed to animation) continues to popularize some potentially dangerous connections between pet owners and commodification of their pets. I will begin by describing particular visual and audio components of the ad, before discussing specific interpretations and implications.

The commercial begins with soft colors and a giggly squeak, framing a worn pink stuffed animal with a huge embroidered smile landing on a tan duvet. This opening frame is indistinguishable from a commercial for a children’s toy. After this happy sound, the commercial’s music track begins with a man’s voice singing, “You without me, me without you, without you I’d be feelin' blue, take it from me, it's just plain to see, I can never be alone.” The next few frames show a small brown dachshund on the same duvet picking up the pink toy in his mouth and carrying it up to a happy woman propped up in the bed. All the frames in this opening sequence are very close up and give a strong sense of blissful intimacy and contentment.

The next series of scenes are romanticized views, filmed at dachshund eye level, that illustrate a very close relationship between the dog and stuffed-animal-toy. First, the audience is shown the dog dragging his toy outside through a doggy door that matches his size. Next, the toy is shown outside, being carried along by the dog on a walk. This sequence closes in on one end of the toy, which is being half-carried, half-dragged through fallen magnolia flower petals on the ground. The following frame shows the entire view of the dog, carrying his toy, from a human-knee-high camera angle. This is the first time the audience can fully realize that this toy is a caricature of the dachshund, elongated to the point that both ends of it touch the ground when being carried in the dog’s mouth.
The next four scenes continue to emphasize the relationship between the dog and its toy. The two are shown together, under the shade of a bush, wrestling in the dirt. The dog is swinging the toy around wildly, ears flapping, little feet grappling the loyal pink toy; followed by a sequence showing the dog, toy in mouth, running toward the camera, through a field of lush green grass. There is a feeling of intimacy created by a halo effect of the sun. After the fun outside, the owner is shown walking up a staircase inside her home, with dog and his toy scrambling up behind. Finally, the dog and toy are shown asleep on the same duvet seen in the first frame of the commercial, on top of a tall bed, in a hushed room.

Within the first seventeen seconds, all of the scenes worked together to create a strong sense of child-like friendship between the dog and its toy. The remainder of the ad plays upon this strong relationship yet interjects a strong affirmation of consumership. As the dog is shown asleep on the tall bed beside his toy, his owner peeks into the bedroom and sneakily removes the toy. The lyrics of the song during this scene sing “I can never be alone,” emphasizing just how great of a risk the owner is taking by removing this toy from its canine companion. For a brief moment the sleeping dachshund is shown alone, unknowing of the missing toy. The audience is made to wonder if the dog will wake to find its loyal friend missing. However, this somewhat desperate emotion expressed by the lyrics is contrasted through close-up framing, in which the owner is obviously disgusted at the toy’s dirty, worn state, using only her index finger and thumb to remove the toy from her bed. The owner’s disgust wins as the following scene is of a stainless steel trash can, with the lid already open, ready to accept the used-up toy.

The remainder of the scenes take place in a PetSmart store and serve to resolve all potential emotional trauma the dog might have suffered at the loss of his toy. The owner and her dog are pictured walking into a pet store together, with PetSmart logo in view at all times. Over
the music track, the owner can be heard saying to her dog “let's go over here,” guiding her dog it to an aisle off-camera. This is an interesting scene because only in the last few years have pets been welcome in major chain pet stores. The series of in-store scenes continue with the owner pointing, speaking, and leading her dog down an aisle in the store: essentially giving the pet consumer training.

The viewer is then introduced, from the dog's point of view, a friendly PetSmart sales associate who knows both the dachshund “Buddy,” and his old toy “Bobo” by name. The clerk expresses a look of great concern as he asks “where's Bobo?” The commercial then cuts to a new frame where the clerk and Buddy's owner are smiling over a newer version of Bobo. The camera then follows the wiggling toy as the clerk enthusiastically introduces Buddy to Bobo's replacement. During this interaction, a female narrator's voice says “PetSmart is the best place to find exactly what great pet parents need, like the perfect toy.”

During this scene, in PetSmart, the harsh light from the entrance is flooding into behind this trio and therefore only the silhouette of Buddy is seen. This scene is interesting because the viewer is unable to see Buddy's reaction to the new toy. However, the immediate next scene leads the viewer to believe that Buddy has taken the new toy into Bobo's cherished status. The dog is seen being led away by its owner to the check-out counter, new toy in mouth. The camera angle slowly rises from dachshund-height to person-height before the ad cuts to the check-out scenario.

The next three seconds consists in an alarming naturalization of the pet owner's identity as consumer. Seemingly, Buddy is already so attached to his toy that his owner must scan them both through the PetSmart check-out. With tentative, outstretched limbs and toy in his mouth, Buddy is swooped over the UPC-scanner, by his owner. In reality, being held above a moving
tread and scanned with a laser is most likely an uncommon and stressful event for most family pets. Yet, the viewer is led to believe this is a humorous and possibly even a necessary action, as not to separate the dog from the toy it has bonded with so naturally. Additionally, any of Buddy's trepidation over the scanner is not present in the final scene, in which the dog is shown contentedly cuddling with its new toy, in a dimly-lit room, with a smiling owner softly blurred in the background. The commercial closes on this scene as the narrator speaks the store's tagline, “That's smart. PetSmart.” Truly, Buddy must be happy, because Buddy has a great pet parent who has purchased for him “The Perfect Toy.”

Translating “The Perfect Toy” into Consumer Ideology

Among numerous meanings that may be taken from this text, two specific interpretations are nearly impossible to deny: Buddy is his owner's child and the owner performs her “great pet parent-hood” through her consumer participation. These interpretations are supported throughout the ad in a careful interplay of audio and visual decisions. The most overt evidence for these claims are in the important role that the Bobo toy fulfills and in the naturalization of PetSmart’s role in the life of the pet. I will briefly discuss these interpretations, which I argue are the commercial's two strongest messages and then address some specific social implications of these two messages.

Buddy's toy Bobo is symbolic of a child's security blanket. Security blankets are a regular comfort possession for sixty percent of U.S. American children three years of age (Passman & Halonen, 1979). Developmental assessments conclude that security blankets act as a “stand in for the mother,” especially during fear-inducing activities such as separation between parent and child (Ybarra, Passman, & Eisenberg, 2000, p. 323). A child's security blanket, which need not always exist in the form of a blanket, is physical object that both reminds the child of their parent
and provides comfort just as a parent might. “The Perfect Toy” emphasizes Buddy's role as a child by centering the ad around Bobo, a toy which performs the role of a security blanket. If Bobo is indeed Buddy's security blanket, there is an implied assumption that the dog does need or want a stand in object for a parental figure. In fact, Buddy is never pictured in the commercial without a Bobo, old or new. Consequently, the viewer is lead to believe that Buddy is a child because he “possesses” a similar need to a human toddler: to be physically reminded of his mother and comforted by a physical object which represents her.

A second strong message of the ad, as mentioned above, addresses the expected behavior of a loving pet owner. This text models how “great” pet owners, who are referred to as “pet parents,” act out devotion for their pets by purchasing “the perfect toy.” However naturalized the commercial appears, viewers are being asked to believe that buying toys for their pets (from PetSmart), makes pet owners “great,” as the female narrator states. Additionally, this pet owner naturalizes the practice of toy replacement. In essence, the ad is identifying that “perfect toys” will not always be perfect; they wear out, becoming used and dirty. Pet parents should seize these opportunities for making important consumer decisions. The question becomes not “if” the toy needs to be replaced but from “where” the replacement should come?

Commodifying the Invaluable

The most frightful implication of this ad is its perpetuation of the commodifiable relationship between pet and pet owner. The ad pushes beyond the necessary consumer duties of a pet owner, which include purchasing food or waste removal products. Instead it proffers the vision that consumernesship is the highest form of love a “pet parent” can perform. Essentially, “The Perfect Toy,” reduces the family pet to the same kind of equation seen in all types of media
advertisements aimed at interpersonal human relationships: if you love someone, you should buy them things.

Although humans lavish unnecessary gifts on one another, this impulse seems relatively out of place in human-animal relationships. The bond between family and pet struggles to be one of the last frontiers where affection, play, emotion, and care are the standard unit of trade. However, as seen in this text, PetSmart forces the relationship between pet and pet owner open to commodifiable negotiation. It seems that recent trends in family construction support texts such as “The Perfect Toy,” because of the ways pets are anthropomorphically portrayed as children. As child stand-ins, however, the pet product industry is naturalizing the pet into a major consumer player.

“The Perfect Toy” raises critical issues for television audiences who are comfortable with its banal representations. If this text serves as an indication of the future for family pets, the outlook is complex. It would seem that this ad is naturalizing a more comfortable, materialistic lifestyle for pets, while at the same time, using them as a reflection of our culture's most infectious social characteristic. As a civilized species, we are constantly remaking our environments, anthropomorphically interpreting our surroundings to reflect our lifestyles and values. However, I wonder how many of our animal companions truly share in our desire and identities found in accumulating things? Media representations, similar to “The Perfect Toy” make troublesome assumptions by imposing human consumerism on other species. This is unclear if pets are indeed happier because of their increased material possessions or if we as pet owners are “great” because of our commodified role in our human/animal relationships. These media representations do, however, affirm that we humans have succeeded in recreating our pets in our own image, the consumer.
Footnotes

1. I will use the term “family,” fully knowing numerous and vague implications of such a word. Therefore, “family” will be used to refer to any type of household structure: a nuclear family, heterosexual and homosexual partnerships, a group of unrelated individuals living together in a communal situation, an individual living by themselves, etc.

2. I feel it is important to mention that the lyrics are sung by a male's voice, because the viewer is lead to believe this singer is the dog's anthropomorphic voice, which establishes the dog as male. Although this might not seem an important detail, it is another way the dog is becoming a human child, who will be addressed as “he” instead of “it.”

3. I use the term “civilized” to mean a group reliant on industrialization, not as a connotatively benevolent term.
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