
Canines and Their Companions: Unleashing the Chains of Sponsorship

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"Animals always have a good meaning, and I'm always happy to be around them"

– Chris, dog owner and Fleet Peeples Park attendee

The sound of tired asphalt and gravel rumbling and turning beneath your tires stirs your excitement as you try to find a spot to park on this crowded Sunday afternoon. As you look outside your window, you see dogs hurrying and pulling their owners towards what they distinguish as their playground (perhaps even their treat for being good that week). Dog owners hold on tight to their leashes, but their dogs do most of the guiding, since they know the path to the special double gate very well. Excitement is in the air as you enter the first black gate. This first gate leads you into a small five feet by five feet enclosure that gives dog owners a chance to unleash their dogs. From the enclosure, you can see the large stretch of open grass and trees providing room for the thirty-something dogs in view. And by a large, open area, I mean it: the whole park stretches 23 acres. Looking past the grass, you see the faint reflections of the sun bouncing off of a lake that most of the dogs are speeding towards. Dogs in the small enclosure before the gate are visibly excited; the one in front of us has his two front legs halfway in the air as his owner tries to contain him and open the second black gate. This gate opens to a world that dogs and dog owners from around the area undoubtedly view as sacred: Fleet Peeples Park.



Importance of Dog Parks for Literacy and as a Subculture

Off-leash dog parks, as defined by Julie Urbanik and Mary Morgan, “are fenced off areas where dogs can be legally unconfined—free to interact with other dogs and romp without the constraints of leashes, harnesses, leads, or muzzles” (292). Parks such as Fleet Peeples “[offer] a safe, controlled environment for dogs to play, socialize and exercise with other dogs,” while also “reduce[ing] boredom and pent-up energy” (Lee, Shepley, and Huang 314). Ever since the first dog park was established in 1979 in Berkeley, California, they have rapidly increased in numbers, with estimates of around 2,200 dog parks in the United States alone. It is no wonder why there has been a significant increase in demand for the allocation of public space for dog recreation: about 39

percent of households in the United States own at least one dog (Lee, Shepley, and Huang 314). A study conducted by Urbanik and Morgan addresses the support for and opposition to the opening of a new public dog park in Kansas City where there are widespread “human-spatial-dog politics” on display. The study notes that the existence of these political struggles correlates with a developing concept of family as existing in private homes and the movement “towards a zoopolis where humans and animals can co-habitat and share public space” (Urbanik and Morgan 301). As Patricia Jackson points out, “The extent of human attachment to dogs is signified by the extensive use of human names for them, the frequency with which caretakers view dogs as a member of the family, and the extent of bereavement following their death” (254).



Dog parks provide more than a leisure spot for dogs and their owners. Multiple studies have proven that dog ownership correlates with higher physical activity in both children and adults (Lee, Shepley, and Huang; Owen et al.). Additionally, in a standardized observational study of six different public dog parks, researchers found that, even when harsh weather was present, dog walkers’ use of the parks continued while non-dog walkers’ use declined (Temple, Rhodes, and Higgins 771).

The growing importance of dogs as family members and dog parks as beneficial sites for both humans and their canine companions has been established. In turn, I would like to consider the importance of dog parks—and, specifically, Fleet Peeples Park—as a site of both literacy development and a unique subculture. As Eric Pleasant points out in his article, “Literacy Sponsors and Learning: An Ethnography of Punk Literacy in Mid-1980s Waco,” the traditional definitions of literacy “are generally limited to the study of written text” (138). He argues that these definitions hinder and do not exemplify the structures of our daily lives. Pleasant joins the concepts of literacy and subcultures to explore “literacy as a set of cultural practices that people engage in,” such as happens in the subculture of punk and, I argue, the subculture of Fleet Peeples Park (138).

Moreover, within every subculture is a web of sponsorship. Sponsors, as defined by Deborah Brandt, are “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy” (166). As Pleasant points out, “literacy influences the direction of further development” as individuals partake in a “snowball effect” of sponsorship and literacy—with “layers of learning, background, and exposure inside” ultimately shaping the snowball (139).

Additionally, Kevin Roozen stresses the importance of David Barton and Mary Hamilton’s understanding of vernacular literacies as “those self-sponsored, informally learned literate practices that are ‘rooted in everyday experience and serve everyday purposes’” and how these become a part of an individual’s developing relationship with academic literate activities (Roozen “Fan-Ficing” 137). Elsewhere, Roozen focuses on the trajectories that shaped a student’s literate development and ultimately her identity as a journalist (“From Journals to Journalism”). In doing so, he discusses how individuals repurpose cultural tools and literacies to ultimately form a “network or matrix of intersecting practices” (“From Journals to Journalism” 545). Roozen emphasizes the interplay of literacies and how they are linked into “longer and more extensive chains of activity” (545).

This study is largely motivated by Pleasant’s work in considering the sponsors of punk literacy. I intend to build upon his ideas about the foundations of sponsorship as well as Roozen’s ideas of repurposing. In the rest of this article, I will examine and discuss the different forms and factors of sponsorship present in the lives of two different dog owners, one of whom is a frequent visitor to Fleet Peeples Park. I hope to provide insight on this subject by also offering my own

personal account and viewpoint as someone who is not a dog owner. Further, I examine and discuss how dog ownership sponsors other literate activities in a dog owner’s life: what does the literacy and sponsorship “snowball” entail for dog owners and does it continually recur? And how does pet ownership connect to Roozen’s interpretations of repurposing?

Method

As a first-year college student, I do not own a dog, nor had I frequently attended Fleet Peeples Park until I began embarking on this study. My interest in this subject was sparked when I attended Fleet Peeples Park as a guest with my boyfriend, Chris, and his older sister’s dog, Tucker, when we were babysitting Tucker for the weekend. To me, this experience was something altogether new and exciting. Not only was there an abundance of dogs in all shapes and sizes, breeds and colors, there were, as expected, an abundance of these canines’ human companions. To many people, the scenes described are nothing out of the ordinary. But for someone who has never had a dog, it was awe-inspiring. As the day went on, I began to ask myself, “Where did all these people come from? How did they find this park in the heart of Winter Park? Why does it seem like the majority of Americans prefer dogs?” To further research these subjects, I visited Fleet Peeples Park with Chris and Tucker a few more times. At the park, I observed my surroundings and noted the interactions between dogs and dog owners as well as the conversations between dog owners. Interviews with two dog owners, Chris and James, served as the driving force for this research, which developed out of their firsthand and very knowledgeable accounts.

Participants and Data Collection

Chris and James are both first-year college students. They both live with their families in addition to their dogs. In order to conduct this study, I employed open-ended interviews. In my interview with James, I asked specific questions about his background of pet ownership throughout his life and what that has led to in past and present times (e.g. “What kinds of pets did your household have when you were younger?”; “Why do you think your mom wanted you to have a pet?”; and “Why did you decide to pick a bulldog?”). Because this study focuses on the subculture of Fleet Peeples Park, I concentrated my interviews on Chris and his pet ownership experiences. Because I have a close relationship with Chris, I already knew quite a bit about his life and childhood. Therefore, I conducted a series of formal open-ended interviews that went in-depth, asking questions that I’ve never thought to ask before. During our first interview, I asked questions to gain a first-hand perspective of all the aspects regarding the subculture of Fleet Peeples Park (e.g., “How did you find this park?”; “Do you usually talk or hangout with other dog owners at this park?”; and “What are the typical behaviors of dogs and dog owners displayed at this park?”). Our second interview was focused more on the questions I had regarding sponsorship as well as Chris’s background. We discussed his childhood and he told me about all the pets he and his family had while he was growing up. I asked further questions to draw connections between his family’s status as pet owners to his life both now and in the future.



Findings

Finding the various forms and factors of sponsorship was easy enough as they were plain to see. To see how the vernacular, everyday literacies connected to pet ownership can link to pet

owners' personal and academic literacies, I analyzed the interview transcripts I put together from those series of interviews with James and Chris.

Sponsors of Participation at Fleet Peeples Park

When I asked Chris how he came to discover Fleet Peeples Park, he said that his sister, Kelly, introduced him to the park. Knowing that Kelly has a very big dog, he told me that she attends this park to let Tucker play in the big outdoor area with other dogs instead of being stuck inside her comparably small apartment. Therefore, Chris's sponsor is his sister. Additionally, Kelly was first told about this park when she was adopting Tucker at PetSmart during their weekend Save-a-Life Pet Rescue program. There is a unique chain of sponsorship that can be seen through this description alone. Whether it was Kelly's large dog's needs acting as a source of motivation or a PetSmart employee acting as a more tangible sponsor, Kelly became somewhat of an expert of the subculture of Fleet Peeples Park. From there, she went on to sponsor her brother, Chris, who has the potential to become a sponsor to any of his dog-owning friends (see Figure 1).

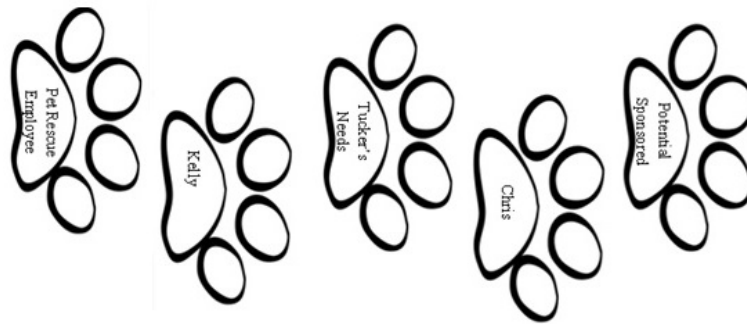


Figure 1: Sponsors of Participation at Fleet Peeples Park

Sponsors of Pet Ownership

In James' case, I found that his mother sponsored his first pet owning experience. She wanted James and his older sister to get a pet guinea pig in an effort to find a common ground for the two dissimilar siblings to share. He says, "We didn't really do much together. We didn't have much in common." This need for a common ground can be seen as both an abstract form of sponsorship and a factor contributing to sponsorship. Presently, James and his family own an English bulldog that he says wouldn't be a part of his family if it weren't for his aunts. The facts that James' aunts have dogs and positive experiences with their dogs was the driving motivation for his mother allowing James and his sister to have a dog as well, allowing these aunts to act as another sponsor (see Figure 2).

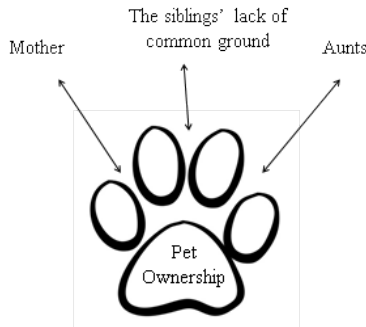


Figure 2: Sponsors of James' Pet Ownership

Similarly, family background also influences Chris' pet owning experiences. To say that Chris and Kelly had pets as children would be an understatement. They grew up with numerous pets, including some that may sound quite unusual to most people. Among these multiple pets, two

or three dogs were always present. These ranged from huskies and German shepherds to bulldogs and pugs. When Chris was about four years old, his father decided to buy a pet fox from a local pet store. When he turned five, Chris was allowed to have a pet hamster and, two years later, Kelly got a pet ferret. Additionally, for his twelfth birthday, Chris received a leopard gecko, while his father also bought a cat. These early experiences sponsored development of the knowledge and expertise needed to care for pets as well as a general fondness towards animals. Chris even declared himself to be a “devoted animal-lover.”

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Because Chris and Kelly’s early experiences with pets were so positive, they decided to continue to take on the responsibility of owning dogs as they grew to become adults. Chris told me that, if he buys a dog in the future, he would rather adopt one from a pet rescue such as the Save-a-Life program through which his sister adopted Tucker. He says, “My sister encourages me to adopt—not just at PetSmart, but, in general, she does encourage me to adopt because it is better to save a life than to not.” In this sense, Kelly is also acting as a sponsor of Chris’s future pet ownership. A pet ownership triangle was constructed to show the dynamic relationship and web of sponsorship seen throughout Chris’s life (see Figure 3 below).

Had their parents’ homes been dog-free, Chris and Kelly may not have had the fundamental sponsorships that promoted and supported their pet ownership now and in the future. Personally, having grown up in a house without dogs, I do not possess the expertise and knowledge needed to own a dog. Although I would like to have a dog at some point in the future, my family background does not directly sponsor that desire, as seen with Chris and Kelly. It is, in fact, the absence of animals in my household that is sponsoring my desired dog ownership. This form of sponsorship is similar to Pleasant’s example of how his conservative background sponsored a reverse effect and led him to the liberal vernacular literacy of punk.

Lasting Effects of Pet Ownership

Pet Ownership as a Sponsor and the Repurposing of Vernacular Literacy

Chris’ responses to my interview questions exhibited his true love and compassion towards animals. When asked if his early dog ownership experiences have taught him responsibility, he said no, “but [dog ownership] did teach me companionship and friendship. It’s kind of crazy to think some people don’t think of a dog as a friend.” Green Beret Chris Corbin would certainly agree. In a recent *60 Minutes* story, “Sniffing for Bombs: Meet America’s Most Elite Dogs,” Corbin tells his and his dog Ax’s story of near death while serving in Afghanistan. Aside from the astonishing capabilities that working dogs like Ax display, there is a great deal of mutual “perfect trust” and companionship seen between military dogs and their owners (“Sniffing”).

Pet ownership, as a sponsor of vernacular literacy, is a part of an interchanging relationship with academic literate activities (Roozen “Fan-Ficing” 137). This holds true in the case of Chris and his experiences as a pet owner. He is currently looking to adopt a pygmy marmoset, otherwise known as a finger monkey—an admittedly strange and unique pet to want. When asked if this desire has anything to do with the fact that, growing up, his family had strange pets, he replied, “Yes, I believe it has something to do with it—something unique, something you don’t see every day. . . . [They can provide] companionship closer to a human or dog.” In this case, Chris’ development as a pet owner throughout his childhood has been repurposed to serve his interests in other unique pets, such as the finger monkey.

Moreover, Chris’ ultimate goal in school is to become a veterinarian. He says this decision resulted from “purely the fact of my love for animals. My father always loved animals, he’s always had animals around, so I just became attached in that way.” Here, we see Chris repurposing a vernacular literacy to shape his academic activities and create a “network of intersecting practices.” His experiences as a pet owner and his love for animals will ultimately shape his identity as a veterinarian (see Figure 3).

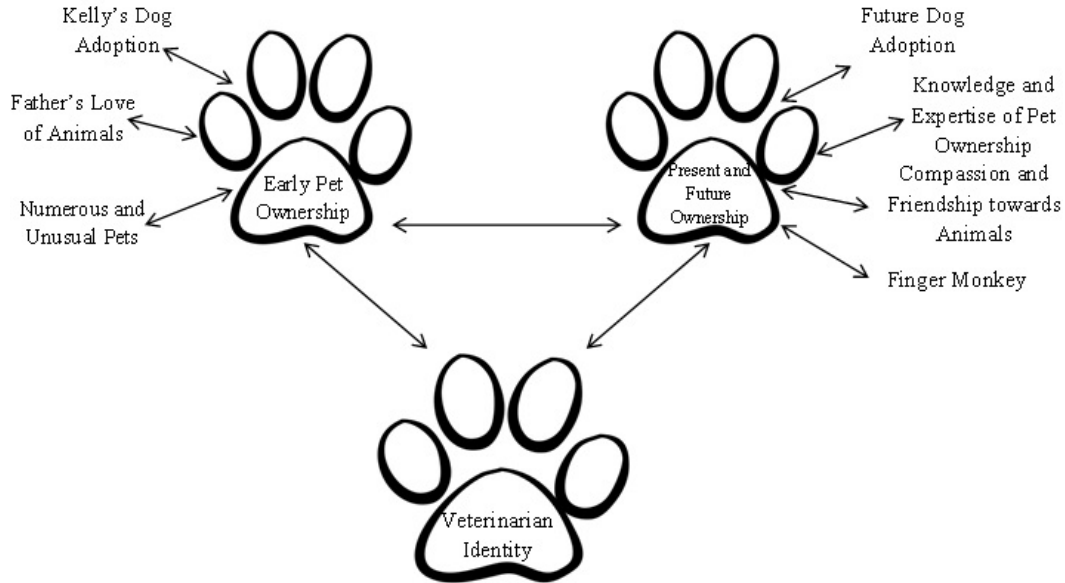


Figure 3: Sponsors of Chris’ Pet Ownership and the Repurposing of Literacy

Snowballing at Home and at the Dog Park

As Pleasant points out, the snowball effect of literacy and sponsorship “is dictated by the layers of learning, background, and exposure inside” (139). Through my observations at Fleet Peeples Park, I have found that the routines and interactions of dog owners are key to being successful or fitting in. This includes everything from owners picking up after their dogs and properly disposing waste to showing composure when a dog kicks sand at visitors or even almost knocks them off their feet. As newcomers join this subculture, their experience and expertise grows as they spend more time at this dog park. These routines and behaviors are then recycled when park attendees visit off-leash dog parks in other locations and attempt to fit in at these new settings.

Furthermore, as we have seen, family background plays a prominent role in both the learning of and exposure to pet ownership. It is evident that literacy and sponsorship have the potential to snowball forever: Chris has the potential to sponsor a dog-owning friend or introduce a dog owner to Fleet Peeples Park. If this happens, a domino effect can take place again and again, simply by word of mouth. Likewise, as Chris and Kelly’s father’s love of animals was passed down to his children, Chris’s love of animals and expertise as a pet owner has the potential to snowball even larger.

Literacy development and sponsorship are more than just terms. They are the way we as a population and as individuals within that population ourselves are introduced to, learn, acquire, and utilize ways of living, inhabiting, surviving, and making use of the world in which we live.

Conclusion

This is only one account of the web of sponsorship found at Fleet Peeples Park. James', Chris', and Kelly's accounts and stories of sponsorship are only a few of many possibilities that are out there. How individuals acquire the knowledge and capabilities to own a pet, how they come to find a recreational area such as Fleet Peeples Park, how they become devoted animal-lovers, and how their identities are shaped by such literacies can be mysteries to outsiders, but become visible after research and analysis.

Literacy development and sponsorship are more than just terms. They are the way we as a population and as individuals within that population ourselves are introduced to, learn, acquire, and utilize ways of living, inhabiting, surviving, and making use of the world in which we live. As Roozen argues, we need to "include the vernacular more prominently in our accounts and analyses of disciplinary and professional work" ("Fan-Ficing" 138). These accounts can and should be uncovered. After all, it is the vernacular literacies we encounter and use in our daily lives that shape our futures and, ultimately, our identities.

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