



The Compassion–Consumption Paradox in Pet Care Markets: Rethinking Inclusion in Multispecies Consumer Policy

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Paradox theory conceptualizes paradoxes as persistent and interdependent tensions between elements that are logically inconsistent yet simultaneously present and enduring within organizational and institutional systems (Smith and Lewis 2011). Pet care markets have expanded dramatically over the past two decades, reshaping how humans understand responsibility, affection, and obligation toward nonhuman companions. Yet beneath the glossy imagery of ethical consumption and responsible ownership lies a structural contradiction at the heart of contemporary pet care economies. Consumers invest emotionally and financially in the well-being of specific animals, often shaped by attachment, responsibility, or routine care practices, while the products required to maintain that care often depend on extractive, polluting, or ethically fraught supply chains that harm other species, ecosystems, and communities (Sayers, Martin, and Bell 2022).

This commentary positions this tension as a compassion–consumption paradox: a systemic contradiction that emerges when market logics collide with moral commitments in human–animal relationships. Drawing on paradox theory (Carmin and De Marchi 2023; Smith et al. 2017) and recent work on the tensions of care under capitalism (Yalkin and Özbilgin 2024), we argue that resolving this paradox requires a reimagining of inclusion beyond the human to embrace ecological and multispecies justice. Multispecies inclusion in this argument refers to the interdependent positioning of companion animals, livestock embedded in feed supply chains, affected wildlife populations, and the ecological systems sustaining these relations, all implicated in the same pet care consumption infrastructure (Erbil and Güngördü Belbağ 2024). In this context, paradox refers to a persistent structural tension (Smith et al. 2017) in which practices that express care for one being are materially entangled with systems that generate harm elsewhere. The tension operates independently of individual intent or awareness and instead emerges from the ways market systems organize production and value. In this commentary, inclusion refers to the consideration of how market structures shape the well-being of companion animals, other species, and ecological systems. Nonhuman animals cannot participate directly in market decisions; their interests are represented through owners,

regulatory frameworks, and institutional design (Srinivasan 2022). Inclusion therefore concerns whether production systems, marketing practices, and policy arrangements materially account for these mediated stakeholders.

Pet care markets are structured around practices of love, companionship, and care. Yet these practices are materially intensive and deeply entangled with broader systems of production. Premium pet foods marketed as natural, humane, or nutritionally superior often depend on carbon-intensive livestock sectors and fisheries under severe ecological pressure (McCance 2012). These dependencies characterize the sector more broadly and are not confined to premium products alone. The act of nourishing companion animals is embedded in production systems that contribute to biodiversity loss, overfishing, greenhouse gas emissions, and habitat degradation (British Veterinary Association 2024). These environmental pressures arise from the way care is organized through materially intensive production systems and are not reducible to isolated consumer purchasing decisions. Paradox theory helps illuminate how such contradictions are not solved through optimization but persist because they are embedded within institutional logics that organize markets. The pet care sector encourages consumers to express love through consumption while obscuring the broader harms such consumption enables. These contradictions are amplified within the proliferating ecosystem of toys, accessories, grooming products, seasonal goods, and personalized items circulating in pet care markets. Most are made from plastics, textiles, and composite materials with short life cycles and limited recyclability. Market narratives present them as essential to quality care, positioning material acquisition as a moral act. In doing so, they narrow the imaginative

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possibilities of what responsible, relational, or ethical care might entail. As Erbil and Güngördü Belbağ (2024) note, capitalism transforms compassion into a performance that serves market priorities rather than the multispecies communities affected by such practices. Thus, care becomes materially expressed through goods whose environmental implications remain obscured.

The compassion–consumption paradox is mediated by socioeconomic structures that shape access to lower-impact alternatives. Market offerings that are branded as sustainable or ethically superior often carry price premiums, yet both premium and lower-cost goods remain embedded in materially intensive production systems. Lower-income households still face structural constraints because market design distributes options unevenly, constraining the choices available to them (Muldoon and Williams 2024). This highlights a policy gap: Sustainability transitions in pet care rarely incorporate distributional considerations. Market-sanctioned care denotes commercially stabilized norms of responsible pet ownership that tie adequate care to the routine purchase of specialized foods, accessories, grooming products, and related services. Such norms do not mitigate the paradox; they reproduce consumption-based definitions of care and sustain materially intensive production systems (Bankel and Solér 2025).

Marketing scholarship increasingly acknowledges that inclusion is fundamental to how markets function (Erbil and Güngördü Belbağ 2024). Yet inclusion in pet care markets remains overwhelmingly anthropocentric, centered on human consumers while excluding the ecological systems that sustain consumption (Day 2025). Advancing equitable and sustainable market futures requires reconceptualizing inclusion as multispecies inclusion. This approach recognizes animals, ecosystems, and future generations as stakeholders whose well-being is shaped by market design. Such a shift demands robust policy interventions, such as systemic regulation of supply chains, incentives for low-impact protein alternatives, mandates for biodegradable materials, and targeted subsidies enabling low-income households to access environmentally responsible pet care options. Debates on the environmental impacts of companion animals highlight the urgency of this policy realignment (Lu 2025).

The paradox is not immutable. It signals the need for systemic redesign rather than individual moral optimization. A multispecies approach to inclusion also calls for reframing responsible leadership within pet care and adjacent markets. Responsible leadership is typically future-oriented, relational, and morally attentive in transforming systems that underpin the interplay of morality and markets. Extending this framework beyond human stakeholders encourages leaders to adopt a broader moral imagination, one that recognizes ecological interdependence and the needs of nonhuman life. In pet care markets, values-led leadership can address the compassion–consumption paradox not by shifting responsibility onto consumers but by redesigning supply chains, product portfolios, and marketing narratives. This involves acknowledging that market-sanctioned forms of care reflect decisions about whose lives matter and what forms of responsibility are legitimized.

Responsible leadership is particularly important for navigating tensions between commercial incentives for continuous

consumption and the ethical imperative to reduce ecological harm. Instead of striving to resolve paradox, responsible leaders hold paradox open as a generative space for innovation. They can create alternative consumption models, for example, circular material systems, repair services, low-impact nutrition solutions, and community-based care infrastructures, that decouple care from material intensity. Such approaches broaden the architecture of choice, making ethical, lower-impact options accessible and affordable rather than niche luxuries.

This shift also transforms consumer expectations. When firms use leadership to expand available options and reshape narratives, consumers are not forced to shoulder disproportionate moral responsibility. Instead, they are supported by systems designed to promote coherence between compassion and ecological well-being. Ethical pet care should not be framed as a personal moral achievement but as a collective project embedded in market design.

Narratives play a central role here. Market narratives define what counts as normal and desirable, and in doing so, they delimit the moral contours of care. Responsible leadership can craft narratives that do not equate love with material acquisition but instead emphasize emotional presence, relational reciprocity, stewardship, and ecological responsibility. These stories can normalize lower-impact forms of care and shift consumer identity from isolated pet owners to participants in interconnected multispecies communities.

Education, whether in marketing classrooms, professional training, or consumer communication, reinforces this shift. Integrating multispecies justice into educational spaces equips future practitioners and consumers to think critically about paradox, inclusion, and the politics of market design. As April (2024) argues more broadly, authentic compassion requires confronting the costs markets externalize.

These dynamics reveal the pet care sector as a vivid illustration of how compassion, consumption, and inequality intersect in contemporary markets. By foregrounding the compassion–consumption paradox, marketing scholarship can illuminate the structural tensions shaping multispecies life and contribute to more inclusive and coherent market futures. Meaningful progress will require more than ethical branding or incremental sustainability improvements; it will require a rethinking of the foundational assumptions linking care, responsibility, and inclusion across species. The pet care market thus becomes a diagnostic site through which broader tensions between care, consumption, and justice in contemporary capitalism can be examined.

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