DO CUIDADO AO CONSUMO: SIGNIFICADOS AFETIVOS E SIMBÓLICOS NA RELAÇÃO ENTRE TUTORES E ANIMAIS DE ESTIMAÇÃO

FROM CARE TO CONSUMPTION: AFFECTIVE AND SYMBOLIC MEANINGS IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PET OWNERS AND PETS

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Objetivo do estudo
Compreender como tutores que se autodenominam “pais de pet” constroem significados afetivos e simbólicos na relação cotidiana com seus animais de companhia, considerando vínculos de cuidado, pertencimento, identidade, antropomorfização e consumo.

Relevância/originalidade
O estudo articula famílias multiespécies, antropomorfização, self estendido e consumo simbólico para explicar como animais de companhia ocupam posições afetivas centrais e passam a integrar identidades, rotinas familiares e práticas de consumo de seus tutores.

Metodologia/abordagem
Adotou-se abordagem qualitativa e descritiva, com entrevistas semiestruturadas realizadas com dez tutores de cães e gatos autodeclarados pais de pet. Os dados foram examinados por análise de conteúdo de Bardin, com apoio do software Taguette.

Principais resultados
Os resultados evidenciaram sete categorias e mostraram que os pets são percebidos como companheiros, membros da família, filhos e fontes de apoio emocional. O consumo surge como expressão concreta de amor, cuidado, proteção e pertencimento.

Contribuições teóricas/metodológicas
A pesquisa amplia as discussões sobre famílias multiespécies, antropomorfização, self estendido e consumo simbólico ao demonstrar que os pets participam da construção identitária e afetiva dos tutores, conectando vínculos emocionais, práticas familiares e decisões de consumo.

Contribuições sociais/para a gestão
Os achados sugerem que marcas e serviços do setor pet desenvolvam propostas de valor que ultrapassem atributos funcionais, enfatizando cuidado, personalização, bem-estar e comunicação emocionalmente sensível, coerente com a centralidade dos animais nas relações familiares contemporâneas.

Palavras-chave: consumo simbólico, famílias multiespécie, antropomorfização, vínculo afetivo, tutores de pets

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Study purpose
To understand how owners who self-identify as “pet parents” construct affective and symbolic meanings in their everyday relationships with companion animals, considering bonds of care, belonging, identity, anthropomorphism, and consumption.

Relevance / originality
The study integrates multispecies families, anthropomorphism, the extended self, and symbolic consumption to explain how companion animals occupy central affective positions and become embedded in owners’ identities, family routines, and consumption practices.

Methodology / approach
A qualitative and descriptive approach was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with ten dog and cat owners who self-identified as pet parents. Data were examined through Bardin’s content analysis, with support from Taguette software.

Main results
The findings revealed seven categories and showed that pets are perceived as companions, family members, children, and sources of emotional support. Consumption emerged as a concrete expression of love, care, protection, and belonging.

Theoretical / methodological contributions
The study advances discussions on multispecies families, anthropomorphism, the extended self, and symbolic consumption by showing that pets participate in owners’ identity and affective construction, linking emotional bonds, family practices, and consumption decisions.

Social / management contributions
The findings suggest that pet-sector brands and services should develop value propositions beyond functional attributes, emphasizing care, personalization, well-being, and emotionally sensitive communication consistent with the central role animals occupy in contemporary family relationships.

Keywords: symbolic consumption, multispecies families, anthropomorphization, affective bond, pet parents

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1 Introduction

In recent decades, companion animals have come to play an increasingly central role in family life, no longer being understood solely in terms of utilitarian functions but instead occupying positions marked by affection, care, belonging, and everyday intimacy (Cavanaugh et al., 2008; Kirk, 2019). This transformation accompanies social changes such as the reduction in the number of children, the increase in people living alone, population aging, and the growing value placed on more stable emotional bonds within the domestic sphere (Liu et al., 2024).

In Brazil, this phenomenon is also expressed in demographic and economic terms. The country has one of the largest populations of companion animals in the world, with a strong presence of dogs, cats, birds, and ornamental fish (Abinpet, 2024; Agência Senado, 2024). These data indicate not only the relevance of the pet commercial sector but also a cultural shift: animals have become part of owners' routines, affections, consumption practices, family decisions, and forms of identification.

In this context, the notion of family has been reconfigured. The idea of the traditional family has expanded to encompass different affective arrangements, including multispecies families, in which companion animals are recognized as members of the family nucleus (Downey & Ellis, 2008; Cavanaugh et al., 2008; Kirk, 2019). Within these relationships, pets may assume symbolic roles as children, siblings, grandchildren, companions, or sources of emotional support.

The incorporation of pets into family life is related to the process of anthropomorphization, understood as the attribution of human characteristics, emotions, intentions, or behaviors to nonhuman beings (Stevenson, 2010). In the case of pets, this process appears in practices such as assigning them personalities, interpreting their emotions, celebrating their birthdays, providing specialized care, and treating them as part of the family (Serpell, 2002). Thus, anthropomorphization functions as a symbolic language through which owners interpret and legitimize their bond with their animals.

The consumer behavior literature also contributes to understanding this phenomenon. Belk (1988) argues that possessions, objects, and meaningful entities may form part of the extended self, expressing identity, belonging, and affection. In the relationship with companion animals, this perspective is relevant because pets are not perceived merely as "goods" or "possessions," but as affective subjects incorporated into owners' identities. Belk (1996) further emphasizes that the relationship between humans and pets involves pleasure, care, the projection of personal characteristics, and the integration of the animal into family life.

Accordingly, pet-related consumption should be understood as a dimension derived from the affective relationship rather than as an isolated axis of analysis. Choices related to food, health, aesthetics, leisure, gifts, and services express care, responsibility, and belonging (Cheong & Yi, 2015). Previous studies indicate that the growth of pet consumption is associated with the humanization of animals and the intensification of bonds between owners and pets (Holbrook et al., 2001; Dotson & Hyatt, 2008; Boya et al., 2012; Cheong & Yi, 2015). Thus, spending on animals may materialize affection, reinforce the owner's identity, and recognize the pet as a family member.

Based on this context, the present study is guided by the following research question: how do owners who self-identify as "pet parents" construct and experience affective and symbolic bonds with their companion animals in everyday life? The general objective of this research is to understand how owners who self-identify as "pet parents" construct affective and symbolic meanings in their everyday relationship with their companion animals.

The relevance of this study lies in understanding how pets occupy central affective and symbolic positions in owners' lives, articulating multispecies families, anthropomorphization, the extended self, and symbolic consumption. As a theoretical contribution, the study expands discussions on identity construction in consumer behavior. As a managerial contribution, it provides insights for developing product offerings, services, or campaigns with greater sensitivity to the emotional bonds between owners and animals.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Changes in Family Configurations

The family may be understood as a complex social structure formed by relationships of coexistence, affection, care, and belonging. Within this environment, the bonds among its members influence personality formation, modes of action, and individuals' subjective experiences (Liu et al., 2024). Although the extended family model predominated at the beginning of the twentieth century, characterized by the cohabitation of several members in the same household, this format became less frequent over time, giving rise to new forms of family organization (Cavanaugh et al., 2008). Today, the understanding of what it means to "be a family" includes arrangements such as single-parent, binuclear, same-sex-parent, and multispecies families, among other possibilities (Downey & Ellis, 2008).

In this context, multispecies families represent a configuration in which owners recognize their companion animals as members of the family nucleus. Pets are no longer seen merely as animals under human care but are instead understood as affective subjects embedded in the family's routines and emotional dynamics (Holbrook et al., 2001). This shift reveals that animals have gained increasing space within the family context, being perceived as companions, de facto members, and, in some cases, symbolic substitutes for other family figures (Cavanaugh et al., 2008).

Family transformations also help explain the expansion of the pet market and the intensification of bonds between owners and animals. Liu et al. (2024) relate this growth to changes in the configuration of Brazilian families, especially in large cities, due to factors such as the reduction in family size, the increase in people living alone, and population aging (Liu et al., 2024). These changes favor the presence of pets as companions, sources of care, and elements of emotional stability in everyday life.

However, the relationship between humans and animals is not entirely new, as it has accompanied human history through processes of domestication, socialization, and mutual cooperation. Dotson and Hyatt (2008) emphasize that this process was marked by cooperation and coevolution, driven by needs such as food, shelter, and security. Although coexistence with animals is present in different cultures, in some periods, such as the Middle Ages and the early modern European era, demonstrations of affection and closeness were less valued or even discouraged (Cavanaugh et al., 2008). Thus, despite its historical roots, the human–animal relationship assumes new meanings in the contemporary context, in which the pet is no longer viewed solely in terms of practical utility but instead occupies a symbolic position within the family.

2.2 Relationship Between Owner and Pet

The relationship between owners and companion animals involves affective, symbolic, identity-related, and practical dimensions. More than a relationship of possession, it is a bond built through everyday coexistence, care, and the incorporation of the animal into family routines. Belk (1996) argues that this relationship is complex and involves different dimensions

of ownership and meaning: pets may be a source of pleasure, affection, and challenges; function as reflections of their owners; be understood as family members; or, in some cases, be treated as toys, objects of domination, or symbols of control over nature (Belk, 1988).

This perspective makes it possible to understand that the pet does not occupy a neutral position in the owner's life but participates in the construction of identity, emotional organization, and consumption practices (Belk, 1988). When owners state that their pets have personalities, resemble them, or are part of the family, they assign the animal a symbolic role that goes beyond the idea of property. Thus, the pet may be interpreted as an extension of the self, as it becomes part of the way owners perceive themselves, express themselves, and relate to the world (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008).

Complementarily, Holbrook et al. (2001) argue that the interaction between humans and animals should not be reduced to ownership, as it involves experiences of coexistence and consumption associated with the relationship. The increase in pet-related consumption, together with the time and attention devoted to animals, demonstrates a bond marked by closeness, care, and companionship (Holbrook et al., 2001; Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). Along the same lines, Hirschman (1994) notes that people may keep companion animals for different reasons, such as status, hobbies, specific functions, extension of one's own identity, or affective attachment. For many owners, the pet occupies a central role, being regarded as a family member, companion, or even child (Hirschman, 1994).

In addition to its symbolic dimension, living with animals is related to subjective well-being. Bao and Schreer (2016) indicate that people with companion animals tend to report greater life satisfaction than those who do not live with pets. Owners' emotional perceptions also deepen this bond. Tsai, Talavera, and Koppel (2020) identified emotional terms associated with human–animal interactions, such as "happy," "anxious," and "embarrassed" for dogs, and "happy," "calm," and "irritated" for cats, indicating that owners interpret animals' signals through human emotional repertoires. Therefore, the owner–pet relationship should be understood as an affective and symbolic experience that articulates coexistence, identity, care, and well-being, helping to explain why practices such as buying, caring for, giving gifts to, or investing in the pet's health acquire emotional and familial meaning.

2.3 Anthropomorphism and Consumer Behavior

Anthropomorphism refers to the attribution of human characteristics, emotions, intentions, or behaviors to nonhuman beings (Antonacopoulos & Pychyl, 2008). In the relationship between owners and companion animals, this phenomenon occurs when pets are perceived as subjects with personalities, feelings, preferences, and family roles. According to Serpell (2002), this can be observed in practices such as offering foods associated with human consumption, giving human names, celebrating birthdays, seeking specialized care, expressing grief, dressing animals, placing them in daycare, investing in complex treatments, and treating them as children. These practices indicate that pets become integrated into human cultural codes, occupying a symbolic position in the family and in the owner's identity (Serpell, 2002).

The intensification of these practices is also related to the growth of the pet market. Today, individuals from different age groups, professions, and social backgrounds have companion animals, driving the expansion of this sector in Brazil, which is marked by the growing supply of products, services, and experiences aimed at animal care, aesthetics, health, and well-being (Apaolaza et al., 2022; D'Souza et al., 2023). In this process, anthropomorphization plays an important role, as the humanization of animals stimulates demand for differentiated services, such as spas, socialization activities, and specialized care (Apaolaza et al., 2022).

In this regard, Cheong and Yi (2015) show that, when owners perceive their animals as part of themselves, they make consumption choices in ways similar to how they would choose for themselves. Boya, Dotson, and Hyatt (2012) also suggest that these choices are influenced by humanization and anthropomorphism, since, when pets are viewed as family members, owners seek products with quality and differentiation similar to those intended for other household members. Because animals do not directly express their preferences, purchase decisions tend to be based on the owner's perception of the pet's quality, needs, and well-being, as well as on the bond established with the animal (Ridgway et al., 2008).

From the perspective of consumer behavior, these choices are influenced by cultural, social, psychological, and personal factors, which help explain the needs, desires, and meanings attributed by individuals and groups to products and services (Kirk, 2019; Liu et al., 2024). Moreover, consumption reflects values, attitudes, and social interpretations, allowing pet-related purchasing practices to be understood as symbolic expressions of affection and belonging (Hill et al., 2008; Brockman et al., 2008). Thus, consumption directed toward companion animals should be interpreted as a consequence of the affective and symbolic bond constructed between owner and pet: purchasing special foods, toys, clothing, health services, aesthetic care, or leisure activities materializes care, responsibility, and love, reinforcing the pet's position as a family member and emotional extension of the owner.

3 Methodological procedures

Considering the objective of the study, a qualitative and descriptive research design was adopted, as it is appropriate for understanding the perceptions, experiences, and meanings attributed by participants to their relationship with their pets. According to Proetti (2017), qualitative research prioritizes the exploration, description, and interpretation of social phenomena from the perspective of the subjects investigated, without emphasizing the measurement of variables. Thus, the study focused on characterizing the owner–pet bond in its affective, symbolic, familial, and consumption-related dimensions.

The participants were dog and/or cat owners who self-identified as "pet parents." The focus on these species was due to their recurrent presence in the domestic context and to the fact that they concentrate practices of humanization, family care, and affective consumption. Participants were selected from a public university in the state of Ceará through snowball sampling, complemented by direct referrals, a procedure suitable for accessing individuals with characteristics relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Vinuto, 2014).

The inclusion criteria were as follows: being the owner of a dog and/or cat, recognizing the animal as a relevant part of everyday life, and self-identifying as a pet father or pet mother. The interviews were conducted online between October 1 and October 11, 2025, via Google Meet, using a semi-structured interview guide, and lasted an average of 30 to 60 minutes. With the participants' authorization, the interviews were transcribed with the support of Tactiq, an artificial intelligence tool that automatically transcribes audio from video calls, and were manually reviewed by the researchers to correct errors and preserve the original meaning.

The study included 10 participants, as shown in Table 1. Information was collected on age, children, marital status, monthly income, education level, type of pet, and the animal's name. These data were used only to contextualize the interviewees' profiles and support the interpretation of their accounts, with no statistical or generalizing purpose.

Table 1 – Interviewee Profile.

Interviewee	Sociodemographic profile	Pet profile
I1	37 years old; no children; single; 1 to 2 minimum wages; completed graduate degree	1 female dog: Tiffany
I2	19 years old; no children; single; less than 1 minimum wage; undergraduate degree in progress	1 female dog and 1 female cat: Sofia and Siggy
I3	25 years old; no children; single; less than 1 minimum wage; undergraduate degree in progress	1 male dog and 1 female dog: Tunico and Glória
I4	55 years old; no children; single; 3 to 5 minimum wages; completed undergraduate degree	2 male dogs: Zion and Marley
I5	33 years old; no children; single; 1 to 2 minimum wages; completed undergraduate degree	2 male cats and 2 female cats: Chico, Planeta, Berenice, and Princesa
I6	34 years old; no children; single; 1 minimum wage; undergraduate degree in progress	1 female cat: Princesa
I7	38 years old; no children; divorced; 5 to 6 minimum wages; doctoral degree	2 female dogs: Kira and Ayla
I8	32 years old; no children; single; 6 to 7 minimum wages; doctoral degree	1 female dog: Pedrita
I9	23 years old; no children; single; 2 to 3 minimum wages; undergraduate degree in progress	1 female dog: Safira
I10	24 years old; no children; single; 1 minimum wage; undergraduate degree in progress	1 male cat: Francisco Frajola

Source: Research data (2026).

Table 1 shows that the participants were between 19 and 55 years old, with a predominance of young adults, individuals without children, and mostly single participants. Income levels varied, and educational attainment was relatively high, contextualizing the reported bonds, care practices, and forms of consumption. The interview guide was developed based on scales and studies addressing attachment, the owner–pet relationship, and human–animal bonds, as shown in Chart 1, with the measurement instruments adapted into open-ended questions suitable for the qualitative approach.

Chart 1 – Studies Used to Develop the Interview Guide.

Foundational study	Focus of the original study	Contribution to the interview guide of this study	Dimension investigated
Johnson, Garrity, and Stallones (1992) – Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (LAPS)	Psychometric assessment of attachment between owners and companion animals	Guided questions on closeness, affective bond, companionship, and the pet's emotional importance	Attachment and emotional well-being
Dwyer, Bennett, and Coleman (2006) – Monash Dog Owner Relationship Scale (MDORS)	Measurement of the quality of the relationship between owner and dog	Guided questions on everyday interaction, play, care, coexistence, and separation from the pet	Owner–pet relationship and everyday practices
Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, and Shaver (2011) – *An Attachment Perspective on Human–Pet Relationships*	Discussion of the human–pet relationship from the perspective of attachment theory	Contributed to questions on emotional support, affective security, dependence, and the pet's role in the owner's life	Attachment, emotional security, and psychological support

Source: Research data (2026).

Based on these studies, the interview guide was organized into three main axes: first, the emotional well-being and attachment of pet parents; second, anthropomorphization and family belonging; and third, care and consumption practices associated with the affective bond. This organization made it possible to investigate both the emotional aspects of the relationship and its practical manifestations in everyday life, such as veterinary care, feeding, gifts, monthly expenses, and willingness to pay for treatments.

Chart 2 – Adapted Interview Guide.

Thematic axis	Guiding questions
Emotional well-being and companionship	Do you believe that your pet's companionship contributes to your well-being? How often do you play with your pet? Do you find it difficult to be separated from your pet for long periods?
Family belonging and anthropomorphization	Do you consider your pet to be part of your family? Why? Does your pet have the same rights or privileges as family members? Do you believe your pet has a personality? Does your pet have traits similar to yours?
Care and consumption	How often do you take your pet to the veterinarian or pet shop? Have you paid, or would you be willing to pay, for high-cost treatment? Do you buy gifts for your pet? Do you invest in high-quality food? What is the monthly cost of caring for your pet? Do you consider this cost worthwhile?
Routine and coexistence	When traveling, do you usually take your pet with you? How does your pet participate in your daily routine?
Pet parenthood	Do you plan to have children? Do you consider your pet to be your child? Do you believe your pet serves as a kind of preparation for having a future child?

Source: Adapted from Johnson et al. (1992), Dwyer et al. (2006), and Zilcha-Mano et al. (2011).

4 Data analysis

For data analysis, Bardin's (2009) content analysis was used, as it is suitable for interpreting communications, identifying recurring meanings, and organizing categories based on textual data (Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2021). The analysis followed three stages: pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and treatment/interpretation of the results.

In the pre-analysis stage, the transcripts were read in full to gain familiarity with the content and to initially identify recurring themes. At this stage, expressions, repetitions, reported emotions, and meanings attributed by owners to their pets were observed, in addition to the selection of representative excerpts from the interviews. During the exploration of the material, the interviews were organized and coded with the support of Taguette, a free and user-friendly software program designed for qualitative data tagging (Rampin & Rampin, 2021). The software assisted in tabulating the accounts, making it possible to highlight excerpts, assign thematic labels, and group similar statements, without replacing the researchers' interpretation.

Initially, provisional codes were created based on the research objectives and the interview guide, such as "emotional well-being," "family," "pet personality," "care," "consumption," and "child." Subsequently, new codes emerged from the accounts, such as "pet as companion," "my pet resembles me," "consumption as a form of love," and "pet as psychological support." After successive readings, similar codes were grouped into analytical categories.

In the treatment and interpretation stage, the coded excerpts were compared across participants, seeking convergences, differences, and predominant meanings. This process resulted in seven categories, discussed below. To organize the data, the interview excerpts were tabulated according to interviewee identification, related question, selected statement, assigned

code, and final category. This procedure facilitated comparison across accounts and the selection of the representative excerpts discussed below.

4.1 Anthropomorphic Practices

As previously discussed, anthropomorphism consists of attributing typically human characteristics, emotions, or attitudes to nonhuman beings (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Yang et al., 2020). Throughout the interviews, participants demonstrated behaviors aligned with this phenomenon, particularly when describing their pets as subjects endowed with personality, intelligence, desires, preferences, and emotions of their own. Interviewee 6, for example, stated:

> "I usually say that Princesa [the cat] is more intelligent than us human beings. The only difference is that she does not speak like we do. She is very intelligent; she has a personality that is uniquely her own. She is grumpy and stressed."

The statement attributes human cognitive and emotional capacities to the cat, who is described as intelligent, endowed with a "unique personality," and capable of expressing emotional states such as "anger" and "stress." By stating that the only difference between the cat and a human being is speech, the interviewee reduces the symbolic distance between human and animal, bringing the pet closer to an almost human condition within the relationship. This interpretation aligns with Martins (2004), who addresses personality as an internal dimension associated with human beings. Another example appears in Interviewee 7's statement when describing the coexistence between her dogs:

> "They are very different [the dogs]. They have very clearly defined personality traits. Kira [the dog] is the older one. She spent five years alone, right? Being the little princess, having everything, getting all the attention, being the only one in everything, right? So when Ayla [the dog] arrived, Kira found Ayla strange. She did not really accept her at first, but she started kind of setting rules for her. Now they live together well; they do not fight. But Kira is very controlling; she sort of limits Ayla's space. If Ayla comes to interact with me, Kira immediately wants to intervene, you know? She goes toward her, like, no, she does not like it, and she makes a whole scene."

The account shows that the owner interprets the relationship between the dogs through human categories, such as jealousy, control, competition for attention, hierarchy, and rule-setting. In this case, anthropomorphization appears not only in the attribution of individual traits but also in the way the owner symbolically organizes the dynamics between the pets themselves, bringing it closer to family relationships similar to those experienced among siblings.

It is therefore evident that the anthropomorphization of pets is recurrent among the interviewees, especially when they attribute personality, intelligence, jealousy, stress, and individual preferences to animals. According to Bekoff (2000), the use of anthropomorphic language can facilitate communication about animal behavior, as human terms help interpret

their actions; however, attributing feelings to pets does not guarantee that they experience them in the same way humans do.

Thus, the anthropomorphic practices observed should not be understood merely as an excess of affection, but rather as a symbolic language of closeness between owner and animal. By naming behaviors through human categories, owners bring pets closer to themselves, integrate them into the emotional logic of the family, and sustain other dimensions of the bond, such as companionship, family belonging, symbolic filiation, and extension of the owner's identity.

4.2 Pet as Companion

It was observed that owners associate their companion animals with an affective presence in everyday life, understanding them as constant companions rather than merely as animals under human care. This category shows that pets occupy a relevant emotional place in the participants' routines, especially in contexts of loneliness, working from home, moving to another city, or needing affective support. Interviewee 2, for example, reported:

> "I spend a lot of time alone at home, so... I do not feel so lonely when I am with them [the dog and the cat]; I have their company."

Interviewee 2's statement demonstrates the role of the pet as a constant emotional presence, reinforcing the idea of belonging. According to Cavanaugh et al. (2008), the companionship of an animal has been increasingly recognized as essential and highly important to people's well-being.

This account indicates that the animal acts as a mediator of the experience of loneliness. The presence of the dog and the cat does not necessarily eliminate the absence of other human relationships, but it reduces their emotional effects, creating a sense of coexistence, acceptance, and reciprocity. Thus, the pet is perceived as someone who "is there," even though this relationship takes place outside the traditional codes of human communication. Another participant, Interviewee 4, stated that his dogs function as a distraction and help reduce stress:

> "I moved here recently; I used to live in Rio, right? And I work from home. So, they [the dogs] are a distraction, both for relieving stress and for companionship."

In this case, the companionship of the pets appears to be associated with a reorganization of everyday life. The interviewee mentions a recent move to another city and working from home, two elements that may intensify social isolation and the absence of face-to-face interactions. The dogs, therefore, become part of the emotional adaptation to this new context, functioning as an affective presence, a stimulus for routine, and an element of stability in the domestic environment. In another account, Interviewee 7 associates the companionship of her dogs with mental health care and encouragement to engage in activities outside the home:

> "I think they [the dogs] contribute a great deal to my mental health because they are companions, right? They are companions, and they also end up encouraging me to do some activities, even to leave the house, right? Going out to walk them is already an activity that I only do because I have them, right? So, they really are very companionable; they are my company."

This statement broadens the understanding of companionship beyond emotional presence, as it shows that pets also mobilize behaviors, encourage movement, and foster self-care practices. Walking, in this case, is no longer merely an animal's need but becomes a shared activity that also benefits the owner.

Thus, the category "pet as companion" shows that animals assume a structuring function in owners' emotional lives, acting as mediators of well-being, routine, and affective stability. Their importance lies less in practical utility and more in their capacity to produce acceptance and belonging, reinforcing human–animal bonds as part of contemporary transformations in forms of care and coexistence.

4.3 Pet as a Family Member

The relationship between owners and their companion animals has undergone significant transformations, and for many owners, pets have come to occupy the position of family members (Serpell, 2002). This category expresses the way interviewees assign their animals a symbolic position within the household, recognizing them as participants in relationships of affection, care, and coexistence. Interviewee 10, for example, commented:

> "Not only me, but also my mother and my father—especially my mother, right, who is very attached to her [the dog]—say that she is her little granddaughter. She actually just got home from work, and Safira [the dog] gets all happy. Then my mother comes in saying, 'Where is Grandma's little baby?."

The statement shows that the pet is incorporated not only into the individual relationship between owner and animal, but also into the broader family dynamic. By being called "little granddaughter" and "Grandma's little baby," the dog comes to occupy a symbolic genealogical position similar to that of a child within the family nucleus. This naming reveals that the animal is affectively recognized not only by the owner, but also by other members of the household. Another example appears in Interviewee 5's account:

> "Do you understand? For example, now they [the cats] are here—let them take over the house. If they go on top of the table, let them stay on the table; if they go on our bed, let them stay on our bed. I do not have this issue of not allowing them. When they are inside the house, they can go anywhere, as long as they do not scratch things, right? I try to educate them; I am trying, but as parents... it is difficult, girl, to educate these children."

In this account, the inclusion of cats in the family structure appears both in their freedom to move around the house and in the way the owner refers to them as "children." The home ceases to be an exclusively human space and becomes shared with the pets, who occupy beds, tables, and other areas. Thus, family belonging is materialized in everyday practices: allowing the animal to circulate and participate in the domestic routine means recognizing its place within the family.

Overall, the statements show that pets are perceived as family members and are involved in dynamics of affection, care, and coexistence similar to human relationships. The multispecies family, therefore, is expressed not only in discourse but also in everyday practices, in the spaces occupied by animals, in individualized treatment, and in the parental terms used by owners. As

a result, the pet is no longer peripheral and comes to occupy a central position in the family's affective dynamics, reinforcing forms of belonging based on care, coexistence, and emotional recognition.

4.4 "My Pet Is Just Like Me"

Throughout the interviews, it was identified that pets are viewed by owners as extensions of their own personalities, reflecting traits of temperament, mood, attitudes, and ways of behaving. This perception reinforces the affective bond and the sense of symbolic connection between human and animal, as the owner comes to see the pet as a kind of mirror of the self. This interpretation aligns with Belk (1988), according to whom companion animals may contribute to the construction of owners' identities, functioning as an extension of the self. Interviewee 7's statement is illustrative:

> "Actually, these two characteristics, they [the dogs] are very similar to me, because I think I am very protective and that I am very fierce about some things, right? Like being protective of my family, marking my presence, you know, establishing my presence and all that. But I am also very needy; I love, love being held. I think the two of them complement me, you know?"

The statement shows that the owner recognizes in her dogs characteristics she uses to define herself, such as protectiveness, intensity, and the need for affection. The expression "they complement me" reinforces that pets are not perceived merely as external beings, but as part of the owner's emotional and identity composition. This identification also appears in Interviewee 2's statement:

> "Sofia [the dog] is very much like this: sometimes she likes to be alone; if you pet her too much, she gets stressed. I think I have a bit of that too."

In this case, the pet functions as a reflection of human emotional states, especially the need for space and discomfort with excessive contact. Identification does not occur only through positive characteristics, but also through ambivalent traits, such as irritation or the desire for isolation, showing that the animal is incorporated into the owner's identity in a complex way.

Thus, this category shows that owners recognize themselves in their animals and project aspects of their own subjectivity onto them, reinforcing anthropomorphization and the understanding of the pet as an extension of the self. By perceiving parts of themselves in the animal, owners strengthen the sense of connection, belonging, and reciprocity. In this way, the pet becomes an emotional mirror, contributing to identity construction and to the legitimization of the affective bond.

4.5 Pets as Children

Owners express a relationship with their pets that goes beyond a conventional affective bond, assigning them the symbolic role of children within the family structure. In these discourses, the pet is understood as a figure of filiation, eliciting feelings of love, care, protection, and responsibility similar to those directed toward a human child. This category deepens the discussion on multispecies families, as it demonstrates that the position occupied by the animal may involve symbolic parenthood. Interviewee 6 stated:

> "I consider Princesa [the cat] my daughter, the daughter I never had and never will have. She is my only one; I love her more than my own life."

For Interviewee 6, her cat occupies a substitutive space, filling the absence of a biological child: "the daughter I never had and never will have." This relationship demonstrates how pets may fulfill emotional and existential needs, functioning as an extension of the self and as an object of projected care, love, and identity (Belk, 1988). The intensity of the bond is evident in the expression "I love her more than my own life," revealing a form of unconditional and maternal love in which the pet becomes an essential part of the owner's well-being.

The statement also shows that symbolic parenthood is not limited to a metaphor. By calling the cat her daughter, the owner assigns her a unique and prioritized place in her life. The pet comes to occupy a stable affective position associated with responsibility, protection, and emotional exclusivity. Interviewee 5 also reported:

> "They [the cats] are part of my family here. I have affection for them as if they really were children; they are my children. And, like, I am even very afraid of getting pregnant and my child having some kind of allergy, you know? I would not be able to get rid of my cats. I was even talking to a friend one day: if I have a child and the baby has some allergy, I will have to rent a house just for my cats... It is as if they really were my children. It is incredible, truly incredible."

The statement reinforces symbolic filiation by presenting the cats as "children" and indicating that their affective place is stable and prioritized. The concern about a possible pregnancy and the hypothetical idea of "renting a house just for the cats" reveal the owner's degree of commitment, demonstrating that pets do not occupy a provisional position but are part of an already consolidated affective structure.

Overall, the category "pets as children" highlights one of the strongest expressions of the multispecies family. The animal is no longer merely a companion or household member, but comes to occupy a filial position marked by care, protection, responsibility, expenses, routine, and dedication. Thus, pet parenthood should not be understood only as a replacement for biological children, but as a contemporary way of exercising affection and belonging in interspecies relationships, which also helps explain the emotional nature of pet-related consumption.

4.6 Consumption and Affection

According to Liu et al. (2024), the growth of the pet market is related to changes in family structure and to the increasingly significant role played by companion animals within this environment. Factors such as improvements in pet care, increased awareness of respect for animals, and the strengthening of the Brazilian population's economic conditions have contributed to making the sector one of the fastest-growing in Brazil and globally (Apaolaza et al., 2022).

In this study, consumption appears as a dimension derived from the affective bond rather than as an isolated axis of the owner–pet relationship. For the interviewees, spending on the animal, providing comfort, special food, personalized products, or recurring services represents a concrete way of materializing care, love, and responsibility. Participant 7, for example, highlights the routine nature of these expenses:

> "I spend more on them [the dogs] than on myself: bathing, grooming... the pet shop charge is there on my card every month; it is their four baths every week, with moisturizing, hygienic grooming, everything."

The expression "I spend more on them than on myself" confirms a form of prioritization in which the dogs' well-being is placed above the owner's own material needs. In this case, consumption appears not merely as an economic decision, but as a practice of care incorporated into the budget and affective routine. Interviewee 9 also reinforces this symbolic dimension of consumption:

> "Sometimes I stop buying things for myself to buy things for her [the dog], especially on Shein... Then I see some cute little things, I go there and buy them for her, so the frequency is quite high, more than for myself."

The account shows that buying for the pet functions as a form of pleasure, care, and emotional reciprocity. By stating that she stops buying for herself in order to buy for her dog, the owner demonstrates that the animal occupies a priority position in her choices, making consumption a concrete expression of affection and responsibility.

Thus, purchasing practices are not limited to meeting basic needs, such as food and health care, but also involve gifts, aesthetics, comfort, and products that strengthen the emotional bond between owner and pet. In this sense, consumption functions as an affective language: products and services materialize love, make visible the animal's importance in the owner's life, and reaffirm the owner's identity as a caregiver, pet father, or pet mother.

4.7 Pet as Psychological Support

Companion animals contribute to quality of life by promoting happiness, reducing loneliness, and fostering physical and emotional well-being (Liu et al., 2024). In this study, the accounts indicate that some owners perceive their pets as sources of acceptance, emotional stability, and psychological support, especially in moments of vulnerability. Interviewee 9, for example, highlights the role of her dog in her well-being:

> "I have actually had Safira [the dog] for five years, but when I adopted her, she was already an adult, right? And I remember that when I adopted her, I was going through a period of anxiety episodes. So, whenever I talk to someone about Safira, I always like to say this, right: that one of the parts of my healing process from anxiety was precisely having a pet. For me, it was a moment of joy when I got home and she came running, wagging her tail. So, in my process of healing from anxiety, Safira was a fundamental remedy." .

The owner's statement highlights the pet's role as an affective mediator during a moment of psychological vulnerability. By describing the dog as a "fundamental remedy," the interviewee attributes to the animal a function of acceptance, comfort, and emotional stability. The simple act of arriving home and being welcomed with joy becomes an affective ritual capable of producing belonging and alleviating the emotional effects of anxiety.

This category shows that the psychological support provided by pets does not appear in isolation, but rather as a result of the intensity of the bond built in everyday life. The animal offers companionship, becomes part of the family, may be treated as a child, and, in some cases, functions as an emotional extension of the owner. Thus, pets participate in contemporary mechanisms of well-being and care, helping to organize routines, reduce feelings of loneliness, and reinforce the centrality of the owner–pet bond as an affective, symbolic, and psychologically meaningful relationship.

5 General Discussion of the Results

Taken together, the findings indicate that the relationship between pet parents and companion animals is structured through interconnected affective, symbolic, familial, and consumption-related meanings. Rather than operating independently, the seven categories reveal a progressive process in which anthropomorphism and companionship strengthen perceptions of family belonging, symbolic parenthood, emotional support, and identification with the pet. Within this process, consumption emerges not merely as an economic behavior, but as a material expression of the bond established with the animal.

The results therefore suggest that pet-related consumption can be understood as a mechanism through which owners reinforce and legitimize the symbolic position attributed to their pets. Spending on food, health, comfort, gifts, aesthetics, and specialized services reflects not only concern for animal well-being, but also the recognition of the pet as an emotionally significant family member. This interpretation connects the notions of multispecies family, anthropomorphism, extended self, and symbolic consumption, showing how everyday consumption practices materialize affection, responsibility, identity, and belonging.

From this perspective, the study advances the understanding of pet parenthood by showing that affective bonds and consumption practices are mutually reinforcing. The stronger the symbolic incorporation of the animal into the owner's family and identity, the more consumption becomes a meaningful practice of care and relational maintenance rather than a purely functional decision.

6 Conclusion

This study aimed to understand how owners who self-identify as "pet parents" construct affective and symbolic meanings in their everyday relationships with their companion animals. Based on a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with dog and cat owners, it was possible to identify that the owner–pet bond goes beyond the logic of possession and is organized around affection, care, belonging, identification, and responsibility.

The results revealed seven central categories. Taken together, these categories show that companion animals occupy relevant symbolic positions in the lives of owners, being perceived as companions, family members, children, and sources of emotional support. Thus, pets participate in the affective organization of the household and influence the way owners construct routines, identities, and care practices.

In this context, consumption appears as a manifestation of the affective bond rather than as an isolated element of the relationship. Spending on food, health care, aesthetics, gifts, or services for the pet represents a way of expressing love, protection, and belonging. In this way, consumption practices associated with animals should be understood as symbolic and relational, as they materialize the place occupied by the pet in the owner's emotional and family life.

As a theoretical contribution, the study expands discussions on multispecies families, anthropomorphization, the extended self, and symbolic consumption by showing that pets may

act as central elements in the identity and affective construction of owners. As a managerial contribution, the findings indicate that brands and services in the pet sector should develop value propositions that go beyond functional attributes, emphasizing care, personalization, well-being, and emotionally sensitive communication regarding the owner–pet relationship.

As limitations, the study highlights the small number of participants, the exclusive focus on dog and cat owners, the concentration of participants in a specific region of the country, and the qualitative approach, which does not allow for statistical generalizations. Future research should expand the sample, include owners of other species, adopt quantitative or mixed methods, consider participants from different regions, and investigate how different social and family profiles construct affective bonds and pet-related consumption practices.

It is concluded that pets play an increasingly central role in contemporary forms of affection, family, and consumption. For the owners investigated, being a pet "father" or "mother" is not merely an everyday expression, but a way of naming bonds of care, identification, belonging, and consumption.

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