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The Community of Dog Show Exhibitors on the Internet. Sociological Sketch

ABSTRAKT

Spółeczność wystawców psów w Internecie. Szkic socjologiczny

Artykuł stanowi krótki szkic poświęcony właścicielom psów rasowych, a w szczególności drobnemu fragmentowi ich świata i społecznej aktywności, jakimi są wystawy. W analizie wykorzystano między innymi teorię klasy próżniaczej Thorsteina Veblena. Tekst oparty został głównie na analizie jakościowej wypowiedzi zamieszczanych na dwóch dobranych celowo specjalistycznych forach internetowych poświęconych właścicielom psów rasowych: *Dogomania* oraz *Forum Właścicieli i Miłośników Owczarków Staroangielskich*. Artykuł pokazuje, jak media wpływają na zmianę pozycji psów w społeczeństwie i funkcje, jakie obecnie pełnią w świecie ludzi.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: społeczność wystawców psów, Internet, fora internetowe, komunikacja w sieci, relacje interpersonalne on-line i off-line.

Introduction

Animals have accompanied humans since time immemorial. In the beginning, they were treated as the source of nutrition, but with the progress of societies their role was changing. Edward Hyams claims that their domestication was closely linked with the development of civilisation. The domestication of animals and plants freed people from constant and precarious search for food and allowed them to spend their time on other important occupations. The taming of animals was a long process, during which human's behaviour towards animals

was changing and vice versa¹. Gradually, domestic animals began to be divided into two categories: the ones which brought humans measurable, economic benefits and the others which first and foremost satisfied their emotional needs and became companions of everyday life.

Currently, according to Krzysztof Konecki, domestic animals play incredibly important role in family life, often they are their equal members. The reason for that is the way their role is defined by people. Yet, this role can adopt different forms. There are three basic functions performed by domestic animals: the function facilitating the projection of ego, social function and substitutive function². In case of the function mentioned first

„an animal serves as a symbolic object, which somehow exists as an external extension of human ego. Social function refers to the facilitation of interpersonal relations within a family. Substitutive function consists in replacing partners in relationships with animals, which ‘normally’ would take place only among people”³.

It seems that in case of dogs, social and substitutive functions are becoming especially important. Dogs are increasingly substituting for absent or non-existent partners, becoming surrogate friends, wives, husbands or children. They are attracting more and more attention and are treated as humans. For many owners, they are becoming silent witnesses of everyday problems and triumphs. However, what seems to be the most relevant in this kind of relationships is the fact that dog never judges the owner, accepts them despite their flaws, puts up with their bad moods and sometimes bad treatment. Dog is becoming the best and most faithful human companion, both in case of adults and children. Increasingly, dogs do not leave their owners even for a moment, accompany them on holidays, during meetings with friends, when playing or doing sports and even while working.

A few scientific works from the fields of sociology and psychology has been dedicated to human-dog relationships. In the introduction to their research, Michael Dotson and Eva Hyatt indicate a few the most interesting ones. For example, Fox:

„reports four categories of such relationships: object-oriented (with the dog as possession), utilitarian/exploitative (with the dog providing benefits to the human), need-dependency (with the dog as companion or child surrogate), and actualizing (with the dog as a respected significant other). He goes on to report the scientific evidence that dogs have emotions like fear, pain, jealousy, anxiety, guilt, joy, depression, and anger and that the brain centers for such states are

¹ E. Hyams, *Zwierzęta w służbie człowieka*, Warszawa 1974, pp. 7-8.

² K. Konecki, *Ludzie i ich zwierzęta. Interakcjonistyczno-symboliczna analiza społecznego świata właścicieli zwierząt domowych*, Warszawa 2005, p. 11.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

virtually identical in human and dog”⁴.

In turn, Hirschman writes:

„suggests six reasons for pet ownership: 1. animals as objects in the consumer's environment representing an extension of the owner, 2. animals as ornaments wherein the animal is kept for its aesthetic value, 3. animals as status symbols, 4. animals as avocations, such as those individuals who exhibit or show their pets, 5. animals as equipment whose use facilitates performance of other functions, such as the use of animals as protectors, guides, search and rescue animals, and therapy animals, 6. animals as people, the most common reason, where the animal has the role of companion, friend, family member, sibling, or child Hirschman goes on to explain the nature of animals as companions. Through depth interviews of pet owners, she describes how pets are seen as friends, family members, and extensions of self”⁵.

Pedigree dogs are getting more and more popular in Poland and along with this trend the interest in dog shows, organized by the Polish Kennel Club is increasing. For many owners, dog shows are becoming an important element of their life as well as a form of spending free time. Thanks to them, they not only have a nice hobby but also meet other dog fans, expand their social circle and form their small communities.

The aim of this article is the analysis and presentation of a small fragment of the social world of dog owners, which dog shows undoubtedly are. The text was based mainly on the qualitative analysis of statements, published on two purposefully selected, specialised internet forums, dedicated to pedigree dogs' owners. The article has no ambition to be a comprehensive study. It is rather a short sociological sketch, referring to the following two, selected forums: Dogomania (eng. Dogmania), which is the biggest one in Poland and Forum Właścicieli i Miłośników Owczarków Staroangielskich (eng. the Forum of Old English Sheepdog Owners and Enthusiasts), which is the smallest of its kind in Poland.

The career of the pet dog in short

There are many theories explaining the origin of domestic dog. Facts, collected so far, indicate that the first primogenitors of present pet dogs occurred about 60 million years ago. Yet, it is still problematic when and where the domestication of dogs took place for the first time. Some scientists claim that the process of their domestication first occurred in the Middle East at least 10 000, if not 35 000 years ago. The oldest dogs' remains, found in the territory of present Poland, are more than 5000 years old⁶.

⁴ M. J. Dotson, E. M. Hyatt, *Understanding dog – human companionship*, „Journal of Business Research”, vol. 61(5) z 2008, p. 458.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 459.

⁶ D. Forelle, M. Szuszkiewiczowa, *Psia Droga*, Warszawa 1976, p. 15.

What seems interesting are theories, referring to the way the domestication of dogs occurred. Some specialists claim that people started throwing pieces of meat to dogs, which were approaching their campfires. Later, humans discovered that dogs can provide a valuable aid in hunting and when it comes to security. Others think that people began the process of dogs` domestication by taking puppies from their lairs⁷. Konrad Lorenz was an adherent of both theories. In one of the most beautiful books, dedicated to dog-human relations titled 'Man meets Dog', he tries to shed some light on the reasons, why the man has domesticated the dog⁸. Regardless to which theory we are going to accept as accurate, what seems relevant is that the basic reason for the domestication of dogs, was the fact that it was mutually beneficial for both sides. The man gained an aid in hunting and protection and the dog free food and shelter.

For a long time, animals were fulfilling exclusively utilitarian function. Thorsten Veblen wrote that animals 'are of nature of productive goods and serve a useful, often a lucrative end; therefore, beauty is not readily imputed to them'⁹. However, at some point, the dog ceased to be treated solely as a utilitarian object. It became a synonym of prestige and social status. It owed its position mainly to its traits of character. Most people emphasize its positive characteristics such as the attachment to its owner, loyalty and intelligence. The dog was and is treated as a friend and companion of the man. At this point, it is worth drawing attention to numerous examples of dog`s faithfulness and dog-man friendship, which can be found in the works of literature, throughout the centuries and even millennia. We should mention Argos, Odysseus`s dog, described in the Iliad by Homer, dogs depicted in Jack London`s¹⁰ or James Oliver Curwood`s¹¹ books. Other examples worth mentioning are Lessie from Knight`s books or the hound of the Baskervilles as well as hilarious adventures of the good soldier Schweik`s dogs or 'Dashenka, the life of a puppy' by Karel Capek. There is no shortage of wonderful canine characters in Polish literature as well. We can list a few here. There is Saba, a dog crossing African hinterland with Staś and Nel in Henryk Sienkiewicz`s famous novel 'In Desert and Wilderness', Ira, Rzecki`s dog from Bolesław Prus`s 'the Doll', Lombo, an incredible dog, which was travelling by train and finally Ferdinand the Magnificent, a dog depicted by Ludwig Jerzy Kern.

⁷ J. Palmer, *Psy rasowe*, Warszawa 1995, p. 9.

⁸ K. Lorenz, *Man Meets Dog*, New York 2002, pp. 2-6.

⁹ T. Veblen *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York 2016, p. 84.

¹⁰ Among others, it is worth mentioning 'The Call of the Wild' or 'White Fang'.

¹¹ Books such as 'Baree, son of Kazan' or 'Kazan' are surely an important part of the memory of many generations of young readers all over the world.

Veblen writes:

„The meaning of this is that the dog is man's servant and that he has the gift of an unquestioning subservience and a slave's quickness in guessing his master's mood. Coupled with these traits, which fit him well for the relation of status—and which must for the present purpose be set down as serviceable traits—the dog has some characteristics which are of a more equivocal aesthetic value. He is the filthiest of the domestic animals in his person and the nastiest in his habits. For this he makes up is a servile, fawning attitude towards his master, and a readiness to inflict damage and discomfort on all else. The dog, then, commends himself to our favor by affording play to our propensity for mastery, and as he is also an item of expense, and commonly serves no industrial purpose, he holds a well-assured place in men's regard as a thing of good repute”¹².

Unusual position of dogs among domestic animals resulted in the fact, that people began paying attention not only to their traits of character but also to their external appearance. Suddenly, dog's beauty has become one of the most important factors, determining its choice. Breeds of dogs started to be created, taking into account particular qualities. Initially, attention was paid mostly to physical traits, later it was focused on outward appearance.

Bruce Fogle writes that people like what is pretty and this rule applies not only to others of their own kind but also to animals, which they own¹³. While creating breeds and paying too much attention to external appearance of dogs, people often forgot that desired outward traits can in fact, in a significant degree, handicap them by influencing their health and even contribute to numerous genetically based diseases. The problem is that the popularity of particular breeds comes from their increasingly strange appearance. The weirder and rarer breed an owner can display, the greater his prestige becomes.

Along with the creation of ever newer breeds, the first dog shows occurred. Initially, they were relatively small and existed rather as an additional part of agricultural shows, where animals such as cows or sheep were displayed or they were carried out as an event with a completely different purpose than contemporary dog shows. It was the case with the very first pedigree dog show, which took place in London on May 30, 1850. It was a small social affair, which was organized as a charity event¹⁴. Yet, it was such a success that next year, another dog show was organized and in the same time, the first kennel association was established. Very quickly, competing clubs, grouping canine enthusiasts, were set up, all of them with the aim of organizing dog shows.

In Poland, first shows took place a little bit later. It is agreed that the first dog show in Poland was organized by Central Economic Association in Gostyń in

¹² T. Veblen, *The Theory...*, op. cit., p. 84.

¹³ B. Fogle, *Sekretne życie właścicieli psów*, Warszawa 1997, p. 36.

¹⁴ Compare with Sayer A., *Wszystko o psie*, Wydawnictwo Ars Polonia, Warszawa 1993, p. 15.

1862¹⁵. In 1902, the first Dog Show in Warsaw took place¹⁶ and the Polish Kennel Club, which grouped breeders, owners and enthusiasts of pedigree dogs was established in 1938. Lubomir Smyczyński writes that the Second World War 'completely destroyed organizational efforts of kennel specialists in Poland. All records were lost and what worse, a lot of people, specializing in cynology were killed as well as most of pedigree dogs, recorded in contemporary pedigree books'¹⁷. In 1948 the Polish Kennel Club was brought back to life and already in the same year, dog shows began to be organized again. Currently, the International Dog Show in Poznań is deemed to be the most prestigious. It takes place on the premises of famous International Trade Fair and the certificates of champion, the international champion as well as the Winner of Poland can be obtained.

Dog show craze – the analysis of selected internet forums for pedigree dogs' exhibitors

According to various estimates, there are from 6 to 8 million dogs living in Poland, including 100 000 pedigree dogs (according to Polish Kennel Club)¹⁸. A significant proportion of these dogs are ones, displayed on dog shows and they take part in such events at least once a year. Learning about the world of dog shows and exhibitors is not an easy task, due to the fact that this community is quite disperse around Poland. Therefore, internet forums for dogs' enthusiasts are becoming an interesting source of knowledge about this group. Quite a few of them have emerged in recent years. They vary, when it comes to the number of users, the frequency of visits, places, where they appear on the internet¹⁹ as well as, when it comes to discussed subjects. We have analyzed posts, published on two forums, dedicated to dogs: Dogmania and the Forum of Old English Sheepdog Owners and Enthusiasts. Our choice was not random. Dogmania is the biggest Polish-language forum, dedicated to canine subject area and has 203 297 users. Currently, the forum has its fan page on Facebook and most of the debate has been moved there. The Forum of Old English Sheepdog Owners and

¹⁵ D. Forelle, M. Szuszkiewiczowa, *Psia...*, op. cit., p.224.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 219.

¹⁷ L. Smyczyński, *Psy, rasy i wychowanie*, Warszawa 1981, p. 20.

¹⁸ It is worth mentioning that the proportion between pedigree dogs and non-pedigree ones sets Poland significantly apart from the countries of Western Europe. For example, 90% of all dogs in Scandinavian countries are pedigree dogs and in remaining countries of the European Union, this proportion oscillates between 50% to 60%.

¹⁹ Some forums are an integral part of specialised websites, dedicated to breeding of domestic animals, pedigree dogs or particular breeds. Sometimes, they exist as a supplement to magazines, dedicated to dogs and their breeding.

Enthusiasts has been chosen because of its specific character. It is a forum, dedicated to a particular breed (Old English Sheepdog) and a significant number of users know one another not only from the internet but also in so called real world. Many of them have more than one dog of this breed, they know one another because their pets come from the same breeding farm or through crossing of their dogs. The number of users is far smaller, there are only 161 of them. Nevertheless, taking into account the fact that the number of Old English Sheepdogs has been stable for some time (about 300 animals), the forum users' statements can be accepted as representative to this group of dogs' owners. In view of a significant amount of material, presented on the forums as well as the main aim of the article, we focused exclusively on statements, linked with pedigree dog shows and their specific character.

All dog forums are constructed in a similar way, therefore, if you know one of them, it is easy to use others. The list of subjects, which occur on each of them is identical. Usually, such forum consists of parts, dedicated to dogs, breeding, legal issues, dogs' image in media and canine accessories. Another part concentrates on health and beauty (in this place, one can find veterinary advice, addresses of good veterinary clinics, advice on nutrition, information on canine cosmetics and advice on dog beauty care). An important part of a forum is the one dedicated to canine sports and work, where one can mostly find information, referring to dogs' trainings, including recently fashionable trainings of agility²⁰, flyball²¹, dog frisbee²² or obedience²³. There is also a place, where one can discuss particular breeds and this one is divided into sub-parts, where each is dedicated to a given dog show group. It is worth emphasizing that in this part there are more and more elements dedicated to mongrels and breeds, which are not accepted by the World Canine Organization. Finally, there is a part, dedicated to dog shows, which due to the subject matter of this article will be the most interesting for us.

For an outside observer, dog shows can seem an especially odd way to spend one's free time. An exhibitor sometimes has to cover many kilometers to get to a dog show and once at the place they must wait for their turn for a long time. The determination to run around a ring only to get a paper certificate or at best the prove of real recognition - a medal and a cup, can be completely incomprehensible. The world of dog shows can seem not entirely understandable

²⁰ The most popular dog sport. A dog, accompanied by its guide, has to clear an obstacle course. Obstacles must be overcome in a specified order, flawlessly and of course as quickly as possible.

²¹ Another dog sport, consisting in clearing an obstacle course towards a machine, which, after being pressed by dog's paw or the whole body, throws a ball. Subsequently, a dog has to run back to its owner as quickly as possible.

²² A dog sport, with a few sub-disciplines, where the most important part consists of throwing a special disk to a dog by its owner.

²³ A dog sport, called obedience, is based on a very good contact between a dog and its owner. Learning process is based on the principle of positive reinforcement.

not only to casual forum`s visitors but also to beginners among exhibitors. On the Dogmania forum in the section 'Dog shows', one can find a tread called 'Dog shows – what is it all about?'. Its author writes:

„Hi. I don` t know if it is a right section and I also haven` t seen this topic being mentioned. I have already read about it all on other websites but it was incomprehensible for me. I know absolutely nothing about dog shows. I mean, I visited an international dog show in Białystok as a spectator, so I know how it is carried out and what one should do but I have no clue about formal stuff. For example, I don` t know to which group I should enroll my Wader (he is 7.5 months old) or if I can 'walk' him in a few categories. Can someone from the forum exhibit him for me? Could it be done for free and if not, how much would it cost? I think it is high time to enroll him on some dog show, so which one do you recommend, only national or also international? Give me some kind of dog show manual, please”²⁴.

The topic provoked a lively discussion among users. Many emphasized that they have gained their dog show experience, using trial and error method, they learned on their own, how to run their dogs in the ring or how to position them.

Beginners ask about almost everything. The following post is a good example of this:

„Hallo! I want to raise an issue of the process of a dog show. I have exhibited my dog Fado (a border collie, 13 months old) for a short while. I would like to ask how the process of a dog show looks like. I know how a dog is assessed but in what order. What categories go first? How can you get Youth Champion Certificate? How can you get Exceptionally Promising Certificate? If I get the first position and excellent assessment as well as Youth Champion, then what comes next? I know basic Dog show`s abbreviations. Second issue I would like to bring up is about Junior Handling. How can I get there and how to enroll?”²⁵.

Numerous questions about the following issues have also appeared: things, worth taking on a dog show, what can cause dog`s disqualification and dog`s behavior both in the ring and outside of it. Naturally, the questions were not left unanswered. The people, who have just begun their adventure with dog shows got a lot of advice. It is worth quoting two the most typical answers by two 'veterans' of dogs` rings. The first of them wrote:

„For the start, you can choose these dog shows which are close to your place and later get up steam. When it comes to exhibiting, don` t worry, I am still stressed. At least, I am glad that showing my dog I can work on my stress problem. For example, Talaga takes Persen to calm down. At least that`s what I have read on Dogo”²⁶.

Talaga, mentioned in the post above, gave the following advice:

„I think that you can always find someone, who will help you with pleasure 😊. It is true that I was taking Persen because I was totally stressed out before dog shows in the past 😞. Now, there is a lot of adrenaline 😲 but this is precisely what get me going in this dog show game 😊.

²⁴ <https://www.dogomania.com/forum/topic/29613-wystawy-o-co-w-tym-wszystkim-chodzi>, (1.10.2018).

²⁵ <https://www.dogomania.com/forum/topic/340501-przebieg-wystawy>, (1.10.2018).

²⁶ <http://www.dogomania.pl/threads/128266-Wystawy-o-co-w-tym-wszystkim-chodzi>, (1.10.2018).

I can tell you with all confidence – it is addictive! (...) The question whether a dog show should be close or not depends solely on your attitude to traveling 😊. When I was beginning my adventure with dog shows, I was traveling 300 kilometers to exhibit my puppy. In youth category, I was on all CACIB dog shows in Poland 😊 (almost – I wasn't in Szczecin 😊). The more shows, the better you and your dog are prepared for the following ones. Therefore, I follow the rule – the more, the better 😊. I guess that you don't know much about the jurors, so this we will leave for later. I will tell you one thing now – it is worth checking a lot of jurors. Finally, ask as many questions as possible – it is worth it!"²⁷

As it can be seen, dog shows involve not only significant expenses and long journeys but also a high level of stress. One user wrote:

„It's normal. I didn't sleep all night before my first show and before my first European show I hadn't been eating anything since the evening before the show. Generally, in the morning, I am so absent-minded that I forget half of things. Not long ago, I almost went without the health record book and the number”²⁸.

These posts can seem quite funny, especially if one takes into account the fact that those are adult people, who simply participate in a dog beauty contest. Nevertheless, emotions accompanying exhibiting a dog, often referred as performance by the users, are really strong. Each victory, medal or title, acquired by a dog is followed by a long celebration. Equally, each failure or defeat is analyzed and discussed for a long time. One can have an impression, that exhibiting dogs has become for their owners not merely the form of amusement but a serious form of self-realization and an important life ambition.

When an inexperienced dog owner gets to a dog show and manages to present it in the ring, the question about the criteria of assessment will naturally arise. What determines that this and not some other dog receives first place and an award and the rest have to accept the verdict, although all of them are certain that their dog is more fit to be the champion? This is the reason why the questions about the criteria of assessment of dogs are one of the most popular issues, discussed on dog forums. Most likely, it is due to a rather vague character of rules, on which the choice of the champion in a given breed is based.

This unclear character of the criteria of assessment has two major consequences. On one hand, owners start to suspect their pets of having some flaws, they have not been aware before, and on the other, the suspicion of corruption of jurors arises. At this point, it is worth quoting a statement of one of internet users, who describes a juror, assessing dogs during a dog show in Warsaw in 2018:

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ <http://www.dogomania.pl/threads/128266-Wystawy-o-co-w-tym-wszystkim-chodzi->page3 (1.10.2018).

„Mr. Schogol is a juror, who has shown what is corruption - big time. Before the show, I had received an information from a very reliable source, which dogs were going to win and it proved to be 100% correct. Dogs from a Russian breeding farm, with a Georgian co-owner, won. He didn't even bother assess dogs from the open category because there were no his favorites among them. No dog got an excellent assessment. He simply didn't give a f... excuse my French. The insolence and corruption of this juror was unbelievable. I was showing to my friends, which dogs would be winners, one category after another. I will never again participate in a show, where this juror will be working. The Polish Kennel Club should never again invite this businessman, who destroys real sport competition”²⁹.

Talking about the corruption of jurors, internet users were drawing attention to the unequal treatment of professional dog breeders and amateur owners. Erving Goffman observes:

„If important secrets of an event are reviled in the backroom and if some people, responsible for carrying out an event, behave inappropriately, therefore, it is natural that this place is inaccessible for the public and perhaps they do not even know about it”³⁰.

This way, ring becomes a stage, where owners present their dogs and where jurors and their assistants work, whereas the backroom is juror's desk, where real decisions are made. This lack of transparency is often the reason, why so many exhibitors become disenchanted.

Participating in dog shows gives an opportunity to meet new people. Friendships sometime start already on the way to a show. Because exhibiting dogs is a quite expensive way to spend one's free time³¹, participants often try to limit expenses by travelling together. It applies not only to national shows but also to international ones.

The owners of pedigree dogs often set up a dog show schedule for their pets even as early as in the very beginning of a given year. The choice of particular shows depends mainly on owner's ambition but also on the breed farm a dog comes from, how successful are its parents, an agreement between an owner and a breeder, as well as on how insistent and supportive is a breeder. Such schedule sometimes consists of merely a few shows nearby owner's place but record-holders are busy with shows almost every weekend of a year. According to Dogomania Forum, its users most often choose dog shows in the following countries: Germany, Austria, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, Belarus and Romania. It is worth noting that Polish exhibitors increasingly go to dog shows in Western Europe. Additionally, they more and more often choose prestigious shows such Cruft Dog Show (in 2018, Poles enrolled 117 dogs

²⁹ <https://www.dogomania.com/forum/topic/87788-george-schogol-gruzja/?tab=comments#comment-17267831> (1.11.2018).

³⁰ E. Goffman, *Człowiek w teatrze dnia codziennego*, Warszawa 1981, p. 165.

³¹ In Poland, the average cost of enrolling a dog to a show oscillates between 60 to 150 Polish zlotys. Additionally, the cost of commuting and money for necessary things, needed for dog's preparation (special shampoos, conditioners, pounders etc.) must be added.

on this show and some of them were quite successful, competing with dogs from practically all over the world³²). In those cases, exhibitors from one city organize a journey together, using their own cars or renting a bigger car, which takes them, their dogs and necessary luggage, safely to a destination. Those travels to more distant locations are also connected with the search for accommodation and the organization of evening meetings.

Reading posts on dog forums, one can have an impression that these are communities, where friendship and amicable relations among all users are fundamental values. Nothing can be further from the truth. This nice atmosphere disappears immediately, when somebody dares to express an opinion about dog shows and exhibiting dogs, which differs even slightly from views, held by the most active users. Good example of this phenomenon are two conflicts, which occurred on the Forum of Old English Sheepdog Owners and Enthusiasts. In both cases, conflict began after presenting an advert, posted on Allegro. In the first situation, one of the users came across an advert, where somebody wanted to sell a five-years old bitch. The internet auction made her suspicious, therefore she placed an information on the forum, asking if somebody could check whether the dog is not stolen. The reaction was immediate and it turned out that dog's owners 'are looking for a new home for her. Unfortunately, due to personal reasons (relocation), they cannot keep the dog so that they are looking for anybody who would be ready to take an adult bob-tail bitch and look after her.'³³

The explanation did not finish the controversy. Comments, referring to this way of getting rid of a dog, occurred. The majority of users were of the opinion that a dog should never be given away but if it nonetheless comes to this, it ought not to be done on internet portals and one should never ask for money for a dog. A good example of this way of reasoning is the following statement by one of the users:

„But for God's sake, do not sell a living creature on the bazaar, Allegro or any other internet auctions. It is forbidden everywhere in the world. Poland is the sole infamous exception. We have worked very hard to introduce this kind of regulation in our Union's rule book. I am also looking for a new home for a one-year old bitch (some of you know, who I am talking about) and it wouldn't even cross my mind to start an auction on the internet"³⁴.

Eventually, the bitch had found new owners, who joined the forum and provoked another conflict with their post. The controversy was caused by the following statement, referring to a dog, previously owned by them:

'From the very beginning, we assumed that she was a member of our family, and she really was! For that reason, you didn't meet us on any dog shows, because we didn't want to drive her for

³² Supronowicz, *Crufts Dog Show*, [in:] *Pies*, no. 02/370/2018, p. 43.

³³ <http://www.bobtaile.fora.pl/mam-juz-nowy-dom,62/allegro,277.html>, (1.11.2018).

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

hours in a car as well as make her stressed and tired for our own vainglory. Most likely, my opinions are too orthodox but I deal with environment protection professionally so I do know something about animals and simply this is what I think about it. Naturally, we often went away together, but exclusively to share common fun, pleasure and relaxation³⁵.

Answers were sent almost immediately, after all, the post by the new owner referred to the very popular issue of exhibiting dogs and was directed explicitly to people who relish showing off their dogs:

„For many dogs, participating in shows is not an ordeal at all. On the contrary, they have a lot of fun with it. Some of them really enjoy being in the ring, it is clearly visible. It is enough to see them in action. Additionally, they can meet other dogs and have some fun together after the show. Another thing is that without shows you couldn't have a pedigree dog but only a mere mongrel. In order to obtain the title of breed bitch and reproductive dog, the animals have to participate in at least a few shows, where they can be professionally assessed, whether they fulfil certain requirements or not. For example, they can't have any genetical defects or be of mixed blood, because in this case dog's appearance and character will be questionable. Dog shows have their purpose and I am surprised that you as a person, who has owned more than one pedigree dog accuses breeders of such things. Without the shows, you couldn't obtain your desired dog because this dog wouldn't be born at all. It is sometimes better to refrain from commenting on issues, about which one has no idea. Fine, not everyone likes going to dog shows and it is not obligatory, one can just keep a dog at home and love it there, but it doesn't mean that the world of exhibitors and shows has to be principally criticized and totally negated”³⁶.

Another forum's user had a different opinion:

„I would never dare to come up with a claim that dogs like shows. In my opinion, they like to make us satisfied, therefore when we are happy with all these titles, medals, ribbons, cups and other nonsense, so do they. Nobody 'totally negates all world of exhibitors and shows and the line 'we have never met on a dog show' is a simple statement of the fact and the form of explanation, not a reproach. I will repeat this once again – I am very happy that Dalia has ended up with such normal, cool and above all sensible owners”³⁷.

The argument, instead of ending, escalated and in the end, it had to be cut short by forum's moderator, due to the fact that the dog show apologist began referring not only to the discussed issue but also attacking her adversaries personally. Her reaction was so emotionally charged that one could get an impression that while defending dog shows and exhibitors, she was really defending her lifestyle and her whole value system.

The second argument was provoked by an internet user, searching for information about Old English Sheepdog, before purchasing one of them. Some of the forum users considered her questions (deemed by her as important) as excessively ignorant. In their opinion, this fact proved that she knows nothing

³⁵ Ibidem.

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Ibidem.

about dogs and that she rather should not own one and certainly she ought not to have an Old English Sheepdog. Additionally, some users assumed that the person, who had asked such questions, had created for herself a completely unrealistic image of an ideal dog. Moreover, a significant part of discussion was focused on the question whether Old English Sheepdog has hair or pelage and how many times a week, it has to be brushed.

The fact that the world of dog show exhibitors is a very peculiar one is confirmed by the posts, referring to the process of preparing a dog to a show (it increasingly goes by name of grooming on dog forums). It is enough to look at dog beauties during shows to realize that a perfect preparation for a show is rather time-consuming, but an outsider has no idea how much time a beauty treatment before a show can take. Posts, published on the Forum of Old English Sheepdog Owners and Enthusiasts, shed some light on this issue³⁸. One of the users, as an answer to a previous post, writes:

Do washing and drying take you mere 4 hours? How can you manage to do it? It always took me about 8 hours. It is a bit better in summer because you can leave some parts somewhat half-dried. When my spine was still fine, combing alone took me 3-4 hours. It took me only those 3-4 hours because I did it every week (these days it happens less frequently), therefore, it was never tangled before a bath so that braking tufts didn't take additional time. I have blisters on my hands to this day. I had never learned to hold brush the way they weren't forming³⁹.

Another user adds:

„There is something in this that you can't talk about a specified, stable amount of time needed to wash and comb an Old English Sheepdog. When Onulek had big pelage, it took me more less 4 hours. It was the same story with 9-month old Kokolinek. Now, it takes me 6 hours (before his hair was cut). I have no clue how much would the whole thing take, meaning bath + drying + combing + trimming +cutting + cutting pelage from paws and other strategic places + washing ears + brushing teeth. I would never dare to do it all at once because it would probably kill me. Koko would equally hate it.”⁴⁰.

As it can be seen, exhibiting a dog is hard work. In some cases, it can be assumed that dogs and exhibiting them on dog shows become a way of life for their owners. Most likely, it is the case for people, who are only successful as dog owners or if it is their only meaningful occupation in life. In this case, going from one show to another or spending long hours on combing a dog become something entirely normal, especially when such efforts and sacrifices are justified and confirmed by titles and awards, brought back from the shows.

³⁸ Assessing the time, dedicated to the preparation of such dog for a show, one has to take into account the fact that this breed has an exceptionally lavish pelage, which is additionally subjected to numerous cosmetic treatments before a show.

³⁹ <http://www.bobtaile.fora.pl/ogolnie,54/klaki-i-filce,207.html>, (1.11.2018).

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

Closing reflections

Pedigree dogs` owners and their pets form a separate world, based on specific norms and values, not entirely comprehensible for outsiders. While analyzing statements, posted on dog internet forums, it is easy to find out that for the majority of the users, exhibiting dogs is not mere play but a way of life. Not only that, this way of life, which gives an owner of a dog the feeling of importance, also provides with company of other people and allows to fulfil their ambitions. A dog, displayed on a show, as it was described by Thorsten Veblen in 'The Theory of the Leisure Class', is becoming an indicator of its owner`s social status and prestige. Thanks to this, they can make their name among other dog enthusiasts. Moreover, due to dog show experience, they become relevant in their own eyes, as well as in the perception of others.

Writing about dog shows, it is also worth drawing attention to a purely economic aspect of it. A pedigree dog, which takes part in shows consumes quite a lot of resources, especially for people in Poland. However, owning such dog can also bring a significant income, notably if it is successful. In this case, such dog can be a good form of investment and after some time can bring significant profits, especially if one has a dog of currently popular breed.

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**The Community of Dog Show Exhibitors on the Internet.
Sociological Sketch**

Summary

The article is a short sketch, dedicated to pedigree dogs` owners. It especially concentrates on a tiny fragment of their world and social activity, namely dog shows. It presents changing position of dogs in society and a role they currently play in the world of humans. We have used among others the work of Thorsten Veblen titled 'The Theory of the Leisure Class'. The text was based mainly on the qualitative analysis of statements published on two purposefully selected, specialised internet forums, dedicated to pedigree dog`s owners: Dogmania (Dogomania in Polish) the Forum of Old English Sheepdog Owners and Enthusiasts (Forum Właścicieli i Miłośników Owczarków Staroangielskich in Polish).

Keywords: the community of dog show exhibitors, the internet, internet forums, communication in the web, interpersonal relations online and offline