



Behind the Pup-ularity Curtain: Understanding the Motivations, Challenges, and Work Performed in Creating and Managing Pet Influencer Accounts

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ABSTRACT

Creating dedicated accounts to post users' pet content is a growing trend on Instagram. While these account owners derive joy from this pursuit, they may also struggle with criticisms and challenges. Yet, there remains a knowledge gap on how pet account owners manage their pets' online presence and navigate these obstacles successfully. Drawing from interviews with 21 Instagram pet account owners, we uncover the motivations behind pet account creation, spanning personal, altruistic, and commercial goals. We learn about the strategies employed for crafting their pets' online identities and personas, as well as the challenges faced by both owners and their pets in navigating the complexities of digital identity management. We discuss the evolving dynamics between humans and their pets, positioning pet identity cultivation as a form of collaborative work, akin to the "third shift", highlighting the need to design interfaces that support this unique identity management process.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → *Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing; Empirical studies in HCI.*

KEYWORDS

social media, pet influencers, Instagram, human-animal interaction

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1 INTRODUCTION

Pet Instagram accounts represent a digital phenomenon where humans curate and manage social media profiles on behalf of their pet, driven by the core emotion of joy [47, 68, 77]. These accounts

bring not only joy to their followers but also provide a source of self-care and fulfillment for the pet owners themselves [68], by gaining affirmation and building connections within the online community [77]. Featuring their pets reinforces the owners' identity as pet lovers [68], while also enabling them to celebrate what they and other social media users cherish [77]. Pet account owners achieve this by depicting their valued relationships with pets, embodying a humanistic pet orientation within the digital landscape [68, 77].

Nonetheless, there exist negative consequences that accompany the creation and management of pet accounts. Pet account owners often find themselves overwhelmed by the labor required to maintain the pet's online presence [77]. This pressure to continuously post and engage can deter amateur pet owners from further promoting their accounts [77]. Additionally, pet account owners are sometimes dismissed as eccentric, labeled as "psychotic weird" for their dedication [82], or even as "silly," while pet accounts are viewed as yet another manifestation of the narcissism embodied by the selfie culture [102]. These criticisms often stem from a lack of understanding regarding the owner's motivations, and the dedication invested in managing pet accounts.

In this paper, we investigate how people address the tension between the positive and negative aspects of managing pet accounts, embarking on an exploration of the following research questions:

- RQ1: Why do pet owners create pet specific accounts in the first place? What drives pet influencer account owners to continue to maintain these accounts?
- RQ2: What strategies do pet account owners use to achieve their goals? How do these strategies help pet account owners facilitate their pets' online presence?
- RQ3: What are the challenges associated with creating and managing pet's identity online, and how do pet account owners navigate these complexities?

Through semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of 21 pet influencer account owners on Instagram, we aim to provide an understanding of the intricate relationship between pet owners, their pets, and the broader online community. Popular pet accounts, often referred to as pet influencers, exhibit distinctive characteristics that set them apart from the average pet account such as large and engaged follower base, community, and brand collaborations. Influencers, who are likely to have encountered similar or more substantial criticisms and challenges, can offer valuable insights into overcoming obstacles and running pet social media accounts. Thus, we gather the perspectives from a representative sample of pet influencers on Instagram and learned the following key insights:

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- Pet account owners have multifaceted goals, including personal, altruistic, and commercial purposes. These goals evolve as they experience different benefits, such as personal fulfillment, community engagement, and financial gain.
- Crafting identity and persona for their pet encompasses levels of staging and editing, representing a form of performative work. Pet and pet owners collaborate to craft their digital self-representation, with personal posts being less staged, commercial posts meticulously edited, and altruistic posts falling in between.
- The pursuit of cuteness on these accounts constitutes a form of labor, akin to a “third shift”. This labor extends beyond the commercial purpose, as even for personal accounts, pet owners invest significant effort, despite it often going unpaid and unrecognized.

These insights can potentially inform the design of more inclusive and purpose-driven social media platforms to better serve the needs of not only pet owners and their audience but also those who express their extended selves online. Unlike individual human influencers who manage their own accounts, pet influencer account owners undertake the strategic task of portraying their pets’ identities. They navigate their responsibilities in the absence of direct and explicit communication with their pet while affecting both of their well-being. This dynamic highlights the intricate tensions inherent in the labor of stewarding the pet’s online representation, where the protagonists of these accounts lack agency in negotiating how they should be portrayed or participate in the process. By understanding and supporting the work of pet influencers, we can create spaces that accommodate the unique aspirations and challenges faced by pet Instagram account owners in their pursuit of joy and connection in the digital age.

2 RELATED WORKS

2.1 Human-pet relationship

People often view the human-pet relationship in three orientations: humanistic, where pets are beloved companions; protectionistic, where pets deserve protection; and dominionistic, where pets are viewed as subservient to humans but useful [21]. However, the significance of the human-pet relationship goes beyond these categorizations. For many pet owners, animals transcend their conventional roles, evolving from mere possessions to cherished friends and even esteemed family members [7, 25, 29, 44]. In cases where pet owners have a humanistic orientation, pets often become akin to child figures in a parent’s life, while they may serve as sibling figures for children [68]. Thus, pets can play significant roles in social aspects of human development, which can be categorized as: (1) projective, (2) sociability, and (3) surrogate functions [101].

Firstly, pets can play a projective function by serving as a symbolic extension of the self, reflecting personality, preferences, and social status [18, 60, 101]. The endearing term “fur babies” encapsulates the emotional connection that pet owners cultivate [68], which deepens when pets exhibit human-like communication abilities [83]. Secondly, pets can serve a socialibility function by facilitating human-to-human interaction [101]. Pet ownership provides people with common conversation topics [84, 87, 109], and enhanced owner’s social visibility [88, 101]. Pets also often act as glue in

families, increasing family cohesion [89, 106], effecting a frame shift to a humorous conversation [99]. Lastly, pets can perform surrogate function by compensating for potential deficits in human relationships [19, 53, 101], which is valuable for individuals and families, from those just starting families to aging individuals [28, 87]. For instance, perceiving a pet as a surrogate child supply comfort and reduce feelings of loneliness during adversity [28, 38]. Children from single-parent families often form strong bonds with their pets, perceiving them as surrogate parents [90, 106].

Due to these significant functions, pets are commonly included in family rituals and ceremonies, such as holiday presents or birthday parties [106]. Pet owners experience grief as profoundly as they would for the loss of a human family member, often struggling to cope with everyday life after their pet’s death [16, 61, 80, 106]. Some even perform memorial services for pets as a way to ward off spiritual vengeance by animal spirits, similar to rituals for untimely human deaths [37, 61, 103]. Consequently, it is not surprising to see people celebrating milestones in pets’ lives on social media or commemorating and memorializing their deceased pets [42, 105].

2.2 Pet influencers

In response to the growing number of pet-centric content and accounts on platforms like Instagram¹ [65], researchers in advertising and marketing have performed content analysis on pet influencer accounts to understand the social media marketing strategies [33, 54, 76]. Chiang *et al.* focused on online pet fashion accounts, providing insights for business pages tailored to Direct Message (DM) sellers on Instagram [33]. Also, Jacobson *et al.* undertook a qualitative analysis of renowned pet accounts on Instagram, classifying advertisement strategies into affective, cohesive, and interactive social presence strategies [54]. Myers *et al.* similarly examined the impact of sponsored posts on engagement levels among followers seeking entertainment. Their study suggested strategies to enhance engagement by including transparent sponsorship disclosures and managing the overall saturation of sponsorship content [76].

Recent works have also investigated consumer behaviors towards specific strategies employed in pet accounts, such as anthropomorphism [66, 112]. Lu *et al.* discovered that advertising appeals using anthropomorphism had a positive effect on consumers’ purchase intentions. This was achieved by enhancing perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and the development of parasocial relationships [66]. Furthermore, Zhang *et al.* demonstrated the narrator for captions and the appeal of the message jointly influenced the interpretation of the message by its recipients [112]. Anthropomorphism can also serve as a medium for increasing empathy and preventing antisocial behaviors. For example, Sprinkle *et al.* introduced rescue dogs to teach children prosocial behavior and prevent violence [97], and Young *et al.* studied enhanced empathy and pro-environmental behavior in zoos and animal conservation [111].

While these studies have concentrated on the commercial and social value associated with pet influencers and personas, a limited number have explored the motivations of pet accounts, characterizing pets as “micro-celebrities” [68, 70, 77]. Maddox’s studies revealed that “joy” is a primary driver of pet accounts, raising

¹In 2019, 67% of U.S. households owned at least one pet and 30% of that population followed celebrity pet influencers on social media [76].

questions about authenticity caused by commodification [68, 69]. Additionally, Ngai’s work highlights that pet account owners are often motivated more by “shared affects” than fame, using their platforms to advocate for causes like rescue animals without strict financial motives [77].

Although these research works offer valuable insights into the motivations and dynamics of joy with pet accounts, it has predominantly focused on amateur accounts with fewer than 1K followers. Furthermore, there is a dearth of insight into pet influencers’ motivations beyond entertainment or information dissemination [54].

2.3 Online identity management

Social media serves as a platform for the construction of identity through visual branding, wherein individuals employ imagery to attract followers and curate their online personas [98]. This process involves what has been termed “visibility labor”, where decisions are continuously made and revised concerning the sharing of various image types, with the use of elements such as hashtags, framing, filters, captions, or tags [13]. While the labor is invisible in the process, it is simultaneously presented as a leisure activity, particularly for users who do not derive income from their efforts [13].

Online personas serve as a means through which individuals present their extended-selves, encapsulating elements to which they feel a deep attachment, such as ideas, experiences, objects, and relationships [20]. One prevalent method of self-presentation in the digital realm involves anthropomorphizing the self through avatars through virtual characters, children, and pets [17]. Online identities moderated by a curator other than the represented character themselves introduce complexity in social media presence and prompt exploration in managing these identities.

Recent studies focused on the phenomenon of “sharenting”, in which parents share their children’s pictures and daily lives on social media platforms [14, 23, 49]. Past works identified the main motivations of sharenting to be building a creative outlet, advocating for child-caring practices, and establishing parents’ extended self-identity through sharing children’s content [10, 22, 49]. Furthermore, motivations extended to profit, driving professional Instagram accounts which feature child models who have amassed millions of followers [58, 59].

Managing children’s content online is susceptible to risks, including privacy and safety concerns, digital footprints, and issues of consent [14, 22, 75]. As such, parents adopt different strategies to navigate these risks, often adopting self-censorship mechanisms driven by considerations related to audience perceptions, societal norms, and platform capabilities [5]. These efforts are perceived as a “third-shift” in parental responsibilities, entailing additional work on top of existing occupational responsibilities (first-shift) and family duties (second-shift) [5].

Some recent studies also shed light on managing pet’s identity online [54, 68, 95]. Similar to how parents use sharenting to represent their extended self, the curation of posts of pet Instagram accounts constitutes a self-representational strategy [68]. The persona attributed to the pet is a crafted invention formulated through the owner’s imagined relationships with their pet [54]. This involves manipulation of visual and textual elements, resulting in the orchestration of either realistic or fantastical narratives of their pet [95].

The content of pet accounts is often imbued with joyful and humorous anthropomorphism, employing concepts used to describe human behavior [9].

Despite the progress made in studying pet influencers’ identity management, there is limited research investigating the reasons behind their choice of specific strategies and the acquisition of necessary skills for effective implementation [36]. Additionally, ethical considerations, potential vulnerabilities, and challenges in regarding pet influencers need further exploration and understanding.

3 METHODS

3.1 Participants

A total of 21 individuals who maintained pet accounts on Instagram participated in this study. To be eligible for inclusion, participants were required to be at least 18 years old and have a public pet account on Instagram in the English language (See Table 1). Participants had a wide range of follower counts on their pet accounts, spanning from 0.46K (nano-influencers) to 189K (macro-influencers)². The average follower count per pet influencer was 34.26K. The majority of participants identified as female (90.1%), and the average age of participants was 32.3 years old. These demographic characteristics reflect disparities of pet account owners on Instagram [44, 51], with a notable prevalence of young females.

3.2 Recruitment and sampling methods

We recruited pet influencers from Instagram, given its rich pet-related content [62] and unique cultural practice that emphasizes visual and direct communication such as stories and DMs [68]. Participant recruitment was conducted through Instagram recursive hashtag searches and targeted outreach. We initiated the recruitment process by creating a brand-new Instagram account with no history bias for search. We first scraped 1000 most recent posts using the #petinfluencer hashtag, as ranked by the Instagram algorithm at the time of data collection. Employing frequency analysis, we identified the most frequent co-used hashtags. To ensure relevance, we excluded overly general hashtags such as #love, #cute, #instagram, and #photography. The result was a refined list of the top 20 popular hashtags related to #petinfluencer, as detailed in Table 2 (See appendix).

Using the refined hashtags, we employed a custom scraper developed to extract popular posts under each hashtag from Instagram. A total of 2000 posts were collected across 10 batches, with each batch containing 200 posts. Two researchers manually extracted, reviewed, and filtered the accounts from the collected posts based on specific criteria: (1) Using English as their primary language in social media content (2) Operating as pet-focused accounts (excluding those not clearly focused on pets, e.g. contain significant human content) (3) Featuring a consistent and selective number of pets (excluding compilation accounts that re-post other pets). This

²We adopted Campbell and Rarrell’s classification of influencer types [30], considering not just the number of followers but also aspects such as perceived authenticity, accessibility, expertise, and cultural capital. The five distinct influencer categories are as follows: celebrity influencers (more than 1M followers, the rich and famous), megainfluencers (more than 1M followers, the everyday celebrity), macroinfluencers (between 100K and 1 M followers, the sweet spot), microinfluencers (between 10K and 100K, the rising star), and nanoinfluencers (less than 10K followers).

Table 1: Participant and pet account information

ID	Age	Gender	Years of pet account	Uploading frequency	Followers (K)	Breed
P1	36	female	2 years	every day	38.6	Cat
P2	27	female	3 years	2-3 times a week	24.1	Dog
P3	38	female	2 years	every day	62.9	Cat
P4	29	female	10 months	every day	13.6	Dog
P5	32	male	5 years	every day	47.9	Hamster
P6	32	female	3 years	2-3 times a week	19.1	2 Dogs
P7	33	female	6 years	every day	189	Cat
P8	27	female	1.5 years	every day	11.8	Cat
P9	36	female	5 years	2-3 times a week	1.67	Dog
P10	25	female	2 years	2-3 times a week	123	Cat
P11	35	female	2.5 years	every day	12.5	Cat
P12	27	female	2 years	every day	43.5	1 Dog 1 Cat
P13	33	female	4.5 years	2-3 times a week	26.8	3 Dogs
P14	25	female	3 years	once a month	0.46	Dog
P15	31	male	5 Years	2-3 times a week	24.4	Cat
P16	32	female	6 years	every day	32.6	2 Dogs
P17	35	female	2 years	every day	15.6	2 Cats
P18	30	female	1.5 years	every day	11.2	3 Cats
P19	49	female	2 years	every day	2	Cat
P20	29	female	3 years	2-3 times a week	17.9	2 Dogs
P21	37	female	1 year	every day	0.77	Cat

meticulous curation resulted in a finalized list of 230 pet influencer accounts on Instagram.

From the compiled list, we initiated recruitment by sending direct messages on Instagram, leveraging the snowball sampling method. Additionally, we sought participants from Facebook Groups such as “Dogs of Instagram” and “Instagram Pets Engagement Group,” as well as Reddit Channels like r/PetPhotography and r/Instagram. Thirteen participants were directly recruited through DM messages, six participants were sourced through snowball sampling, and two participants responded to the advertisement posts.

3.3 Study procedure

Participants first completed a pre-interview survey, providing demographic details about themselves and their pets, along with information about their years of ownership and experience in maintaining pet accounts (See Table 1). Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview, offering insights into how they portrayed their pets in the online platform and the strategies they utilized to curate and share content on their dedicated pet accounts. The interviews centered on a range of themes, including motivations, objectives, and the positive and negative outcomes associated with maintaining such accounts. Participants also delved into their content selection and curation approaches, detailing how they balanced visual representation and textual elements. Additionally, the discussions extended to encompass strategies for fostering engagement and interactions, while addressing the various challenges and concerns encountered as pet account owners. These discussions

were facilitated through Zoom video conferencing, spanning approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Participants received compensation of \$30 for their contributions.

3.4 Data analysis approach

Interview transcripts were obtained from two sources: Zoom live transcriptions and audio transcriptions with *otter.ai*. The transcripts ranged from 4000 to 5000 words in length. The subsequent analysis entailed an open coding approach [31, 32], systematically undertaken by two independent researchers, adhering to established thematic analysis methodologies [26, 100]. The analysis involved iterative stages of familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of recurrent themes, and comprehensive definition and labelling of the identified themes. To ensure rigorous analysis, the researchers engaged in three rounds of collaborative discussions, effectively addressing any conflicts or uncertainties related to the coding process. The study protocol was approved by our university’s research ethics board.

4 FINDINGS

Our findings examine how pet account owners balance the positive and negative aspects of work involved in managing their accounts. First, we discuss why pet owners created pet specific accounts, moving from personal accounts. Second, we describe how pet account owners have multi-faceted goals, driven by diverse benefits. Third, we discuss the varying levels of methods to depict their pet’s identity, in pursuit of their unique objectives. Lastly, we discuss the challenges and concerns involved in the identity management process (See Figure 1).

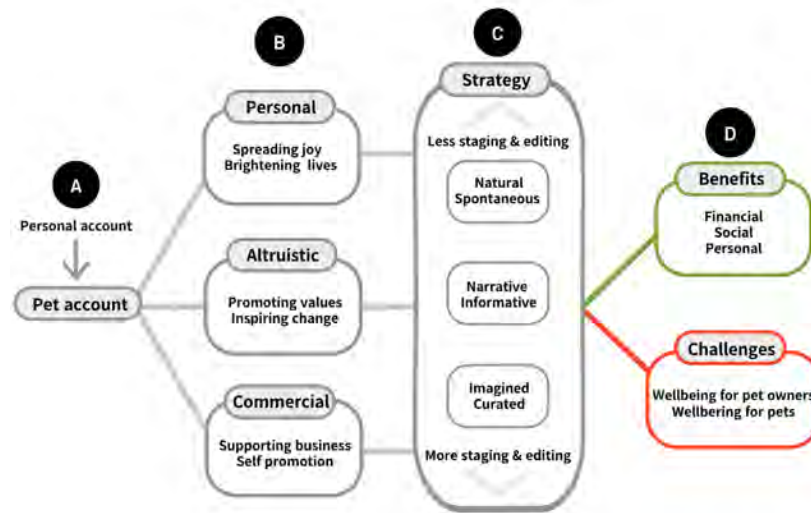


Figure 1: Process and factors involved in creating and managing pet specific accounts (A) Transition from personal accounts to pet accounts. (B) Three goals in creating and managing pet accounts. (C) Spectrum of representation strategy. (D) Benefits and challenges of operating pet accounts

4.1 Motivations of transitioning personal accounts to pet specific accounts

For the majority of participants ($N = 15$), their pet’s online presence originated from their pre-existing personal social media accounts. Participants reported first uploading pet content on their personal accounts but then migrating to a separate account dedicated to pet content for various reasons. A recurring distinction was evident in the dichotomy of personal versus pet accounts, where personal accounts tended to be private spaces reserved for specific aspects of the participants’ lives or their personal online presence (P7, P16, P18, P21). For example, P17 reported that they upload food and recipe content on their personal account due to their occupation as a chef. P16, a photographer, initially posted pet content on her account which was meant to market her business, but ultimately created a separate pet content because “the whole point wasn’t really business related. It was more to share my dog and also because my dogs are rescue dogs.”

However, for some participants (P3, P12), their personal representation intertwines with their pets’ online persona, leading to a mixture of pet and human content on their accounts. For P3, their intended social media presence includes their pet as well as their whole family performing outdoor activities. P3 therefore incorporates both the pet and family members in their content: “[pet’s name] is always the main attraction. And so it’s always the cat. And then what I said earlier is I mix it up with my daughter or my daughter and my son or my son or my husband.” On the other hand, P12 reported a shift from posting pet content only to revealing human presence and building a persona for themselves: “I’m mostly a pet account, but I’m also trying to shift towards like more of like a lifestyle, sort of me and my pets instead of just my pets.” The persona of the social media account that the owner desires to represent dictates how they balance the presentation of the users themselves versus their pets.

For participants who transitioned from posting pet content on their personal accounts to starting dedicated pet accounts, the transition occurs with a shift in popularity and the consequent concern for privacy. One motif underpinning pet account creation was the remarkable engagement garnered by pet-related posts. Participants often recounted instances where pet content accrued significantly more likes and followers than their personal posts (P7, P18, P19). This often led to encouragement from both friends and followers to establish dedicated pet accounts (P7, P18).

“I kept getting friend requests and people would see the pictures and want to see more pictures of him (pet). So finally I decided to create an account. In probably three hours, he had more followers than me that I had in the three years I had my Instagram account.” (P7)

Some participants also noted reduced activity on their personal accounts due to the burgeoning presence of their pets on dedicated platforms (P12, P14). As pet content gained prominence, personal accounts transformed, with the scope and frequency of personal content diminishing (P19, P20). Another motif was to avoid the risk of overwhelming and oversharing their personal networks with an excessive influx of pet-centric posts. Participants thought posting pet content on personal accounts might inundate friends and families (P1, P3, P4, P6, P10, P12, P21).

4.2 Goals and benefits of creating and managing pet influencer accounts

The allure of goals and benefits might outweigh the negative aspects of having a pet account, which may deter amateur pet account owners from further promoting their accounts. In this section, we describe the motivations that drive successful pet account owners to sustain and nurture their digital presence.



Figure 2: Three multifaceted goals of creating and managing pet influencer accounts. (A) Personal goal: keeping memories. (B) Altruistic goal: informative or altruistic. (C) Commercial goal: promoting business or showcasing skills.

4.2.1 Purpose of pet influencer accounts. We found that the goals behind creating and managing pet accounts evolve over time. Initially, for most participants, the primary aim was personal, focusing on preserving cherished memories rather than pursuing specific objectives. However, as their accounts gained momentum, many pet owners transitioned from sharing simple personal posts to heavily curating the content.

This transformation was exemplified by participants like P19 who noted, “In the beginning, we were just taking pictures of random little things we thought were cute... in the last six months, he’s become an ambassador for a couple of companies. So now more of his posts are curated to show products.” It became evident that, as their accounts gained traction, many pet owners developed multifaceted goals for their pet accounts, serving (1) personal, (2) altruistic, and (3) commercial purposes (See Figure 2).

(1) Personal purpose: spreading joy and brightening lives

For most participants (except P15), their initial engagement in pet accounts primarily stemmed from a personal desire to document and share their pets’ experiences. Their pet account was a source of entertainment and positivity that not only brought joy and happiness to their followers but also to the pet owners themselves, establishing a dual connection with their audience.

For many participants ($N = 7$), sharing their pets’ lighthearted and endearing moments with others became a hobby, a source of pure enjoyment. As one participant (P6) expressed, “Honestly, I did it purely for fun. It’s a little hobby of mine. I love decorating the patio and I love decorating the house with all cat stuff, and people seem to enjoy it online.” This, in turn, engendered engagement from their followers, creating a reciprocal and fulfilling experience as participants derived satisfaction from knowing that their pets’ antics could evoke smiles and laughter in others. As articulated by P21, “People share it with someone, and maybe they enjoyed it, and then hopefully that brings enjoyment to someone else as well.” This ripple effect of joy became a cornerstone of their content creation, transcending their pet accounts’ virtual existence to offer a respite from life’s challenges and brighten the days of their audience.

For a significant number of participants, the impetus behind maintaining pet accounts centered around **memory keeping** ($N = 12$). These digital spaces were not only a celebration of the unique bonds between pets and their owners but also an avenue for commemorating growth and processing loss.

Participants articulated a profound desire to create a repository of cherished memories and moments shared with their pets. The concept of a “digital memory book (P13)” or “online scrapbooks (P17)” resonated among participants. They valued the capacity to look back and reflect on their pets’ growth and experiences, reminiscent of a time capsule that encapsulated both the pet’s journey and their own.

Another objective was to commemorate and grieve for deceased pets (P5, P17). Through these online sanctuaries, they crafted sacred spaces to revisit memories, fostering personal healing and preserving their bonds. For P5, these pet accounts took on a spiritual role, perpetuating the presence and memory of their departed pets.

“It was very spiritual. The goal is to keep his memory going on and on. So it’s interesting because he actually passed away... And I come from a Shinto faith. We believe that if you do something good for them, you bring something good. And that’s why we do this... Because it is in a way like a cult. Yeah, it’s like a crazy religion or something.” (P5)

The majority of participants ($N=14$) with personal goals likened their relationship with their pet to that of a parent-child dynamic, revealing a diverse range of sentiments and associated responsibilities. Many participants carried a sense of duty to safeguard and nurture their pets, mirroring a parent’s commitment to their child, for example, “teaching expectations and boundaries, how to be a family member” (P9). The connection stemmed from similarities between their pets’ actions and the behaviors of children, eliciting an affectionate and protective stance (P17, P20). The spectrum of relationships expands to encompass a hybrid role, where pets embody both the traits of a best friend and a child figure (P10), while simultaneously acknowledging the evolving transition towards a familial designation (P18). In contrast, a few participants ($N = 2$) established a nuanced perspective by delineating their pets solely as animals or pets (P16, P21), acknowledging the traits and behaviors of their pets such as being “independent and vocal” (P21) which reinforces a clear distinction between human and animal roles.

(2) Altruistic purpose: promoting values and inspiring change In addition to personal objectives, 10 participants also had altruistic intentions, aiming to share knowledge, promote positive practices, and motivate change among their audience. Their pet accounts allowed them to convey meaningful messages and insights related to well-being, and advocacy.

Participants sought to challenge misconceptions and barriers within pet care (P5, P7, P9, P18, P10). Addressing sensitive topics like feeding hamsters raw food (P5) and using catios for cats (P7), they aimed to reshape perspectives and encourage informed discussions. Additionally, certain participants (P5, P9) dedicated themselves to raising awareness about adopting elderly or sick pets, emphasizing these animals’ exceptional qualities as companions. Through these efforts, participants harnessed their platforms as instruments of

change, leveraging their influence to challenge biases, with the ultimate goal of enriching the lives of pets and their caregivers.

For some participants (P6, P11), an altruistic purpose was fulfilled through the dissemination of **informative** content that could be of assistance to their followers. This endeavor encompassed a diverse array of content designed to provide practical tips and recommendations, fostering informed decision-making. P6, in particular, concentrated on providing suggestions for “dog-friendly travel, outdoor adventures, activities, and local points of interest.” Her goal was to establish herself as a reliable source and an authoritative figure in their geographic region, recognizing a gap in the market for information on these subjects. P9 and P11 also elucidated their goals, sharing the reviews of pet products.

“It’s just to give my followers options when we do promote a brand. We want people to have different choices...We’re not overly focused on trying to profit from it. We just want to inform people that these options exist, whether a product is good or not. That’s essentially our goal.” (P11)

Participants furthered their altruistic goals by serving as educational resources, transforming their platforms into spaces for learning (P3, P7, P10, P14, P18). They focused on bridging knowledge gaps, enlightening their audience on various pet-related subjects. For instance, P3 and P10 championed the cause of educating their followers about taking cats outside and engaging in outdoor adventures with them. In this regard, P10 articulated, “We do a lot of education on how to go outside with your cat. And I think that we provide a different kind of insight for some people who are trying to do that with their own cat.”

Participants also used their platforms to **advocate** for meaningful causes, supporting animal welfare, responsible ownership, and empathy for pets with unique needs (P5, P9, P16, P19, P21). Some participants (P5, P9) challenged stereotypes and promoted awareness about the unique needs of older animals, as P9 stated: “I was able to really advocate and educate people about senior animals and long-term shelter animals, both of which are considered ‘hard to adopt’. She was the face of the marketing campaign, so to speak.” Advocacy extended to pet safety and responsible ownership practices, conveying a message of acceptance and understanding. By sharing both the highs and lows of their journeys, they inspired others to navigate challenges with resilience and compassion.

“I know there are others who face similar struggles and it’s okay to not be perfect all the time. I’m giving comfort to fellow dog owners. It’s okay to still have Instagram and share the good and the bad. Responsible dog ownership is a continuous commitment, regardless of where your dog comes from.” (P16)

(3) Commercial purpose: supporting businesses and self-promotion Participants with commercial goals ventured into various avenues of promoting businesses and showcasing their own talents. Their account served as an incentive for financial profit, with varying levels of commitment and approach.

Some participants (P5, P9) vehemently rejected sponsored posts, citing a desire to preserve the authenticity and purity of their content, while some others (P21, P14) faced the challenge of limited popularity, making sponsorships elusive. However, a contrasting

group saw commercial purposes as the driving force behind their online presence. Eight participants dabbled in a modest number of sponsored posts, where profit was not the primary goal, yet the allure of popularity and the addictive nature of increasing follower counts remained evident (P2, P3, P4). Venturing further, some (P6, P11, P19) took on regular sponsored content, akin to “part-time jobs,” while a select few (P12, P15) fully embraced sponsored posts, relying on them as their main source of financial sustenance — a “full-time role” as social media content creators, placing a significant emphasis on brand partnerships.

Through efforts to make their accounts profitable, participants often commodified their pet’s cute aesthetics. For 10 participants, securing larger sponsorship from brands was a key objective. Participants pursuing this goal emphasized the responsibility of faithfully representing brands as pet ambassadors, aiming to align the pet’s image with the brand identity to “translate followers to customers”.

“I feel that if I’m going to be representing or [pet’s name]’s going to be representing them, I want to do a good job. And to me, that means having really consistent exposure. I prioritize the ambassadorship because I’ve made that commitment.” (P19)

Beyond supporting external businesses, some participants utilized their pet accounts to drive their own entrepreneurial endeavors (P4, P11, P15). They delved into the sale of pet merchandise, utilizing online platforms like Etsy to reach their audience. For instance, P4 recognized the value of their followers as a crucial support network for their business ventures, emphasizing the significance of having an established audience in the business world:

“I think the most challenging aspect of running a business is acquiring customers. If you already have a substantial following, you have an existing audience. I have a substantial number of followers, which makes it easier to introduce and sell products.” (P4)

For some participants (P11, P16), the commercial purpose was intertwined with self-branding their expertise. P11 and P16, who were photographers, described their pet accounts as “a creative outlet for me with photography (P11)”. They transformed their pet accounts into compelling portfolios, showcasing their photography skills to potential clients.

“Well, I’m a photographer myself, so I thought to myself, ‘I have one dog, and I enjoy taking photos of him’. So, I thought of it as a second advertising route for my photography because I’ve got my business account and my dog account.” (P16)

4.2.2 Benefits of pet accounts. As participants amassed a growing following, their motivations and goals underwent a transformation, driven by the diverse benefits they derived from managing pet accounts. The benefits extended not only to the pet account owners but also to their pets, encompassing three primary categories: (1) financial benefits, including monetary and material gain, (2) personal benefits, including self-expression and self-care, and (3) social benefits, including enriching relationships and community belonging. These benefits collectively fueled their commitment to nurturing their accounts, spurring them to explore personal, altruistic, and commercial avenues.

Financial gains emerged as a notable benefit for a subset of participants ($N = 11$). Participants viewed sponsorship as a “mutual benefit” (P18, P20), providing a means to endorse brands and products while simultaneously benefiting their own pet accounts. The financial benefits spanned a spectrum, including receiving complimentary or trial products, discounted items, invitations to trips, and monetary compensation. These rewards often covered the costs associated with their pets. Moreover, many participants ($N = 8$) observed their pets enjoying an enriched lifestyle, often attributed to the perks of being Instagram celebrities. Participants mentioned their pet spoiled from getting products and gifts.

However, many participants also found running a pet account to be personally rewarding and enjoyable ($N = 9$). They emphasized the fun aspect of the endeavor for both themselves and their pets:

“I want to make this as fun as possible, as long as [pet’s name]’s happy, you know, getting treats... So, as long as we both enjoy it, then we’ll continue, but if one of us doesn’t enjoy it anymore, then it’s something we’ll probably retire.” (P11)

Some participants used their accounts to express themselves (P4, P14, P16, P20, P21). Engaging in pet account curation offered them a means to infuse their creative perspective, as P21 stated, “Account let me like indulge in kinda like comedic writing. I’m just creating like silly stories that are amusing to me. So for me it’s a log of creativity”. It was also a manifestation of their passion for photography, allowing them to capture delightful moments featuring their pets. Their pets, in turn, relished the opportunity to model for photos, enticed by the promise of treats (P11, P13, P19).

The personal benefits extended to mental health and emotional well-being, with several participants sharing their experiences (P5, P7, P9, P19, P20): the account served as a platform to express their emotions (P9), an outlet for improving their mental health (P20), and sources of companionship alleviating loneliness (P19).

For their pets, the sense of improved well-being is manifested through increased attention and care from the owner (P5, P9, P21). As P5 noted: “He gets more love and care not just from us but from people. And his well-being is better... Because of that, we are driven to give him better care.”

Maintaining a pet influencer account also yielded positive impacts on their social lives. P5 found that co-managing the account with their spouse deepened their bond, fostering a heightened sense of shared responsibility to their pet. Additionally, P15 highlighted how their pet’s Instagram account served as a conversational ice-breaker, making social interactions more accessible and engaging.

One of the overwhelmingly positive aspects of pet influencer accounts, cited by almost all participants ($N = 16$), was the sense of community belonging and meaningful interaction they facilitated. These accounts led to the formation of online friendships with like-minded individuals (P8, P12, P21), often transcending the virtual realm, resulting in in-person meetups (P6, P14).

Engaging with other pet accounts often resulted in reciprocal interactions. Participants offered support through comments and engagement on each other’s posts (P8, P12, P21) exchanging recommendations, tips, and advice through group chats (P13). This mutual assistance fostered a sense of reliability, as they engaged with individuals who had similar experiences (P9, P19).



Figure 3: Example of personal posts (A) Keeping memories

Additionally, participants (P10, P17, P20) recognized social benefits for their pets, such as increased socialization through events and activities. These experiences not only allowed their pets to enjoy “playful interactions” (P20) but also provided them with a “sense of freedom and connection” (P10).

“They’re having very social lives. So I believe that they are happy doing all of these different activities and events. because they love playing with other dogs and meeting people.” (P20)

4.3 Strategies for maintaining pet’s online presence

As participants’ goals evolved, they adjusted identities and personas for their pets that aligned with their objectives. For instance, P20 shared how she adapted to using captions from the pet’s point of view: “When I first started, it was primarily from [pet’s name]’s perspective and [pet’s name] talking. After a while, I started getting a little cringe with that. I’m a human and I can talk and I can say it’s from my perspective, but sometimes I still do it from the dog’s perspective, just for fun.” (P20) This gradual process of refining their account’s focus played a significant role in their success, helping them attract and engage audiences and achieve their various goals.

Representing pet’s identity or persona involved collaborative work with their pets, including pre-processing through staging and post-processing via editing. These methods were tailored to align with three primary categories of goals: (1) Personal (2) Altruistic (3) Commercial, ranging from authentically mirroring their pet’s traits and behaviors to contriving deliberately constructed personas to captivate their audience. In this section, we illustrate the different types of representation methods found for each goal category.

4.3.1 Personal posts. Many participants with personal goals curated their content to provide accurate images of their pets ($N = 7$). These contents showed mundane yet endearing moments of their

pets, which are captured organically. For instance, P8 captured her pets' daily routines and interactions with their surroundings, reflecting their pets' natural actions (See Figure 3A).

“There’s not really a thought process behind it. It’s mostly my cat’s day-to-day life inside the house. It’s like whenever I see my cat and think she looks nice or pretty. I notice most people like seeing her eyes when they’re really big. It’s really cute and enticing” (P8)

These participants aimed to genuinely portray their pets' personalities and the dynamics of their relationships without resorting to excessive staging or heavy editing.

“I do try to keep it as natural as possible. So I do show the dogs’ personalities as they are, even if it is in the setup environment where I’m creating a reel. It’s how I see them and how their personalities are when it comes to like captions.” (P20)

“I think it’s just to show the relationship between my pet. So a lot of my content is about our humorous take on our relationship. Like, my cat is very sassy and talkative. So I find that really funny.” (P21)

This unpretentious approach to content curation prioritized emotional resonance over meticulously staged perfection, often resulting in heightened engagement from both participants and their followers (P1, P9, P10, P12, P15, P16, P20). For example, P1 highlighted the innate trait of their pet naturally aligns with what social media users were drawn to.

“He’s kind of exactly what social media wants to see. He’s a little orange cat. He’s very helpless and cute. He has a little wheelchair. He just needs a lot of special care. So he is being helped to learn how to walk. He has a built journey that people want to follow. It’s not something that I manufactured at all.” (P1)

Furthermore, participants noted that this approach allowed their followers to relate to and empathize with their own pets (P6, P10, P11, P20). As P20 articulated, “Especially with [pet’s name], who has such a vibrant personality, many of our followers tend to connect with her and see similarities with their own pets.” (P20)

4.3.2 Altruistic posts. Ten participants had altruistic goals for their pet accounts, using their platforms to share recommendations, tips, and advice to inspire others. This approach involved crafting their pet’s identity to showcase unconventional pet care methods, such as outdoor activities for cats, or to challenge stereotypes surrounding certain types of pets, such as elderly or special needs animals. For example, P10 shaped her cat’s outdoor adventure identity to show how cats can enjoy hiking: “I depict [pet’s name] as adventurous, curious, independent, and fearless, showing him walking on his own. I want people to understand that cats aren’t just ‘scaredy cats’ but can also be strong, independent, and loving companions.”

This approach often required more staging and editing compared to personal posts in order to convey specific messages or narratives. In staging, pet owners intentionally chose locations or backgrounds that aligned with their pet’s identity. For example, P7 explained how she intentionally photographed her cat in the catio (a semi-outdoor patio space with cat platforms) consistently (See Figure 4A):

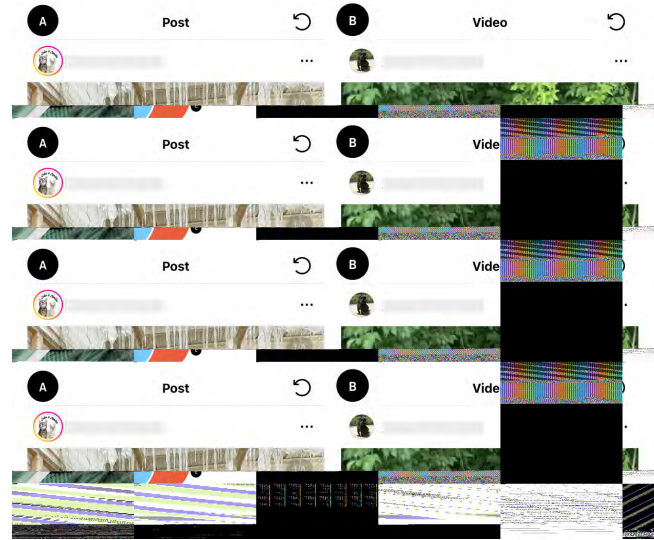


Figure 4: Example of altruistic posts (A) Informational. (B) Advocative.

“I purposely try to take more pictures in the catio even in the wintertime, although we don’t spend as much time in the catio. I still try to go out there once a week with them and get pictures because I know that’s why most of my followers follow us. So I do try to post a lot of catio content.” (P7)

Altruistic posts often involve editing work. For example, as seen in P9’s careful crafting of captions to highlight her foster pet’s milestones, aiming to promote adoption awareness through storytelling (See Figure 4B).

“So I like telling the story. ‘This is a huge step!’ But for many people, they wouldn’t understand why that’s significant. Right? So I’d say, ‘This means she feels secure in her surroundings and knows I’m not leaving her’...People then might see this progression.” (P9)

Participants noted that this hybrid approach to curating and crafting their pet’s content effectively engaged their followers and conveyed their intended messages. For instance, P9 leveraged her senior dog’s unique identity to raise awareness about adoption, garnering support and celebration from more people.

“It was important because she was a senior dog that had lived over five years in the shelter. Her story just made people sad so they cared and then followed along. They wanted to celebrate her adoption.” (P9)

4.3.3 Commercial posts. Participants with commercial objectives performed work to craft specific identities for their pets. Such an approach involves creating an artificial but captivating personality to their content, to engage the target audience. Their posts involved both staging and editing to convey carefully constructed pet personas. For instance, P15 explained how he created an imagined persona to support his cat apparel business (See Figure 5B).

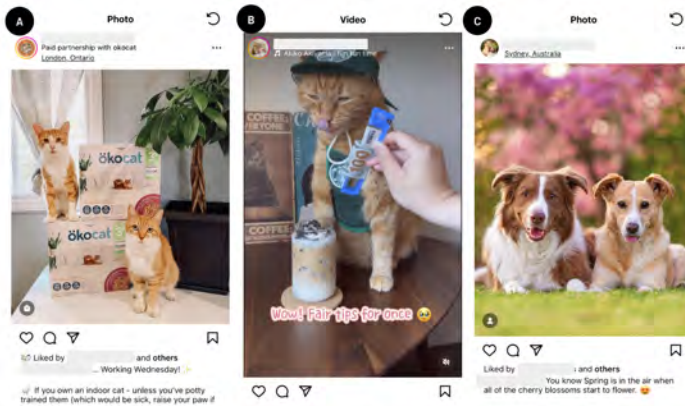


Figure 5: Example of commercial posts (A) Promoting sponsored products. (B) Supporting own business. (C) Showcasing own skills

“My account used to feature random pictures of my cat. There was no real personality or identity to [pet’s name]. During the pandemic, I started a cat apparel business, and we gave her a barista identity... The goal with that is to create awareness, like, ‘Hey, she’s a barista wearing this apron’. So it helped my business in a way too.” (P15)

Creating commercial posts demanded a high level of staging, often involving pets wearing costumes, posing, or performing specific actions. This also required training pets to be models, involving treats and coaxing to capture the desired shots (See Figure 5A).

“Sometimes it takes a lot of coaxing and treats. I make an effort not to overdo it. So when we’re out, I’m not generally posing them, I just wait for them to do whatever, and snap a photo. But when I need them to sit still for products, I use treats to coax them. It can be challenging with two cats that one is disinterested while the other is all about the treats.” (P17)

These types of posts also required enormous editing efforts. Participants emphasized the quality of their content, which led them to engage in post-processing for visually and textually captivating content. This included using editing software such as photoshops (P11, P12), and filters (P20) for cohesiveness (See Figure 5C).

Participants felt that their pet’s distinctive persona served as a means to access a broader audience. However, some participants also noted that excessive use of staging and editing might not represent their pet’s genuine aspects. For example, P12 noted “Lot of people will show the perfect and flawless side of the pet, not the raw side. Like some people can put on a fake persona or something like that. Yeah. But it’s just like, it just feels like a fake to me.” (P12)

4.4 Challenges and concerns about creating and managing pet’s identity online

While four participants (P9, P10, P11, P19) expressed no particular concerns and felt support from their online communities, the majority of the interviewed pet account owners ($N = 17$) revealed

different challenges that impact their well-being and their pets as they manage the pet’s online identity. As their account grew bigger, some participants encountered skepticism or indifference toward their pet account endeavors, with labels like “crazy cat lady” (P3) and feedback such as “I wouldn’t get value out of that (operating pet account); this is a waste of time” (P18). Additionally, they experienced pressure when it came to engaging with different types of audiences and expressed concerns about staging content that might have an unnatural impact on their pets. In the following sections, we outline these challenges and explore the strategies participants used to address them, both reactively and proactively.

4.4.1 Well-being for pet owners. Addressing negative comments:

A primary challenge that participants ($N = 14$) reported was the negative comments they received. Five participants commented that they received a growing number of criticisms as their accounts grew popular (P3, P6, P7, P10, P13). One category of negative feedback involves criticism regarding specific parts of the pet’s online content or identity. For example, P3, an outdoor cat account, often received hateful comments: “Always a cat should be inside. It’s too bad to see a cat on a leash or in the car.” Similarly, the audience criticized pets wearing costumes, with concerns about the pet’s safety and comfort, despite the dress-up being a central part of the pet’s representation (P13, P15, P18).

Negative feedback could also exacerbate and become attacks and online trolling. These messages, in the form of post comments or direct messages, are specific in attacking a part of the pet’s online identity, such as hating a specific animal breed (P13) or shaming the pet owner to post content about their pet (P4). P1 recalls personal attacks due to representing the pet’s disability and special needs.

“I regularly get like people telling me that ‘If I had to live like that, I would kill myself’. And it’s mostly because people haven’t bothered to inform themselves about [pet’s name]’s condition and his care. And they think that I’m just keeping him alive for money... Just because he doesn’t behave like a normal cat doesn’t mean that he’s like, unhappy or in pain or anything like that or needs to be euthanized.” (P1)

To cope with the negative comments rising with their accounts’ popularity, participants adopted different strategies. Some participants interact with their audience to respond to the feedback. P3 and P18 proposed they would answer every negative comment to thank the audience for their concern and emphasize their pet is safe. P3 and P5 also hosted live sessions as a way to prove their pets’ well-being and clarify misconceptions. On the other hand, some participants limit their interactions with audiences. P1 restricts their comment section to follower-only, while many participants opted to ignore the criticisms (P1, P7, P8, P10, P20). P7 reflected that their followers would help deflect the negative comments.

“Honestly, nine times out of ten, I don’t have to do anything because of all of my followers. There’s a good chunk of them, they have been following me for a long time or being agreed with me. So normally, if somebody comments something rude or negative on my video, my followers will comment and reply to them and they’ll back me up.” (P7)

Balancing personal lives: Outside of negative comments, participants also reported challenges in balancing their duty as account curators with their main occupations and personal lives ($N = 17$).

Participants experienced burnout, often stemming from the time commitment and mental strain of communicating with various audiences including sponsors, peer pet accounts, and followers. Many participants ($N = 8$) mentioned that handling sponsored posts posed a particular challenge due to stringent brand requirements. Some participants also faced difficulty due to competitiveness in the community, with pressure to distinguish among similar pet accounts (P6, P21), and constantly being creative to generate new ideas for content (P10, P21).

“You’re constantly comparing yourself to others and be like, well, these people have this many views and these people have this many followers and like, it just becomes a lot, it’s like a 24/7 job. It never ends.” (P12)

Another pressure was from the obligation to post content consistently ($N = 11$), and the mental strain to communicate or react with their followers ($N = 6$).

To deal with these challenges, participants reported setting boundaries to reject sponsorships that go against their values and pet’s identity (P7, P12, P13, P16, P18), prioritizing personal life (P3, P11, P17, P20), developing schedules or routines (P11, P17), and reminding themselves of their original goals (P3, P9, P21).

“But you have to keep your priorities straight. I always think about our main goal. Our goal is to keep memory for ourselves, but also to educate our followers.” (P3)

4.4.2 Well-being for the pet. On the other hand, presenting and managing an online identity poses challenges for the featured pets. Many pet account owners emphasized the importance of consistency in posting new content, with 13 participants reporting posting daily, and 7 reporting multiple times a week. The high demand for content means the pet has to be frequently involved in the staging process. However, participants often encountered instances where their pets were not inclined to participate in content creation ($N = 6$). This includes pets showing reluctance to have their picture or video taken, or avoiding activities that the pet account owners want to present on social media (e.g. going outdoors, wearing costumes).

Participants also expressed concerns about the unnatural act of always filming and staging the pet.

“Sometimes I’m questioning myself whether it has an effect on him that I’m frequently filming him. So he sees the camera, which is not something natural. So I guess he’s now used to it. But yeah, this is maybe something that could have an effect on him.” (P2)

When conflict arises between the pet’s well-being and content creation for the online identity, pet account owners reported they will prioritize the pet’s comfort and not force the pet (P2, P4, P11, P16, P19, P20) However, some participants also adopted strategies that allow the pets to experience the process with the least discomfort. For example, some streamlined the content creation, setting schedules for their pets to ensure minimal disruption (P11, P19). Other participants would coax or train their pets and offer them treats while staging them (P13, P15, P17, P19).

“I literally trained them to model. So it went from me training them and then sitting in the same chair, the same kind of position. Then like harness training him, and we started going outside, and then it just moved into this adventure cat page. It’s also to show the changes in my growth, my learning, and also the cats being trained in different ways.” (P17)

4.4.3 Avoided content. To maintain the consistency of their pet’s online identity and prevent backlash from their content representations, pet account owners often set guidelines to stay away from certain types of content. Participants expressed that they would refrain from posting content that deviates from their pet’s established goals and identity. For example, P3 and P10, both representing their cats through outdoor adventures in nature, express reluctance toward sharing indoor content, as it does not align with their pet’s identity and their overarching goal of educating others about outdoor experiences for cats. Given the substantial effort invested in shaping and curating their pet’s online identity, participants are unwilling to lose their authenticity and niche role in the community.

Post with human presence: Some participants ($N = 6$) avoided human presence in their content, such as refraining from showing the owner’s face, with the intention of keeping the pet as the central focus of the account. These participants felt that their own presence would interfere with the pet’s identity.

“I try not to be in the actual photos because... that’s kind of not really the focus that I want to emphasize in terms of my account for my cat. She’s basically the focal point. She’s the main character” (P11)

However, some participants embraced human presence in their pet identity-building. P6 and P12 expressed that they found posts with both themselves and the pet appear more relatable and humane.

Post with personal info: Safety and privacy concerns are another main driver to avoid human presence or personal information ($N = 8$). Participants avoided posting content that intruded on their privacy or personal information, particularly their location. P1 and P19 avoid posting themselves to mitigate the risks of exposing their identities, while P9 emphasized protecting other people’s privacy and asking for consent when other people (e.g. neighborhood kids) appear in their posts.

“Maintaining privacy. If I’m posting content, I kind of check what’s in the background. For instance, when we go for a walk outside or take her on a harness, I’ll ensure there are no visible street signs or anything that could reveal my interests. I also make sure to obscure any names or sensitive information.” (P21)

Post with sensitive topic: More generally, most participants avoid making controversial posts to prevent critical feedback ($N = 16$). The controversy could be based on parts of the pet caring that compose the pet’s identity. For example, P7 and P17 found their catio content, despite being central to their account’s niche, sometimes causes controversy from both sides of the argument. P7 described the audience assuming that their cat is never allowed indoors due to the predominant outdoor content, or holding the belief that cats should be solely kept indoors, leading to criticisms.

However, participants also acknowledged (P5, P7) that the controversial topics brought more attention from the audience, thereby underscoring the ambivalence of such content.

“I think posts that are a bit controversial kind of go viral. Posts where we give him human food, where some self-proclaimed expert would criticize, those kinds would go far. The cute ones, where he’s like sleeping or doing nothing, would not.” (P5)

5 DISCUSSION

Existing literature on social media influencers have often focused on motivation [6, 107], perception [43, 78], engagement strategy and appeal [12, 35, 107], and creator ecology managing content across multiple platforms [67, 113]. Concurrently, considerable research has explored extended-self accounts, where the account operator uses an online persona as an extension of their self-identity [20], notably in areas like “sharenting”, where parents showcase children [14, 23, 49]. Our study extends the above research by examining the motivation and goals (RQ1), identity management strategies (RQ2) and challenges (RQ3) of pet influencers. Our findings underscore the distinctive nature of pet influencers, akin to sharenting accounts in considering the well-being of their subjects while having their online representation determined by others, yet divergent in their strategies and concerns.

We observe that the transition from personal to dedicated pet accounts represents not just an extension of the owner’s identity but the creation of distinct entities shaped by privacy concerns, audience engagement, and the negotiation between personal and public spaces. This shift redefines privacy management boundaries in terms of disclosure, identity, and temporality, echoing the discussions by Palen and Dourish [79]. The impact of these evolving boundaries is particularly pronounced for pet account owners, driven by the unique influence of the pets themselves.

In the sections below, we discuss how to support labor involved in managing pet accounts to advance the development of inclusive and purpose-driven social media platforms, addressing the diverse needs of pet owners, their pets, and the broader online community. Firstly, we discuss identity labor and how platforms should be designed to support creating and selecting content that aligns with pets’ identities while maintaining “authenticity.” Secondly, we discuss relational labor and the need for design implications for tools that facilitate interactions to sustain “joy”. Finally, we shed light on how these labors are akin to the concept of the “third shift,” encouraging further explorations beyond the cute economy.

5.1 Identity labor: striking a balance between authenticity and portrayal

Identity labor entails establishing, maintaining, and altering identities during social interaction [27]. In essence, it reflects individuals’ efforts to shape a coherent and distinctive sense of personal identity [1]. Different from managing their personal accounts, pet account owners engage in a unique form of identity labor, where they shape and project their pets’ identities on behalf of their pets. This projection also extends and manifests part of the pet account owners’ self-identities [54, 68], despite the shift away from their personal accounts to the embodiment of dedicated pet accounts.

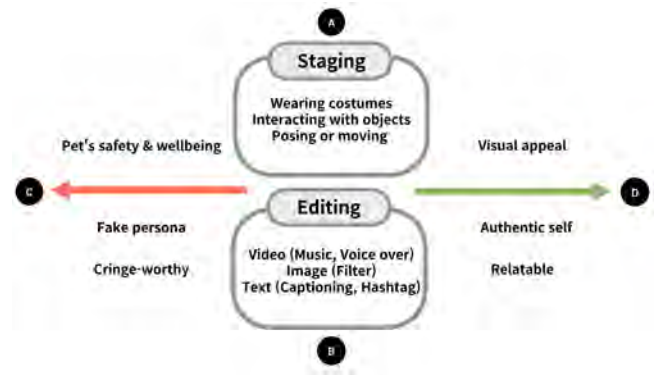


Figure 6: Identity labor: Balancing the spectrum of representation strategy involves work in both (A) staging (e.g., wearing costumes, interacting with objects, and posing) and (B) editing (e.g., video processing, image filtering, and text labelling). (C) Negative effect: concerns about pet’s safety and well-being, fake persona, and cringe-worthy content. (D) Positive effects: visual appeal, authentic self-representation, and relatable content.

We identified two main representation methods employed by pet account owners, including staging (pre-processing) and editing (post-processing), utilized to different extents depending on the owner’s objectives and goals. We found that a spectrum of effort was spent on staging and editing, ranging from the lowest for personal, intrinsic goals, the middle for altruistic goals, and the highest for commercial, extrinsic incentives. The amount of identity labor input directly influences popularity growth and audience engagement in general. It’s also pivotal in realizing the pet account owners’ goals—yet it requires appropriate balance to prevent overbearing burden (See Figure 6).

Staging can be a labor-intensive process, involving the capturing of content that aligns with the pet’s identity. Engaging pets in staging requires a delicate balance between the needs of the pet and those of the owner. Staging with pets typically includes dressing them in costumes and posing them, often requiring training to turn the pet into a model [77, 95]. Participants faced challenges when their pets uncooperative to participate in staging, highlighting the importance of considering the pet’s well-being. While staging with pets generated visually captivating content, it also raised concerns about the artificiality of the process. This might bring controversy, particularly concerning pet safety [69], as excessive staging can lead to backlash and ethical considerations.

Editing represents another laborious identity labor, involving the selection and curation of content that matches the pet’s identity. Commonly, editing involves pet account owners adopting their pets’ point of view [77, 95]. Ngai found this method enables pet owners to empathize and think from their pets’ standpoint, allowing them to project their aspirational and positive selves [77]. However, the excessive use of the pet’s point of view can have adverse effects. Some participants found it cringe-worthy or contrived, labeling it as a “fake persona.” This aligns with the criticism faced by pet

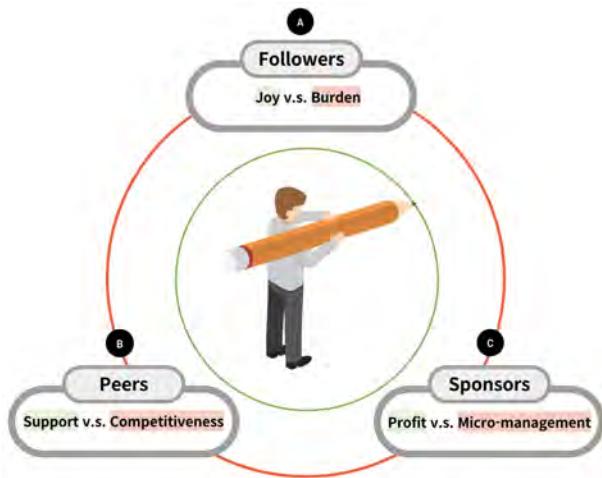


Figure 7: Relational labor: Boundary drawing in different relationships with (A) followers, (B) peer influencers, and (C) sponsors. Appropriate boundary drawing (green circle) can result in positive effects such as joy, support, and profit, while uncomfortable boundary drawing (red circle) can result in negative effects such as burden, competitiveness, and micro-management.

accounts, as a forced or inauthentic portrayal can undermine the perception of cuteness, revealing that cuteness has its limits [95].

Research and design implications: Pet account owners may benefit from tools designed to streamline the content creation and selection process, aligning with their established identities and goals. For pet owners with personal goals, tools can support them in capturing spontaneous moments using bursts of photos. Tools can further assist pet owners with commercial goals, by utilizing pose detection [63, 81] or emotion detection [40, 96] to automatically notice when the pet is in a suitable pose or expressing the desired emotion. In addition, platforms can feature collaborative content creation initiatives for audience engagement. These could include templates for creating shared hashtags and thematic challenges, tailored to echo pets’ identity. Pet account owners can also benefit from tools featuring algorithms analyzing tone [2, 92] and style/aesthetic [11, 108] to select the best-fitted contents and to filter unwanted content according to set criteria. Additionally, Natural Language Processing (NLP) models for detecting humor, sarcasm, or irony [48, 55, 57, 85] can be applied to inform the “cringeworthy” content, while multimodal models identifying abusive and objectionable content [74, 104, 110, 115] can be utilized to inform the “mistreatment or distress” in pets.

5.2 Relational labor: Facing Audience Feedback and Building Community

Relational labor, as defined by Baym, encompasses the ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work involved in communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work [15]. Operating within the digital creator and micro-celebrity [68, 77] realm, pet influencers perform relational labor. They required skills and expertise to foster connections

while adeptly managing boundaries and communicating with their followers, peers, and sponsors in a purposeful and sustained manner, all intended to cultivate an intimate relationship.

We found **boundary drawing** a crucial dimension of relational labor, as participants navigated boundaries in various relationships, each fraught with its own tensions. The initial decision many participants made to create a dedicated pet account were often regarded as an act of drawing boundaries from personal and private relationships. This is consistent with the findings of Bonifacio *et al.* regarding the positive and negative facets of relational labor for digital creators [24]: Engaging with followers brought joy but also a sense of burden to meet expectations. Interactions with fellow pet account owners offered support but were sometimes overshadowed by the competitiveness inherent in niche pursuits. Engaging with sponsors yielded profit yet with the demands of micro-management. Consequently, participants highlighted the challenge of balancing between roles as account managers and their personal lives due to these complex relationships (See Figure 7).

Audience feedback exerts a profound impact on participants, serving as both motivators and obstacles. Positive feedback, such as support and affirmation, mirrored the concept of “shared affect” outlined by Ngai [77]. This fostered a sense of community among pet influencers and their audience, which was a key benefit to participants. Moreover, participants engaged in reciprocal interaction with their audience, such as “loop activity” by tagging each other’s accounts [77] and pursuing “mutual benefits” with sponsors. Conversely, pet influencers grappled with negative feedback, which we identified as a principal challenge in managing pet accounts. Negative feedback, including online trolling and criticisms, tended to amplify as their popularity soared. This introduced new tasks to participants, some solved them by disabling comments while others replied to each comment.

Baym highlighted the pressure exerted by the digital age on musicians to nurture online relationships with fans while simultaneously safeguarding their privacy needs in social media [15]. Our findings mirrored this as we found that pet influencers also prioritize providing constant accessibility and intimate disclosures about their pets to their audiences, fostering a sense of friendship rather than purely maintaining celebrity status. However, pet influencer accounts offer a unique perspective, given that their subjects are non-human. This distinction leads to more relaxed boundaries when sharing information about pets. We found pet account owners expressed reservations about sharing personal information, underscoring a distinct focus on their privacy over that of their pets.

Design implications: Platforms can be designed to minimize or mitigate the effort of pet account owners dealing with negative feedback. Detecting and flagging negative comments [45, 73, 91, 94] and clustering types of negative comments [86] can help the user selectively reply to valid comments. Employing pre-trained language models like GPT [41] to generate appropriate responses to common types of negative comments may reduce the manual effort required for crafting replies. Additionally, platforms can highlight positive feedback, such as extended appreciative notes, making them more visible for users to respond to. Visualizations overview of comment sentiment can allow pet account owners to gain insights into their audience’s responses without the need to individually review each

comment. Extending comment moderators on YouTube [4, 56], similar mechanisms can be extended to pet accounts on Instagram. Additionally, pet account owners can benefit from text generation tools [8, 39] to further reduce labor in mundane communication.

5.3 Third shift: beyond the cute economy

Relational and identity labors in pet influencer accounts intersect with the concept of the “cute economy”. The cute economy revolves around the creation and dissemination of user-generated content featuring entities, such as animals, babies, and objects that are perceived as cute [72]. Pet account owners can perform relational and identity labors to gain popularity and attract brand sponsorships, monetizing their pets’ cuteness. The joy and intimacy fostered through relational labor can attract audiences seeking endearing and relatable pet-related content. Simultaneously, the authentic display of humanized pets through identity labor can create an appeal of cute aesthetics.

However, we learned that not all pet account owners seek profit from their efforts. Some invest their time and energy without financial incentives, paralleling what has been described as the “third shift” in managing sharenting accounts. Managing children’s identity represents an additional responsibility that parents undertake beyond their formal work hours, often without compensation or recognition [5]. Here, we draw parallels between pet accounts and sharenting, as pets are often considered as the pet owner’s children, both being extensions of one’s self [17]. Despite Sharenting parents often facing concerns in guidelines and privacy, they still operate the account more than just to share their kids, but also to portray their parenting practice in an ideal way [14, 34, 49]. Pet influencers are similar in a way that they not merely display their cute pets, but also strive for multi-faceted goals.

Pet account owners who performed third shift prioritized “altruistic” goals over personal or commercial goals. They challenge prevailing norms and seek to diversify the dominant content landscape. For instance, we found some participants use their accounts as instruments of empowerment, particularly for marginalized groups like the elderly and special needs pets (P1, P5, P9, P16). This exemplifies the work of Maddox, who explores how joy can serve as a form of resistance, challenging the status quo [68, 69].

Focusing solely on supporting relational and identity labors within the cute economy may inadvertently overlook or undermine the diverse goals of pet account owners. To date, however, this diversity is not well reflected in studies of pet influencers (nor in digital creators). Extensive research has been conducted on marketing strategies and consumer behaviors, focusing on content curation of pet influencers for advertising purposes [33, 54, 66, 76, 112]. While this may assist pet account owners with commercial objectives, there is a notable absence of research aimed at improving platform vernacular to cater to non-profit values [114]. Our study encourages further exploration of the multifaceted goals of pet account owners beyond commercial values, supporting their efforts to maintain their pet accounts, akin to the third shift observed in sharenting.

Research and Design implications: Inclusive platforms should be designed to prevent platform capitalism from exploiting the relational and identity labor of pet account owners. While considerable

research has centered around supporting NPO (Non-profit organizations) [3, 50, 52], little work has been done on individual level (Non-profit influencers) [93]. Future research could investigate how people interact with and perceive pet account owners with altruistic purposes. Social media platforms might consider incorporating features that acknowledge and reward the labors performed by pet account owners. Features such as badges or recognition systems may serve as tokens of appreciation for accounts that consistently produce authentic content. Insights from studies on the effects of peer recognition and badge systems on online content provision [64] and digital learning [46, 71] can inform the design of these recognition mechanisms to support non-profit pet influencers.

6 LIMITATION

Aligning with a trend where cat or dog accounts dominate the pet influencer landscape [54], the majority of participants ($N = 20$) featured either cats or dogs. Although similar studies often focused on these pet types [68, 77], we acknowledge this might restrict the generalizability of our results to the broader pet influencer population, as different types of pets may have distinct characteristics.

Our research focused on pet influencer accounts with followers ranging from 0.46K to 189K. While this range captures a substantial portion of the influencer spectrum including nano, micro, and macro influencers, it may not fully represent influencers with significantly larger followings, referred to as mega influencers. Nevertheless, our study offers a unique perspective, as existing research has often concentrated on either mega influencers through content analysis [54, 76] or nano influencers through interview studies [68, 77].

While Instagram has been extensively studied in relation to pet influencers in social media influencer [47, 65, 66, 76] and micro-celebrity studies [68, 69, 77], we note that pet influencers also exist on platforms like YouTube and TikTok. Future research could delve into these platforms to gain a comprehensive understanding, given each platform’s unique vernacular and dynamics.

7 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have explored motivations, challenges, and work involved in curating and managing successful pet accounts through interviews with 21 pet influencer account owners. We found evolution in the participants’ goals, initially rooted in personal motives but expanded to encompass a multifaceted spectrum, including altruistic and commercial aspirations. These goals collectively stem from personal, social, and financial incentives, benefiting both the owners and their pets. Pet account owners performed identity labor, employing various levels of staging and editing to portray their pets’ authentic online identities for each goal. They also engaged in relational labor, maintaining boundaries between followers, peer accounts, and sponsors while fostering connections. These labors functioned as a double-edged sword for pet account owners, where more input and commitment can lead to one step closer to achieving their diverse range of goals; but when the labors are not well-balanced, the progress is made at the expense of an overbearing “third shift” that consumes their time and well-being. We discuss the importance of supporting identity and relational labors to maintain joy and connections while recognizing the diverse motivations that drive pet account owners beyond the cute economy.

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A APPENDIX

A.1 Instagram Hashtags Used for Data Collection

Table 2: Top 20 co-related hashtags of #petinfluencer

Rank	Hashtag	Rank	Hashtag
1	dogsofinstagram	11	pets
2	dog	12	doglife
3	dogs	13	instadog
4	pet	14	dogstagram
5	cat	15	puppylove
6	doglover	16	doglovers
7	puppy	17	catlover
8	catsofinstagram	18	petsofinstagram
9	cats	19	petlovers
10	dogoftheday	20	puppiesofinstagram