

The Humanization of Pets

Walk down a typical pet-store aisle in the U.S. and you still see the same thing: loud colors, cartoon bones, and chunky plastic bottles that look more like toys than toiletries. For a growing number of younger pet owners, those products feel out of place in a carefully curated bathroom. Their dogs are “fur babies,” treated as full-fledged family members, and they want products that fit that image. Amid this broader cultural shift, a new kind of brand steps into the scene: Lil Luv Dog.

Co-founded by actress Cara Santana Leto and influencer Stephanie Suganami, Lil Luv Dog positions itself as a premium, beauty-style pet-care label. Launched in August, it quickly raised \$1 million from Backers who see strong potential in the luxury pet market. The brand’s mission is straightforward: bring the same aesthetic, ingredient standards, and wellness language seen in human skincare into the realm of dog grooming.

Lil Luv Dog’s first product is a human-grade dry shampoo for dogs, sold in cactus and oat scents. It uses “clean” ingredients and comes in two sustainable formats: a compostable bamboo shaker and small sachets made from dissolvable wood pulp. Prices range from \$26 to \$36, far above many standard dog shampoos, but the company argues that a single container can last for months on a medium-size dog. The shampoo also carries a key distinction: it was the first pet-grooming product to be verified by the Environmental Working Group, giving cautious consumers an extra layer of trust.

What really sets the company apart is its visual identity. Instead of cartoon mascots and neon fonts, Lil Luv Dog uses muted tones, small illustrations, and minimalist layouts reminiscent of prestige skincare lines. Placed next to a human luxury serum, the bottle wouldn’t look strange at all. The idea is that the product mirrors the owner’s own routine and design preferences, making dog shampoo part of the same upscale environment as face masks and hair oils.

Lil Luv Dog isn’t relying on online sales alone. Products are already stocked at trendy cafes in major U.S. cities and will also appear in human hair salons. By placing the brand where people already go to pamper themselves, the founders hope it will feel natural for customers to pick up shampoo for their dog along with their own styling products.

This strategy taps into a broader shift in how Americans see their animals. In a recent survey of 1,000 adults, 88% said they consider their pets to be as much a part of the family as a human. Many owners throw birthday parties, buy holiday gifts, and talk about their pets almost as children. Spending patterns reflect that attitude. The same poll found that Gen Z pet owners spend an average of \$148.50 per month on their animals, while millennials spend about \$136.20. Older generations spend significantly less, showing just how aggressively younger groups are driving this market.

Crucially, younger owners don’t just think luxury is acceptable—they often see it as sensible. About two-thirds of Gen Z respondents said it’s reasonable to pay for luxury products or

services for pets, compared with roughly 40% of Baby Boomers. When U.S. pet spending is projected to reach around \$157 billion this year, it's easy to see how brands like Lil Luv Dog are poised to benefit from this momentum.

Social media supercharges these trends. For Gen Z, digital and offline life are nearly inseparable. Their feeds are filled with beautifully groomed dogs, unboxing videos of stylish pet products, and detailed “morning routine” clips that include supplements and skincare—for both human and animal. This constant stream of content normalizes behavior that older generations might find excessive, whether that's buying a “skin barrier stick” for a cat or booking a spot for dog yoga. In this environment, a design-forward dry shampoo doesn't feel strange; it simply mirrors everything else in their lifestyle.

Lil Luv Dog is part of a competitive wave. Beauty-inspired pet brands such as Artemis (with a powder-to-lather wash) and Biche (developing dog perfumes) are entering the market, alongside Welltaylor, which uses human skincare terms like “hyaluronic acid” in its products. Established human labels have already experimented with pet lines; luxury houses sell dog shampoos and mists at prices that underline the category's new prominence. Together, these offerings show that grooming for pets has evolved into a full-fledged niche inside the wider wellness economy.

Still, the price tag is a sticking point. Some owners openly balk at the idea of spending \$36 on shampoo for a dog, especially when they don't spend that much on themselves. Supporters argue that higher-quality, longer-lasting products may cut down on trips to the groomer and reduce exposure to harsh ingredients, but that argument will not convince everyone. For many shoppers, premium pet care will remain an occasional treat rather than a monthly habit.

Even with that resistance, the broader trend is clear. As the market expands and younger generations continue to treat their animals like close relatives, branding and design are gaining new prominence in pet care. Products are no longer just about removing dirt; they are expected to fit into a visually cohesive home, reflect environmental values, and feel emotionally aligned with how people see their “fur babies.” In that sense, Lil Luv Dog doesn't just sell shampoo. It sells a vision of human–pet life in which wellness, style, and affection flow together—two routines, side by side, that are designed to look and feel the same.

- 1) Do you think this “humanization” of pets is mainly emotional, or is it also driven by marketing and social media?
- 2) How much do you think branding and flair influence your buying decisions compared to function and price?
- 3) How common is it to pamper pets with upscale products or services in Korea?
- 4) How far do you think this luxury pet trend can continue growing?
- 5) Why do you think Gen Z is spending more on pets than older generations?
- 6) Do you think the strong emotional bond with pets can sometimes replace human relationships?

Balk	(v)	to suddenly refuse to do something or continue with something because it seems difficult or expensive	Customers may balk at paying extra fees for basic services.
Cohesive	(adj)	forming a united, logical, and consistent whole	The designer used similar colors and shapes to create a cohesive look.
Format	(n)	the form, style, or arrangement in which something is presented or produced	The teacher asked students to follow a specific format for their reports.
Full-fledged	(adj)	completely developed or having all the rights, status, or features of something	After years of training, he finally became a full-fledged architect.
Fur baby	(n)	an affectionate term for a pet, especially a dog or cat, treated like a child	She calls her dog her fur baby and even takes him to daycare.
Inseparable	(adj)	so closely connected that it is very difficult to separate or think of them apart	The twins were inseparable and did everything together.
Pamper	(v)	to treat someone or something with a lot of care and attention, often more than necessary	She booked a weekend at a spa to pamper herself after a busy month.
Prominence	(n)	the state of being important, well-known, or easy to notice	The issue of data privacy has risen to prominence in recent years.
Realm	(n)	a particular area of activity, interest, or knowledge	The company is trying to expand into the realm of online education.
Sticking point	(n)	a problem or issue that prevents people from reaching an agreement or making progress	The main sticking point in the contract was the length of the agreement.
Sustainable	(adj)	using methods or materials that do not harm the environment and can continue over time	They switched to sustainable packaging to reduce plastic waste.
Toiletry	(n)	a product used for washing, cleaning, or taking care of your body	I always keep a small bag of toiletries ready for last-minute trips.
Upscale	(adj)	relating to products, services, or places that are expensive and designed for wealthy customers	They opened an upscale restaurant in the center of the city.
Vision	(n)	a clear idea or picture in your mind of how something should be in the future	The founder has a strong vision for how the company should grow over the next decade.