

**BARE PAWS FOR A BIGGER IMPACT: HOW PET INFLUENCERS'
CLOTHING SHAPES THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT**

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ABSTRACT

While the importance of influencer marketing in communication strategies remains undeniable, the growing concerns about influencers' credibility are compromising their effectiveness. Therefore, the scientific community is starting to explore alternatives to traditional influencers, with pet influencers emerging as an engaging option. However, current literature still lacks insights about what makes some pet influencers more effective than others. In this research, we propose that pet influencers' anthropomorphized appearance – specifically, whether they wear clothes or accessories – can impact social media engagement. We explore this question by conducting a field study on 18,653 Instagram posts from 69 top pet influencers. Econometric analysis revealed that pet influencers wearing clothes lead to lower engagement compared to those without. This finding holds even after controlling for pet size, animal type, and fixed effects related to accounts and time. Results provide contributions to the literature of influencer marketing literature and anthropomorphic cues on social media, presenting counterintuitive yet practical implications for brands and creators aiming to create effective social media campaigns.

Keywords: pet influencers, clothing, anthropomorphic cues, social media engagement

CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

Influencer marketing has rapidly evolved into a pivotal component of modern marketing strategies, transforming how brands engage with consumers (Leung et al., 2022). However, despite the dominance of this research stream within the marketing scientific community, recent controversies involving influencers have undermined their credibility and fueled skepticism about their real effectiveness (Vogue Business, 2022). For instance, the famous Chiara Ferragni's scandal led her to lose half a million followers, as well as major collaborations with brands such as Coca Cola and L'Oréal (The Guardian, 2024). Notably, the average engagement of influencers on Instagram has dropped to its lowest level in five years, with macro-influencers registering the highest drop from 1.97% to 0.95% (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024).

As a consequence, the influencer marketing literature began to explore alternative types of influencer, such as *pet influencers*. This shift reflects the industry's adaptation to evolving consumer preferences for new forms of influence that maintain high levels of authenticity. In this regard, pet influencers stand out for their ability to provide authentic entertainment and relatable experiences (Myers et al., 2022). They are animals with a large social media audience, gaining millions of followers on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (Statista, 2023). Their online success represents the rapid growth of the pet industry, as emphasized by the 147 billion of US dollars spent on pets in 2023 (American Pet Product Association, 2024). However, despite their increasing popularity, most scientific research on pet influencers is still at an early and exploratory stage (e.g., Jacobson et al., 2022). Moreover, the few empirical studies conducted so far have focused on comparing the effectiveness between pet and human influencers: Zhang et al. (2023) found that a social media post written from the pet's (vs. the owner's) point of view enhances consumers responses – specifically booking intentions – when the message has a rational (vs. emotional) appeal. Consistently, Di Cioccio et al. (2024) showed that pet (vs. human) influencers lead to higher engagement and

purchase intention because they are seen as cuter and, in turn, more credible. While these studies advance our understanding of the dynamics of pet influencers on social media, they offer little insights into the elements that make some pet influencers more effective than others.

The present research aims to address this gap by investigating how the way pet influencers appear – specifically, whether they wear clothing or accessories – affects their engagement on social media (see Figure 1 for concrete examples). Pet influencers wearing clothing or accessories should be considered a form of anthropomorphism, as they emulate a behaviour typical of humans. We propose this categorization as the focal variable in our study due to the growing importance of visual elements in social media communication, which has evolved beyond a focus on text alone (Li and Xie, 2020). This shift recognizes that visuals are the first aspect of content to grab user attention, playing a pivotal role in shaping their behaviour (Pieters and Wedel, 2004). Our choice is further justified by the conflicting findings regarding the impact of anthropomorphism on user behaviour and engagement on social media (Lou et al., 2023). Indeed, the lack of an unambiguous answer leaves open the possibility that the engagement of pet influencers might differ depending on whether they are dressed in clothes and accessories, and in turn appear more anthropomorphized.

Figure 1: Pet Influencers with (top row) and without (bottom row) clothing.



THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Anthropomorphism – defined as the “attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman things or events” (Guthrie, 1995, p.3) – has been studied across various marketing contexts, often yielding contradictory outcomes. For instance, a meta-analysis from Blut et al. (2021) highlighted both positive and negative effects of anthropomorphism in service provision, while Ding et al. (2022) observed similar contrasts in consumer behaviour in hospitality and tourism. In social media, the effects of anthropomorphism have been explored in both virtual influencers (VIs) and brands. Kim et al. (2024) found that realistic VIs evoke mixed emotions, such as eeriness and coolness. In addition, while anthropomorphized brands often boost engagement (Pérez-Vega et al., 2018), they can also trigger negative reactions due to perceived risks associated with humanness (Barcelos et al., 2018).

However, the impact of anthropomorphism on social media outcomes remains unexplored in the context of pet influencers. On the one hand, one could expect pet wearing clothes to have a positive impact on social media engagement as they might increase feelings of playfulness. Specifically, the whimsical appearance of a pet dressed in human-like attire can evoke laughter and delight, making the social media experience more entertaining and potentially boosting engagement (Noguti and Waller, 2020). On the other hand, concerns may arise that pet wearing clothes have limited freedom, which can potentially undermine their effectiveness. Recently, users seem to pay close attention to the ethical implications associated with influencer marketing practices (Ye et al., 2021) and presenting animals wearing clothes may be perceived as restricting their natural behaviours. In addition, dressing animals may also make them appear as “not true to themselves” and therefore less authentic (Koles et al., 2024). To address this uncertainty, we conducted a field study on Instagram posts examining how pet clothing and accessories impact engagement.

FIELD STUDY

Method. In December 2023, we collected data from leading pet influencer accounts on Instagram. We employed lists from specialized agencies (e.g., Hypeauditor) to identify accounts with at least 300,000 followers. This process led us to 69 accounts, averaging 1.2 million followers. From these accounts, we gathered content posted from 2020 onwards, including media details, the number of likes and comments, captions, and publication timestamps. For our analysis, we focused exclusively on image posts. We excluded videos due to the difficulty of automatic categorization and sidecards because they contain multiple media types and only provide a single engagement metric per post. Our final dataset included 18,653 posts.

Image analysis. To categorize the images in the posts as featuring pets with or without clothing, we used the Google Cloud Vision API via KNIME Analytics (Villarroel Ordenes and Silipo, 2021). Specifically, the label detection function provided a set of descriptive labels for each image, effectively converting visual content into text, making categorization easier. The Cloud Vision tool also assigns a confidence score to each label, indicating the likelihood that the object is present in the image. To ensure reliable categorization, we only retained labels with a confidence score above 80%. This process generated 1,012 unique labels. The authors reviewed these labels, identifying 56 related to clothing or accessories, such as *clothing*, *dress*, *jacket*, *jeans*, and *sunglasses*, using them to classify the posts. The process led to the identification of into two categories: 2,499 images with clothing and 16,154 without. To verify the accuracy of this categorization, a research assistant manually coded 100 randomly selected images from each category. The levels of agreement (Wang et al., 2024) were satisfactory, with Precision at 94%, Recall at 89.52%, and the F1 score at 91.71%.

Econometrics models. We analyzed the impact of clothing on pet engagement across several models. Engagement, our dependent variable, is measured as the sum of likes and comments divided by the account's number of followers. The primary independent variable, labeled “clothes,” is a binary variable that equals 1 when the pet is dressed and 0 when it is not. In all models, we used robust standard errors to account for heteroskedasticity, confirmed by the Breusch-Pagan test.

In our initial OLS model, without any control variables, clothing had a negative and significant effect on engagement ($b = -1194.94, t = -2.68, p = 0.007$). In a second model, we included fixed effects for Instagram usernames to account for individual pet influencer characteristics. The negative effect of clothing remained significant ($b = -955.12, t = -2.83, p = 0.005$).

To ensure robustness, we tested alternative models using the total number of likes and comments as the dependent variable, treating the number of followers as a control variable. The negative effect of clothing persisted ($b = -1409.07, t = -2.23, p = 0.026$). Finally, we added controls for pet size (0 = small, 1 = large) and animal type (two dummies for dogs and cats, with *other animals* as the reference category), as well as time fixed effects at the year, month, day, and hour levels (Kanuri et al., 2018). The results consistently indicated an even stronger negative effect of clothing on engagement ($b = -2605.26, t = -4.19, p < 0.001$).

Discussion. Across all estimated models, posts featuring dressed pets generate less engagement than those with undressed pets. This finding holds true when accounting for account fixed effects and specific pet characteristics like type and size.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This research offers two key contributions. First, it adds to the influencer marketing literature (e.g., Leung et al., 2022) by identifying a crucial factor in pet influencers' effectiveness. Unlike prior studies comparing pet and human influencers (e.g., Di Cioccio et al., 2024), we found that pet influencers without (vs. with) clothes or accessories generate higher (vs. lower) engagement. Second, we contribute to the literature on anthropomorphic cues in social media. While previous research investigated brands and virtual influencers anthropomorphism (Kim et al., 2024), we explored its role with respect to pet influencers, and found that it undermines their effectiveness. Lastly, this study holds practical and counterintuitive implications for brands and creators about how to make pet influencers' content more effective. Despite the overwhelming presence of content in which pet influencers emulate human behaviours – for instance, some of the most followed pet influencers such as @itsdougthepug and @thatatlittlepuff often wear clothes – this research shows that they are actually more effective when presented in their “natural state”.

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