

PULSAR✳



The Power of the Dog (and Cat):

Mapping our evolving relationship with our pets

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Pets became an obsession in the pandemic era. Enduring lockdowns and social distancing spurred more people to look for companionship and entertainment from pets. And this has been reflected in several distinct patterns of behavior.

Within this report, we'll be exploring the 3 trends in the pet conversation:

- Pets as an anthropomorphized part of the family.
- The link between pets & individual psychological needs.
- How, amid this recontextualization, interest in healthier, 'clean' pet foods has exploded.

To do so, we analyzed **over 579,000** English-language posts made between Jan – April 2022. This data was divided between 3 distinct searches on Pulsar's **TRAC** tool, focusing on Pets in the Family, Pets and Mental Health and Health-conscious Pet food.

APPROACH

Data Collection Period:

Dec 14th 2021 – Apr 27th 2023

Channels:

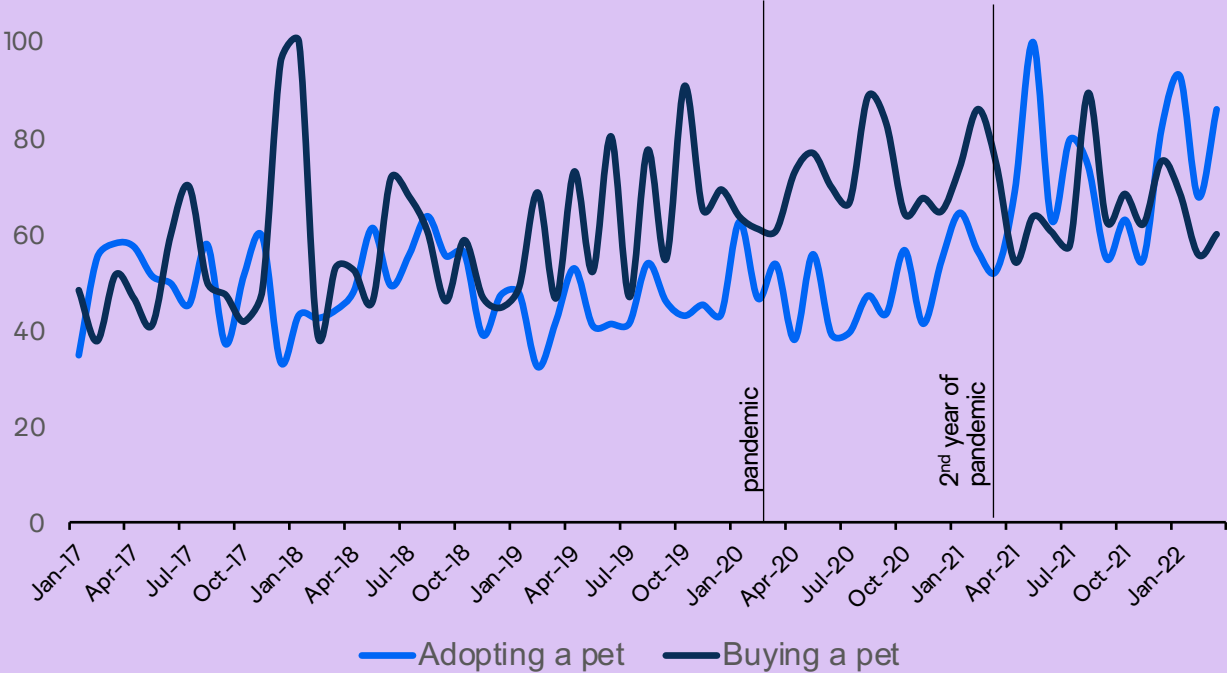
- | | | |
|-------------|------------------|-----------------|
| • Twitter | • YouTube | • Expedia |
| • Reddit | • Blogs | • Naver |
| • Facebook | • Forums | • Google Search |
| • Instagram | • Online News | |
| • TikTok | • Amazon Reviews | |
| • Pinterest | • Sermo | |
| • Tumblr | • Trustpilot | |

Markets/Languages:

US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Cambodia, Brunei, Vietnam and Indonesia. Analysis in English-language

Post-pandemic rise in pet buying mentions overtaken by adoption

Despite uncertainty around health and the economy, interest in buying pets quickly rebounded several months into the pandemic, as people made the most of working from home to bed into new furred friends. This was succeeded by a growing awareness of “Adopt Don’t Shop”, as a surge of sent-back pets in following the return to workplaces became the talk of pet-lovers on social.



Mentions of Atopic Dermatitis on Twitter Jan 2010 – Sept 2022, set against Google Search interest over the same period. Source: Pulsar TRENDS and Google Trends.

Pets in the Family

Pets have come a long way since being viewed as guard dogs and vermin control. The connotations around the word 'pet' itself suggest this shift, but looking at social data suggests a further development over the past few years – the rise of the 'fur baby'.

By honing in on mentions of the word, as well as similar ones like 'dog mom' and 'cat dad', we can detect increased anthropomorphism on the part of owners. Or, in their own conception, parents.



**Fur Babies
ARE Family!**

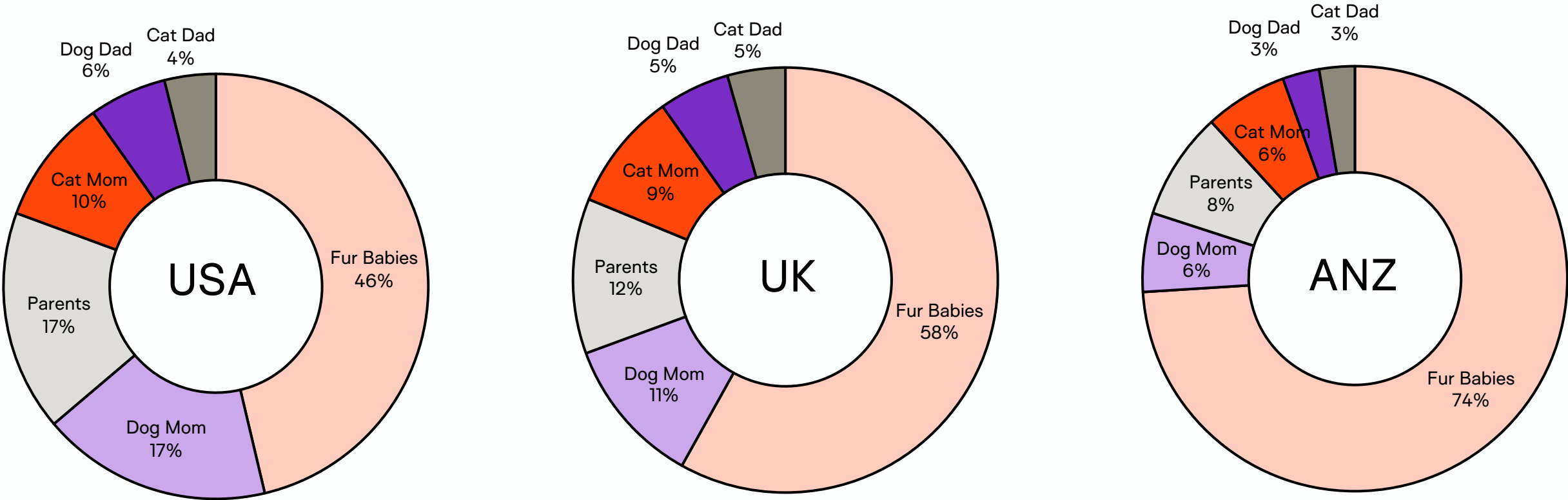
Where are the fur babies? How the language around pets differs globally

The language around pets increasingly resembles that used around children – this differs from nation to nation, however.

‘Dog Mum/Mom’, for instance, is a phrase most commonly used in the States, in all sorts of context.

We see it appear within Google Reviews of vets, in commercial posts on Instagram, and in viral memes across Pinterest.

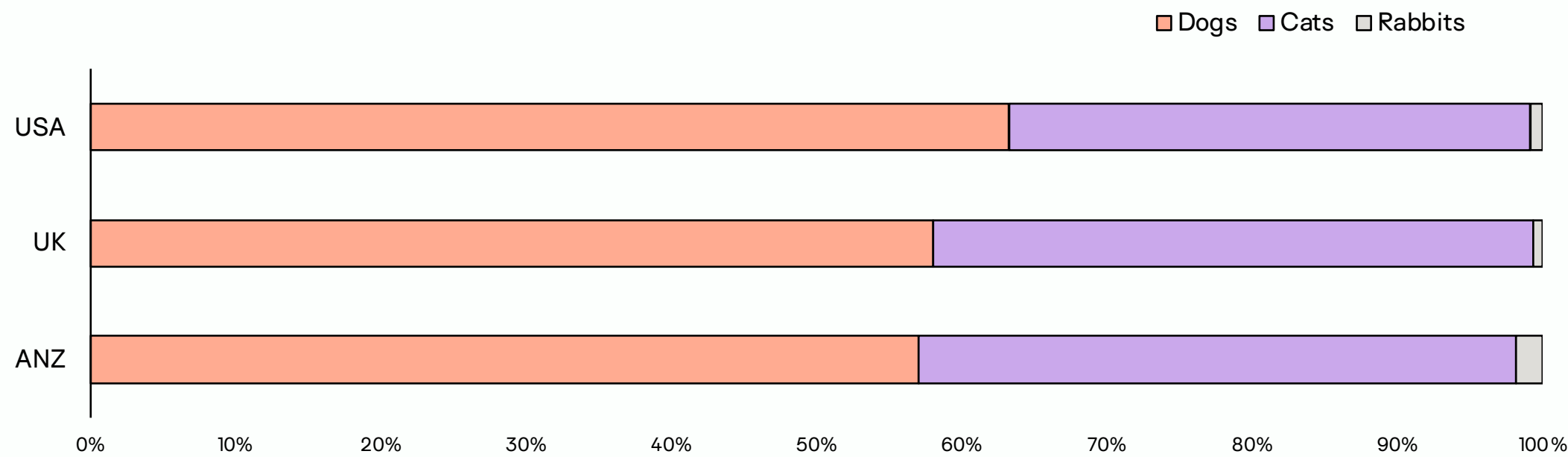
Within Australia & New Zealand, on the other hand, the conversation is far more focused on the umbrella term ‘Fur baby’, which suggests the concept has not achieved quite the same cultural penetration. Here, the most-engaged-with posts revolve around animal-themed tattoos.



What kind of pets are most identified using family words?

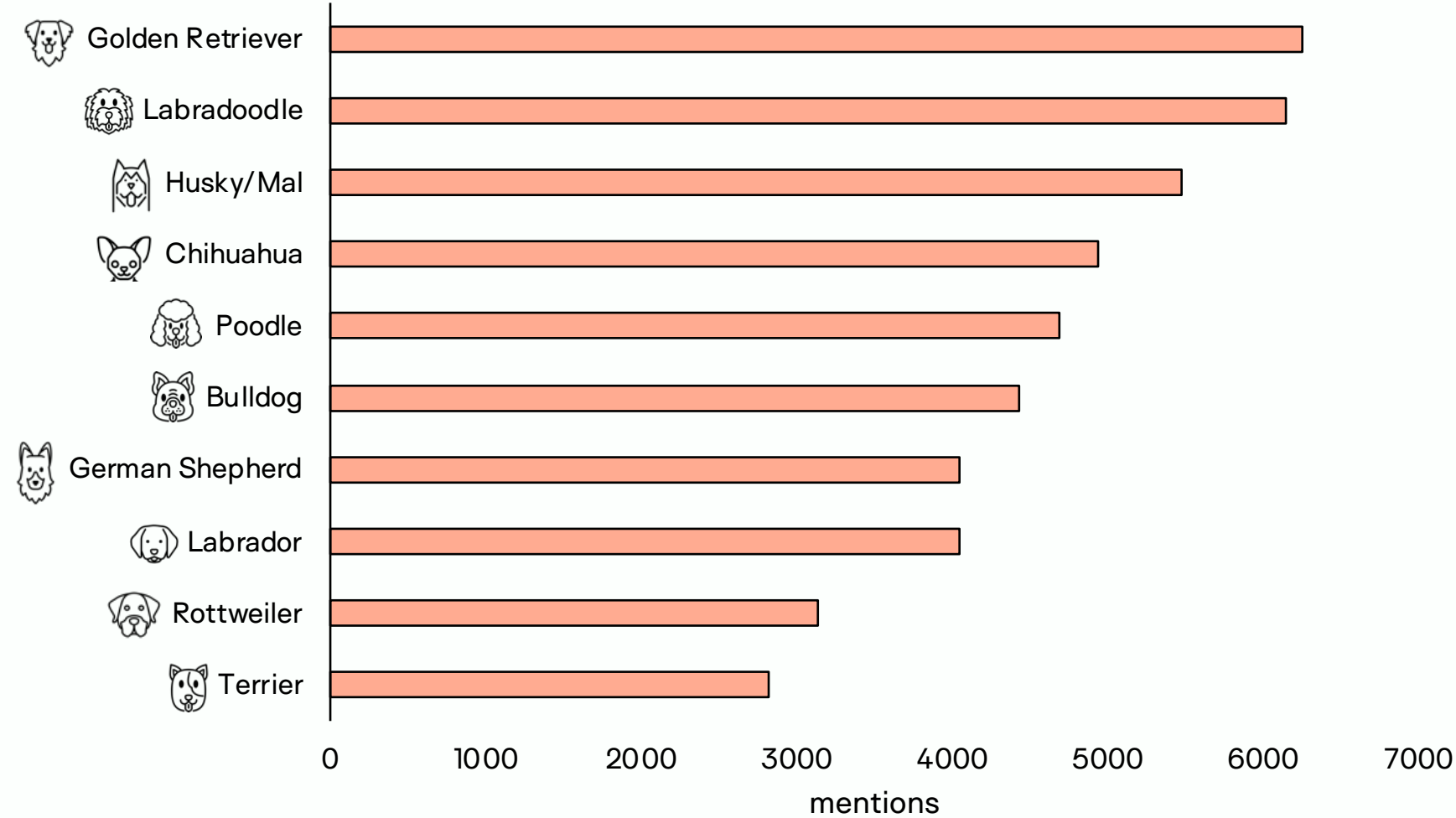
Here, the conversational splits hold up remarkably consistently across anglophone nations. Dogs are, by some distance, the pet most mentioned using baby/parent language, while many of the most-engaged posts about cats *also* incorporate dogs in some way, from reviews of pet stores to viral images of mixed-species ‘families’.

The UK emerges as a slight outlier here, with a more even split in emphasis thanks to a popular Guardian article detailing vet burnout, which touched in owner attitudes towards both cats and dogs. And an honorable mention for rabbits, too, best-represented in Australia & New Zealand in the face of overwhelming Dog-Cat dominance



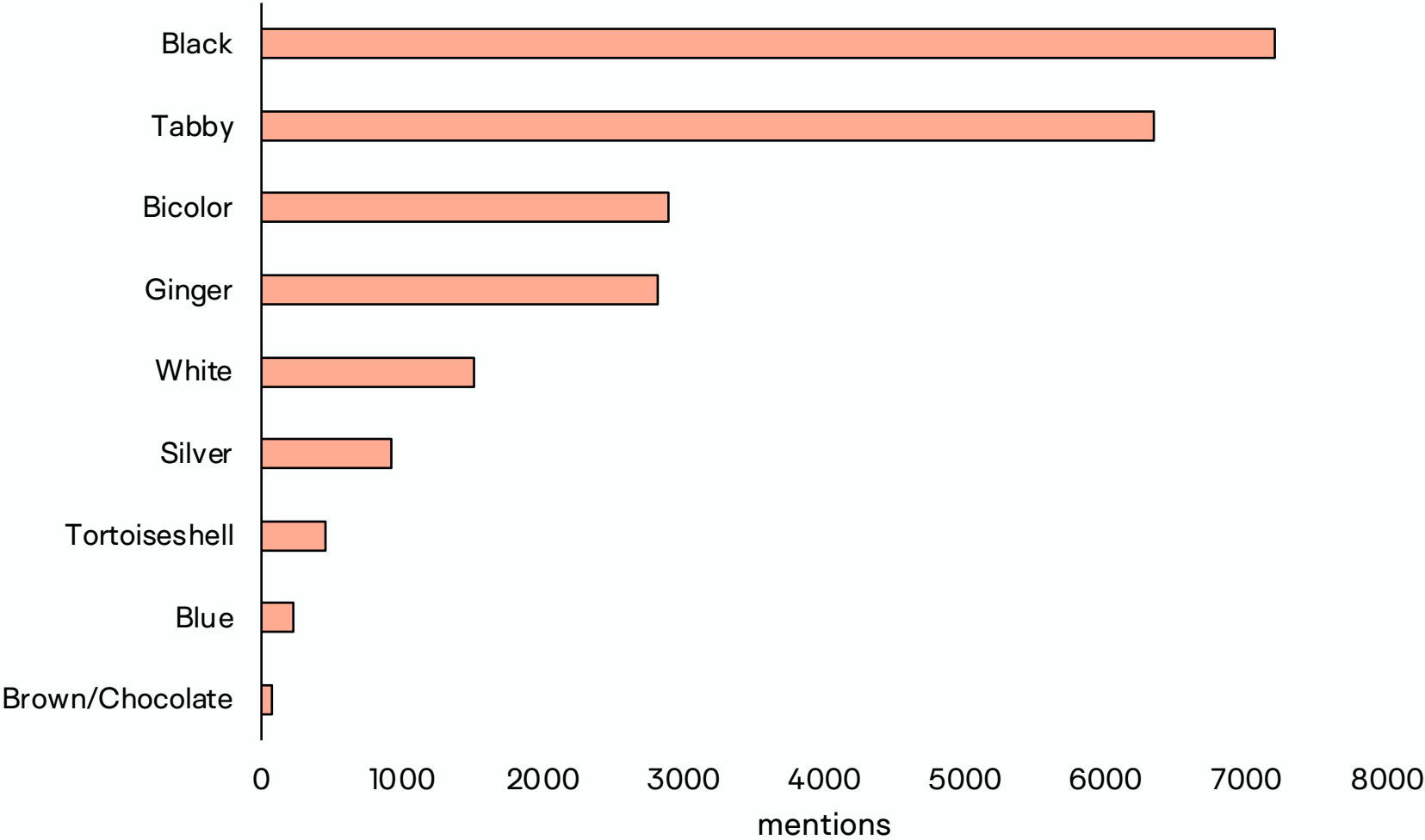
Top dogs in the Fur Baby conversation

So which dogs are most discussed using these terms? Well, as a rule of thumb, it pays to be *almost*, but not *actually*, a Labrador, with Golden Retrievers and Labradoodles emerging as the alphas. One thing that's immediately obvious from these top breeds is that a dog does not have to be small or easily portable to classify as a 'fur baby' – quite the opposite, in fact.



Feline like part of the family

Unlike dogs, cats are commonly referred to via the color of their coats. And here, to the likely consternation of the superstitious, its black cats who are most often referred to using the language of the family. In fact, defending the animals (and the ‘cat ladies’ who own them) against their common reputations is a common thread throughout this conversation, and likely a reason for the strength of language and feeling. Tabbies, meanwhile, are largely celebrated on Instagram, in a series of posts that range from posthumous tributes to memeable moments.



Pets & Mental Health

There's another way owners signify the importance of the pets – particularly over lockdowns – and that's the impact on their mental health. For many, dogs and cats became something of a lifeline when other forms of interaction were curtailed.



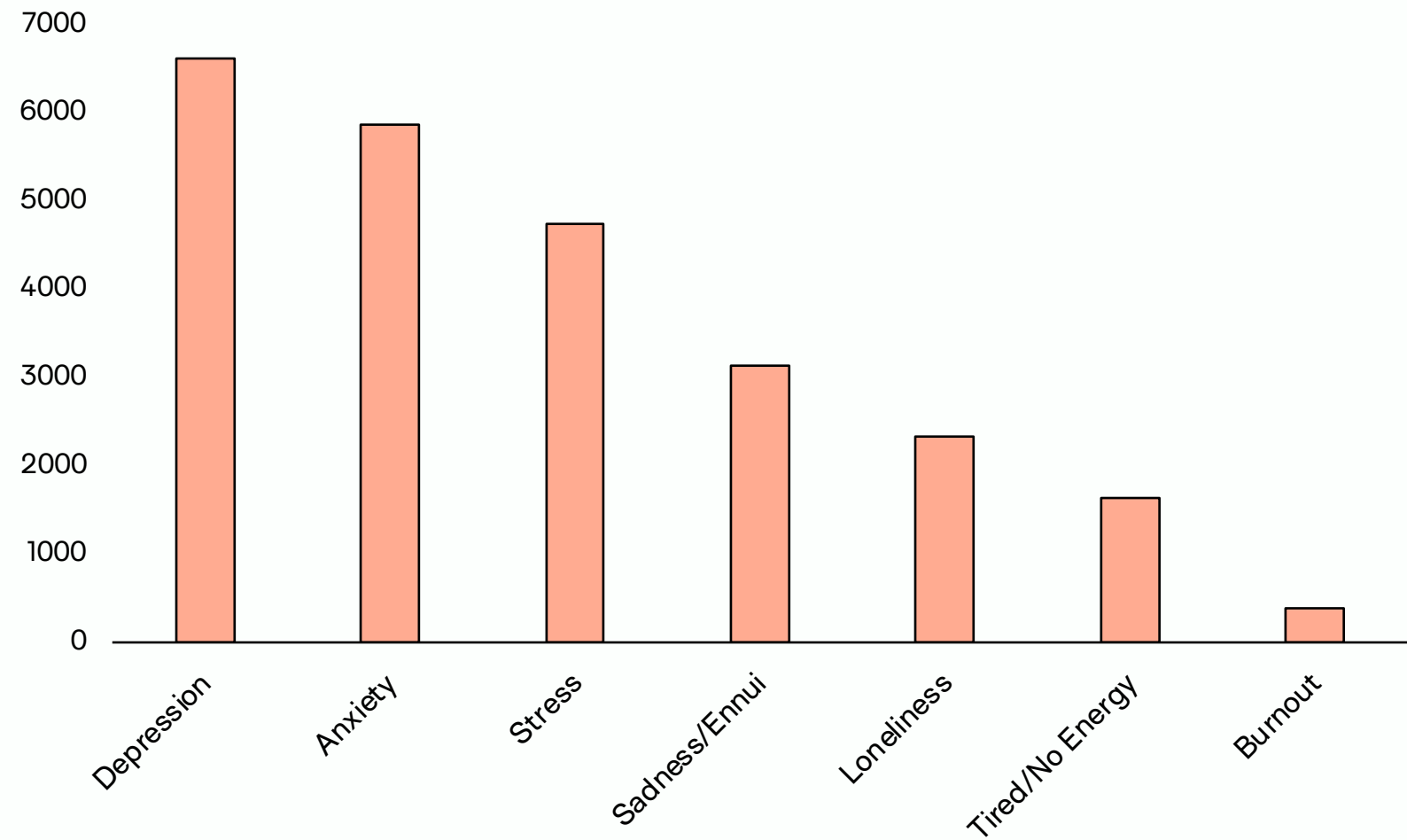
Everyone on Twitter should be required to follow at least one dog account (for mental health purposes)

The association between pets & mental health struggles

When individuals recount the positive effect pet ownership had on their state of mind, they're most likely to cite clinical conditions, such as depression and anxiety, over more generalized terms like sadness or loneliness.

While the most widely disseminated posts recurrently feature relatively light stories around emotional support animals, looking at the individual posts that make up the bulk of this conversation reveals a number of very personal stories and journeys, often recounted via anonymous means like Reddit.

These can range from weighing up the pros and cons of adopting a dog when suffering from mental health difficulties, to expressions of thanks towards the animal that helps assure and orientate the individual.

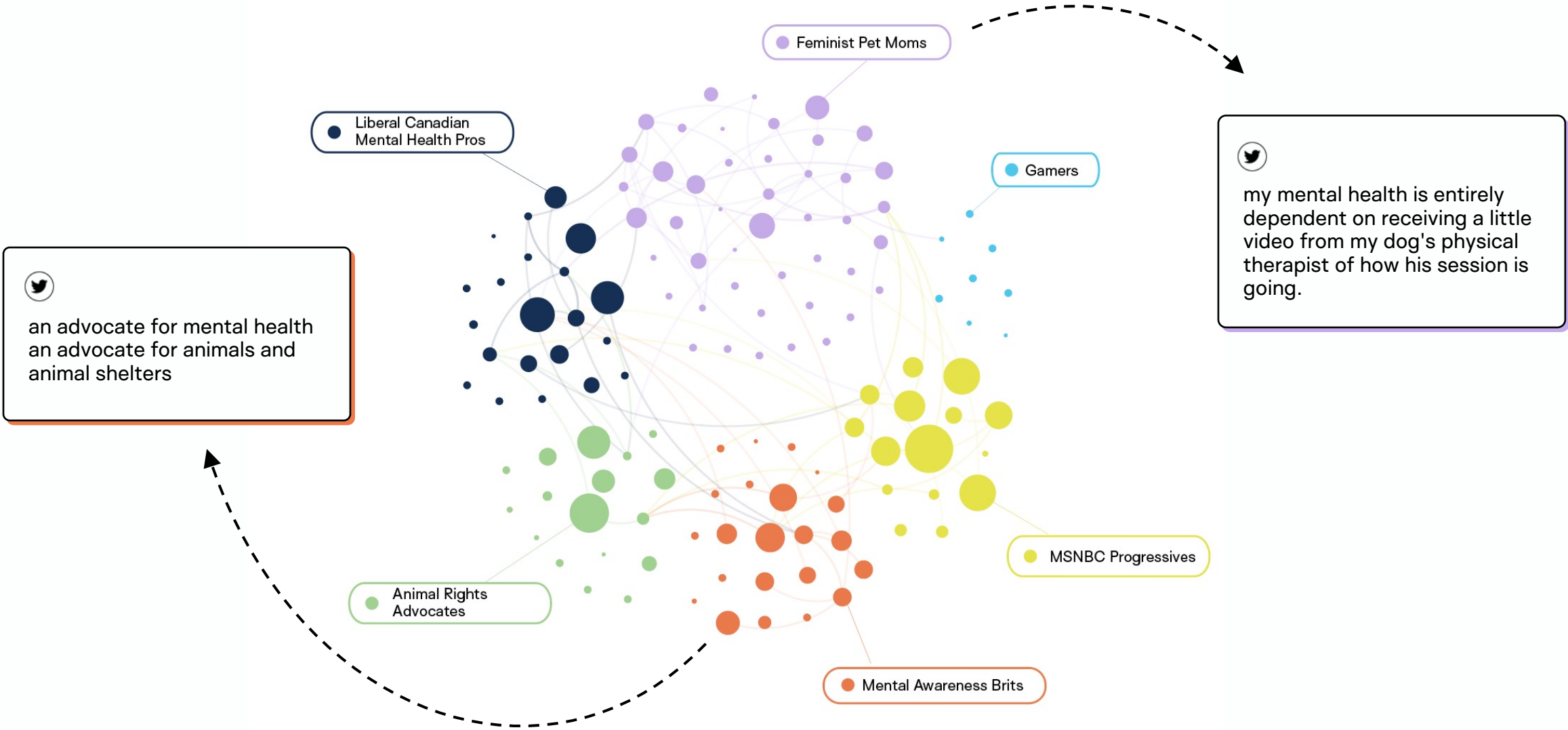


Who talks about pets in the context of mental health?

The people who talk about their pets in the context of mental health on non-anonymous platforms often do so as a means of creating support networks and bringing public attention to the invisible struggles often faced across society.

As a result, these individuals tend to follow organizations geared towards spreading awareness, whether that's Mental Health Awareness Brits engaging with Mind, or Animal Rights Advocates amplifying The Dog's Trust.

For much the same reason, the communities within this conversation tend to be quite political in nature, often aligning to either the major left-wing party within their respective nation of origin or, in the case of Feminist Pet Moms, social justice writers and activists

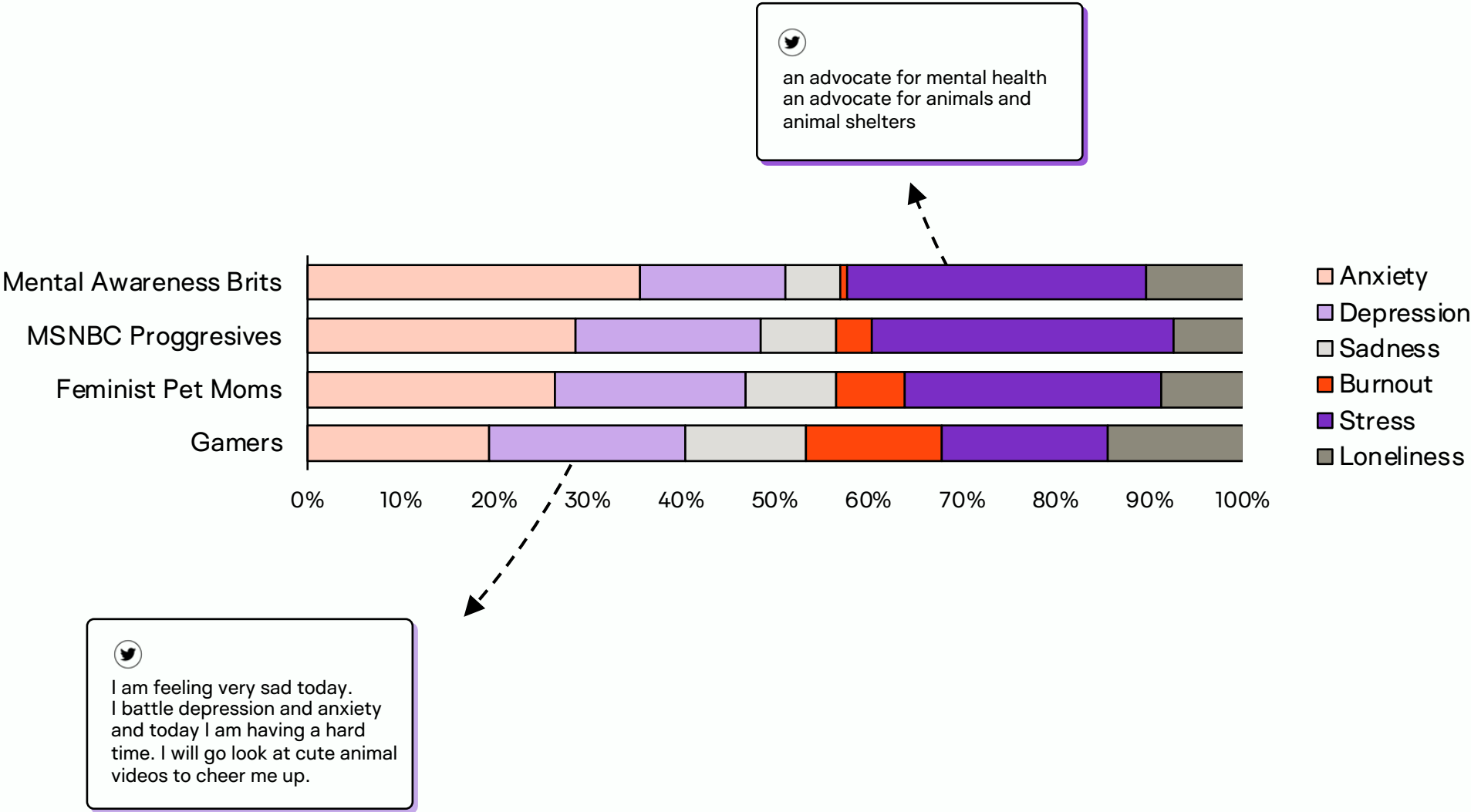


Pets help different people in different ways

The nature of the solace that different communities find in pets is heavily dependent on the behaviors, attitudes and lifestyles of those communities.

Mental Health Awareness Brits, for instance, heavily focus their conversations on anxiety and stress, while Gamers and far more likely to mention burnout.

And while many of the animals mentioned are the pets of the posters, there are also numerous instances in which videos, pictures and other media types are cited as a potential mental health aid in their own right.

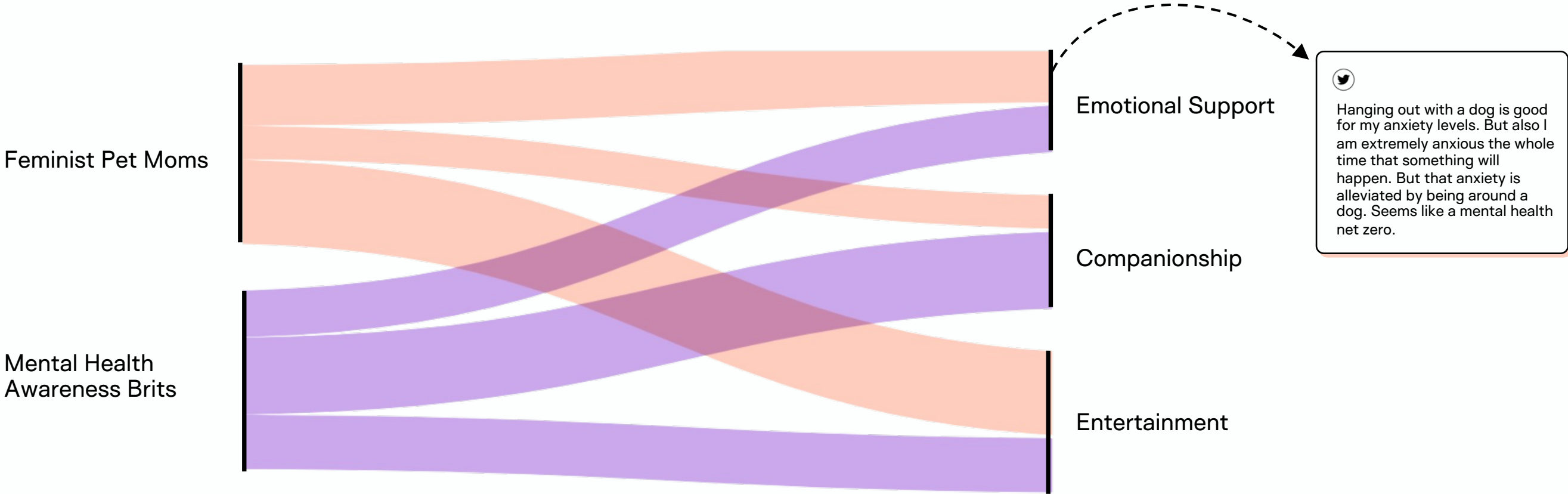


The pawstitive benefits of pet ownership

So, what’s the precise nature of the support interacting with pets can provide? For Feminist Pet Moms, pets can help cheer up the individual when they’re feeling especially low.

In addition to posting images and anecdotes concerning their own pets, this group is the most likely to ask for cute pictures or videos when struggling.

For Mental Health Awareness Brits, meanwhile, it’s the sense of companionship a dog can provide that’s most effective in alleviating stress of loneliness. This group was especially engaged with the #nationalpetmonth hashtag, a campaign which celebrated the positive impact a pet can have on mental health.



Health-conscious Pet Foods

If Pets are increasingly humanised and viewed in numerous instances as the difference between good and bad mental health, then it follows that the way we treat them, and more specifically, what we buy to feed them, has also changed.

Parallel to the rise of veganism and clean eating among their human counterparts, the equivalent trends have, albeit somewhat delayed, taken off in the world of pet food.

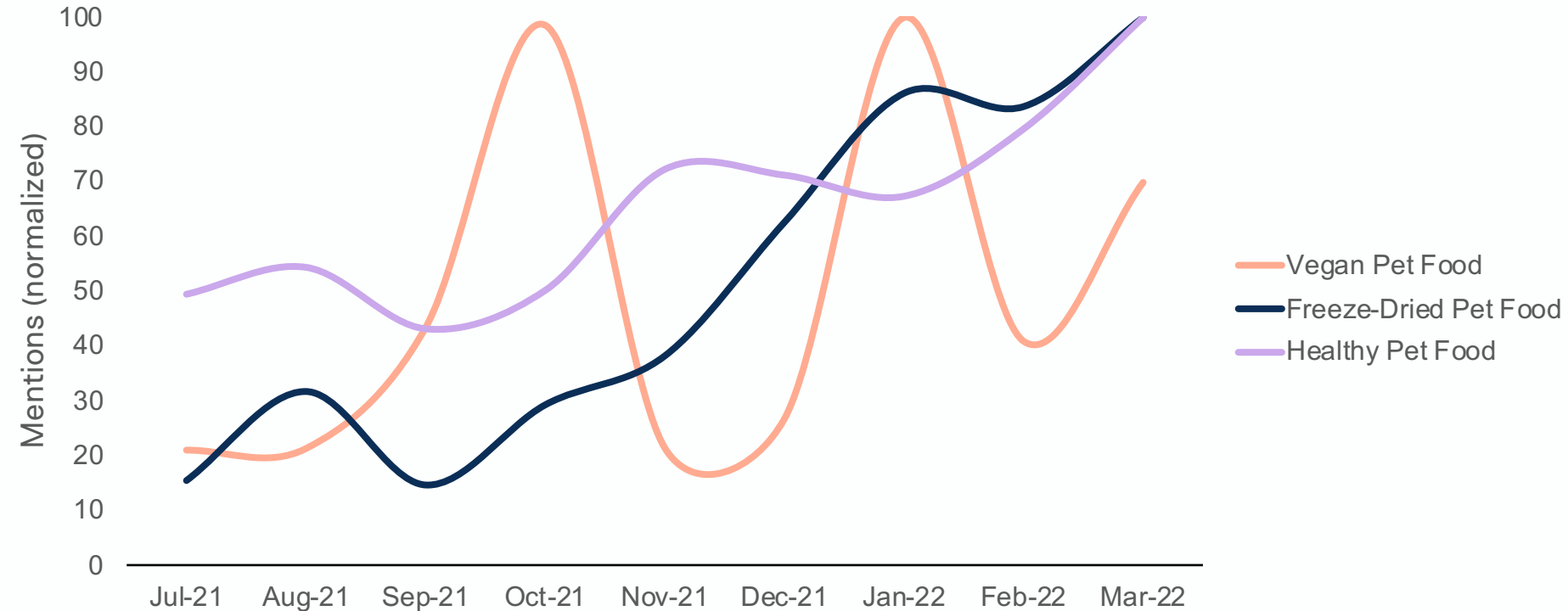


It's not just us humans who benefit from healthy eating – good nutrition is key for pets, too. 🐱

The cuisine of the kennel & the cattery

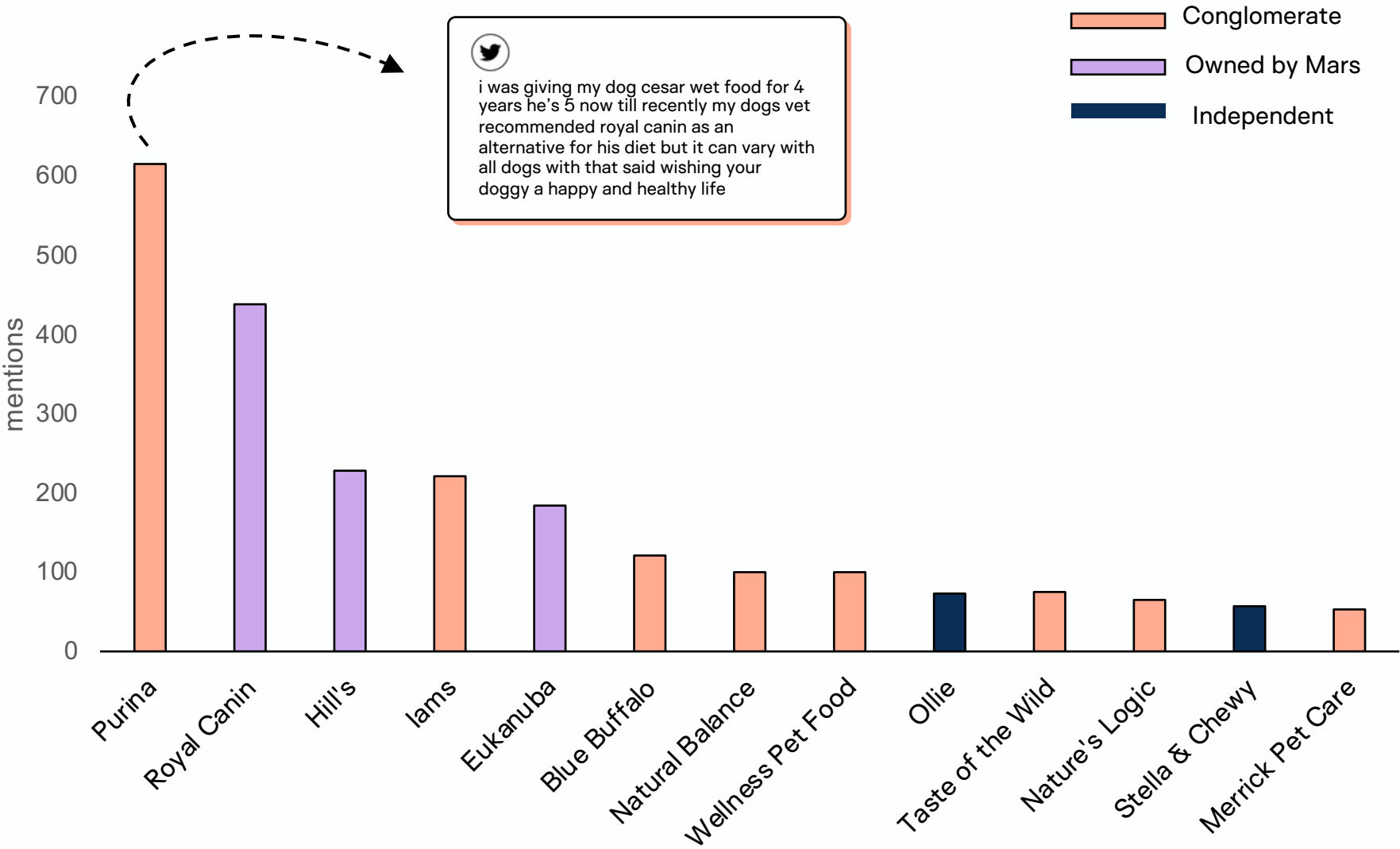
Healthy pet food has been on a steady incline from 2021–2022, and it projected to grow further still. Vegan Pet Food, meanwhile, has undergone something of a streakier progression, while still exhibiting clear signs of growth. The reason for this is due largely to controversy, as individual posters criticize pet owners for feeding the animal contrary to ‘their nature’ and are then met with counter-argument.

At the same time, freeze-dried pet food has also seen elevated interest, with the ingredient shortages brought on by supply chain issues making wet or raw pet foods harder to purchase. Consumers appreciate the retained nutritional value, while also exhibiting excitement in a new category type.



Big players occupy top spots in the pet food convo

In the light of its recent double-digit sales growth, it's little wonder that heritage brand Purina (a subsidiary of Nestlé), and its range of science-based and premium pet food tops pet food social share. Mars-owned brands, meanwhile, in Royal Canin, IAMS, Hill's and Eukanuba, sit in hot pursuit while independent labels are also creeping upwards. Looking at the data available, we see the popularity of Purina, Royal Canin and Hills positively impacted by veterinary approval, with many discerning pet owners using forums such as Reddit to source recommendations.

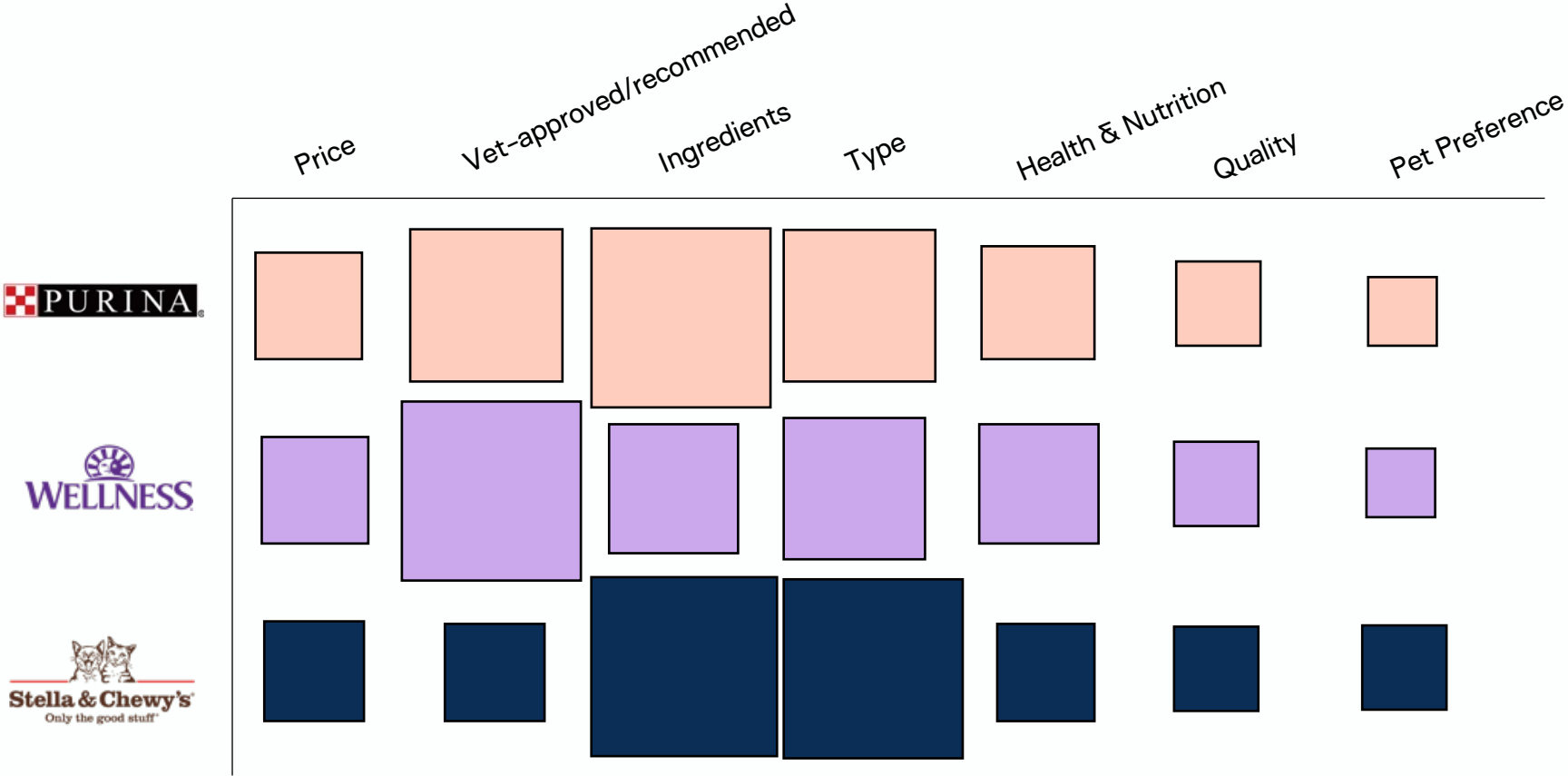


Decisions in the supermarket aisle – consumer associations with brands

When it comes to picking an item to purchase, the consumer calls upon the experiences and associations they attach to a distinct brand and its products.

Unsurprisingly, Health & Nutrition emerges as the single most cited factor, but in the case of Purina, we see Vet approval come a very close second. Price is third largest topic of conversation for each brand aside from Wellness, where it actually makes up the smallest percentage of the overall conversation.

And where are these conversations taking place? For the most part it appears to be on different forums, from dedicated subreddits around particular breeds or r/AskVet, to dedicated websites like thecatesite.com. The associations that individuals hold are expressed and formed on sites that are essentially collaborative and geared around the easy exchange of news and information.



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