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**EXAMINATION OF PET IMAGERY IN DIGITAL
MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS:
UNDERSTANDING IF AND WHEN
PETS CAN BE EFFECTIVE ENDORSERS**

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Doctor of Philosophy
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2024

Declaration of Own Work

I declare that the thesis has been composed by myself and that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. I confirm that the work submitted is my own, except where work which has formed part of jointly-authored publications has been included. My contribution and those of the other authors to this work have been explicitly indicated below. I confirm that appropriate credit has been given within this thesis where reference has been made to the work of others. Specifically:

- The work presented in Chapter Four is part of a paper that has been co-authored by Dr Katina Kulow, Dr Kirsten Cowan, and Dr Ben Marder. As the first author, I designed and created all of the surveys and stimuli, ran all of the studies except one, conducted the data analysis, and wrote the full draft of the paper. My co-authors contributed to the design of the stimuli/surveys and the writing of the paper. Additionally, Dr Katina Kulow ran Study 3 and conducted data analysis as well.
- The work presented in Chapter Five is part of a paper that has been co-authored by Dr Kirsten Cowan and Dr Ben Marder. As the first author, I designed and created all of the surveys and stimuli, ran all of the studies, conducted the data analysis, and wrote the full draft of the paper. My co-authors contributed to the design of the stimuli/surveys and the writing of the paper.
- The work presented in Chapter Six is part of a paper that has been co-authored by Dr Ben Marder, Dr Amin Nazifi, and Dr Kirsten Cowan. As the first author, I designed and created all of the surveys and stimuli, ran all of the studies, conducted the data analysis, and wrote the full paper. My co-authors contributed to the design of the stimuli/surveys. Additionally, Dr Ben Marder managed the relationship with the company used in the field study.

This statement has been shared with and approved by all the co-authors involved in this research.

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Acknowledgements

My first thought goes to my supervisors, Kirsten and Ben, who I cannot thank enough for the support, knowledge, fun and friendship they brought me over the last four years, beyond of course teaching me most of the things I know today as a researcher and teacher. Kirsten, you encouraged me to get out of my comfort zone and find my way in the academic world, and inspired me to dare and try things. Thank you for being my conference roommate, US tour guide, networking coach, and pub buddy. You have definitely shaped who I am as an academic, and I am glad I got to be your first PhD student. Thank you for the legacy that I will hopefully pass on to other students in the future. Ben, thank you for your unwavering support on the academic battlefield over the last... 6, or 7 years? I will never thank you enough for teaching me and making me love research, the hours spent on calls, the coaching and preparation for literally every step of my academic career, for always including me when an interesting research project is around the corner, for the crazy stories that always surprise me, the messages before every stressful moment and the ones after bad news, and for always having the right word at the right time. I would never be where I am now without you as my brother-in-arms in academia (I will never be as good as you at making Call of Duty references, but you will surely appreciate the effort). Kirsten and Ben, I truly hope you know how grateful I am to have you as my supervisors, co-authors, colleagues, and friends. Thank you, and here to many more adventures together.

A heartfelt thank you to my other co-authors, Katina and Amin, but also to my co-authors on other research projects, for their trust, patience, and collaboration. I have learned a lot from working with you, and I am excited to see our projects find their homes. It is not always easy to work with a more junior researcher and to collaborate from afar, so I hope you know I am grateful to work alongside inspiring and interesting people from whom I have learned so much and who have contributed to where I am today. Thanks!

I would also like to thank my partner, for being by my side throughout the PhD, and long before that. Thank you for encouraging me to pursue what I wanted to do, even if that meant making sacrifices along the way. Thank you for always motivating

me, encouraging me, sharing my successes and cheering me up when I fail, for your patience in dealing with the long hours and late nights, for bringing me ice cream when I am down, and pretending to be happy to read my thesis for the tenth time. Nothing I do would be possible without you. I am so proud of what you have accomplished, and to have spent more than half of my life with you. To the next 14 years and beyond!

Another thank you to my family in France who are equally proud and confused about what I do. Although we did not have many opportunities to see each other over the last few years, the long video calls and short getaways at home in the countryside have been precious to me and helped me recharge. Merci.

I would also like to thank the University of Edinburgh, which did not only provide me with an opportunity to do a PhD and research on topics I am passionate about, but granted me a scholarship without which I would not be here today. I am also grateful for the several opportunities that were offered to me over the years, including becoming a Teaching Fellow, guest lectures and obtaining the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice. This would not be possible without great colleagues, including Jennifer Yule, Susan Dunnett, and Sophie Duncan-Sheperd, who also provided support in one way or another. All these opportunities and interactions allowed me to grow as an academic and as a person. Simultaneously, I would also like to thank the University of Strathclyde for the trust they vested in me by allowing me to join the team as a Lecturer prior to finishing my PhD. The last few months have been quite a ride, between finishing my PhD, starting a new job, organising and teaching courses and working on research projects, but it has been an incredibly rewarding and interesting one.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to my research, both the participants in my surveys and the company that agreed to collaborate on my research project. This research's findings exist thanks to your contributions.

I would also like to thank the Examiners who agreed to take the time to read my thesis, attend my viva, and whom I am sure will provide me with very insightful feedback. I know how difficult it is to carve time out in academia, and I am thankful for the time and attention spent on my work. I hope you enjoy reading this thesis and

learning about my research, and I am looking forward to closing this chapter of my life by presenting to you the results of my work conducted over the past years.

A final thanks goes to all the pets involved in this research. These include Lucian, who is apparently more successful than me as an influencer, Miso who managed to resist the peanut butter temptation, but also my supervisors (aka their pet parents). I am also grateful for the support I received from my own cats, Baby Cat, Simba, and Mr Cat, who were always sitting on me and asking for hugs throughout this very long and challenging journey, be it writing, analysing the data and even marking. Although they are not with me anymore, I am grateful for all the purrs and hugs that definitely comforted me when I needed them.



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List of Abbreviations

The following lists abbreviations used within this thesis in alphabetical order.

nWOM: Negative Word-of-Mouth

SMI: Social Media Influencer

WTP: Willingness to Pay

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Abstract

Animals, and pets in particular, are prevalent in consumers' lives, as well as in marketing communications. Yet, despite the important roles they play in our society, the marketing literature remains scarce and crucial questions are still to be answered. Are pets effective endorsers? Can they be more effective than human endorsers? Are there certain circumstances under which they might be more or less effective? This research aims to start answering these questions. Adopting a positivist stance, and through one qualitative exploratory study and three experimental papers (including seven experiments and two field studies), this research explores pet endorsements in the digital environment, with the first two papers exploring pets as social media influencers (SMIs), whereas the last paper examines generic pet images used in marketing communications (not from SMIs). While the exploratory study helps to confirm which areas mentioned in the literature are worth exploring, Paper One finds that pet social media influencers, also known as petfluencers, can be more effective than their human counterparts in driving positive consumer responses such as social media engagement and willingness to pay (WTP) because they are perceived as more sincere. Petfluencers' sincerity can be further manipulated through the type of photos they post on their social media profiles, increasing their effectiveness for consumers who are less likely to respond positively to their content, such as individuals with a low propensity to anthropomorphise. Paper Two supports that overall, pets are more persuasive (i.e., increase purchase intentions) when endorsing congruent products (i.e., products that they can use or 'fit' with the pet endorser) rather than incongruent products. This is because congruent information attracts greater consumer attention in digital environments where clearer and simpler information is more effective. However, inducing immersion through a more vivid background can mitigate the negative consequence of product incongruence and increase the effectiveness of incongruent pet ads. Paper Three shows that including the image of a pet in an apology message following a service failure results in better outcomes, such as increased repurchase intentions and customer service ratings, and decreased intention to engage in negative word-of-mouth (nWOM). Apologies including a pet picture increase the perceptions of warmth towards the brand, without reducing its competence perceptions. However, the effect only holds when the service failure is

minor, not when it is major. The findings provide novel theoretical contributions to the marketing literature on pets, influencer marketing, congruence, and service recovery. It also offers actionable recommendations for marketers.

Chapter One: Introduction

Marketing communication, often referred to as advertising, is a strategic tool for brands to inform and persuade consumers (De Pelsmacker et al., 2021; Iyer et al., 2014). Indeed, marketing communications do not only allow brands to convey information about their offerings, but they also differentiate the brand from its competitors as well as create and maintain relationships with consumers (De Pelsmacker et al., 2021). However, over the past decades, the marketing communication landscape has been dramatically impacted by the emergence of new technology, offering new opportunities for brands to reach their consumers through new digital media (Winer, 2009). Yet, while brands have more opportunities than ever to reach and interact with consumers, they are also increasingly struggling to attract and retain customers' attention (Dessart, 2018). Indeed, as consumers are constantly exposed to marketing messages (Sicilia & Ruiz, 2010), marketers now all aim to overcome this marketing message fatigue, which has a negative impact on life satisfaction (Torres, 2020). As consumers feel increasingly bombarded by marketing messages (Optimove, 2023), is marketing doomed to make consumers unhappy as suggested by some (Torres, 2020), or does an alternative exist to engage with consumers while putting a smile on their faces? This research investigates an existing marketing tool which has also been found to improve mental health: pets (Oaklander, 2017). Although omnipresent in marketing communications and consumers' homes, the full potential of pets as marketing tools is yet to be fully uncovered.

Humans have always relied on animals, from a purely utilitarian perspective at first (e.g., using them as food, as material for clothes, as experiments), to a closer relationship involving greater respect for animals, especially pets. The latter, in particular, has gained a special role in people's lives, becoming close companions or even family members (Amiot et al., 2020), with 95% of pet owners considering their pets a true member of their family (Oaklander, 2017). Although pet ownership has been found to have a profound impact on owners' feelings and behaviours, such as an increased sense of safety and belongingness (Zeifman & Hazan, 1997), greater physical and psychological well-being (Amiot & Bastian, 2015), and even a stronger interest in animal rights causes (Kidd et al., 1995), the positive effect of pets is not limited to pet owners. For example, people are increasingly following social media

accounts dedicated to pets, as pets are considered mood-lifting, providing emotional support to millions of consumers, especially during the pandemic (Van Vliet, 2023). More recently, pet influencers have been used to help Ukrainians cope with war by providing advice on their social media accounts and raising funds for charities (Shevchenko, 2023).

Unsurprisingly, as pets have gained growing importance in consumers' lives, their presence in marketing communications has expanded as well, with one of five ads featuring animals (Webster, 2018). Beyond appearing more frequently as brand endorsers, the way they are depicted has evolved in the same way as their role in people's homes and hearts did: from humans' properties kept outside to indoor friends or family members (Kennedy & McGarvey, 2008). Therefore, pets are now regular partakers in marketing communications of all sorts, endorsing both non-pet-related and pet-related offerings. Furthermore, their presence unsurprisingly has spread beyond traditional media, from pets featuring on online retailers' websites to pet social media influencers (SMIs). Yet, despite pets' growing importance in consumers' lives, and their prevalence in advertising, the marketing literature on the topic remains scarce.

Recent findings suggest that pets may influence consumers' behaviours. For example, Jia et al. (2022) find that exposure to dogs and cats can influence consumers' mindsets, such that people are more likely to favour a promotion- (vs prevention-) focus when exposed to dogs (vs cats). Additionally, Lancendorfer et al. (2008) argue that the presence of a dog in an ad increases ad attitude. Other marketing literature on the topic, although valuable, examines pets mainly through a cultural (i.e., animal symbolism; Lloyd & Woodside, 2013; Spears et al., 1996) and anthropomorphising lens (Connell, 2013; Miles & Ibrahim, 2013; Wang et al., 2020), focusing on traditional marketing only such as television advertising (Lerner & Kalof, 1999; Yelkur et al., 2013), print advertising (Kennedy & McGarvey, 2008; Spears et al., 1996; Trivedi & Teichert, 2020) and packaging (Park & Kim, 2021). While the majority of studies adopted a qualitative design (e.g., Kennedy & McGarvey, 2008; Lerner & Kalof, 1999), quantitative studies assess and compare pets to other endorsers in significantly different ways [e.g., pet absent vs present (Lancendorfer et al., 2008); animal vs animal with human (Trivedi & Teichert, 2020); anthropomorphised animal vs humanoid

(Connell, 2013; Wang et al., 2020)]. Moreover, these studies consistently consider contingencies, such as pet ownership (Jia et al., 2022), gender (Yelkur et al., 2013), consumers' affiliation towards animals (Lancendorfer et al., 2008), appreciation for nature (Keller & Gierl, 2020), or even consumers' level of identification with the animals (Connell, 2013; Dessart, 2018), to assess their effectiveness. Still missing is a more systematic evaluation of pet endorsements, including in digital media, and a better understanding of the factors impacting their persuasiveness. This lack of insights and guidance regarding pets in marketing seems to be a concern amongst practitioners too, according to a short pilot study conducted for the purpose of this thesis. It consists of an online survey involving 55 marketers (i.e., in charge of or actively participating in the marketing decision-making of their company) from the United States recruited on Prolific ($M_{age} = 39.03$, 52.7% male), and provides interesting practical insights. A large majority of the respondents agree that pets are effective marketing tools (89.1%), can be the most effective endorsers (76.4%), and can be effective in promoting products and services of all sorts (87.3%). Unsurprisingly, most of the respondents would consider using pets in their current marketing activities (74.5%) or have already done so in the past (49.1%). Yet, 70.9% of the respondents indicate that pets do not always work in marketing. Importantly, more than half of the respondents attribute this ineffectiveness to a lack of knowledge about how to use pets in their marketing activities (58.2%). In particular, guidance on how to use pets is not easy to find (61.8%) or widely available (60%); however, they agree that such guidance would be useful (63.6%). In sum, although most marketers consider pets as effective endorsers that they are willing to use, half of them do not know how to effectively use them in their marketing activities. Therefore, these findings provide fertile grounds for this research.

This research takes a consumer psychology perspective to consumers' responses to pet endorsements and aims to uncover how consumers feel and behave when they are exposed to marketing communications featuring pets, in a variety of contexts, although all within the digital realm. Therefore, two considerations delineate the realm of this research: the focus on pets (vs animals in general) and the focus on digital (vs traditional) marketing communications. The focus on pets relies on three factors. First, examining the effect of animals at large without focusing on one particular category like pets, would render extremely challenging the rigorous analysis of their effect on consumer responses. Indeed, the large number of animal species is

likely to evoke a vast array of emotions and responses from consumers, which would be difficult to systematically analyse as part of this thesis. Focusing on pets, which are animals that are domesticated and tamed, allows for a clearer delineation of the topic to be examined, which can then be more rigorously tested through experiments. It is worth noting that although what can be considered a pet varies (e.g., a rat may be considered a pet by some, but not by others), this thesis focuses on the most common pets, namely dogs and cats (Jia et al., 2022). Second, pets are prevalent and play a key role in people's lives, at least in Western countries in which this research is conducted, and hence have the ability to influence individuals' responses (Amiot et al., 2020; Jia et al., 2022). Third, examining pet endorsements also reflects marketplace practices, as pets frequently appear in marketing communications of all sorts (Jia et al., 2022). Simultaneously, the focus on digital marketing communications is also rooted in three reasons. First, similar to the focus on pets, narrowing the scope of this research to one media type allows for a more systematic and rigorous analysis of the effect of pet images on consumer responses. Indeed, individuals assimilate digital messages (vs traditional marketing communications) differently as they can process these at their own pace, allowing for greater customer-brand interaction and message complexity (Belch & Belch, 2012). As consumers' expectations differ between digital and traditional marketing communications, so do their responses. Therefore, to avoid potential confounds related to media choice, this research focuses solely on digital communications (e.g., social media, webpages). Second, this focus on digital marketing communications also reflects industry practices, as practitioners now spend more on digital than traditional marketing (Buchholz, 2020). Third, the limited academic literature available on pets in marketing largely focuses on traditional media such as print and television advertising (e.g., Kennedy & McGarvey, 2008; Lerner & Kalof, 1999; Trivedi & Teichert, 2020; Yelkur et al., 2013) but remains silent regarding the use of pet images in digital media, which is where this research aims to build knowledge. To address the topic of pet images in digital marketing communications, specific choices regarding the research strategy have also been made. Specifically, regarding the philosophical and methodological choices for this research, a positivist research philosophy is adopted. This research aims to observe and causally explain a social reality, that is the omnipresence of pets in marketing communications and their effectiveness as endorsers. Facts and observations are first examined through a qualitative exploratory study, hence providing a basis for subsequent hypothesis

testing (Saunders et al., 2016). This is common practice when researching a new topic with a positivist philosophy on which there is little existing literature (Saunders et al., 2016). Using a deductive approach, hypotheses are then proposed and quantitatively tested through three experimental papers.

It could be argued that pets may elicit the same consumer responses as some other endorsers, such as babies, and that an examination of pets in marketing may involve a variety of comparisons between pets and other endorser types. Therefore, to rule out a potential comparison with babies and to delineate which comparisons are relevant and can be rigorously assessed, another short pilot study was conducted. Ninety Prolific participants from the United States ($M_{age} = 37.40$, 31.1% male) participated in this within-subjects study. Fictitious ads were created, each featuring a different type of endorser (i.e., dog, cat, baby, woman, man) endorsing a water brand (i.e., consumable by humans and pets to avoid confounds) from a British brand (i.e., Smartwater) to minimise brand familiarity biases. All endorsers are sitting on the floor and gazing at the camera in order to minimise confounds. The study involves showing these ads (presented in a randomised order) to participants, before asking them to respond to various measures (i.e., attention-grabbing capacity, attractiveness, likeability, and purchase intention) for each visual. The results of this pilot study support that pet endorsers significantly differ from other (human) endorser types, eliciting increased positive consumer responses. Specifically, the dog and cat endorsers consistently rank first compared to their human counterparts. Respondents find both pets as significantly more attention-grabbing, attractive, and likeable, and report significantly greater purchase intentions of the featured product when endorsed by pets (vs humans). More importantly, pairwise comparisons reveal no differences between the dog and cat endorsers, but significant differences between the pet endorsers (i.e., dog and cat) and all the other human endorsers. Therefore, as the pilot study's results suggest that consumers respond differently to pets than they do to all human endorsers (i.e., babies, women, and men), this research considers pets as a separate phenomenon worthy of its own examination, that can be evaluated versus human endorsers, regardless of the human endorser type.

This research includes three experimental papers that investigate digital pet endorsements at different stages of the customer journey, with the first two papers

exploring pet endorsements up to the purchase decision stage, while the third paper assesses pet endorsements from the purchase decision stage and beyond. Specifically, Paper One and Paper Two focus on petfluencers, which are pets that have, similar to human SMIs, a substantially large following on social media by posting content centred around the said pet. This is in contrast to other pet endorsers that may appear occasionally in marketing communications or act as brand mascots (e.g., Andrex's puppy), or animal imagery involving 'unknown' pets to bring cuteness or humour to an ad (e.g., cleaning brand Flash's singing dog). Petfluencers are not associated with a specific brand, nor are they used as mere tools to make ads more entertaining. They have their own dedicated accounts, either seemingly managed by the pets themselves or more transparently by the pet owners, on which they share their everyday lives and may endorse various brands as human SMIs would. While they might be perceived as cute or humorous, as any human SMI might, they are more than this as they have developed their own online personas, and developed their own identities as influencers rather than as endorsers. Paper Three shifts the focus away from petfluencers to examine generic pet images (not from petfluencers) that are included in corporate apologies (e.g., Amazon's dogs in error pages). Unlike petfluencers, such pet images feature 'unknown' dogs and are used as occasional tools, akin to human models featured in stock images.

The first paper examines pet SMIs versus human SMIs, with the aim of uncovering whether pets can be more persuasive than their human counterparts, and the associated behavioural process. The second paper considers the role of product congruence and immersion in ads featuring pets, exploring ways to increase pet endorsements' effectiveness across different product categories and the factors explaining the effect. Finally, the third paper suggests pets as an effective service recovery tool, along with factors explaining and influencing their effect. Examples of real-life marketing communications related to the three topics are provided in [Appendix One](#). A summary of the studies and research questions is provided in [Table 1](#).

Exploratory Study

- What benefits do consumers associate with pets? (RQ1)
- How do these impact pet endorsements? (RQ2)

Paper One – Petfluencers

- Can petfluencers be more persuasive than human influencers? (RQ3)
- Is this effect mediated by sincerity perceptions? (RQ4)
- What factors can amplify/reduce the effect? (RQ5)

Paper Two – Product congruence and immersion

- Are pets more persuasive when endorsing congruent or incongruent products? (RQ6)
- Is this effect mediated by attention? (RQ7)
- What factors can amplify/reduce the effect? (RQ8)

Paper Three – Pets as service recovery tools

- Can pet images in corporate apologies mitigate the negative consequences of service failures? (RQ9)
- Is this effect mediated by warmth? (RQ10)
- What factors can amplify/reduce the effect? (RQ11)

Table 1: Summary of this research's studies and research questions.

This research provides important theoretical and managerial contributions. The main theoretical contribution is a novel understanding of pet endorsements' persuasiveness, providing a better knowledge of pets as marketing tools. Across three papers and nine experiments, this research critically evaluates whether the presence of a pet in marketing communications (vs no pet or vs human endorsers) has a positive impact on consumer responses, and the factors amplifying (mitigating) their persuasiveness. It contributes to the scarce literature in the domain of pets in marketing which remains focused on qualitative methods, traditional media and consumer contingencies, and starts to shed light on a popular yet under-explored phenomenon.

Second, this research furthers knowledge in the domain of social media marketing, and more specifically influencer marketing, distinguishing animal (i.e., pets) versus traditional (i.e., human) SMIs, and supporting petfluencers as potentially more persuasive than their human counterparts through their perceived innate sincerity. By assessing how individuals' anthropomorphism tendencies influence consumer responses, this research also contributes to theory on the role of propensity to anthropomorphise in marketing.

Third, this research contributes to theory on the role of product congruence and attention in advertising and reconciles somewhat contradicting findings on (in)congruence, suggesting that product congruence is key to gaining consumer attention and encouraging purchase behaviours in the context of pet endorsements. By manipulating immersion and measuring its impact on consumer responses to pet ads, this research also contributes to theory on the role of immersion in digital advertising.

Fourth, it contributes to the extant knowledge in the domain of service failure and recovery, suggesting pet images as service recovery tools to mitigate the negative consequences of service failures. It also contributes to theory on the role of warmth and competence perceptions in service recovery by suggesting pet images in corporate apologies as a means to increase warmth and positive outcomes, and to theory on the role of service failure severity by showing that the effect only holds in response to minor (vs major) service failures.

Finally, this research offers actionable insights for marketers, brands, and influencers, on the factors to consider when using pets in digital endorsements for more positive consumer responses.

The next chapter discusses the methodological approach informing this research. Following this, the exploratory study and the three papers are presented. Finally, an overall discussion brings the three papers' findings together, before drawing a conclusion which gathers this research's theoretical and practical contributions.

Chapter Two: Methodology

This methodology chapter discusses the methodological approach adopted for this research, including an overview of the philosophical stance and approach, research design, and ethical considerations. Participant sampling as well as data collection and analysis are explored independently in each study and are therefore not examined in this chapter.

2.1 Research Philosophy

“A research philosophy is a framework that guides how research should be conducted based on ideas about reality and the nature of knowledge” (Collis & Hussey, 2021, p. 43)

More specifically, a research philosophy is a set of assumptions that shape *what* can be found and *how* it can be interpreted (Grix, 2018; Saunders et al., 2016). These assumptions need to be carefully considered to ensure the consistency and coherence of any piece of research (Saunders et al., 2016), and can be classified into three groups: ontological, epistemological and axiological. These are defined in [Table 2](#).

Ontological assumptions	Assumptions about the nature of reality, or about what is a reality worthy of examination (Saunders et al., 2016)
Epistemological assumptions	Assumptions about “what constitutes acceptable, valid and legitimate knowledge” (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 127)
Axiological assumptions	Assumptions about the researcher’s values and how they will be considered in the research (Saunders et al., 2016)

Table 2: Assumptions considered when selecting a research philosophy.

Two major philosophies emerge in business and management research, namely positivism and interpretivism. Positivism is a philosophical stance concerned with creating law-like generalisations, similar to what natural scientists do (Saunders et al., 2016). Ontologically, positivists see social phenomena as equally real as physical objects or natural phenomena. Epistemologically, knowledge is created by gathering objective, real and empirical facts that can be observed and measured to

allow for causal relationships to be tested. As such, data is collected independently from the researcher's values and beliefs to produce unbiased findings (Saunders et al., 2016). Oppositely, interpretivism is a philosophical stance concerned with studying the meanings created by humans, which cannot be done through law-like generalisations but rather through interpretation. Ontologically, interpretivists see social phenomena as different from physical and natural phenomena, as these are rich and complex due to the multiplicity of social realities which are constructed by individuals according to their own backgrounds (Saunders et al., 2016). Epistemologically, knowledge is created by interpreting the multiple social realities that may exist to create meaning. As such, interpretivists aim to collect what is meaningful to their research participants (i.e., subjective viewpoints) and subjectively interpret this to create meaning (Saunders et al., 2016). [Table 3](#) summarises the assumptions related to each research philosophy.

Objectivism ←————→ Subjectivism

	Positivism	Interpretivism
Ontological assumptions	Real, external, independent social reality	Complex, rich, multiple socially constructed realities
Epistemological assumptions	Observable and measurable facts that can be causally explained to create law-like generalisations	Individuals' viewpoints that can be interpreted to create a richer understanding of social worlds
Axiological assumptions	The researcher is neutral and detached from the data	The researcher interprets the data

Table 3: Comparison of the two main research philosophies in business and management research (Saunders et al., 2016).

This research adopts a positivist philosophical stance, aiming to objectively assess pets in marketing as a real social phenomenon that can be observed and causally explained.

2.2 Research Approach

The selection of a research philosophy involves an understanding of what knowledge is to be created and how it will be interpreted. But how will this knowledge

be acquired and how does it relate to theory? Two approaches can be considered, namely induction and deduction (Saunders et al., 2016).

Induction involves drawing generalisable conclusions inferred from observations, where theory is the outcome of research (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders et al., 2016). Therefore, it is typically linked to an interpretive philosophy and qualitative methods (Saunders et al., 2016). Oppositely, deduction involves using existing theory to develop hypotheses which can then be empirically tested to revise theory (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As such, it is typically linked to a positivist philosophy and quantitative methods (Saunders et al., 2016).

The present research aims to test causal relationships between the use of pets in digital marketing communications and consumer responses. To do so, hypotheses are developed based on existing marketing and psychology literature, which are then empirically tested. Based on these objectives and the positivist philosophical stance of this research, a deductive approach is adopted.

2.3 Research Strategy

The first methodological choice involves choosing between a quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods research design (Saunders et al., 2016). A quantitative research design is usually associated with positivism and deduction as it allows for the examination of causal relationships between variables by collecting numeric data (Saunders et al., 2016). A qualitative research design is typically associated with interpretivism and induction as researchers aim to make sense of the participants' meanings to develop theory (Saunders et al., 2016). A mixed methods research design combines both quantitative and qualitative methods and can be adapted to fit the research goals (Saunders et al., 2016). The latter is adopted for this research, which more specifically involves a sequential exploratory research design including a qualitative phase (i.e., semi-structured interviews) followed by a quantitative phase (i.e., experiments; Saunders et al., 2016). However, it is important to note that the quantitative phase is the priority, as the qualitative phase is an exploratory study that only has a supporting role. Specifically, the qualitative exploratory study aims to extract precise information from research participants to clarify the scope of the research and expected hypotheses. This is common practice when researching a new topic with a

positivist philosophy on which there is little existing literature (Saunders et al., 2016). Hence, the qualitative phase is not used to advance knowledge, whereas the quantitative phase is. More information about the strategies used (i.e., semi-structured interviews and experiments) is provided in each related chapter. A summary of the methodological choices made for this thesis is provided in [Table 4](#).

Research philosophy	Positivism
Approach	Deduction
Strategy	Mixed methods (sequential exploratory)
Priority	Quantitative
Methods	Semi-structured interviews (exploratory) and experiments

Table 4: Summary of the methodological choices.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

This research follows the University of Edinburgh Business School’s Research Ethics Policy. Hence, in order to fully comply with the school’s policy, Data Protection Training was undertaken to ensure that data would be appropriately handled. Ethical approval was also requested and granted before beginning work on this research. Specifically, this research follows the following guiding principles:

- Participants are informed of the purpose of the research and of their right to withdraw from it at any time and for any reason.
- Explicit and informed consent is given by participants.
- No vulnerable individuals or living animals are involved in this research.
- No personal data is collected.
- The research does not entail any potential risk of harm or discomfort to any of the individuals involved.
- Data is anonymised and securely stored. The researcher informs the participants about data usage.

The present chapter provides a discussion of the methodological choices related to this research. [Table 5](#) offers an overview of the research design including the different research phases, each to be further discussed in the following chapters.

Research Phase	Objective	Design
Exploratory study	To clarify and confirm aspects around pets in ads that have been suggested by the limited existing literature and need to be explored, as well as potentially unearth elements that could be useful to test the hypotheses – RQ1 and RQ2	Semi-structured interviews
Paper One	To test the persuasiveness of petfluencers versus human SMIs, sincerity as a mediator, and factors potentially amplifying/reducing the effect – RQ3, RQ4 and RQ5	Experimental paper
Study 1	To test the main effect of influencer type (SMI: human vs pet) on consumer responses (i.e., engagement) – H ₁	Field study Between-subjects Single-factor (SMI: human vs pet) study
Study 2	To provide further support for the main effect (on WTP) and test sincerity as a mediator – H ₁ and H ₂	Online experiment Between-subjects One manipulated factor, SMI type (human vs pet), and one measured factor, sincerity
Study 3	To provide further support for the main effect (on WTP) and sincerity as a mediator – H ₁ and H ₂	Online experiment Between-subjects 2(SMI: human vs pet) x 2(sincerity prime: insincere vs sincere)
Study 4	To test whether manipulating petfluencers' sincerity through their photo arrays can generate more positive consumer outcomes (i.e., WTP) depending on consumers' propensity to anthropomorphise – H ₃	Online experiment Between-subjects One manipulated factor, sincerity (low vs high), and one measured factor, propensity to anthropomorphise
Paper Two	To test whether product congruence impacts pet endorsements, attention as a mediator, and factors potentially amplifying/reducing the effect – RQ6, RQ7 and RQ8	Experimental paper

Study 1	To test the main effect of product congruence (incongruent vs congruent) on consumer responses (i.e., purchase intentions) – H ₁	Online experiment Between-subjects Single-factor (product congruence: incongruent vs congruent) study
Study 2	To provide further support for the main effect and test attention as a mediator – H ₁ and H ₂	Online experiment Between-subjects One manipulated factor, product congruence (incongruent vs congruent), and one measured factor, attention
Study 3	To provide further support for the main effect and attention as a mediator, as well as test immersion as a moderator – H ₁ , H ₂ , and H ₃	Online experiment Between-subjects 3(product congruence: incongruent vs mixed vs congruent) x 2(immersion: non-immersive vs immersive)
Paper Three	To test whether pet images can mitigate the negative consequences of a service failure, warmth as a mediator, and factors potentially amplifying/reducing the effect – RQ9, RQ10 and RQ11	Experimental paper
Study 1	To test the main effect of pet pictures (absent vs present) on consumer responses (i.e., repurchase intentions and nWOM) and warmth as a mediator – H ₁ and H ₂	Online experiment Between-subjects One manipulated factor, pet picture (absent vs present), and one measured factor, warmth
Study 2	To provide further support for the main effect and test service failure severity as a moderator – H ₁ and H ₃	Field study Between-subjects 3(pet picture: absent vs present) x 2(failure severity: minor vs major)

Table 5: Summary of the research design.

The next chapter discusses the exploratory study conducted to gain insights from consumers on pet endorsements, which help guide the topics and hypotheses to consider in the subsequent studies.

Chapter Three: Exploratory Study

This exploratory study aims to provide a better understanding of the benefits associated with pets and how these may reflect on pet endorsements. In doing so, this study answers the following research questions:

RQ1: What benefits do consumers associate with pets?

RQ2: How do consumers perceive pet endorsements?

The next section provides the study's background, including its alignment with this research's philosophical stance.

3.1 Background

The main aims of this exploratory study are to provide initial support for pets' persuasiveness and potential factors explaining it, which are then considered for experimental testing in the next studies. Semi-structured interviews are chosen as they are consistent with a positivist research philosophy (Cassell, 2015). Aligned with this thesis's positivist stance, the goal is not to question individuals about their realities with an inductive approach, but rather to clarify and provide support to the knowledge gained from the limited existing literature, and potentially extract new aspects that would be worthy of consideration. As importantly, the type of analysis used also needs to be consistent with the philosophical stance of the research. Therefore, the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews is analysed using a top-down thematic analysis, which allows for the identification and analysis of patterns (i.e., themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is chosen as it is not "not wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81) and can be used with a positivist paradigm to extract the required information. Still consistent with the deductive approach adopted in this research, the themes from the exploratory study are identified using a deductive or 'top-down' approach. This means that themes are informed by specific research questions and by the researcher's expected hypotheses, as well as existing literature.

Existing literature mainly examines the benefits associated with pets through the pet ownership lens. The present study aims to clarify what influence pets have on

individuals, whether they are pet owners or not. Furthermore, the scarce literature addressing pets in marketing provides somewhat contradicting findings, either presenting pets as effective marketing tools (Lancendorfer et al., 2008), or oppositely, as unsuccessful endorsers (Dessart, 2018). Simultaneously, this study addresses whether the benefits associated with pets reflect on pet endorsements, hence providing support for the latter as well as potential aspects to consider in the following experiments.

The next section discusses the methodology chosen for the qualitative exploratory study.

3.2 Methodology

This section discusses sampling methods, data collection, design and ethical considerations related to qualitative research.

3.2.1 Sampling

Individuals from all backgrounds were recruited, without considering their pet ownership status or attitude toward animals, to gather a variety of opinions and get similar numbers of female and male participants. A purposeful snowball sample was recruited from the researcher's own network as well as from a panel data service provider (i.e., Prolific) to find additional participants. Participants were offered a small monetary compensation for their time and effort. In line with the recommendations from Saunders et al. (2016) for a minimum sample size ranging from five to 25 participants, ten face-to-face semi-structured interviews were undertaken online with participants residing in the United Kingdom, aged 20-52, six being female ([Appendix Two](#) provides full participants details).

3.2.2 Data Collection

Interviews took place online via Zoom because of the ongoing COVID restrictions at the time. Respondents were given their rights as participants and asked to give their consent. Interviews lasted 30 minutes on average and were recorded. Following the interviews, respondents were thanked for their participation and asked if they had any questions regarding the research. Respondents were then offered an

explanation of the research and were told that they could request the research's results by sending an email.

3.2.3 Design

This research uses semi-structured interviews to clarify which aspects of the explored social phenomenon are worthy of examination as well as to potentially discover new research areas that were not originally considered (Saunders et al., 2016). Moreover, structure is needed to ensure consistency with the positivist position of this research (Saunders et al., 2016).

An interview guide was created to address the key topics of interest while granting freedom to stimulate further discussion with the respondents. As suggested by Bryman (2008), the interview guide first focuses on general questions on demographics and respondents' relationships with animals. The interviews involve questions inspired by previous work on social identification with animals (Amiot et al., 2020), as well as prompts (e.g., fictitious marketing communications including animals created for this research) to encourage reflection and discussion (Yau et al., 2019). The interview guide is provided in [Appendix Three](#).

Data was then analysed following a six-step analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involves the following phases:

- Familiarisation with the data: transcribing and reading the data.
- Generation of initial codes: creating codes representing patterns in the data.
- Creation of themes: gathering codes into relevant themes.
- Review of the themes: checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset.
- Definition and naming of the themes: generating clear names and definitions for the themes.
- Production of the report: final selection of the coded extracts and writing of the analysis.

It is important to note that a thematic analysis can be semantic or latent, either looking at surface-level themes emerging from what participants explicitly say in the

former, or deeply examining what participants may imply or implicitly mean (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Considering the positivist stance of this research and the chosen deductive approach, a semantic thematic analysis is selected.

3.2.4 Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure that the four ethical principles (Bryman, 2008) were respected (i.e., harm, informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception), the following measures have been taken:

- Informed consent was obtained from participants.
- Participants were made aware of their ability to withdraw their consent at any time.
- Participants' anonymity has been preserved using pseudonyms.
- Participants received an explanation of the research and were informed of their ability to not respond to questions that made them feel uncomfortable or to stop the interview.
- Participants were ensured that collected data would be kept securely and confidentially following the University's guidelines.

The next section discusses the results of the data analysis.

3.3 Analysis

As discussed in Section 3.1, the data is analysed using a top-down thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The emerging seven codes are grouped across two themes, namely the benefits associated with pets and the perceptions of pet endorsements. The results are provided in the following subsections and can be visualised in [Figure 1](#).

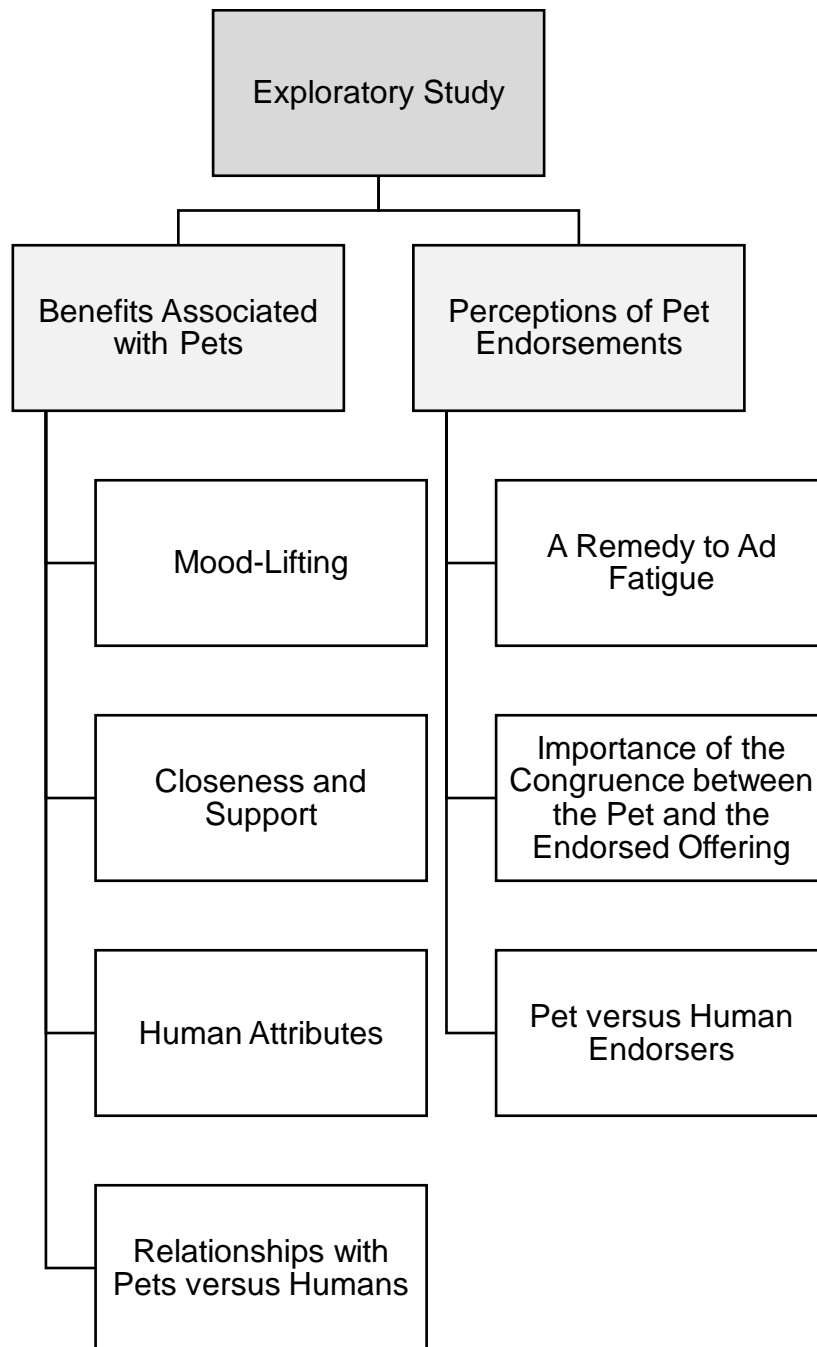


Figure 1: Themes and codes for the exploratory study.

3.3.1 Benefits Associated with Pets

The collection of data concerning the benefits associated with pets extends existing work on the advantages of owning a pet, although it is here extended to include individuals who are not current pet owners, hence providing support for the benefits pets bring to individuals regardless of their pet ownership status.

3.3.1.1 Mood-Lifting

Most participants acknowledge that pets bring people joy and other positive emotions. More interestingly, participants recognise that this effect can occur even if they do not own a pet themselves, for example by coming across someone else's pet.

"I feel like with most pets, it brings a smile to people's face. And it's just like, you know, they're comfortable around humans, most animals do bring people like joy, they're cute" (Sam)

[Referring to coming across pets] "It just makes me happy, it's just like I instantly light up and like I forget about everything else, it's all about this cute little ball that is in front of me" (Marie)

[Referring to their own pets] "It's just, you know, they are the reason that I go for a walk each day. They make me laugh. They prevent loneliness. They're great, like, mental health-wise, it's fantastic." (Sarah)

"Animals bring a bit of fun, they break up my day when I look out the window and see some of them, or have animals around me. They represent the unexpected in terms of what they do, like to get attention, and a bit of fun and they represent, you know, something different, and break up to your day. They represent loyalty, variety in terms of the things that they do, you know, and the classes of behaviour that they show. And what's interesting as well is when they do things that are outside of the norm and, you know, so entertainment as well, friendship, you build a bond, kinship, with them and compassion, love, fun, entertainment, laughter" (Julia)

"If you're ever feeling really down or really low they kind of cheer you up" (Maddie)

These quotes suggest that individuals feel positively toward pets, and experience positive emotions from being around them, regardless of whether they own one or not.

3.3.1.2 Closeness and Support

Pets are at the centre of close emotional bonds and provide companionship as well as mental health support. Participants report feeling close and connected to their pets, and more broadly to nature. Some participants candidly acknowledge that the bond they share with some of their pets has been lifesaving, emphasising the key role pets play in people's lives.

[Referring to being around their own pets] "It makes me feel really connected to, you know, larger structures, so having a clear connection with nature, and animals in nature makes me feel really grounded to both this community, but also to my surroundings. So I think it's a key part of my identity and something that I really value in taking part in, just being known for taking care of animals." (Sarah)

"I had cats. It was a really positive relationship, certainly for mental health. They definitely, I've got no qualms about saying they definitely kept me alive on a couple of occasions when I suffered quite badly from depression. I probably wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for my cats. And I was protective of them, but they were also fun to be with as well. So I got a lot out of the relationship too, on the soft and cute. Yeah. So it was a win-win situation for everybody. But then as they got older and they became more independent, actually I often relied on them more than the other way around because I, you know, I wanted them to sit on my lap and let me make a fuss with them. It was a really important part of my life. And they were around for about 15 or 16 years, which is the longest I had lived with anybody other than my parents." (Jane)

"I've just been brought up with animals around me and they were just part of my life. And I also was always really interested in nature anyway, so animals and nature. And it's just a way of actually kind of having that close connection with nature, having a pet in my life." (Jane)

"They are obviously a source of fuel for some people and food, they're just very multipurpose and very multifaceted and I think especially in the case of dogs, you know, they give a lot more than they ask for. They can be quite funny and quite unusual and they can bring people together as well, you know,

they can be quite healing and cathartic for people, I mean the list is quite long.”
(Julia)

“You've got that bond with an animal, that becomes your person. The bond between an animal and their person, I mean it can save lives, you know, like people who struggle with suicide and depression and stuff like that. You know that they are gonna make you laugh, man one animal will save your life.”
(Marie)

Participants admit to creating strong positive relationships with pets, which consequently often leads to a tendency to attribute human characteristics (i.e., anthropomorphising) to them. This is discussed in the next subsection.

3.3.1.3 Human Attributes

Participants recognise certain human qualities in pets, attributing feelings and personalities to them. Several participants admit to talking to pets as if they were human and assume they have the ability to understand their owners.

[Referring to talking to pets] “I guess, yeah, when you say stuff to them you think they understand, you give them names. Like this cat we gave it a name and then we just like, we call his name as if he knows and understands”
(Sam)

“It makes me feel happy, like every time I see them like every time I pass a dog in the street or whatever, I like instantly smile and always want to talk to them” (Marie)

“I kiss my dogs a lot or I ask them how they're doing or whether they want a sandwich” (Sarah)

“I think they have personalities of their own and, yeah, I'll just talk to them and I'll talk for them as well.” (Josie)

“I think animals are very intelligent, they have lots of different ranges of feelings and personalities and characters and things like that, they're very gifted as well. [...] You know they're very intelligent, not just dogs, obviously,

*and so, for me, I think people don't give them enough credit, not just dogs”
(Julia)*

[Referring to their previous pets] “It was easy to have them and to have human personalities on them. So yes, we did talk to them and, yes, very strange.” (Rob)

Interestingly though, despite assigning human attributes to pets, participants perceive relationships with pets as sometimes superior to those they entertain with humans, as explored in the following subsection.

3.3.1.4 Relationships with Pets versus Humans

Although humanising pets appears to be a common practice, all participants agree that relationships with pets are sometimes superior to those they have with other humans, mainly because pets do not have bad intentions and are more sincere. Pets live in the moment and have no agendas guiding their actions, compared to humans. Therefore, pets offer the advantages of companionship and entertainment without the negative aspects associated with other humans.

[Referring to pets] “They're just so much better than people. For one people suck. They're just, it's unconditional, like I mean cats can be pretty aloof and stuff like that, and sometimes you get shy dogs and things like that, but there's never any, like they're just so adorable for one. There's something so, I don't know, like peaceful I guess for me. It's just pure when you've got a connection, like obviously you don't have a connection with every animal, but when you've got a connection with an animal it's like it's just pure love there's nothing else about it. [...] I trust animals, I can you know be my weird and wonderful self, it's a little trickier with people as they judge, you know. And you're always, for whatever reason, always, that's an internal issue with me is that I'm always afraid of what people are gonna think of me and it's like I don't feel that with animals. People hurt you. And they do it on purpose. An animal would never do that, like it might hurt you but it's never gonna hurt you in the same way that a human would, like malicious intent.” (Marie)

“I love them more than many people that I have met. So, um, they, I don't know what relationship it is. I can tell them off and you can't really tell your friends off if they've done something that might offend you. [...] There isn't, I can't imagine my dogs would ever want to offend me or do something that would cause me harm. I trust them entirely.” (Sarah)

Participants recognise that the relationship they entertain with pets is simpler than those they entertain with other humans, as the large panel of emotions and intentions behind humans' actions render relationships complex. As pets are perceived as innocent, their actions (even when negative) are usually met by more positive responses from individuals who are more understanding and patient with pets than with other people.

[Referring to relationships with humans] “It's not as easy. It's so different to a human relationship. It's just so unconditional and not complex. [...] I think certainly there's that element of I mean, you know, obviously animals can be volatile, but usually it's because we're cornering them or, you know, taking their habitat or something like that. Whereas people I find are unpredictable. And, you know, what certainly is my morals might not be the same to someone else. Whereas, you know, obviously, if you're going to give a dog a treat, it's most likely it's going to come to you regardless of, you know. But with humans, I think, you know, we're so we are so complex with our emotions and our actions. And, you know, I like to treat people how I expect to be treated. Well, that's not always reciprocated and there is an element of, I don't know this person, this person's a stranger, like they have all their own internal conflicts like myself and internal monologue. I suppose this goes until you get to know someone well, which can be scary.” (Josie)

“I think like, you know, they have a different intelligence towards like, you know, the way that they communicate with each other just because they don't speak and maybe, you know, they don't have as many complex emotions as we do. I think that does give them a level of innocence, even though they might go and, you know, kill and hunt for food. That's just awesome. Rather than, you know, humans, you know, we do it for our own benefit.” (Josie)

[Referring to pets] “Many of them live in the moment, for example, our dog is in the moment, he doesn't hold grudges, doesn't reflect on things, doesn't analyse. You know, with a dog, it's very straightforward, it has its needs, its needs are immediate, and you can respond to them. With a human, it's more complex, not just in terms of the resources required, but also in terms of whether it's real or pretence or manipulation.” (Max)

Interestingly, participants recognise that pets' simplicity and sincerity also imply that they cannot provide the same level of interaction and intellectual exchange as other humans, yet this adds to their interesting and entertaining capabilities.

“I think that they have interesting personalities, I think that they are very different to humans, I think that they have an innocence about them, a purity about them, they have an unpredictability about them, which makes them fun and interesting and engaging. And I think that they are much more simplistic than human beings as well. [...] They have some good things that are better and some things, obviously they can't talk to the same intellectual level, but I think what's better about them is that they are very adaptable, extremely loyal and I'm talking about in a pet context, obviously. It's very simplistic, it's kind of like you know there's no ulterior motives, it's like we're hungry or you're in our space, you're in our territory. I think humans we're just so multifaceted and there's a lack of purity in humanity as well, there's so many different dimensions to what we do, why we do it.” (Julia)

Pets' innocence allows them to often be considered more trustworthy, whereas people need to gain their peers' trust, usually by building more long-term relationships.

“I feel like I'm probably more receptive to animals in the sense that I wouldn't let a random human just come into my house freely the way I just let this cat in. And so I feel like we're more forgiving towards animals in the sense that humans, like you make more initial judgments. I feel like we feel like they're more capable of doing stuff. So you probably have, you've got to make more quick judgements. You're less willing to let your guard down around certain humans, while animals you're probably more willing, like it's the kind of way for humans like you've got to build up your trust before you can probably trust

them. While animals, you probably have a lower guard, you're more willing to accept things. Like the cat would probably have to do something to make me not trust it, while humans probably have to do something to build on my trust. I feel like they're less, like their intentions are probably more pure if I can say it like this." (Sam)

Furthermore, although pets' innocence may be perceived as similar to those of children, the latter may be associated with more negative emotions as relationships with children are as complex as those with adults.

[Referring to pets versus children] "They were always very calming, they're always very pleased to see you, especially dogs when you come home, and they make a big fuss of you. Pets are very different from children, very diverting, very soothing, they help take your mind off your worries and your problems and they are loyal and they don't answer back, and their needs are easily met." (Rob)

While humans need to gain other humans' trust, pets appear to have the innate ability of already owning trust and sympathy from individuals, which may have a positive impact on pets in marketing. Before turning to pet endorsements, it seems relevant to discuss the influence that the presence of a pet may have on individuals' behaviours, such as charitable donations. Participants were asked to consider their feelings and intentions toward giving money to a homeless person, and how these may change in the presence of a dog. The following quotes provide interesting insights into the powerful impact pets have on individuals.

"Every time I ever see some homeless person with a dog. They're so much more likely to get my money." (Jane)

"I think, in my mind, if someone has an animal that loves them, it says a lot about their personality. So, I guess I would have more empathy for them" (Mike)

[Referring to a homeless person with a dog] "An animal gives common ground, it breaks down a barrier between one and the other. It's harder to put away the prejudice on the man, he may be there by his own faults, he might

be on drugs, would have done things in the past, or something. And that's harder to empathise with, but because people have pets themselves it's a common ground, I think, so it's easy to start a conversation, even if that conversation is just would you like a pound or can I buy you a drink. So I'd be more likely to give to somebody.” (Rob)

[Referring to a homeless person without a dog] “So, if I am brutally honest, I think there's a dehumanising effect to seeing homeless people on the street. And that chap, if he were to have a dog, it'd feel far more, a 100 percent more human because he's got the ability to care for somebody, something else, um, rather than thinking about him as maybe somebody who might be dishonest, or not presenting you with the full picture. Whereas if he were to have a dog there, I automatically attribute him as having kind of caring skills, he's going to look after that dog, that dog wants to be with him, he's the owner. So I think I would view him far more positively and I would probably think I'm far more honest about his situation rather than thinking that, I don't know, he's or isn't sleeping rough and I think, I think I can probably tell by the dog that there's a relationship there.” (Sarah)

The above quotes show that pets seem to gather more empathy from individuals because they are perceived as innately sincere and pure and have the ability to create simpler yet sometimes stronger relationships with individuals, resultantly driving greater positive responses. This is consistent with existing psychology literature on the human-animal relationship, although these findings extend here to non-pet owners as well. As pets seem to present advantages that are harder to replicate with humans, these may explain the potential success of pet endorsements. This is discussed in the next subsection.

3.3.2 Perceptions of Pet Endorsements

3.3.2.1 A Remedy to Ad Fatigue

Participants agree that pets in marketing communications bring several advantages, such as making ads more attention-grabbing and memorable, overall turning ads that people are tired of seeing into a more pleasant experience. While

consumers increasingly try to avoid ads, pet endorsements appear to be leaving long-lasting positive emotions in people's minds.

"It stands out. Like, I can't think of any other toilet brands, even though there must be others, other than Andrex and the dog, it just stands out. [...] Like the ones that normally come out to my head seem to have animals in them. So yeah, it definitely makes them more memorable." (Sam)

"I don't like ads in general, but I guess, kind of want to avoid them, but I guess if there's an animal I'm more likely to watch it because I like watching the animal, especially like if it was a cute animal or if it's like a wild animal. And the adverts, come on it's just another generic boring advert, but if there's something interesting or different or it's got animals then I'm like oh" (Marie)

"I love animals in ads. I think I remember far more about the animals in ads than particular Mr. Muscle adverts or, you know, Captain Birdseye or something like that. And those are really key brands, but I can remember the Andrex puppy far more so I think they bring a real kind of identity" (Sarah)

"It makes it more appetising, you know, because we have animals in advertising, it makes it more cutesy and it makes it more engaging and it makes it more, just I don't know something that breaks up things. [...] They're cute and entertaining or they remind you, you know, households have their pets or they're innocent and they're furry and, you know, they're attention-grabbing, and it makes it more memorable and more marketable." (Julia)

According to participants, these positive emotions would still occur for individuals who may not share a love for pets, mainly because pets are perceived as cute and attractive regardless.

[Referring to ads featuring pets] "Friends who are not animal lovers, they don't like dogs or whatever, but they will remember if they see that. [...] You know my friend might be able to say like Okay, I can see why you think it's cute, even though I don't like dogs." (Julia)

[Referring to people who do not like pets] “There aren’t that many of them. Also, if you have like the cutest kitten, we’re kind of almost wired to find baby animals cute. So they’re just a really genius way of sending things.” (Jane)

[Referring to people who do not like pets] “I don’t think they like to admit it, but I think like on a deep, deep level, because I think evolutionarily we like cute things and, you know, I think it’s just one of the things when you’re faced with it, just those sorts of emotions take over, even if you just like, Oh, that is cute, but I don’t like it.” (Josie)

Including pets in ads therefore seems to represent a viable means to engender positive emotions in consumers. However, the type of offerings appearing in ads featuring pets may have an impact on their persuasiveness, as suggested by the quotes in the next subsection.

3.3.2.2 Importance of the Congruence between the Pet and the Endorsed Offering

Similar to the existing literature on congruence, participants have different perspectives on the role played by congruence between the pet and the endorsed offering in pet endorsements’ effectiveness. Some participants believe that pet endorsements should be somewhat congruent, although they would still be effective in driving positive feelings.

[Referring to pet endorsements] “It just can’t be too far removed, it’s kind of like you know where do we draw the line. It’s like so if we’re advertising clothing for women and then we’ve got a dog then that’s kind of a bit too far-fetched so yeah there needs to be congruence in that scenario. [...] But you could have a smiling dog with like you know, an animated smiling dog and there’s a really nice new candle or whatever, and you know believe he loves it whatever, and then you know people go that might smell nice or whatever. There’s no congruence with that either, but it’s cute and it works.” (Julia)

“I feel like maybe I’ve just been conditioned to see it, but I feel like animals in ads are fine when you’re selling a product, if it matches” (Sam)

While a certain level of congruence between the pet and the endorsed offering appears to be important, this seems mitigated in comparison to human endorsers, for which congruence is an important element for participants.

[Referring to an ad for toilet paper featuring a pet vs a baby] “I think there’s a recognition that maybe the animals are being used as a, I don’t know, a spokesperson, or like a figure that you, that doesn’t necessarily have to use it. But if you add a generic baby on there, you’re implying that that baby uses that toilet paper, and I don’t think that baby does.” (Sarah)

While participants appear to have different opinions on the role of congruence, and what can be considered as (in)congruent, they agree that pets are superior to human endorsers in ads, as shown next.

3.3.2.3 Pet versus Human Endorsers

Participants, regardless of their pet ownership status or interest in pets, perceive them as more universal endorsers, such that consumers do not need to relate or compare to them as they would with human endorsers. Such universality also implies that consumers do not necessarily need to imagine how the endorser or themselves would use the offering, which is particularly beneficial for some types of offerings (e.g., toilet paper). The sincerity and entertainment associated with pets appear to transfer to their endorsements, which may not be true for human endorsers.

“I think a lot of it has got to do with the fact that when you see pictures of people, you’ve got to relate to them in some way. But with animals, because they could be from any household, they’re more neutral. Unless a picture of a woman happened to look a lot like me. If she was wearing dungarees and was only five foot two, then it might. But that happens so rarely in advertising anyway. That’s probably one of the reasons why I relate to the animals in ads. Because they’re more entertaining, neutral. But yeah, perhaps I relate to them more easily than, than pictures of people who don’t seem to have the same lifestyle as me. Also because it becomes quite gender neutral and ethnicity neutral and religion neutral. It’s like, it’s it doesn’t exclude anybody unless you happen to hate a particular type of animal, really. So I think that’s probably why.” (Jane)

“I think in terms of advertising, because they try and make it seem like, you know, we’re all like middle-class working families and a stereotypical family unit. I suppose whenever I see people in adverts, I just find it a bit patronising. Whereas animals, it’s just like I’d rather look like at an animal rather than, you know, conventionally a person trying to slap me so that I’m going to buy anyway, right? I think it is because it’ll make us remember it. Because I think, like, you know, if we see something cute and nice, we have that protectiveness over it, like we want to go over and, you know, embrace it. It’s like, I want that cute thing near me. And I suppose they are more universal, more universally liked.” (Josie)

Beyond avoiding comparisons with the endorser, pets in ads trigger positive emotions which tend to be universal and attract consumers’ attention. As people do not need to compare themselves to the featured endorser, or do not need to imagine how the human endorser makes use of the featured offering, they are more likely to pay attention and enjoy an ad featuring a pet instead of avoiding ads with human endorsers that may be perceived as potentially boring, patronising and may trigger self-comparison.

“I think the appearance of animals gives people joy and I suppose that’s the emotion that advertisers are trying to get you to feel and then transfer that onto their products. It’s happy, it’s not judgmental, it’s carefree and, as you say, with humans, is that person like me or how is that person different from what I aspire to be.” (Rob)

“Having a human is just, okay guys, we know it is more functional when we see humans, but when we see animals, they represent entertainment, they represent fun. They represent something, you know, households can relate to that have pets and things like that, and they branch out to or they get attention, it’s attention-grabbing more because it’s something that stands out.” (Julia)

This universality and attention-grabbing capacities hence often trigger more positive responses from consumers, not only affecting consumers’ perceptions but also their behaviours.

[Referring to ads] “I don’t like the ones with the people I’m much less inclined to buy something that had people on it than animals on it.” (Marie)

Beyond avoiding social comparisons, pets are less likely to be associated with negative thoughts and emotions. For example, some individuals do not have and/or do not want children, and may not only feel indifferent to ads featuring babies, but may even feel negatively about them, potentially having negative repercussions on the brand.

[Referring to ads featuring babies] “I probably, you know what, as a lady who doesn’t have children, um, I probably am less warm to that idea.” (Sarah)

[Referring to ads featuring babies] “The baby, when I see it, I think natural baby things, you know, who’s that person we want to grow up and all that stuff. When I see the animals, I guess I can just see them as they are. I don’t have any extra things I’m putting on to them” (Mike)

“Like, you know, a lot of people have strong stances on a dislike for children, whereas like with an animal it’s like, yeah, I know they don’t, like babies, cry and you know, and they are positive, certainly.” (Josie)

Pet endorsements seem to drive positive emotions and mitigate the drawbacks associated with human endorsers, such as social comparison and negative associations. The findings of this exploratory study are discussed and summarised in the next section.

3.4 Discussion

The aim of this study is to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What benefits do consumers associate with pets?

RQ2: How do consumers perceive pet endorsements?

Drawing from existing literature on the human-animal relationship and pets in marketing, these semi-structured interviews provide data relating to the benefits individuals generally associate with pets, and how these may reflect on pet endorsements. Regarding **RQ1**, the findings largely echo existing psychology

literature on animals (e.g., Hirschman, 1994). Specifically, pets are praised for the several advantages they bring, such as the ability to provide emotional support, companionship, entertainment, and even help that can go as far as being lifesaving (e.g., people suffering from depression). Unsurprisingly then, individuals frequently assign human attributes to pets, considering them as loyal friends or family members capable of emotions and intelligence, which results in actual behaviours (e.g., feeling protective of them, talking to them, dressing them) that are particularly frequent in pet owners (Archer, 1997; Hirschman, 1994). Furthermore, although pets are often attributed certain human characteristics and are sometimes treated as such, participants recognise that in comparison to human companions, pets provide unconditional love which is not accompanied by high expectations, and more importantly, have no malicious intent. Pets' inability to talk back, judge or lie therefore positions them as sincere, non-judgmental and non-competitive companions, as supported by previous literature (e.g., Hirschman, 1994). Therefore, pets are at the centre of purer and simpler relationships, which are sometimes considered superior to those entertained with other humans. While this largely reflects existing psychology literature, the latter remains focused on pet owners. The data from this study seems to indicate that such perceptions of pets hold for non-pet owners as well, hence suggesting that these may have an impact on pet endorsements' effectiveness.

Moreover, in responding to **RQ2**, the data suggests that pet endorsements lead to positive emotions, which is in line with the limited existing literature in the domain of pets in marketing (Lancendorfer et al., 2008; Yelkur et al., 2013). The data also provides several potential factors at the origin of such positive emotions, such as cuteness, entertainment, and attention-grabbing capacity. However, it is unlikely that these factors all happen coincidentally and across all contexts (e.g., a dog might be entertaining in an ad for toilet paper but not in a customer service message announcing a cancelled flight). Therefore, although pets undeniably have the potential to be effective endorsers, more clarity is needed regarding the factors to consider when using them. Furthermore, existing literature (e.g., Lancendorfer et al., 2008) suggests the importance of considering the pet-offering congruence when using pet endorsers. The data supports that although what is considered as (in)congruent with pets may vary across individuals, pet endorsements should be at least coherent and not too incongruent. As many brands use pets to endorse what can be perceived as

incongruent offerings (i.e., that pets cannot use, such as Budweiser beer and its dog), this provides interesting research avenues that are still to be explored. Finally, although pet endorsements have been assessed through several lenses (e.g., pet absent vs present, pet vs humanoid, etc.; see Chapter One), they have never been considered against human endorsements. A study from Dessart (2018) investigates storytelling video ads featuring either humans or animals and argues that pets lead to negative consumer responses, because they are not easy to identify with. While Dessart (2018) does not actually compare pet versus human endorsements, but rather animals versus human endorsements, this exploratory study's findings provide a different perspective, as all participants reacted positively to pet endorsements and somewhat negatively to human endorsements. Therefore, this exploratory study opens the path for experimental testing of pet versus human endorsers' effectiveness.

3.5 Limitations and Future Research

The qualitative exploratory study includes semi-structured interviews guided by an interview guide, while the data is analysed using a deductive approach and a semantic (i.e., surface-level) thematic analysis. While this fits with this research's objective and philosophical stance, and is appropriate to ensure the cohesiveness of this research, future research could use other forms of qualitative studies, such as unstructured or longitudinal interviews, and analyse the data using a latent thematic analysis strategy, in order to gain a deeper insight into individuals' emotions and thoughts when exposed to pets. Furthermore, as this study's interview guide was designed with the key themes of interest in mind based on the researcher's expected research questions and knowledge from existing literature, future research not adopting a positivist stance and a deductive approach could be more appropriate to uncover potential themes that were not previously suggested by the literature, without being informed by the researcher's expected hypotheses or knowledge.

Additionally, the exploratory study used some individuals from the researcher's network, while all interviewees were British residents. As the United Kingdom has one of the highest pet ownership rates (*Pet Ownership Statistics by Country 2023*, 2023), future research should aim to interview individuals with no prior connection to the

research team and who come from/reside in other countries where pets hold a less prevalent role, as this may influence individuals' responses.

The next chapter examines pet versus human endorsements on social media in a first experimental paper.

Chapter Four: Paper One

PAWS-itive Influence: Examining how and when Pets Exhibit Greater Persuasion as Influencers

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***Reminder regarding authorship:** As the first author, I designed and created all of the surveys and stimuli, ran all of the studies except one (Study 3), conducted the data analysis, and wrote the full draft of the paper. My co-authors contributed to the design of the stimuli/surveys and the writing of the paper. Additionally, Dr Katina Kulow ran Study 3 and conducted data analysis as well.*

The first paper of this thesis investigates pets' persuasiveness as SMIs. While providing an initial evaluation of pet versus human endorsers, this paper remains in the digital marketing realm, which is the focus of this thesis. Specifically, Paper One empirically tests whether pets can be more persuasive than human influencers (**RQ3**) and supports sincerity as a mediator (**RQ4**). Additionally, Paper One investigates a practical means to manipulate petfluencers' sincerity perceptions while considering consumers' propensity to anthropomorphise (**RQ5**).

4.1. Abstract

The use of SMIs is of growing interest to advertisers as well as researchers. Though, to date, research has solely focused on human influencers. Increasingly, advertising agencies and brands are turning to animal influencers to promote brands. Given the rise of the 'petfluencer', this research aims to investigate whether pets are more persuasive than humans, and if so, why. Using an experimental approach, with one field study and three experiments, this research supports petfluencers (vs human SMIs) as more persuasive (Studies 1 and 2). These effects are driven by increased perceptions of sincerity associated with the petfluencer (Studies 2 and 3), which can be manipulated through their photo arrays (Study 4). The findings provide novel theoretical contributions to the marketing literature on SMIs and offer recommendations for marketers.

4.2. Introduction

Brands are increasingly interested in using SMIs to reach consumers. In fact, while estimated at 6 billion dollars in 2019, the influencer market is expected to grow to \$24.1 billion by 2025 (ReportLinker, 2020). The term SMI refers to individuals who have a substantial social media following and create content for brands in exchange for compensation (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Voorveld, 2019). Influencers are particularly persuasive because people tend to afford SMIs with similar levels of trust as they do their own friends (Swant, 2016). One type of influencer that is receiving increasing attention from brands is the pet SMI, or petfluencer. A petfluencer is a pet that has a substantially large social media following acquired by posting content centred around the said pet, either posted by the pet owner or seemingly by the pet itself (Myers et al., 2022). Similar to human SMIs, they share their everyday lives and may endorse various brands in exchange for compensation (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Voorveld, 2019).

Notably, the recent pandemic has spurred the growth of the petfluencer phenomenon through an increased interest in pets, with 90% of Britons citing that their pets have been a considerable means of feeling supported during the lockdown (University of York, 2020). In fact, consumers deem pets more important than ever before (Wichiantanon, 2020). With one out of three pet owners creating a social media account specifically for their pet (Sparks, 2022), the number of petfluencers in the United States alone could reach 30 million, hence explaining the momentum they are gathering from brands, marketing agencies as well as media outlets. As an example, Mr Pokee the hedgehog has 1.8 million followers on Instagram, and Jiffpom, a Pomeranian, has over 10 million followers. With large followings such as these, it is not surprising that brands such as Dyson, Mercedes, and Gucci invest thousands per post using petfluencers (Rabimov, 2018). As the hashtag #pets has been used more than 72 billion times on TikTok, there is no doubt that petfluencers have become some of the most popular influencers on social media (Anderson, 2023).

Despite the following that petfluencers have been able to amass, academic research has been relatively silent on the matter. Indeed, the number of advertising agencies dedicated to pets increases daily, and the media are devoting a growing

number of articles to petfluencers. Yet, research on endorsers remains limited to traditional endorsers (e.g., Amos et al., 2008) and human SMIs (e.g., Kupfer et al., 2018). To date, research in this domain has largely focused on influencer-related factors, such as the number of followers an influencer has (Maheshwari, 2018) or the extent to which their content is sponsored affects their credibility and persuasiveness (Nelson et al., 2009; Stubb & Colliander, 2019; Tessitore & Geuens, 2013). In fact, within both academia and practice, the discussion of influencer classification is often limited to their number of followers and their potential reach, thus classifying them as nano-, micro-, macro-, and mega-influencers (Domingues Aguiar & Reijmersdal, 2018; Lin et al., 2018; MediaKix, 2019). And yet, these discussions seem to be limited in scope to human influencers. As such, this research introduces a new type of influencer to academic scholarship (i.e., petfluencers) and a new, yet simple, type of classification: human versus pet.

As more brands incorporate influencer marketing as part of their overall promotional strategy, not only does the market become increasingly crowded, but it also potentially threatens characteristics attributed to human influencers' success. For instance, the strength of SMIs stems from the authentic and close relationships they cultivate with their online followers. Yet, the exponential growth of sponsored content generated by these new celebrities might engender increasing scepticism from their followers and negatively impact their persuasiveness (Lou & Yuan, 2019). With only 4% of people trusting what influencers say online (Stewart, 2019), SMIs are now facing an 'authenticity crisis' as individuals increasingly experience influencer fatigue from constant exposition to product endorsements, often perceived as insincere (Casey, 2020; Smith, 2017). Furthermore, brands should also be concerned with the behaviour of a human influencer, and the effect an SMI's actions have on the brand image. According to Loni Edwards, the founder of Dog Agency, petfluencers cannot publicly offend others or behave irresponsibly in public, as their human counterparts could (Wichiantanon, 2020). Further, recent research on influencer marketing to date has focused on the harm influencers can cause (e.g., Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Campbell & Marks, 2015; Evans et al., 2018; Kees & Andrews, 2019; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016), highlighting the increasing issues brands may experience with SMIs. Given these potential issues, could petfluencers represent a more persuasive source than human influencers?

The current research begins to address these issues and argues that petfluencers can, in fact, be more persuasive than their human SMI counterparts due to the perceived sincerity underlying their endorsements. It further argues that petfluencers' sincerity can be manipulated through the type of photos they post on social media, which can increase their persuasiveness even for individuals who may be less sensitive to petfluencers' content (i.e., individuals with a low propensity to anthropomorphise pets). Precisely, this research aims to investigate the following research questions. Are petfluencers more persuasive than traditional (human) SMIs? If so, do perceptions of sincerity explain these effects? Does consumers' propensity to anthropomorphise influence petfluencers' persuasiveness, and is there a means to increase the latter?

This research offers several theoretical and practical implications. First, the current research contributes to knowledge in the domain of pet endorsements by providing the earliest empirical support for the social influence petfluencers hold on their online audiences and the behavioural process underpinning it. In doing so, this research responds to calls for guidance from practitioners on how to leverage petfluencers (Connell, 2013), and from academics to compare pet to human endorsers (Jia et al., 2022). Second, this research broadens knowledge in the domain of social media and influencer marketing, distinguishing animal (i.e., pets) versus traditional (i.e., human) SMIs. Indeed, whereas human SMIs' persuasiveness emanates from either felt similarity and identification (Daniel et al., 2018; Schouten et al., 2020) or aspirational identification (Leban et al., 2021), the findings demonstrate that petfluencers' persuasiveness stems from emotions (i.e., perceptions of sincerity) underlying their posts. Third, this research contributes to knowledge of the role of consumers' propensity to anthropomorphise in pet endorsements' persuasiveness. In doing so, it responds to calls (e.g., Jia et al., 2022) to investigate pets' persuasiveness considering consumers' propensity to anthropomorphise and suggests that consumers with a low (vs high) propensity to anthropomorphise react differently to petfluencers' content. Specifically, it proposes that for consumers with a low propensity to anthropomorphise, petfluencers may be more persuasive when featuring fewer (vs greater) posed pictures. These results offer a means to increase petfluencers' persuasiveness for consumers who are less likely to respond positively to their content, namely by manipulating sincerity perceptions through the type of

photos petfluencers post on their social media profiles. This research provides practical suggestions on how brands can benefit from this one-of-a-kind type of influencer by offering actionable insights on influencer selection and content creation.

4.3. Literature Review

4.3.1. Social Media Influencers

Influencers have been classified in several ways. For instance, some researchers classify them by their number of followers, such as nano-, micro-, macro-, and mega-, where nano- and micro-influencers have low reach but highly specialised content. Macro-influencers have more than 10,000 followers and mega-influencers over 1 million followers (MediaKix, 2019). Both of these latter types have an established personality and content (Domingues Aguiar & Reijmersdal, 2018). Lin et al. (2018) classify influencers based on social reach (e.g., number of followers), the degree to which their personal brand is tied to their primary job, and the degree to which the offering is related to their expertise, and introduce many types of varying influencers. Ge & Gretzel (2018) delineate grassroots influencers and celebrities by their professional experience and institutional position (e.g., grassroots influencers have no professional experience or institutional position), though this cannot fully capture all types of influencers, as some may be entrepreneurial with prior expertise (e.g., foodie or cosmetic influencers). Still missing is a meaningful investigation into more varied types of SMIs (Maheshwari, 2018), and in particular, comparing human and petfluencers. Despite the complicated nature of current classifications, this research seeks to introduce another classification of SMIs, but in a more simplistic fashion: pet versus human SMIs.

Traditional human SMIs are successful because they can create intimate bonds (or what appear to be) with their followers (Kupfer et al., 2018). Hence, human SMIs mainly rely on similarity with their audience (e.g., parasocial interaction), offering them a strong identification and trustful relationship potential (Kupfer et al., 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Social identification with human SMIs is hence led by projecting a lifestyle that their followers can emulate (Jin & Phua, 2014). Given the dimensions that the basis of similarity with SMIs is often related to feeling a high degree of commonality

and shared experience (Balabanis & Chatzopoulou, 2019), it is arguable that animals cannot rely on the same identification aspect and thus, may not be as successful as SMIs. While animals trigger positive outcomes such as higher levels of narrative transportation in comparison to humans (Dessart, 2018) and are at the centre of close psychological bonds that are essential to people's social lives (Amiot & Bastian, 2017; Herzog, 2011), they are not easy to identify with (Dessart, 2018). In fact, the degree to which humans identify with animals depends on how close they feel to them (Amiot et al., 2020). In other words, animals cannot offer the same level of identification that human SMIs can. Given that identification provides the foundation of SMIs' social influence, using the traditional lens applied to human SMIs, pets may, in fact, not be as persuasive endorsers as their human counterparts.

While human SMIs can leverage their perceived similarity to enhance their overall persuasiveness, there is increasing evidence that not all aspects of human SMIs are well-received. Human endorsers, including SMIs, often generate feelings of defiance and scepticism when advertising a brand, particularly if the persuasive intent is made salient (Uribe et al., 2016; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). Indeed, while sponsored posts featuring human SMIs might trigger disbelief and produce a negative impact on brand attitude and purchase intentions, the underlying motivations attributed to animals, and pets in particular, are primarily positively valenced. As opposed to humans, animals are not "subject to envy, jealousy, elitism, and materialism" (Hirschman, 1994, p. 620). Moreover, animals are biologically unable to lie, cheat or voluntarily behave in an actively deceptive manner (Keller & Gierl, 2020). While this skill develops between three and five years old for children (Goldman, 2012; Talwar & Lee, 2008), animals do not possess the sufficient neural capacity to acquire such skill and thus, cannot learn and engage in a complex lying process (Call & Tomasello, 2008; Premack & Woodruff, 1978). Hence, an evolutionary limitation in cognitive capacity also provides an enviable endorser's skill. Petfluencers may therefore be more persuasive and successful than human SMIs who are often remunerated to endorse certain brands and whose message might appear disingenuous. Therefore, the next section turns to the sincerity dimension to explore a potential differentiator between human SMIs and petfluencers.

4.3.2. Sincerity Differences in Petfluencers versus Human Influencers

Recent research on human SMIs suggests that endorser personality can affect their persuasiveness. In particular, influencers with more sincere (e.g., down-to-earth, real; McRae, 2017) personalities have more successful relationships with their followers and make more effective brand endorsers (Duffy, 2017; Dwivedi et al., 2016). Indeed, sincerity reflects a character's moral traits and is important in impression formation (Goodwin et al., 2014). However, when exposed to nonverbal communication (Mehrabian & Wiener, 1967) like on social media, individuals must assess whether they perceive an emotional display as sincere or not (Caza et al., 2015), and easily differentiate sincere emotional displays from insincere emotional displays (Frank et al., 1993).

It is important to note that sincerity is often used interchangeably with authenticity in the marketing literature, although the two concepts are different. Sincerity can only manifest in relation to other people (in a social setting) as it refers to being true to others, whereas authenticity relates to being true to oneself and is more of a private virtue (Crair, 2008; Moulard et al., 2016; Trilling, 1972). The current research investigates how individuals perceive SMIs to be true and honest in their endorsements with regard to their audience, thus the focus is here on sincerity.

Research investigating the role of sincerity in SMI persuasiveness is scarce. Some research suggests that sincerity judgments emerge from a range of verbal and non-verbal stimuli. For example, sincerity can be effectuated through influencer interactivity (Jun & Yi, 2020), the types of images shared on social media (Lee & Eastin, 2020), and even the endorser's accent (Puzakova et al., 2015). Such judgments are made immediately after exposure to stimuli and can impact future attitudes and behaviours (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Initial research suggests that individuals report higher attitudes toward high- (vs low-) sincerity SMIs, but only when individuals do not envy the SMI (Lee & Eastin, 2020) and the SMI is a micro- (vs mega-) influencer (Park et al., 2021). This evidence ties in with disadvantages that can occur with human endorsers that may not arise from their animal counterparts. Based on the prior literature, as pets are innately sincere and individuals are most sensitive to

impressions of sincerity, it is expected that petfluencers will be perceived as more sincere than human SMIs, therefore engendering more favourable consumer responses. Specifically:

H₁: Social media endorsements by petfluencers (vs human influencers) will generate more (less) favourable consumer responses (i.e., greater engagement and WTP).

H₂: The effect of influencer type on consumer responses will be mediated by perceptions of sincerity.

4.3.3. Petfluencers' Persuasiveness and Consumers' Propensity to Anthropomorphise

Petfluencers may be more persuasive than human influencers because they are generally perceived as more sincere, however this effect is likely to be impacted by consumers' propensity to anthropomorphise. Anthropomorphism relates to the tendency individuals have to assign human characteristics (e.g., emotions, capabilities) to animals and even objects (Amiot et al., 2020). A recent study from Li & Sung (2021) supports that individuals anthropomorphise non-human agents (e.g., artificial intelligence assistants) to reduce psychological distance, resulting in a more positive evaluation of the said agent. Additionally, Connell (2013) suggests that anthropomorphising an animal can impact how sincere individuals perceive it to be. Indeed, individuals with a high propensity to anthropomorphise usually attribute feelings to animals, perceiving them as more sincere, and are therefore more likely to respond positively to them, feel more empathy towards them, and dedicate more resources to them (e.g., increase support for animal rights). Thus, while individuals with a high propensity to anthropomorphise are more susceptible to finding petfluencers sincere and persuasive, this may not be the case for individuals with a low propensity to anthropomorphise.

One way to influence petfluencers' sincerity, and hence, their persuasiveness, might be to consider the type of photos that they post. For example, Colliander & Marder (2018) find that more natural and amateur pictures of human endorsers are perceived as more sincere and induce more favourable consumer responses than

more professional pictures. Similarly, Lee & Eastin (2020) use human influencers' Instagram photo arrays to manipulate the influencer's perceived sincerity, and support that higher sincerity leads to more favourable consumer responses. Following these findings, and the hypothesis that sincerity is central to petfluencers' persuasiveness, it is likely that petfluencers' sincerity can be manipulated through the type of photos they post on their profiles (i.e., photo arrays), and that their persuasiveness is influenced by consumers' propensity to anthropomorphise. Indeed, petfluencers' styles vary, with some posting more curated content featuring the pet 'posing' for higher-quality pictures, while others favour more authentic and raw content with more casual pictures (Anderson, 2023). This research suggests that individuals with a high propensity to anthropomorphise will respond positively to petfluencers in all circumstances (i.e., independent from the photo type). However, it is likely that this may not be the case for individuals low in anthropomorphism. Specifically, individuals with a low propensity to anthropomorphise should perceive the petfluencer as more sincere when the latter features a fewer (vs greater) number of posed photos, resulting in greater WTP. Indeed, if they tend to not attribute human characteristics to animals, they are more likely to respond positively to them when they do not feature in more human-like situations, such as posed pictures. More formally:

H₃: Petfluencers will generate more favourable consumer responses (i.e., greater WTP) when their photo arrays feature a fewer (vs greater) number of posed photos for individuals with a low (vs high) propensity to anthropomorphise.

4.4. Methodology and Findings

Study 1 tests the main effect of SMI type (human vs pet) on customer responses (**H₁**) using a field study on Instagram. Study 2 replicates the main effect using an experimental design (**H₁**) while investigating sincerity as a mediator (**H₂**). Study 3 provides further support for the effect of SMI type on customer responses and sincerity as a mediator by priming sincerity rather than manipulating it (**H₁** and **H₂**). Finally, Study 4 investigates a means to manipulate petfluencers' sincerity (i.e., through their photo arrays) to increase their persuasiveness, especially for consumers

who may be less inclined to respond positively to petfluencers' content (i.e., individuals with a low propensity to anthropomorphise pets; H₃).

4.4.1. Study 1

4.4.1.1. Method

The Meta A/B testing functionality was used to test the effect of a petfluencer versus a human influencer in an ecologically valid environment, following Orazi & Johnston's (2020) protocol. Two ads manipulating the influencer condition (SMI: human vs pet) were created, featuring in an Instagram post for the peanut butter brand Pip & Nut. While the focal SMI on the Instagram post either featured a man's hands (i.e., human condition) or a dog's paws (i.e., pet condition), the content of the images and text in the post were consistent across conditions. The pictures were accompanied by the following texts written in the first person. The petfluencer perspective read: "Any peanut butter addicts around here? 🐾 Just helping my human daddy clean up this Pip & Nut jar! #peanutbutter #pipandnut #peanutbutterlover #instadog #ad #sponsored". Alternatively, the human SMI the post read: "Any peanut butter addicts around here? 🍪 Reached out to my Pip & Nut jar for a treat this morning! #peanutbutter #pipandnut #peanutbutterlover #instafood #ad #sponsored" (see [Appendix Four](#)). The ads were delivered using Meta's split test function, which allows the testing of two ad versions with random non-overlapping audience groups. Facebook A/B testing is increasingly used in high-quality marketing research as it provides valid and reliable data (e.g., Mulier et al., 2021; To & Patrick, 2021). The ads ran over the course of four days (Wednesday to Saturday) on Instagram with the same daily budget per ad. The target audience was set to include Instagram users from the United States aged over 18 years old and interested in peanut butter.

4.4.1.2. Results and Discussion

Post Engagement. Results showed that the pet SMI performed better than the human SMI. Specifically, the pet SMI ad reached an audience of 18,224 (vs 17,613) Instagram users from the target audience and generated 18 (vs 6) post engagements at the cost of £2.29 (vs £6.86) per result. As predicted, the pet SMI generated a

significantly higher number of post engagements compared to the human SMI ($\chi^2 = 5.59, p < .02$).

Page Engagement. The pet SMI ad also generated a significantly higher number of page engagements, with 9 (vs 1) page engagements at the cost of £4.58 (vs £41.17) per result ($\chi^2 = 6.13, p < .02$; see [Figure 2](#)).

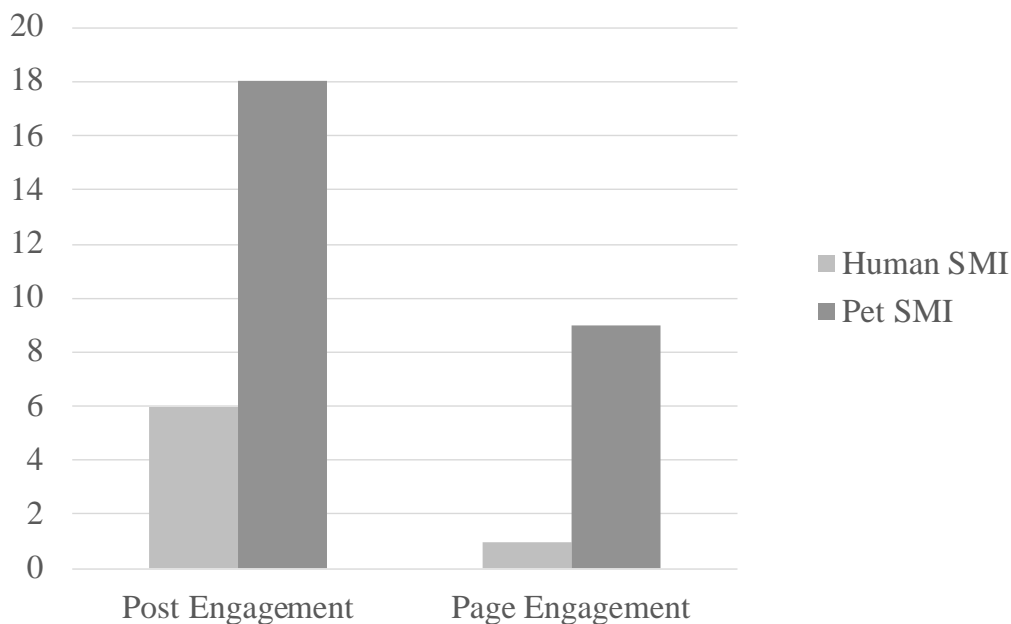


Figure 2: Effect of SMI type on post and page engagement.

This field study provides real-world evidence that a pet SMI leads to favourable brand responses, in support of **H₁**. As importantly, the fact that the stimuli only show the influencer’s paws (hands) controls for potential confounds such as attractiveness and gender, showing that the effect of petfluencers holds nonetheless. The next study tests **H₁** again, this time with WTP as the dependent variable and explores sincerity as a mediator (**H₂**).

4.4.2. Study 2

4.4.2.1. Method

One hundred fifty TurkPrime participants from the United States (46.7% Male, $M_{\text{age}} = 36.16$ years, $SD = 11.82$) completed a study that consisted of one manipulated factor (SMI: human vs pet). Participants were randomly assigned to either a human or pet SMI condition featured in an Instagram post for Naked Wines. While the focal SMI on the Instagram post either featured a woman (i.e., human condition) or a cat (i.e.,

pet condition), the content of the images and text in the post were consistent across conditions. A female SMI was selected as the human SMI, reflecting real marketplace practices as 84% of SMIs are females (Dencheva, 2023). A pre-test that involved showing the stimuli to a small number of social media users validated that both the human and pet influencers were believable as SMIs. The pictures were accompanied by the following texts written in the first person. The petfluencer perspective read: “What’s your human’s go-to wine that sets the scene for cozy evenings snuggled up by the fire? 🍷😌 This one seems perfect for my human: Naked Wines says it’s fruity, soft and easy to drink with its black currant fruits and its peppery finish. #ad #sponsored #nakedwines #redwine”. Alternatively, the human SMI the post read: “What’s your go-to wine that sets the scene for cozy evenings snuggled up by the fire? 🍷😌 This one seems perfect for me on a cold night: Naked Wines says it’s fruity, soft and easy to drink with its black currant fruits and its peppery finish. #ad #sponsored #nakedwines #redwine” (see [Appendix Four](#)).

After viewing the post, participants reported their WTP for a case of wine (\$0 - \$200). Participants next rated seven items that measured participants’ perceptions of the SMI’s sincerity (where 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; $\alpha = .94$; Aaker, 1997). Lastly, participants reported how frequently they consumed wine (where 1 = never, 7 = very frequently) and demographic information. A list of all measures can be seen in [Table 6](#).

4.4.2.2. Results and Discussion

WTP. A one-way ANCOVA with WTP as the dependent variable, SMI condition as the independent variable, and wine consumption frequency as a covariate yielded main effects of both the wine consumption frequency covariate ($F[1,147] = 23.81, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$), and more importantly, the SMI condition ($F[1, 147] = 10.15, p = .002, \eta^2 = .06$). In particular, participants who viewed the post featuring the pet SMI reported a higher WTP for a case of wine ($M = \$58.08, SD = \40.49) compared to those who viewed a post featuring the human SMI ($M = \$40.57, SD = \34.64).

Mediating Role of Sincerity. A one-way ANCOVA with sincerity index as the dependent variable, SMI condition as the independent variable, and wine consumption frequency as a covariate yielded main effects of both the wine consumption frequency

covariate ($F[1,147] = 10.52, p = .001, \eta^2 = .07$), and more importantly, the SMI condition ($F[1, 147] = 23.33, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$). In particular, participants who viewed the post featuring the pet SMI reported greater perceptions of sincerity ($M = 5.03, SD = 1.20$) compared to those who viewed a post featuring the human SMI ($M = 4.02, SD = 1.47$). To examine the mediating role of sincerity as predicted in **H₂**, an analysis using Model 4 from PROCESS (Hayes, 2018) was undertaken. Bootstrapping involving 10,000 resamples from the data revealed that the effect of the SMI condition (0 = human, 1 = pet) on WTP was mediated by perceptions of sincerity ($b = 8.74, SE = 2.65; 95\% CI [4.0594, 14.4341]$; see [Figure 3](#)).

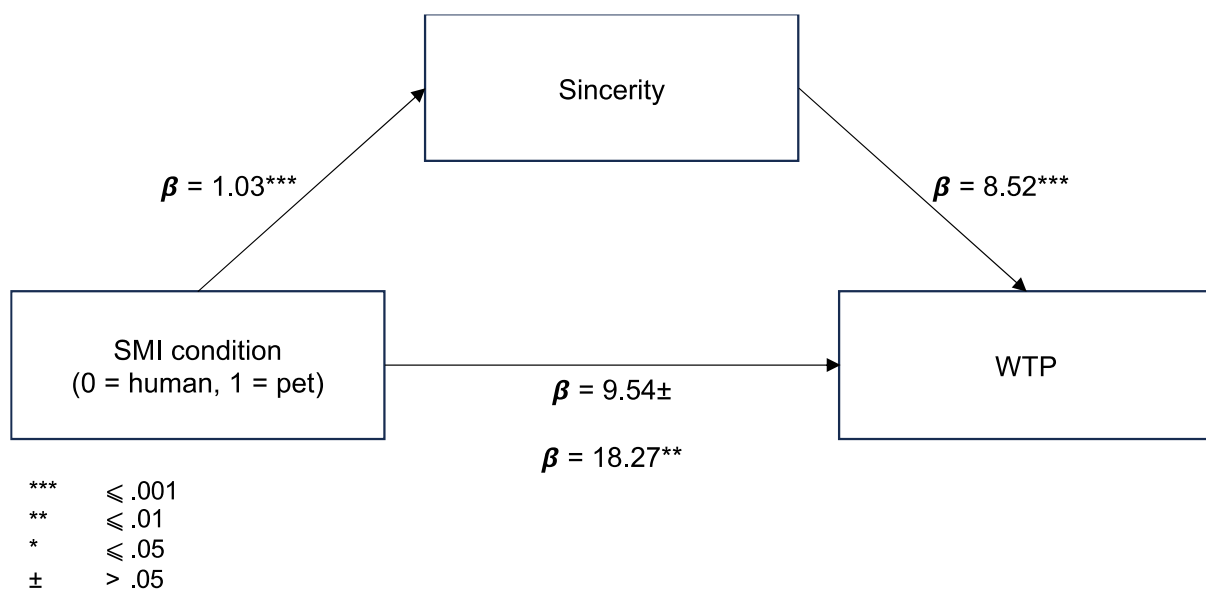


Figure 3: Full behavioural model for Study 1.

As hypothesised, Study 2 confirms that individuals exhibit a higher WTP when exposed to petfluencers rather than human influencers (**H₁**), and that such decisions are driven by perceptions of sincerity (**H₂**). The next study seeks to provide additional support for the proposed mediator via a moderation of process design (Spencer et al., 2005). Therefore, it is suggested that the increased WTP among individuals who view pet (vs human) influencer posts found in Study 2 will be attenuated when petfluencers are primed with insincerity. Additionally, while the SMI manipulation reflects common marketplace practices (e.g., the use of props, such as glasses; Olson, 2018), its inclusion may have been viewed as a novelty on the cat, hence contributing to the participants' affective responses. Therefore, in the next study, similar stimuli were developed without the inclusion of glasses to address this potential alternate explanation. A second potential limitation of Study 2 was the ambiguity related to the

number of bottles included in a case of wine, which served as the basis for participants' WTP and likely contributed to the large standard deviations observed in both conditions. Thus, to control for this ambiguity, the next study once again used wine as the focal product category but assessed participants' WTP for a single bottle of wine.

4.4.3. Study 3

4.4.3.1. Method

Two hundred and one TurkPrime participants from the United States (43.3% Male, $M_{age} = 43.65$ years, $SD = 15.18$), completed a 2(SMI: human vs pet) x 2(sincerity prime: insincere vs sincere) between-subjects study. Similar to Study 2, participants were randomly assigned to either a human or pet SMI condition. They were then presented with a writing task which served as the sincerity prime manipulation. Participants in the human (pet) sincerity prime condition read the following, "Sincerity is often defined as being heartfelt and genuine. For up to the next minute, we would like you to think about an example where an individual [animal/pet (dog, cat, etc.)] that you had seen, heard, or had previous experience whose actions embodied this definition of sincerity." Alternatively, participants in the human (pet) insincerity prime condition read the following, "Sincerity is often defined as being heartfelt and genuine. For up to the next minute, we would like you to think about an example where an individual [animal/pet (dog, cat, etc.)] whose actions did not embody this definition of sincerity." A pre-test with a separate sample of 121 TurkPrime participants (57.9% male, $M_{age} = 39.99$ years, $SD = 12.10$) confirmed that the target of the sincerity prime (humans or animals/pets) was perceived as more sincere ($\alpha = .90$; Aaker, 1997) among participants in the sincerity (vs insincerity) prime conditions ($M_{sincere} = 5.54$, $SD = 1.05$ vs $M_{insincere} = 4.79$, $SD = 1.38$; $F[1, 119] = 11.32$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$). In the main study, participants were then presented with an Instagram post for Naked Wines that matched their initial assigned condition for the writing task, such that those who completed the human (pet) writing task then viewed an Instagram post from a human (pet) SMI. The posts were similar to those used in Study 2, still written in the first person [i.e., from the (pet)fluencer perspective but without glasses]. A pre-test with a separate sample of 61 of TurkPrime participants (54.1% female, $M_{age} = 38.47$ years) confirmed that the SMIs generated different levels of sincerity perceptions ($M_{pet} = 4.60$,

SD = 1.40 vs $M_{\text{human}} = 3.73$, $SD = 1.75$; $F[1, 59] = 4.61$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .07$; $\alpha = .95$; Aaker, 1997). More importantly, the pre-test confirmed that the SMIs featured in the stimuli did not differ in terms of attractiveness and cuteness ($ps > .05$), hence also ruling out potential alternative explanations (see [Appendix Four](#)). Then, after viewing the post, participants in the main study reported their WTP on a single bottle of wine (\$0 - \$50), their wine consumption frequency and demographic information (see [Appendix Four](#) for the stimuli and [Table 6](#) for the measures).

4.4.3.2. Results and Discussion

WTP. A two-way ANCOVA with WTP as the dependent variable, SMI condition and sincerity prime condition as independent variables, and wine consumption frequency as a covariate yielded a main effect of both the wine consumption frequency covariate ($F[1,196] = 24.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$) and a marginal effect of SMI condition ($F[1,196] = 2.93$, $p = .09$, $\eta^2 = .01$), and more importantly, revealed the expected interaction between SMI condition and sincerity manipulation ($F[1,196] = 9.65$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .05$; see [Figure 4](#)).

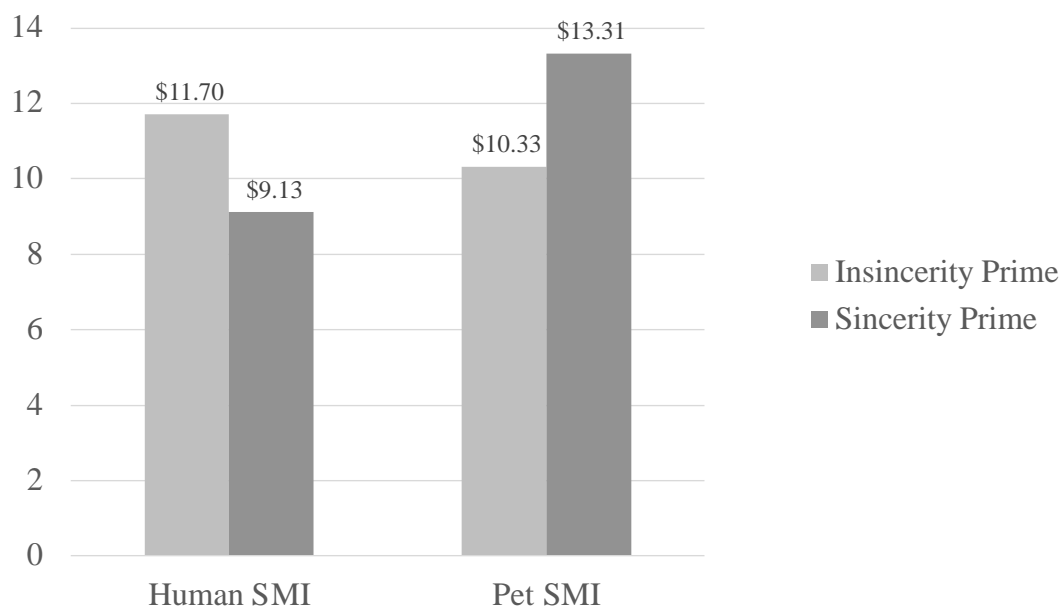


Figure 4: Effect of SMI type on WTP as a function of sincerity prime.

When participants were exposed to the sincerity prime, a higher WTP was reported by those in the pet ($M = \$13.31$, $SD = \$8.82$) versus human SMI condition ($M = \$9.13$, $SD = \$6.90$; $F[1,196] = 9.49$, $p = .002$). Yet, no differences were observed across SMI conditions when participants were primed with thoughts of insincerity (M_{pet}

= \$10.33, $SD = \$6.33$ vs $M_{\text{human}} = \$11.70$, $SD = \$6.57$; $F[1,196] = .99$, $p = .32$). Further, within the pet SMI condition, a higher WTP for a bottle of wine was observed among participants exposed to the sincerity ($M = \$13.31$, $SD = \$8.82$) versus insincerity prime ($M = \$10.33$, $SD = \$6.33$; $F[1,196] = 4.77$, $p = .03$). Conversely, among participants in the human SMI condition, participants expressed a lower WTP following exposure to the sincerity ($M = \$9.13$, $SD = \$6.90$) versus insincerity prime ($M = \$11.70$, $SD = \$6.57$; $F[1,196] = 3.52$, $p = .06$).

Replicating the prior findings in Study 2, and once again supporting **H₁**, Study 3 demonstrates that consumers exposed to posts by petfluencers (vs human SMIs) report greater WTP for the featured product. Importantly, supporting sincerity as the underlying process (**H₂**), through a process by moderation design, Study 3 demonstrates that when consumers are primed with thoughts of sincerity (vs insincerity), which also comports with consumers' animal schemas, consumers exhibit greater WTP. While the results reveal that human SMIs lead to greater WTP in the insincerity (vs sincerity) prime, this reversal might have occurred because the sincerity prime evoked scepticism in SMIs associated with influencer fatigue. Though, this is just one plausible explanation for this unpredicted finding.

The next study aims to show further support for the role of sincerity while providing more practical insights on how sincerity perceptions may be impacted by marketplace contexts. To do so, the mix of photos highlighted on a petfluencer's page [i.e., a greater number of posed (vs natural) photos] is considered. Simultaneously, the next study considers how petfluencers' sincerity and persuasiveness may be impacted by consumers' propensity to anthropomorphise pets, as individuals with a low propensity to anthropomorphise are less likely to respond positively to petfluencers. Therefore, Study 4 next examines the moderating effect of consumers' propensity to anthropomorphise and photo arrays as a means to increase petfluencers' sincerity and persuasiveness.

4.4.4. Study 4

4.4.4.1. Method

Two hundred and nineteen TurkPrime participants from the United States (45.2% Male, $M_{\text{age}} = 42.26$ years, $SD = 12.76^1$), completed a study that consisted of one manipulated factor, sincerity (low vs high), and one measured factor, propensity to anthropomorphise. Participants were randomly assigned to either a low or high sincerity condition and were then presented with a picture collage from TuckerthePug's Instagram profile, which served as the sincerity manipulation. Participants in the low (vs high) sincerity condition viewed an array of photos that included a greater (vs lesser) number of posed photos for TuckerthePug. A separate pre-test with 110 TurkPrime participants (46.4% Male, $M_{\text{age}} = 41.57$ years, $SD = 13.30$) revealed greater perceptions of sincerity ($\alpha = .93$; Aaker, 1997) of the petfluencer when the photo array included fewer (vs more) posed photos ($M = 5.59$, $SD = .83$ vs $M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.25$, respectively; $F[1, 108] = 4.41$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .04$; see [Appendix Four](#)).

In the main study, individuals were then presented with an Instagram post by a petfluencer, TuckerthePug, for Randy's Donuts. The Instagram post featured TuckerthePug in front of Randy's Donut and the following text: "No one can resist such a giant donut. Couldn't bring this one home, so just bought a dozen of DELICIOUSLY DECADENT donuts from Randy's donuts instead #ad #sponsored #randysdonuts" (see [Appendix Four](#)). After viewing the post, participants indicated how much they were willing to pay (WTP) for a dozen doughnuts. Participants then completed a four-item propensity to anthropomorphise scale (where 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .93$; Apaolaza et al., 2022), followed by their doughnut consumption frequency (1 = never, 7 = very frequently) and demographic information (see measures in [Table 6](#)).

¹ After the removal of five responses that failed data quality checks (i.e., incomplete demographics and respondents with the same location data). The same data cleaning criteria have been applied to all this paper's studies but did not require any response removal.

WTP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study 2: How much would you be willing to spend with the featured wine merchant on a case of wines? (\$0-\$200)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study 3: How much would you be willing to spend on a bottle of wine from Naked Wines? (\$0-\$50)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study 4: How much would you be willing to pay for a dozen donuts from Randy's Donuts (in USD \$)? (\$0-\$20)
Sincerity Perceptions (Aaker, 1997), 1 = not at all / 7 = very much, $\alpha > .90$
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does the influencer seem to be honest
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does the influencer seem to be sincere
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does the influencer seem to be real
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does the influencer seem to be wholesome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does the influencer seem to be cheerful
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does the influencer seem to be friendly
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does the influencer seem to be trustworthy
SMI Attractiveness , 1 = not at all / 7 = very much
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do you think the influencer is nice-looking
SMI Cuteness , 1 = not at all / 7 = very much
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do you think the influencer is cute
Propensity to Anthropomorphise Pets (Apaolaza et al., 2022), 1 = strongly disagree / 7 = strongly agree, $\alpha = .73$
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pets should have the same rights as people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like celebrating my pet's birthday / If I had a pet, I would like to celebrate my pet's birthday
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pets understand everything we say
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like giving pets affectionate nicknames like "baby" or "sweetheart"
Consumption Frequency , 1 = never / 7 = very frequently
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How frequently do you drink wine?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How frequently do you eat donuts?

Table 6: Constructs, measures and sources for Paper One.

4.4.4.2. Results and Discussion

WTP. A regression analysis with sincerity (0 = low, 1 = high), propensity to anthropomorphise and their interaction as independent variables, doughnut consumption frequency as the covariate, and WTP as the dependent variable revealed a simple effect of the frequency of doughnut consumption covariate ($b = 1.03$, $t = 4.62$, $p < .001$), and more importantly, the predicted sincerity x propensity to anthropomorphise interaction ($b = -.83$, $t = -1.99$, $p = .048$). A spotlight analysis, performed at one SD below the propensity to anthropomorphise mean ($M = 4.42$), revealed that among participants with a lower propensity to anthropomorphise, a higher WTP was observed in the high sincerity versus low sincerity conditions ($b = 1.51$, $t = 1.90$, $p = .059$). Conversely, WTP for the dozen doughnuts did not differ by sincerity condition among those participants with a greater propensity to anthropomorphise ($b = -.73$, $t = -.92$, $p = .36$; see [Figure 5](#)).

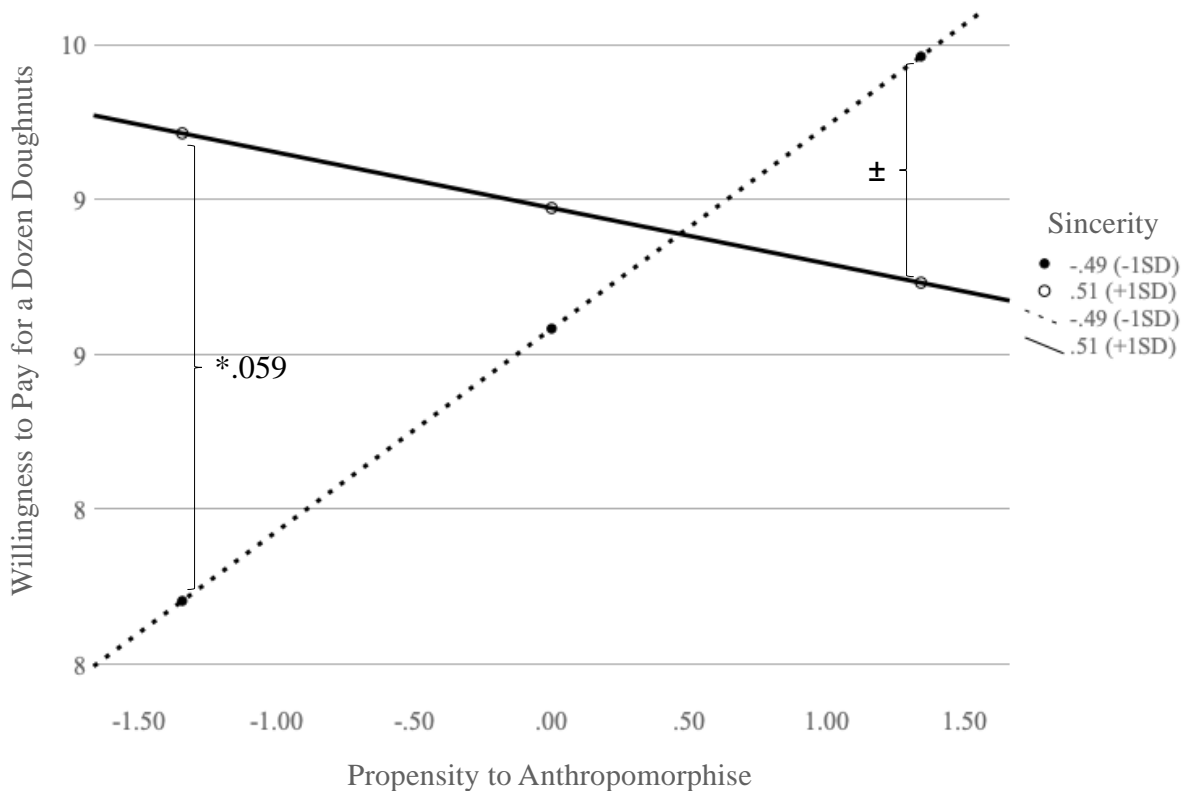


Figure 5: Estimated means for WTP for insincere versus sincere conditions by propensity to anthropomorphise.

Replicating the prior findings from Study 1 and Study 2, Study 4 once again supports sincerity as the underlying process (H_2) and explores how sincerity can be manipulated to increase petfluencers' persuasiveness for all individuals. The findings

demonstrate that, as suggested by the existing literature on anthropomorphism and its ability to elicit emotional connections, individuals with a high propensity to anthropomorphise intuitively respond positively to petfluencers, whether the petfluencer features in more casual pictures or not. More importantly, the findings provide a practical means to increase petfluencers' persuasiveness for individuals with a low propensity to anthropomorphise, and who are therefore less likely to respond positively to petfluencers, by increasing sincerity perceptions through casual pictures (vs posed), hence supporting **H₃**.

4.5. General Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this present research is to provide, through a field study and three experiments, initial evidence for the effectiveness of petfluencers (vs human SMIs) in influencing social media users' brand responses. This research offers both theoretical and managerial contributions.

4.5.1. Theoretical Contributions

First, the current research extends knowledge of pets in marketing by providing initial empirical support for the influence petfluencers hold on their online audience. The findings suggest that petfluencers can be more persuasive than human SMIs, even when controlling for the use of props, gender, and attractiveness. This effect is observed in one field study and three different experiments, increasing the generalisability of the results. This research responds to several calls (Connell, 2013; Keller & Gierl, 2020; Lancendorfer et al., 2008) for investigating the effectiveness of animals in advertising, which despite their increasing presence, have not been thoroughly examined. This is even more relevant regarding animals on social media, as previous research focuses on traditional endorsers (e.g., Amos et al., 2008) or human SMIs (e.g., Kupfer et al., 2018). Compared to the advertising literature, which has qualified the effectiveness of animals in advertising with varying consumer-level contingencies (e.g., Connell, 2013; Lancendorfer et al., 2008; Yelkur et al., 2013), this might not be the case for animals in social media. This research supports that animals, or at least pets, can be used effectively to endorse brands on social media without these qualifiers and act as the source of a brand-sponsored message, rather than

merely as a persuasive element in a promotional message created by the brand. Furthermore, it responds to calls for a direct comparison of pet versus human endorsers (Jia et al., 2022), and suggests that pets can indeed be more persuasive than humans, at least as SMIs.

Second, this research furthers knowledge in the domain of social media marketing, and more specifically influencer marketing, suggesting petfluencers as a new SMI type that differs from traditional (i.e., human) SMIs by the way their persuasiveness manifests. While human SMIs' persuasiveness arises from identification with the SMI through either similarity and intimacy (Daniel et al., 2018; Schouten et al., 2020) or an SMI's aspirational nature (Kupfer et al., 2018; Leban et al., 2021), petfluencers' persuasive ability stems from the sincerity they embody. Hence, this shows the crucial role sincerity holds in explaining the superior success of petfluencers in comparison with human SMIs. This highlights the fact that social media users show increased scepticism and defiance towards human SMIs because of the increase of fake and sponsored content available on social network sites, hence explaining why social media are increasingly criticised for deceiving users into accepting and sometimes mimicking a fake version of reality (Chandler, 2019). Therefore, petfluencers provide an alternative to mitigate the increasing concerns related to deceiving and insincere content posted on social media, seemingly bringing sincerity to an overwhelming and saturated digital space.

Third, this research contributes to knowledge of the role of consumers' propensity to anthropomorphise on pet endorsements' persuasiveness, hence responding to Jia et al.'s (2022) call to investigate pets' persuasiveness alongside consumers' anthropomorphism tendencies. The findings show that consumers perceive and respond to petfluencers' content differently, based on their propensity to anthropomorphise pets. Specifically, and as expected, consumers with a high propensity to anthropomorphise are positively influenced by petfluencers regardless of the content they post, likely because such individuals have a greater interest in pets (Amiot et al., 2020). However, consumers with a low propensity to anthropomorphise usually perceive pets as less close and similar to them (Amiot et al., 2020). The findings suggest that for these individuals, petfluencers may be less persuasive when featuring in human-like situations (e.g., posed pictures), whereas more casual pictures

are perceived as more sincere and as such, more persuasive. This echoes Colliander & Marder's (2018) findings on (human) pictures posted on social media, which they find are more effective when natural and more amateur (vs more professional). This research extends Lee & Eastin's (2020) findings that photo arrays can be used to manipulate an influencer's sincerity and persuasiveness, and highlights the importance for petfluencers to consider more casual and natural pictures to reach a wider audience.

4.5.2. Practical Contributions

This research responds to calls for guidance from practitioners on how to leverage petfluencers (Connell, 2013). It provides practical suggestions on how brands can benefit from this one-of-a-kind type of SMI by providing actionable insights on SMI selection and content creation. Social media users consume over 300 posts in less than an hour, only spending a few seconds on each post (Pancer et al., 2019). As such, social media users are overwhelmed with information from SMIs and other users, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to generate content that attracts sufficient attention and stops the scrolling (Pancer et al., 2019). Although human SMIs provide potential for identification and inspiration (i.e., lifestyle, appearance, etc.), it is accomplished with a double-edged sword. Social media users compare themselves to these SMIs, which could potentially result in negative consequences (i.e., jealousy, emotional distance, etc.). This research suggests that petfluencers mitigate these, providing enough potential for generating more positive consumer responses, and allowing them to be more persuasive than their human counterparts. Marketing managers may therefore consider petfluencers as a viable alternative to traditional endorsers and human SMIs for product sponsoring, bringing more positive emotions to social media users. More importantly, marketers need to consider the importance of the SMI's perceived sincerity. When considering an SMI to sponsor their brand, either pet or human, marketing managers need to pay careful attention beyond the SMI's number of followers and favour those who nurture close relationships and authentic interactions with their audiences.

Furthermore, to amplify the effect of petfluencers on customer responses, practitioners need to consider their audience's propensity to anthropomorphise in order to frame the petfluencer's message more effectively. Petfluencers' sincerity can

be manipulated through their photo arrays, and increase (or decrease) their persuasiveness depending on consumers' propensity to anthropomorphise. Therefore, practitioners opting for a petfluencer should consider the latter's style and types of photos posted. Additionally, the offering to be endorsed might give a clue to practitioners about the petfluencer and content type to select. Indeed, when opting for a petfluencer to promote pet-related offerings, the audience that will be engaging with the petfluencer's content is more likely to include pet owners interested in purchasing pet-related offerings, with a strong anthropomorphising tendency (Apaolaza et al., 2022). However, when selecting a petfluencer to promote offerings beyond the pet industry, the audience might include individuals with varying degrees of propensity to anthropomorphise, who may react differently to petfluencers' pictures. As such, practitioners may want to favour petfluencers that post more casual (vs posed) pictures, to amplify the effect of petfluencers even for individuals with a low propensity to anthropomorphise.

4.5.3. Limitations and Future Research

The research provides theoretical and practical implications but is not without its limitations. The aim of this research is to investigate whether petfluencers can be more influential than their human counterparts and why they exhibit greater influence, but comparing human and pet endorsers is a difficult task as it can involve many potential confounds. Although the stimuli used aim to minimise differences to a minimum, and although the field study confirms the effect without potential attractiveness or gender confounds, future experimental research should further validate the findings in various contexts, for example by using a male influencer (i.e., not just the hands) and unknown brands to avoid potential biases.

Moreover, other potential influencing factors, such as humour and cuteness, should be considered in future research. This paper's findings suggest that sincerity is the main driver of petfluencers' superior persuasiveness. Indeed, the pre-test from Study 3 confirms that there is no difference in cuteness between the human and pet SMIs featured in the stimuli, yet the petfluencer still generates greater positive consumer responses. Similarly, Study 1 only features the SMIs' paws/hands and a product that is congruent with both the human and pet SMIs, hence removing potential confounds such as cuteness, attractiveness, or humour associated with the product-

endorser fit. Nonetheless, cuteness and humour may still be reflected in the text accompanying the pictures. Future research should therefore consider other potential drivers for petfluencers' persuasiveness and how these manifest.

Furthermore, although this research tests and even manipulates sincerity in different ways (i.e., priming, petfluencer's photo array), another interesting avenue for research involves manipulating sincerity through petfluencers' text, or assessing petfluencers' perceived sincerity through the lens of the common criteria associated with human SMIs, such as number of followers.

Additionally, future research should investigate the impact of congruence between petfluencers and the offerings they endorse on their persuasiveness. Although this research uses a variety of products including both congruent and incongruent ones (i.e., Studies 2, 3 and 4 feature wine and doughnuts which are products that are incongruent with pets, Study 1 features peanut butter which is a product suitable for both human and animal consumption), and while it is not the aim of the current research to investigate SMI-product congruence, this can be acknowledged as a limitation. Indeed, it is possible that petfluencers may be even more sincere, and as such more persuasive, when endorsing congruent offerings. Given that petfluencers frequently endorse both congruent (e.g., BarkBox and Subaru; Ungerleider, 2016) and incongruent products (e.g., Budweiser and NyxCosmetics; Dua, 2017), and to support the generalisability of the results, future research could be conducted on the efficacy of pet SMIs in promoting both traditional human versus pet products, as well as products that can be consumed by both.

Furthermore, while this research provides an initial examination of the petfluencers category among other endorsers, the petfluencers were depicted in the absence of any humans. The findings suggest that petfluencers engender more favourable consumer responses due to perceptions of sincerity, though the introduction of a human element, possibly the petfluencers' owners, and the implications of that relationship may affect the overall response to the petfluencer. It is possible that the presence of a human reminds consumers of the fact that the account is, indeed, managed by a human, hence impacting sincerity perceptions. In this light, it may be worthwhile to consider the consequences of human/petfluencer relationships and how the latter is shared with the petfluencer's audience.

Finally, although two different types of pets are featured in this research, future studies should consider exploring other types of petfluencers such as wilder animals, especially as these might raise concerns about animal rights. After all, some of the top petfluencers are non-traditional pets (e.g., hedgehogs). These other animals might not convey the same type of sincerity that traditional pets might. However, these pets might be able to contribute other meanings to brands.

The next chapter examines the role of product congruence in pet endorsements in a second experimental paper.

Chapter Five: Paper Two

Tail-oring Ads: The Impact of Product Congruence and Ad Immersion on the Effectiveness of Ads Featuring Pets

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Reminder regarding authorship: As the first author, I designed and created all of the surveys and stimuli, ran all of the studies, conducted the data analysis, and wrote the full draft of the paper. My co-authors contributed to the design of the stimuli/surveys and the writing of the paper.

The second paper of this thesis investigates the key role product congruence plays in the effectiveness of ads featuring pets, still focusing on digital communications. While Paper One suggests that pets are effective endorsers, and can even be more effective than human endorsers, Paper Two aims to assess under which circumstances pets may be more (or less) effective endorsers. Therefore, while Paper One explores *if* pets can be effective endorsers, Paper Two investigates *when*. Specifically, Paper Two empirically tests whether pet endorsements are more effective when featuring congruent products (**RQ6**) and supports attention as a mediator (**RQ7**). Additionally, Paper Two investigates immersion as a moderator, suggesting that increasing ad immersion can increase attention toward the ad and consumer responses, especially when the ad is incongruent (**RQ8**).

5.1. Abstract

Pets frequently feature in advertisements, endorsing pet supplies to Starbucks coffee or even Jeep cars. Yet, despite pets' ubiquity in marketing, literature examining when pets are more effective as endorsers is scarce. Given the prevalence of pet endorsers in ads featuring offerings of all sorts, this research aims to investigate whether ads featuring pets are more effective when the endorsed offering is congruent (vs incongruent) with the pet endorser, and if so, why. Using three experiments to investigate product congruence in pet ads, this research supports that the latter drives

more positive outcomes (i.e., purchase intentions) when the endorsed product is congruent (vs incongruent) with the pet (Studies 1 to 3), and that this effect is driven by increased attention (Studies 2 and 3). Furthermore, inducing immersion in the ad through the background mitigates the negative effect of product incongruence, thus increasing consumer attention and purchase intentions for incongruent products (Study 3). The findings provide novel theoretical contributions to the marketing literature on ads featuring pets, congruence, and immersion, and offer recommendations for practitioners.

5.2. Introduction

Animals are ubiquitous in consumers' daily lives and advertisements. In particular, animals frequently star in marketing communications, with one of five advertisements featuring animals (Webster, 2018). For example, focusing here on pets, the American retailer Target has used a dog as their mascot for the last two decades (Target Corporate, 2019), while Budweiser's 2014 Super Bowl 'Puppy Love' commercial has been the most popular ad in the fifty-year history of the event (Henry, 2016). From television to more recently social media, as brand mascots or occasional endorsers in ads, pets' popularity as marketing assets is undeniable. Yet, while pets seem to be widely adopted as endorsers and viewed as a safe choice in marketing (Spears et al., 1996), there is no guidance about when pets are effective as endorsers. Armstrong (2013), an advertising agency's director, states in *Forbes* that "whatever the reason, trends show that pets are one of the most meaningful ways to engage consumers". This highlights the lack of knowledge on what drives the power of pets, hence motivating the present research to find what 'the reason' is.

Despite pets' omnipresence, scarce research has examined their effectiveness as brand endorsers as well as the key influential factors (Jia et al., 2022). To date, existing literature remains largely focused on symbolic (Lloyd & Woodside, 2013; Spears et al., 1996) and anthropomorphized perspectives (Connell, 2013; Wang et al., 2020), as well as consumer contingencies such as pet ownership (Amiot & Bastian, 2015; Cavanaugh et al., 2008). Such research would provide crucial guidance for marketers and brands on how to effectively tailor marketing communications featuring pets (Jia et al., 2022). Specifically, while the limited literature (e.g., Lancendorfer et al.,

2008) seems to suggest that pets can help increase the effectiveness of an ad, and while they are indeed frequently used in advertising (Webster, 2018), it is still unclear under which conditions this effectiveness manifests. To summarise, while pets may be effective endorsers, *when* they are (or are less) effective is still undetermined.

The present research responds to calls for further research investigating the role of pets in influencing consumer responses beyond the aforementioned consumer contingencies, and an understanding of when pets may be more or less effective endorsers (Lancendorfer et al., 2008). Recent research (Dessart, 2018) suggests that animals in ads decrease consumer persuasion because people cannot easily identify or relate to them. So, how then can pets be effective endorsers? It could be that the type of offering pets endorse influences their effectiveness, as congruent ads usually lead to more positive consumer outcomes (Moorman et al., 2002). Yet, pets endorse brands like Starbucks and Jeep, in addition to typical pet products. Therefore, this research answers calls to explore the role of product congruence in pets' effectiveness (e.g., Keller & Gierl, 2020; Lancendorfer et al., 2008). This is echoed by the [pilot study mentioned in the introduction](#), as 23.6% of the marketers involved in the survey mentioned the importance of congruence between the endorsed offering and the pet endorser, as well as pet endorsers' capacity to attract consumers' attention (20%), when asked to explain why they believe pets may be (in)effective.

This research proposes that product congruence, that is the congruence or 'fit' of the product with the pet endorser, leads to increased ad effectiveness as it attracts greater attention to the ad. Furthermore, it proposes ad immersion, the degree to which the ad is able to transport and immerse consumers into the ad through the integration of background imagery, as a means to offset the challenges associated with product incongruence. Precisely, this research aims to answer the following questions. With regard to ads featuring pets as endorsers, are pets more effective when endorsing congruent products? What mechanism explains this process? Does ad immersion moderate this effect?

Drawing from marketing and psychology literature on congruence and immersion, it is argued that pets are more effective when endorsing congruent pet-related products but can effectively endorse non-pet-related offerings when immersion is further induced. Attention is further identified as mediating the effect. This research

hence provides three theoretical contributions. First, this research increases knowledge in the domain of pet endorsements by assessing *when* pets may be more (or less) effective endorsers depending on the offering they promote. In doing so, this research extends knowledge in the domain of product-endorser congruence and supports that product congruence is crucial in pet endorsements. Building on contradicting findings on (in)congruence, this research provides the first insights into the role of product congruence on ads featuring pets and shows that pet endorsers' effectiveness is heavily reliant on the type of offerings they endorse. Specifically, this research assesses *when* pets can be more (but also less) effective endorsers depending on product congruence and shows that although they frequently promote various offerings and brands, they are actually less successful in driving positive consumer responses when they endorse incongruent products. Second, it increases knowledge of the role of attention in pet endorsements by examining its mediating effect, simultaneously responding to a call to assess the role of attention in pet ads (Lancendorfer et al., 2008). Echoing previous findings on congruence and its effect on attention (Moorman et al., 2002), this research shows that congruence (product congruence in particular) can indeed impact consumer attention, such that pet ads endorsing congruent (vs incongruent) products attract greater (lesser) attention. Third, it provides a novel understanding of immersion in the advertising discipline, supporting that it can be manipulated through the background and attract consumer attention, hence providing a way to mitigate the negative consequences of product incongruence in pet endorsements by increasing their effectiveness. Therefore, this research nuances recent findings (Dessart, 2018) and supports that increased immersion induced by the presence of a pet and ad elements (e.g., ad background) can attract increased consumer attention and purchase intentions, supporting pets as effective endorsers when product congruence is considered. Therefore, although pets more successfully endorse congruent products, they can also do so for incongruent products when immersion is further induced into the ad. Finally, this research provides key insights for practitioners on how to effectively use pets in product endorsements.

5.3. Literature Review

5.3.1 Pets, Congruence, and Consumer Responses

The limited literature on pets in marketing calls for further investigation of the impact of congruence between the pet endorser and the endorsed product (e.g., Lancendorfer et al., 2008). Indeed, prior marketing research supports congruence as an important factor capable of influencing ad effectiveness across a variety of contexts, such as product-website congruence (e.g., Moore et al., 2005), ad-context congruence (e.g., Belanche et al., 2017; Moorman et al., 2002; Russell, 2002; Zanjani et al., 2011), location-medium type congruence (e.g., Ketelaar et al., 2017), and product-endorser congruence (e.g. Fleck et al., 2012; Gong & Li, 2017; Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2022) on which this paper focuses.

Specifically, research supports that congruent information leads to more favourable outcomes such as more positive ad attitudes and behavioural intentions, whereas incongruent information increases complexity and often results in more negative outcomes (Mandler, 1982). More related to this research, previous findings (Russell, 2002) suggest that incongruent product placements within television shows drive negative outcomes as incongruent products are perceived as out of place. Additionally, recent research on social media advertising echoes these findings, arguing that the effectiveness of social media ads is dependent on the congruence or 'fit' between the endorser and the endorsed product (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2022). This is because congruent stimuli communicate a simpler and clearer message, hence allowing consumers to feel more confident and motivated to process the information (Campbell & Goodstein, 2001; Fleck et al., 2012). While no research has examined how congruence impacts pets' effectiveness in advertising, these findings may suggest that the more the advertised offering is congruent with the pet endorser (e.g., pet-related offerings), the more effective the ad should be.

Conversely, other research offers evidence to the contrary. Specifically, recent research from Choi et al. (2020) suggests that incongruence might be more effective. Their findings support that background colour incongruent with the valence of a charity appeal (e.g., a warm orange colour with a sad charity appeal) attracts increased attention from individuals, resulting in increased charitable donations. These results

align with previous research on incongruence, whereby incongruent information is more informative (Crocker et al., 1983; Fiske et al., 1983) and encourages individuals to resolve the incongruence (Goodstein, 1993; Moore et al., 2005). In this case, congruent information may not motivate people to engage deeper with the ad (Fiske et al., 1983; Machleit et al., 1993). Following this reasoning, ads featuring pets would be more effective when using incongruent information, such as an incongruent product (e.g., a product that can only be used or consumed by humans, but not by pets).

Despite these contradicting findings and the crucial role congruence seems to play in attracting consumers' attention and positive responses, there seems to be no research which examines how congruence impacts the effectiveness of ads featuring pets. Responding to several calls to investigate the fit between the pet endorser and the advertised offering (e.g., Keller & Gierl, 2020; Lancendorfer et al., 2008), this research focuses on product congruence. Product congruence is here defined as the extent to which an offering can be used or consumed by the endorser. Therefore, a congruent (incongruent) product is one that can (cannot) be used or consumed by the pet endorser, such as, for example, diverse pet supplies.

This research argues that ads featuring pets are more effective when the endorsed product is congruent with the pet. This is consistent with research supporting product congruence as critical for social media ads' effectiveness, as these need to be (or appear to be) organic and authentic, reflecting the endorser's credibility in endorsing the product (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2022). It is also supported by the longstanding theory that congruent information is more effective in driving positive consumer outcomes (Moorman et al., 2002), and by research supporting that congruent information is more effective in interactive digital environments (Vermeir et al., 2014). Therefore:

H₁: Ads featuring pets will generate more (less) favourable consumer responses (i.e., purchase intentions) when endorsing more (less) congruent products.

Moorman et al. (2002) suggest that congruent information is more effective in driving positive consumer responses as it attracts greater attention, because congruent information is easier to understand and process. Additionally, as interactive

environments have been found to diminish consumers' available cognitive resources, congruent information is more appropriate as it does not require as much effort and time to process (Vermeir et al., 2014), hence freeing enough resources for consumers to pay more attention to the congruent content. Furthermore, ads featuring pets encourage heuristic processing, which is a focus on superficial cues without motivation to engage deeply with the message (Lancendorfer et al., 2008). This means that pet ads are more appropriate for simple and clear messages, where consumers can easily process the information and focus their attention on the brand elements, such as the pet and the product. Oppositely, they are less likely to do so when the message is complex, such as when the product is incongruent. To summarise, consumers in digital environments are left with fewer cognitive resources and are more likely to pay attention to content that is easy to process, such as congruent content. Similarly, pet ads are also more effective when featuring in simple and clear messages. Therefore, pet ads featuring congruent products should be easier to process and thus, more effective in attracting consumer attention and positive responses, even more so in digital environments.

Yet, while consumer attention is an essential antecedent to positive consumer responses and is key in explaining (in)congruent information's effectiveness (Choi et al., 2020), research remains mainly focused on context, medium or schema incongruence, but is relatively silent regarding the role product congruence plays in attracting consumer attention. Additionally, although product congruence and attention are likely to impact pet ads' effectiveness, the limited literature on pets in marketing has yet to investigate these (Lancendorfer et al., 2008).

In line with the aforementioned findings, and as product congruence with the endorser is crucial in digital environments (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2022), it is suggested that online ads featuring pets will be more (less) effective in attracting consumer attention when the endorsed product is congruent (incongruent) with the pet endorser, resulting in more positive outcomes. Thus:

H₂: The effect of product congruence on consumer responses will be mediated by attention.

5.3.2 Immersion and Attention

Immersion is associated with increased consumer attention (Lunardo & Ponsignon, 2020; Mainemelis, 2001) and therefore may provide clues on how to leverage pets' attention-grabbing capacity, offsetting the challenges associated with product incongruence to increase their effectiveness. Immersion reflects the degree to which "users feel absorbed in, involved with, and engrossed by ... stimuli" (Palmer, 1995, as cited in Yim et al., 2017, p. 92). The notion of immersion has gained popularity and become a key theme in both consumer behaviour and psychology literature (e.g., Carù & Cova, 2006; Mainemelis, 2001). This increased visibility is due to the growth of the experience economy and the powerful effect immersion has on consumer experience and attention (Mainemelis, 2001). Although immersion captivates consumers' attention and therefore represents a crucial opportunity for marketers to reach and retain customers, it remains unclear what immersion exactly is and how to manipulate it (Jennett et al., 2008).

Recent research from Walters et al. (2007) and Yoo & Kim (2014) manipulates pictures' vividness, a component of immersion (Filter et al., 2020), through the background. However, the former does not test the effect such manipulation has on consumer responses; neither test whether the vividness manipulation succeeds in manipulating immersion. Furthermore, only a very limited number of studies, including the valuable research from Yoo & Kim (2014), test immersion as an independent variable and examine its effect on consumer outcomes (Hudson et al., 2019), such as attention and shopping outcomes. More importantly, immersion may be useful to mitigate the negative effect of product incongruence, but this remains untested.

Consumers are more likely to pay attention to information that is easier to process and does not require a lot of cognitive resources, as this allows them to be easily immersed in the story. Hence, consumers are more naturally immersed in ads presenting congruent information, as the latter frees up cognitive resources, which allows individuals to pay attention and focus on the brand elements (Bhatnagar & Wan, 2011; Houghton, 2021). Oppositely, incongruence requires considerable cognitive resources, hindering consumers from being immersed in and paying attention to the ad (Bhatnagar & Wan, 2011; Houghton, 2021). Therefore, inducing immersion can be a viable means to increase the effectiveness of an incongruent ad. Indeed, while

congruent elements do not require immersion to be further induced, as consumers are already immersed in the brand information (Bhatnagar & Wan, 2011), this is not the case for incongruent information. In the presence of incongruent elements, inducing immersion is required to immerse consumers with few cognitive resources left, in the story, and gain their attention (Bhatnagar & Wan, 2011).

Taken together, it is predicted that immersion can be manipulated through the background (e.g. Walters et al., 2007; Yoo & Kim, 2014). More importantly, it is predicted that increased immersion will mitigate the negative effect of product incongruence in ads featuring pets. While increased immersion is not expected to impact congruent pet ads (i.e., featuring a product that can be used or consumed by the pet endorser), it should have a strong effect on incongruent pet ads (i.e., featuring a product that can be used or consumed by humans only) by helping reconcile the incongruence and immerse consumers into the ad, hence attracting greater attention and more positive responses. Thus:

H₃. The effect of product congruence on consumer responses will be moderated by ad immersion, such that increased ad immersion will mitigate the negative effect of product incongruence and lead to greater attention toward the ad.

5.4. Methodology and Findings

Study 1 tests the main effect of product congruence (incongruent vs congruent) on customer responses to ads featuring pets (**H₁**). Study 2 replicates the main effect (**H₁**) while investigating customer attention as a mediator (**H₂**). Study 3 provides further support for the effect of product congruence on customer responses (**H₁**) and attention as mediating the effect (**H₂**), while exploring immersion as a moderator which can mitigate the negative consequences of product incongruence (**H₃**).

5.4.1 Study 1

5.4.1.1 Method

One hundred and sixteen Connect participants from the United States (44% Male, $M_{age} = 42.69$ years, $SD = 13.62^2$) completed a single-factor between-subjects study (product congruence: incongruent vs congruent) to test the main effect of product congruence on customer responses. Connect is an extension of CloudResearch (formerly known as TurkPrime) and is recognised for its high-quality data superior to platforms such as MTurk (Douglas et al., 2023; Litman et al., 2017).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. Fictitious Instagram posts featuring a dog were created. Product congruence was manipulated using two levels: congruent (i.e., pet food) and incongruent (i.e., granola), with British brands to minimise the risk of familiarity biases. The pictures were accompanied by the following texts written in the first person. The congruent post read: “I love my new breakfast food! These nuggets for dogs are the perfect morning treat! #dogsofinstagram #petfluencer #dogfood #Lily’skitchen #sponsored”. Alternatively, the incongruent post read: “My mum just loves her new granola! She says they are the perfect way to start the day! #dogsofinstagram #petfluencer #breakfast #Husk&Honey #sponsored” (see [Appendix Five](#)).

After viewing the post, participants reported their purchase intentions for the featured product on a three-item bipolar scale ($\alpha = .96$), as well as the relevance of the featured product (i.e., if they have a dog for pet food, or if they buy granola or not). A list of all measures can be seen in [Table 7](#).

5.4.1.2 Results and Discussion

Purchase Intentions. A one-way ANCOVA with purchase intentions as the dependent variable, product congruence as the independent variable, and product relevance as a covariate (0 = irrelevant product, 1 = relevant product) yielded a marginally significant effect of the covariate ($F[1, 113] = 3.37, p = .07, \eta^2 = .03$) and

² After the removal of seven responses that failed data quality checks (i.e., failed an attention check [i.e., Please select option 3] and responses with the same location data). The same data quality checks will be applied throughout the paper.

more importantly, the expected main effect of product congruence on purchase intentions ($F[1, 113] = 7.23, p = .008, \eta^2 = .06$). In particular, participants who viewed the post featuring the congruent product reported higher purchase intentions ($M = 3.53, SD = 1.89$) compared to those who viewed a post featuring an incongruent product ($M = 2.83, SD = 1.63$).

As hypothesised, Study 1 confirms that individuals exhibit higher purchase intentions when exposed to a pet endorsing a congruent product rather than an incongruent product (H_1). The next study seeks to investigate attention as a mediator. Additionally, a potential limitation of Study 1 is the absence of a manipulation check for product congruence. Thus, Study 2 includes a manipulation check for product congruence as well as an attention check to ensure participants are aware of the featured product.

5.4.2 Study 2

5.4.2.1 Method

Ninety-five participants from the United States (51.6% Male, $M_{age} = 40.94$ years, $SD = 11.88^3$) completed a single-factor between-subjects study (product congruence: incongruent vs congruent) on Connect. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. Instagram posts similar to Study 1 were created, featuring the same products and texts (see [Appendix Five](#)).

After viewing the post, participants were asked to confirm which product was featured in the post. One respondent failed to confirm the featured product and was removed from the study, resulting in a final sample of ninety-four responses (52.1% Male, $M_{age} = 41.04$ years, $SD = 11.90$). Participants then reported their purchase intentions for the featured product on a three-item bipolar scale ($\alpha = .94$; Bruner, 2009). Participants next rated two bipolar items that measured their attention toward the ad ($\alpha = .83$; Choi et al., 2020), the congruence of the product featured ($\alpha = .95$) and product relevance (see measures in [Table 7](#)).

³ After the removal of seven responses that failed data quality checks (i.e., failed an attention check [i.e., Please select option 3] and responses with the same location data).

5.4.2.2 Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. An ANOVA confirmed that the product congruence manipulation was successful ($F[1, 92] = 60.61, p < .001, \eta^2 = .40$), as the dog food (i.e., congruent product condition) was perceived as more congruent ($M_{\text{congruent}} = 5.56, SD = 1.05$) than the granola (i.e., incongruent; $M_{\text{incongruent}} = 3.25, SD = 1.78$).

Purchase Intentions. A one-way ANOVA with purchase intentions as the dependent variable and product congruence as the independent variable⁴ yielded a main effect ($F[1, 92] = 9.23, p = .003, \eta^2 = .09$). In particular, participants who viewed the post featuring the congruent product reported higher purchase intentions ($M = 3.89, SD = 1.63$) compared to those who viewed a post featuring an incongruent product ($M = 2.86, SD = 1.68$; see [Figure 6](#)).

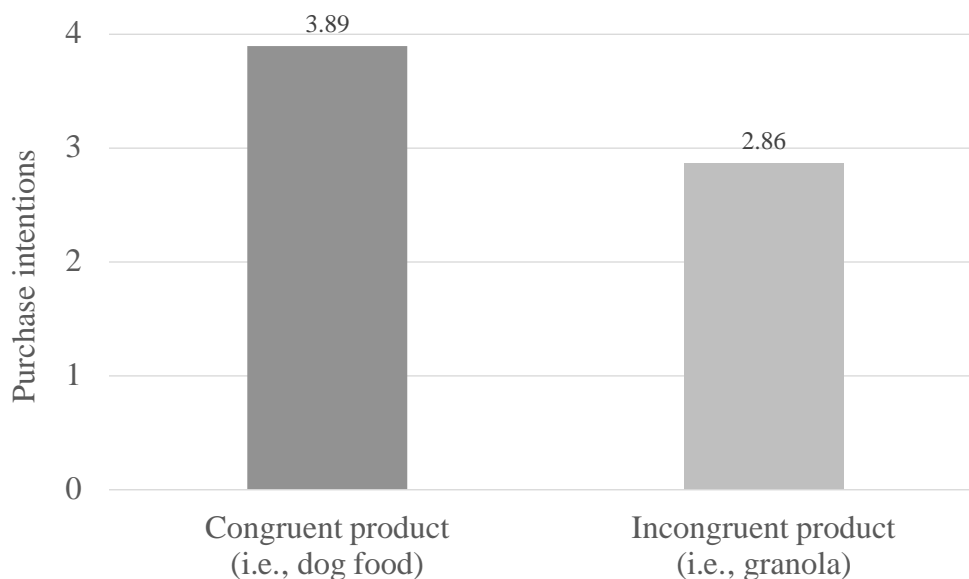


Figure 6: Effect of product congruence on purchase intentions.

Mediating Role of Attention. A one-way ANOVA with attention as the dependent variable and product congruence as the independent variable yielded a main effect ($F[1,92] = 6.34, p = .01, \eta^2 = .06$). In particular, participants in the congruent product (vs incongruent product) condition reported greater attention ($M_{\text{congruent/incongruent}} = 5.00/4.17, SD = 1.41/1.74$). To examine the mediating role of attention as predicted in **H₂**, an analysis using Model 4 from PROCESS (Hayes, 2018) was undertaken.

⁴ Product relevance was not included as a covariate as all participants stated that the featured product was relevant to them.

Bootstrapping involving 5,000 resamples from the data revealed that the effect of product congruence (0 = congruent product, 1 = incongruent product) on purchase intentions was mediated by attention ($b = -.16$, $SE = .06$; 95% CI [-.2686, -.0368]; see [Figure 7](#)).

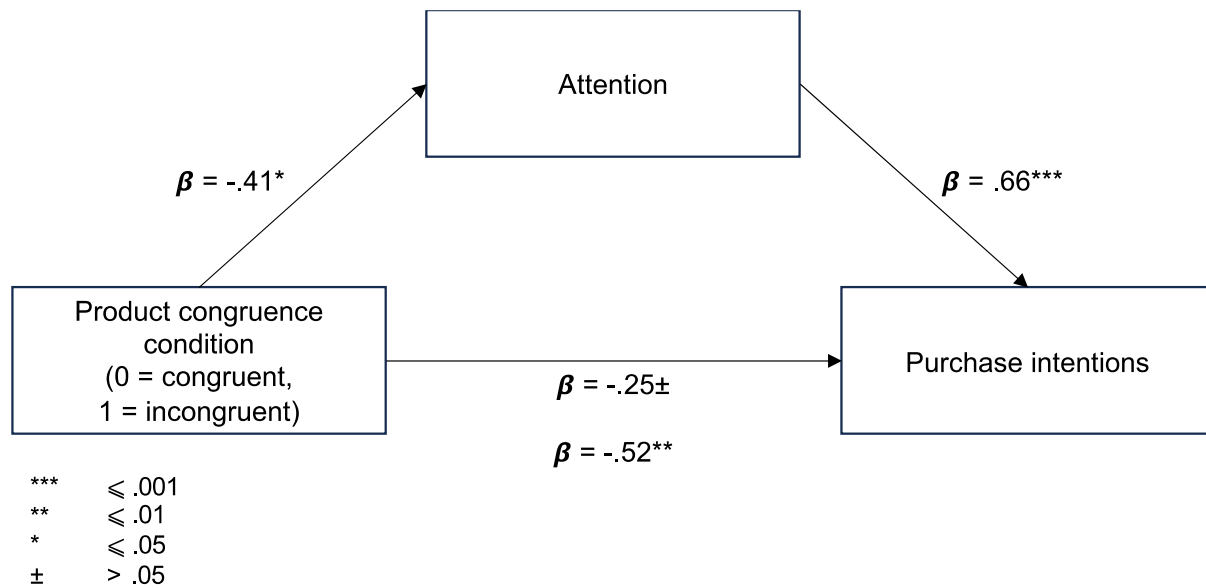


Figure 7: Full behavioural model for Study 2.

As hypothesised, Study 2 provides further support for the effect of product congruence on purchase intentions (H_1) and confirms that attention mediates the effect (H_2). The next study seeks to investigate ad immersion as moderating the effect of product congruence on attention (H_3). Additionally, Study 3 introduces another level of product congruence (i.e., mixed product: beef jerky), hence considering products that can be consumed by both humans for a more nuanced and precise outlook on the role of product congruence on consumer behaviour.

5.4.3 Study 3

5.4.3.1 Method

Three hundred and fifty-one TurkPrime participants (35.1% Male, $M_{age} = 39.03$ years, $SD = 11.37^5$) completed a 3(product congruence: incongruent vs mixed vs congruent) x 2(immersion: non-immersive vs immersive) between-subjects study.

⁵ After the removal of thirty responses that failed data quality checks (i.e., failed an attention check [i.e., Please select option 3] and responses with the same location data).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions. Fictitious Instagram posts featuring a dog were once again created, similar to those used in Study 1 and Study 2 but this time changing the dog to minimise endogeneity and increase validity (see [Appendix Five](#)). Product congruence was manipulated using three levels: congruent (i.e., pet food), mixed pet-human-related (i.e., beef jerky), and incongruent (i.e., granola). Immersion was manipulated through the background (Walters et al., 2007; Yoo & Kim, 2014), either featuring a plain background similar to those in Study 1 and Study 2 in the non-immersive condition, or an indoor background in the immersive condition. The text for the congruent and incongruent posts remained the same, whereas the post for the mixed product read: “Mum and I just love this beef jerky! A good source of energy for both humans and dogs! #dogsofinstagram #petfluencer #beefjerky #Tuddys #sponsored”.

After viewing the post, participants were asked to confirm which product was featured in the post. Thirty-three respondents failed to confirm the featured product and were removed from the study, resulting in a final sample of three hundred and eighteen responses (35% Male, $M_{age} = 39.36$ years, $SD = 11.33$). Participants then reported their purchase intentions for the featured product on a three-item bipolar scale ($\alpha = .94$; Bruner, 2009). Participants next rated two bipolar items that measured their attention toward the ad ($\alpha = .87$; Choi et al., 2020). Participants also responded to measures on the congruence of the product featured ($\alpha = .91$), immersion levels of the ad ($\alpha = .84$; two bipolar measures from Yim et al., 2017), and product relevance (see measures in [Table 7](#)).

Purchase Intentions (Bruner, 2009), $\alpha s > .90$

- Not eager to check out the featured brand because of this post (1) / Eager to check out the featured brand because of this post (7)

- Not intending to buy the featured brand (1) / Intending to buy the featured brand (7)

- Not planning on buying the featured brand (1) / Planning on buying the featured brand (7)

Attention toward the Ad (adapted from Choi et al., 2020), $\alpha > .80$

- How attention-grabbing do you think the Instagram post is?
 - Not at all (1) / Extremely (7)
 - How effective do you think the Instagram post is?
 - Not at all (1) / Extremely (7)
-

Product Congruence, 1 = strongly disagree / 7 = strongly agree, $\alpha > .90$

- The sponsored product is congruent with the influencer
 - The sponsored product is a good fit for the influencer
-

Immersion (Yim et al., 2017), $\alpha = .84$

- Please describe your feelings when looking at the post.
 - Not deeply captivated (1) / Deeply captivated (7)
 - Please describe your feelings when looking at the post.
 - Not absorbed (1) / Absorbed (7)
-

Table 7: Constructs, measures and sources for Paper Two.

5.4.3.2 Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks. An ANOVA confirmed that the product congruence manipulation was successful ($F[1, 315] = 66.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$), as the dog food (i.e., congruent product condition) and beef jerky (i.e., mixed condition) were perceived as more congruent ($M_{\text{congruent}} = 5.31, SD = 1.09$ vs $M_{\text{mixed}} = 5.09, SD = 1.08$) than the granola (i.e., incongruent; $M_{\text{incongruent}} = 3.45, SD = 1.46$). Specifically, pairwise comparisons revealed a significant difference in perceived product congruence between the incongruent product and the congruent product as well as the mixed product ($ps < .001$), but not between the congruent and mixed products ($p > .05$). Furthermore, perceived immersion increased in the immersive condition ($M_{\text{immersive}} = 4.62, SD = 1.58$) versus the non-immersive condition ($M_{\text{non-immersive}} = 4.28, SD = 1.69$; $F[1, 316] = 3.48, p = .06, \eta^2 = .01$).

Purchase Intentions. A one-way ANCOVA with purchase intentions as the dependent variable, product congruence and immersion as the independent variables, and product relevance as a covariate, yielded a main effect of product congruence ($F[1, 310] = 19.66, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$) and immersion ($F[1, 310] = 10.07, p = .002, \eta^2$

= .03), as well as of product relevance ($F[1, 310] = 22.67, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$), but no significant interaction effect ($p > .05$; see [Figure 8](#)).

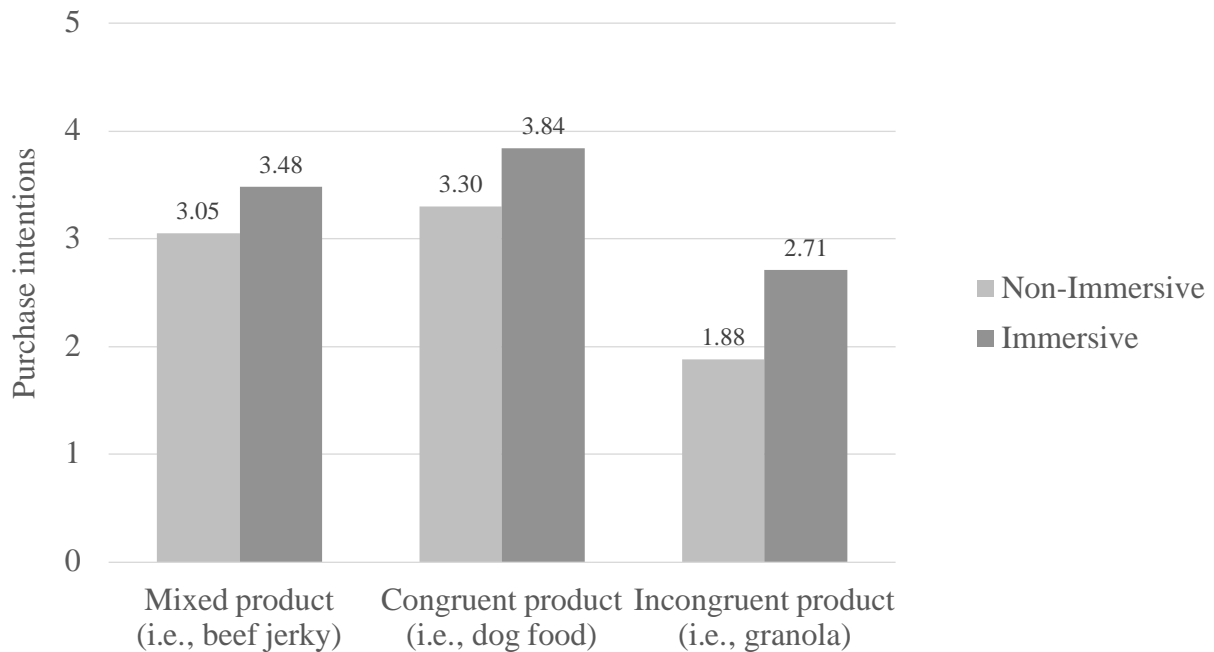


Figure 8: Effect of product congruence on purchase intentions as a function of immersion.

Pairwise comparisons provide more details on the findings. Confirming results from Study 1 and Study 2, respondents in the non-immersive condition reported significantly lower ratings in purchase intentions in the incongruent product condition versus congruent and mixed product conditions ($M_{\text{incongruent}} = 1.79, SE = .24$, vs $M_{\text{congruent/mixed}} = 3.45/2.99, SE = .23/.21, ps < .001$), while there was no difference in purchase intentions between the congruent and mixed products conditions ($p > .05$). More importantly, increased immersion had a strong significant effect when the product is incongruent ($M_{\text{incongruent-nonimmersive}} = 1.79, SE = .24$, vs $M_{\text{incongruent-immersive}} = 2.64, SE = .24, p = .01$), but had no significant effect on purchase intentions when the product is congruent or mixed ($ps > .05$).

Moderating Role of Immersion. A one-way ANCOVA was conducted with purchase intentions as the dependent variable, product congruence and immersion as the independent variables, and product relevance as a covariate. Results revealed significant main effects of both product congruence ($F[1, 310] = 19.31, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$) and immersion ($F[1, 310] = 11.41, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$) on attention, a marginally significant effect of product relevance ($F[1, 310] = 2.85, p = .09, \eta^2 = .01$), and more importantly the interaction effect ($F[1, 312] = 2.53, p = .08, \eta^2 = .02$; see [Figure 9](#)).

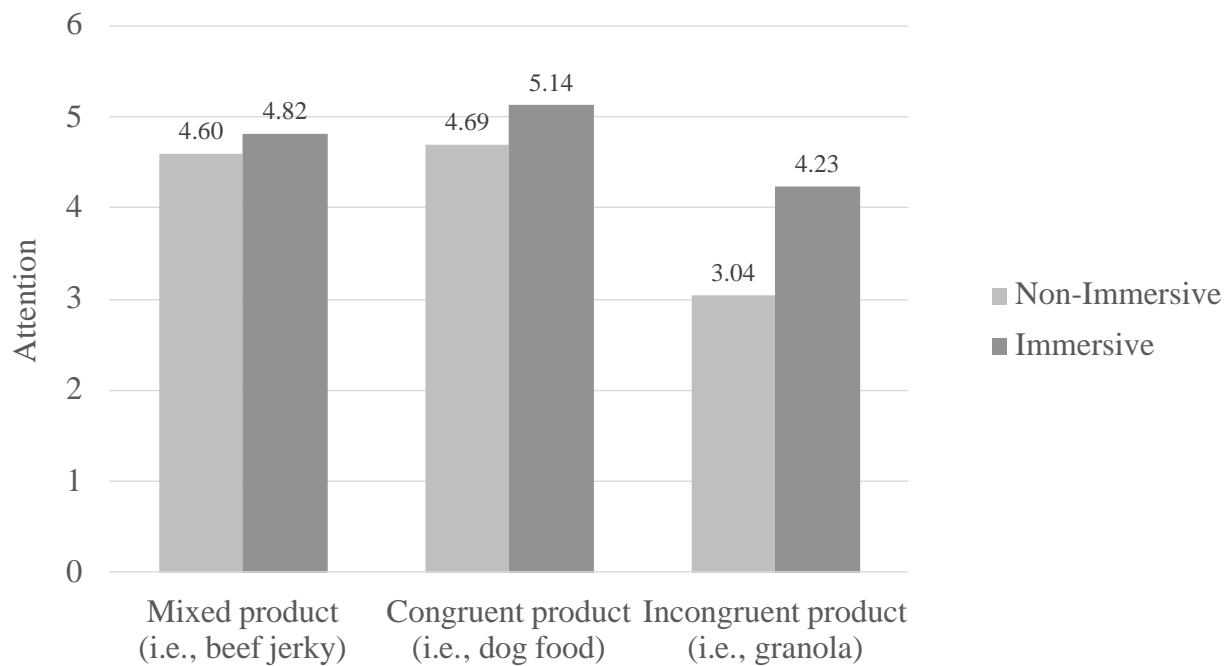


Figure 9: Effect of product congruence on attention as a function of immersion.

Specifically, pairwise comparisons showed that respondents in the non-immersive condition reported significantly lower ratings in attention in the incongruent product condition versus congruent and mixed product conditions ($M_{\text{incongruent}} = 3.01$, $SE = .23$, vs $M_{\text{congruent/mixed}} = 4.74/4.57$, $SE = .22/.20$, $ps < .001$), while there was no difference in attention between the congruent and mixed products conditions ($p > .05$). More importantly, increased immersion had a strong significant effect when the product is incongruent ($M_{\text{incongruent-nonimmersive}} = 3.01$, $SE = .23$, vs $M_{\text{incongruent-immersive}} = 4.18$, $SE = .24$, $p < .001$), but had no significant effect on attention when the product is congruent or mixed ($ps > .05$).

A moderation analysis (Model 7) was performed based on Hayes (2018). Product congruence was selected as the multicategorical IV (0 [reference group] = mixed product, 1 = congruent product, 2 = incongruent product), immersion as the moderator (0 = non-immersive, 1 = immersive), product relevance as a covariate (0 = irrelevant product, 1 = relevant product), attention as the mediator, and purchase intentions as the dependent variable. The results confirmed a significant simple effect for the incongruent product decreasing attention ($b_{\text{incongruent}} = -1.10$, $SE = .22$, 95% CI = -1.53, -.67, $p < .001$). More importantly, the results confirmed the ANOVAs' findings, as the interaction effect is significant for the incongruent product ($b_{\text{incongruent}} = .92$, $SE = .44$, 95% CI = .06, 1.79, $p = .04$) but not for the congruent product ($b_{\text{congruent}} = .16$,

$SE = .42$, 95% CI = $-.67, 1.00$, $p > .05$). Specifically, immersion significantly increased attention when the product was incongruent, leading to increased purchase intentions (95% CI = $.01, 1.00$), but not when the product was congruent (95% CI = $-.38, .54$; see [Figure 10](#)).

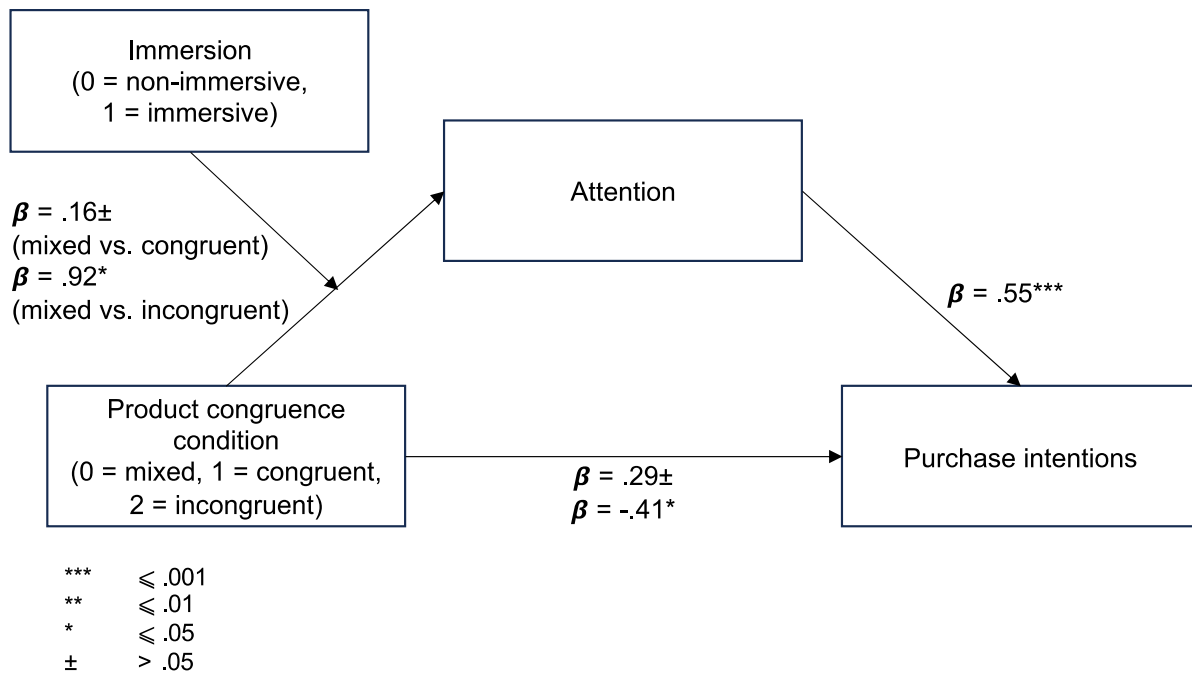


Figure 10: Full behavioural process for Study 3.

Study 3 provides further support for the role of product congruence on purchase intentions as well as the mediating role of attention. More importantly, Study 3 shows that increasing a pet ad's immersion levels, for example through the background, provides a means to mitigate the negative consequences of product incongruence, hence making incongruent pet ads more effective (H_3). Additionally, by introducing a product that can be consumed by both pets and humans, this research suggests that pets are not only effective when endorsing pet-related offerings, but can also be persuasive when the product is at least somehow related to them.

5.5. General Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the present research is to provide, through three experiments, initial evidence for the role product congruence plays in the effectiveness of ads featuring pets. This research offers both theoretical and managerial contributions.

5.5.1 Theoretical Contributions

Embedded in the literature on congruence, immersion, and animals in advertising, this research makes several important contributions. First, it contributes to building knowledge of pets as marketing tools by providing seminal insights on *when* pets can be more (or less) effective endorsers, with a focus on the type of offerings they endorse. In doing so, this research extends knowledge in the domain of product-endorser congruence and suggests that although findings in the literature on congruence are somewhat contradicting, product congruence is key in the domain of pet endorsements. While the question of whether pets can effectively endorse all sorts of products and services has been lingering, academic research has remained silent on the matter. This research is the first to assess how pet endorsements' effectiveness may be impacted by the perceived congruence or 'fit' between the pet endorser and the endorsed offering, hence responding to calls for assessing the role of product congruence in ads featuring pets (Keller & Gierl, 2020; Lancendorfer et al., 2008). Specifically, this research regards product congruence as the extent to which a product can be consumed or used by a pet, such that an incongruent product is one that cannot be used or consumed at all by the pet endorser. Although pets frequently endorse both pet-related (e.g., pet supplies) and non-pet-related offerings (e.g., cars), the findings suggest that pet ads are more effective when the products endorsed are congruent with the pet endorsers. In line with previous findings (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Moorman et al., 2002), this research supports that the congruence of the product with the pet endorser is crucial, especially in online environments where consumers are left with fewer cognitive resources and often choose to dedicate their attention on information that is easy to process, such as congruent information (Vermeir et al., 2014). Therefore, although the findings support pets as effective endorsers, they also show that they may be less effective under certain circumstances, providing a more nuanced perspective on pets and animals in advertising, arguing that ads are not necessarily more effective thanks to the mere presence of pets (Lancendorfer et al., 2008) but not always less effective because of it (Dessart, 2018).

Second, this research broadens knowledge of the role of attention in the context of pet ads by empirically testing how product congruence can impact consumer attention, hence responding to Lancendorfer et al.'s call (2008) to investigate

consumer attention in the context of pet ads. Specifically, this research supports attention as mediating the effect of product congruence on consumer purchase behaviours, and proposes that product congruence (vs incongruence) with the pet endorser is more (vs less) effective in gaining consumers' attention and positive responses, in line with Moorman et al. (2002)'s findings on the positive effect of congruence. Building on existing findings on the role of congruence in interactive environments (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Vermeir et al., 2014), this research proposes that congruence, which requires less processing, is more effective in attracting the attention of consumers who are already left with few cognitive resources online. This finding is also consistent with previous research suggesting that pets in ads encourage heuristic processing, with consumers not spending time engaging in deep processing but rather enjoying the ad (Lancendorfer et al., 2008).

Third, this research provides a novel understanding of immersion in the marketing discipline, and shows that increased immersion can be a powerful way to gain consumer attention in digital environments and mitigate the negative consequences of product incongruence in the context of pet ads. The findings support that while ads featuring pets are less effective when promoting incongruent (vs congruent) products, immersion can mitigate this negative effect and provide a means to increase consumer attention to pet ads endorsing incongruent offerings. As a non-pet-related product endorsed by a pet may not make sense and require more effort to process and comprehend, inducing immersion (e.g., through the background) helps attract consumer attention by making the ad more relevant to the consumer and easier to process. In doing so, this research also supports that an ad background can be implemented as a means to manipulate ad immersion. As more research is needed on immersion, especially on how to operationalise it and its effect on consumer responses, this research provides seminal insights into how immersion can be manipulated to increase positive consumer outcomes, such as increased attention and purchase intentions. While the results revealed that immersion increases positive consumer responses overall, they also reveal immersion's interaction with product congruence and suggest it as a tool to mitigate the negative consequences of product incongruence.

5.5.2 Practical Contributions

This research offers novel important implications to practitioners. First, marketers are encouraged to incorporate pets into their marketing communications, even those endorsing non-pet-related offerings, as they can be effective in attracting consumers' attention and purchase intentions. In contrast to recent research which suggests that animals' presence in ads increases narrative transportation and results in decreased positive consumer responses, especially in storytelling ads (Dessart, 2018), this research shows that pets can be effective endorsers for both pet-related and non-pet-related offerings. According to the findings, the key consideration factor is the product's congruence with the pet, which drives the level of immersion marketers should be targeting.

Second, this research provides crucial insights into how to tailor ads and marketing communications featuring pets to increase their effectiveness, hence assessing *when* pets can be more effective endorsers: that is when they promote congruent rather than incongruent offerings. Animals, and pets in particular, are frequently incorporated in advertisements and more generally branding assets (Jia et al., 2022) of all sorts, ranging from congruent offerings such as pet supplies to incongruent ones like electronic devices for humans. Yet, guidance on how to craft effective ads including pets, and the type of offerings they can effectively endorse, is scarce. According to the findings, marketers should first carefully consider the type of product or service being advertised. Pets are more effective endorsers for products that they can use, at least to a certain extent. For offerings that can be used or consumed by humans only, increased immersion seems necessary to increase the ad's effectiveness. For example, this might include lively backgrounds or colours, or other marketing elements that can help the consumer visualise how the product could be used.

Finally, marketers should consider the marketing channel used depending on the offering's congruence with the pet. Since immersion needs to be considered alongside product congruence, not all marketing channels might be appropriate, or some might be favoured. For example, television and other marketing channels encouraging ad immersion (e.g., social media platforms focusing on video sharing such as YouTube and TikTok) might be more effective in advertising human-related

offerings. After all, pets frequently endorse brands on television and count amongst the most-watched TV campaigns (e.g., 'Mog the Cat' in the most-watched TV advertisement in 2015; Hendriksz, 2015). Oppositely, channels which are less immersive, such as billboards, might be preferred for congruent offerings, but may be less effective with incongruent ones, unless immersion can be successfully manipulated through the background.

5.5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This research focuses on product congruence, delineating it based on products that the pet endorser can or cannot use. As such, potential symbolic associations between the featured products and the pet endorser were not considered and may lead to different results. Future research should use different stimuli to test other product and service categories. It is possible that the symbolic meaning associated with the pet endorser impacts what is perceived as (in)congruent. After all, Andrex has been successful with its puppy mascot endorsing toilet rolls, probably for its symbolic association with softness and whiteness. While the products chosen in this study were selected with the specific purpose of avoiding such biases, as the focus is not on symbolism, future research could investigate how it may affect pet endorsements' effectiveness. For example, it is possible that a dust brush, a product that cannot be directly used by pets, could be considered congruent with a dog endorser that is fluffy, as it may remind the fluffiness of the brush. It could also be that a product that cannot be directly used by pets, but benefits them indirectly, could also be perceived as congruent. Still considering the example of the dust brush, consumers may consider the product as congruent with a pet endorser as it can be used to clean after a pet. Hence, future research could further test the boundaries of product congruence in pet ads and establish whether potential symbolic associations can impact which pet ads are considered congruent and more effective.

As importantly, while this research focuses on product congruence in order to assess its effect in a rigorously controlled environment, future research should expand the scope of product congruence to service offerings as well. For example, it would be interesting to assess incongruent and congruent service offerings, such as pet insurance versus life or car insurance. While the findings are expected to be similar, it

could be that services' intangibility would reduce perceived incongruence and that pets would be effective in endorsing all types of services.

Additionally, existing brands have been used in this paper's studies. Although British brands were chosen to minimise familiarity biases, future research could use fictitious brands to ensure the findings are not impacted by potential opinions about the featured brands.

In addition, since some research suggests that consumers react differently to marketing communications featuring different pets (e.g., dog vs cat; Jia et al., 2022), it would be relevant to investigate whether this research's findings hold across pet types, or even other animals. According to the findings, product incongruence has a negative impact on pet endorsements. Hence, as wild animals mainly endorse incongruent products, they are likely to be less effective endorsers. Whereas pets are part of our everyday lives and mainstream endorsers, wild animals may generate levels of incongruence that are too high to be mitigated by immersion.

Furthermore, ad immersion was manipulated through the background, similar to what has been done in previous studies (Walters et al., 2007; Yoo & Kim, 2014). As immersion was successfully manipulated using a simple bedroom background, it would be valuable to manipulate immersion differently (e.g., by using an outdoor instead of an indoor background) and test whether the effect can be even stronger with more vivid stimuli. As the featured products were food offerings and are appropriate for indoor consumption, it is possible that the effect would be different with an outdoor background. More importantly, as it is still unclear how immersion can be manipulated (Jennett et al., 2008), future research is needed to fully unpack how ad backgrounds can be used for this purpose. Therefore, future research could replicate the findings using a variety of different backgrounds, and maybe even across different media types, such as pictures versus videos, or other potential ways to manipulate immersion (e.g., through the text). It might be that as videos are already more immersive, the background type may hold less importance and provide sufficiently high immersion levels for pets to effectively endorse all sorts of offerings.

Moreover, future research could explore whether increased immersion through the background can mitigate the negative consequences of other types of

congruences. For example, can an immersive background help an ad incongruent with the context (e.g., a sad ad in a happy context, such as watching a comedy) be more effective? Investigating immersion's interaction with other incongruence types could therefore provide valuable insights.

Additionally, future research could examine whether the effect of immersion and product congruence on consumer responses holds in other contexts, beyond ads featuring pets. For example, are human endorsers also more effective when endorsing congruent products, and does immersion have an impact? It is highly likely that similar to pet endorsements, ads featuring humans endorsing incongruent products, such as pet supplies, would be less effective and would require immersion to be induced to increase the ad effectiveness. The scope of product incongruence could even be larger for humans, for example adult versus children's products. For example, babies endorsing toilet paper that they cannot use, as previously seen in ads such as Andrex in the past, might be less effective as well. Therefore, future research is needed to investigate whether the findings apply to human endorsers as well and whether immersion needs to be considered alongside product congruence for increased ad effectiveness.

Finally, as the stimuli solely used social media posts, future research should investigate other types of ads, both online and offline. It could be that when the pet is not 'personally' endorsing the product (e.g., billboards) like on social media where credibility is important, or when the ad comes from the brand rather than from the pet, incongruence may be more effective. Although this format allowed participants to be fully aware of the type of product endorsed and to whom it is destined (i.e., pets, human owners, both), hence ensuring that the focus is on product congruence, it would be interesting to explore how other ad formats may impact the findings.

The next chapter is the final experimental paper of this thesis and assesses pet pictures as potential service recovery tools when accompanying corporate apologies following a service failure.

Chapter Six: Paper Three

Effective Apaw-logies: Can Apologies Featuring Pet Images Soften the Blow of Service Failures?

Laura Lavertu, Ben Marder, Amin Nazifi, Kirsten Cowan.

Reminder regarding authorship: As the first author, I designed and created all of the surveys and stimuli, ran all of the studies, conducted the data analysis, and wrote the full paper. My co-authors contributed to the design of the stimuli/surveys. Additionally, Dr Ben Marder managed the relationship with the company used in the field study.

The third paper of this thesis investigates pets as service recovery tools in digital corporate apologies. While providing an initial evaluation of the impact pet images have when accompanying corporate apologies, this paper, like Paper One and Paper Two, remains focused on digital communications. Specifically, Paper Three empirically tests whether the mere presence of pet images in corporate apologies can mitigate the negative consequences of service failures (**RQ9**) and supports warmth as a mediator (**RQ10**). Additionally, Paper Three investigates service failure severity as a moderator, suggesting that pets may be more effective depending on the type of service failure (**RQ11**).

6.1. Abstract

Brands are increasingly using pictures of pets when apologising to customers online, with the very famous example of Amazon and its ‘dogs of Amazon’ featuring on error pages alongside an apologetic message. Though, to date, research remains silent regarding pets as potential service recovery tools. Given the rising popularity of pet images amongst brands’ service recovery efforts, this research aims to investigate whether corporate apologies featuring pets can mitigate service failures’ negative consequences, and if so, why. Using an experimental approach, with one experiment and one field study, this research supports that the presence (vs absence) of a pet picture in a digital corporate apology leads to more positive consumer outcomes (Studies 1 and 2). This effect is driven by increased perceptions of warmth (Study 1) and only occurs when the service failure is minor (Study 2). The findings provide novel

theoretical contributions to the marketing literature on service failure and recovery and offer recommendations for practitioners.

6.2. Introduction

Service recovery is an increasingly important consideration for brands wishing to improve their customer retention, with 96% of customers saying that customer service is a key driver of their loyalty to a brand (Microsoft, 2017). While service failures are inevitable, the way these are handled is crucial, as about two-thirds of customers would consider switching brands immediately after poor service (El-Abidin, 2024). To turn dissatisfied customers into satisfied (and potentially loyal) ones following a service failure, apologies are a powerful and effective tool, as a recent study suggests that 96% of customers would continue buying from a brand following a service failure if the company apologised (Bernazzani Barron, 2023). However, service interactions, including corporate apologies, need to be pleasant and warm (American Express, 2017; Elad, 2023). Hence, if pleasant and warm apologies appear to be a viable means to deal with service failures, adding pet images, similar to what major brands like Amazon are doing, may be even more effective.

Animals, and pets in particular, are prevalent in people's lives and business communications (Jia et al., 2022). Their ability to significantly impact individuals' feelings and responses is of particular interest to brands for marketing purposes (Jia et al., 2022), but also to potentially recover from service failures. For example, the Internet has seen the rise of "fail pets", which are pets used in brands' online error messages. Famous examples of error messages featuring pets include Twitter and their humorous images of cats, while more recently, Amazon has been spotlighting their newly famous "dogs of Amazon", tenderly apologising on behalf of the company for their various types of failures. While popular culture and mass media are already fond of these new furry agents that seem to make service failures easy to forgive and forget (Lekach, 2017), and although some of the major brands have already decided to use pets as part of their recovery strategies, research has yet to investigate pets as potential service recovery tools.

Despite pets' ubiquity in customers' lives, the limited research examining their effectiveness in influencing consumers' behaviours remains focused on advertising

(e.g., Jia et al., 2022; Lancendorfer et al., 2008) but has yet to explore pets as potentially helping in the service recovery efforts. Yet, service recovery is a key consideration for brands, as the post-purchase experience drives consumers' subsequent behaviours and loyalty (Court et al., 2009). Specifically, once consumers reach the decision to purchase from a particular brand, each brand-consumer interaction can potentially drive consumers to come back or to leave (Court et al., 2009), hence placing greater importance on providing a satisfying customer experience, even following a service failure. Although brands and marketers have long been encouraged to focus their efforts on the phases leading up to the moment of purchase, there is now a greater emphasis on the phases following the purchase decision (Court et al., 2009). Indeed, as access to more offerings and information through digital channels is possible for increasingly informed customers, betting all marketing efforts on the initial phases of the customer journey may be a mistake (Court et al., 2009). Not only the post-purchase (or post-purchase decision) phase is key to driving consumer loyalty, but it also defines whether customers talk positively or negatively about the brand to other potential customers (Court et al., 2009). As service failures are inevitable, brands should be ready to handle these effectively when they occur in order to mitigate the negative consequences and ideally turn dissatisfied customers into satisfied ones (Roschk & Kaiser, 2013; Sengupta et al., 2015).

Simultaneously, research on service failure and recovery is increasingly recognising new alternatives to traditional service agents and service recovery tools, now turning to robots, virtual agents and other technological agents (e.g., Choi et al., 2020). For example, recent findings suggest that warm apologies from a service robot can be an effective service recovery tactic (Choi et al., 2021). It could be that pets also help make apologies warmer and more effective. This is what this research proposes. As such, it responds to calls for examining new methods to handle service failures (Grewal et al., 2022), as well as to investigate animals' other potential uses as business tools beyond featuring in advertisements or as brand mascots (Keller & Gierl, 2020; Lancendorfer et al., 2008).

This research suggests that when a brand apologises for a service failure, the presence of a pet leads to more positive customer responses (i.e., increased repurchase intentions and satisfaction, lower intentions to engage in nWOM). It further

suggests warmth as a mediator, hence supporting that using pet images in a corporate apology drives positive emotions in consumers. Furthermore, it investigates service failure severity as a moderator and proposes that the effect of pet images in corporate apologies on customer responses only holds when the service failure is minor (vs major). Specifically, this research aims to answer the following questions. Can the presence of a pet mitigate the negative consequences and soften the blow of a service failure? What mechanism explains this process? Does service failure severity moderate this effect?

Drawing from existing literature on service failure and recovery, this research provides both theoretical and practical contributions. First, this research provides a novel understanding of marketing communications featuring pets by proposing pet images as an effective service recovery tool which can be used to maintain a positive customer-brand relationship. In doing so, this research also contributes to the extant knowledge in the domain of service failure and severity and supports that corporate apologies can be more effective in driving more positive consumer responses following a service failure when they feature pet images. The post-purchase phase is crucial for brands as it defines subsequent customers' attitudes and behaviours (Court et al., 2009), hence encouraging brands and academics alike to find new means to improve the customer experience and deal with service failures (Mattila & Patterson, 2004). The current research is the first to provide seminal support for the influence pets may have on service recovery when included in corporate apologies, thus offering a viable solution to recover from potential online service failures. Second, this research extends knowledge of the role of warmth and competence perceptions in service recovery, supporting that warmth can lead over competence when the goal is to maximise consumer satisfaction and future engagement with the brand. Specifically, the findings support that increasing warmth perceptions, for example by including pet pictures, is crucial for corporate apologies to effectively drive positive consumer responses, without necessarily harming the competence perceptions associated with a brand, or without requiring an increase in competence perceptions. Third, this research also broadens knowledge of service failure severity by examining how the effect of pet images in corporate apologies is impacted by whether the service failure is minor or major. As the effect of pet pictures on consumer responses only holds when the service failure is minor (vs major), the research suggests that warm

apologies can have a powerful positive impact on customers when dealing with minor service failures, whereas these are not sufficient for major ones. Hence, this research proposes an effective means to handle minor service failure incidents, which are more difficult to address but can have a critical negative impact on the brand-customer relationship (Johnson et al., 2011).

6.3. Literature Review

6.3.1 Pets and Corporate Apologies

Companies dealing with service failures can resort to different recovery strategies to mitigate negative consequences (Nazifi et al., 2021; Nazifi et al., 2022; Smith et al., 1999; Weber & Hsu, 2022). These strategies usually involve two different forms of compensation, namely economic or utilitarian (e.g., discount, refund) and psychological or symbolic (e.g., apology, promise to not repeat the failure; Basso & Pizzutti, 2016; Roschk & Gelbrich, 2014; You et al., 2020). Both forms of compensation have been investigated in the literature and found to be effective (Smith et al., 1999; You et al., 2020). However, a growing recognition of the importance of service recovery for brands has sparked renewed interest in research around service failure and recovery efforts (Mattila & Patterson, 2004), with a greater acknowledgement of apologies' effectiveness in restoring social losses (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2015).

An apology is a reparative behaviour enacted after a negative incident with the aim of sustaining a relationship with the recipient of the apology (i.e., victimised party; Leary, 2010). Apologies following service failures involve an acknowledgement by the firm of the service failure's responsibility and the customer's distress, as well as an expression of remorse (Davidow, 2003; Liao, 2007). Research in psychology, marketing, and management investigates apologies' effectiveness in repairing relationships after an incident such as a service failure (Dirks et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2004; Smith et al., 1999). Findings suggest that an apology's effectiveness in the service failure context is related to the fact that they help customers perceive the firm's positive motives (or rule out potential negative motives) and decrease their anger or desire for revenge (Joireman et al., 2013; You et al., 2020). As importantly, apologies

“communicate respect and empathy (social resources) to the customer” (Smith et al., 1999, p. 360) but need to be perceived as sincere and convey warmth to be effective (Choi et al., 2021; Migacz et al., 2018).

Previous research on service recovery remains largely focused, however, on the role of humans (e.g., employees) as the agents apologising to customers (Shen & Wang, 2022). Indeed, brands have been traditionally leveraging their employees’ skills to manage customer relationships (Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011), though technological advancements dramatically impacted how brands and customers interact (Sands et al., 2022; Wirtz et al., 2018). More recent research considers technological alternatives [e.g., robots (Choi et al., 2020), virtual agents (Sands et al., 2022)], and examines their performance as apologising agents (e.g., how effective are apologies coming from a robot vs a human employee?; Choi et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2021; Shen & Wang, 2022). This research does not intend to introduce pets as new service agents seemingly delivering the apology, but rather focuses on pet images accompanying a corporate apology, regardless of the agent delivering it. For example, Li et al. (2019) explore apologies including emoticons in customer service emails, focusing solely on the use of emoticons rather than on the service agent delivering the apology. Similarly, this paper considers pet images accompanying digital corporate apologies, solely focusing on the presence (vs absence) of pet images.

For example, pet images frequently appear in error messages (i.e., messages appearing when a webpage or website is unavailable) or accompany corporate emails. Hence, this research aims to investigate whether including pet images alongside an apology, such as in error pages, as well as other online service failure contexts, can result in positive customer responses. Indeed, despite their ubiquity in service recovery efforts, it is unclear whether pet images are actually successful in driving positive consumer responses, and the reason behind their effectiveness. As pets are associated with warmth (Sevillano & Fiske, 2016), it is possible that pet images may be effective service recovery tools because they provide consumers with the warmth necessary for an effective apology. Therefore, we next turn to warmth and its role in corporate apologies’ effectiveness.

6.3.2 Pets and Warm Apologies

A corporate apology can be a powerful and effective service recovery tool as it can restore perceptions of warmth (Choi et al., 2021). Warmth perceptions, alongside competence perceptions, are crucial determinants of attitude and behavioural change (Aaker et al., 2012), and are therefore unsurprisingly important in service interactions (Choi et al., 2021). While warmth is associated with traits such as friendliness and pleasantness, competence is related to skilfulness and capability (Oliver et al., 2022). Such judgments are made immediately after exposure to visual stimuli (e.g., pictures), yet can impact future attitudes and behaviours (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Simultaneously, warmth is a relevant dimension to consider when investigating pets as marketing tools. Indeed, the application of the stereotype content model to animals reveals that those that have the closest relationships to humans, such as pets, elicit the greatest positive emotions and warmth perceptions (Sevillano & Fiske, 2016). Pets, and dogs in particular, are associated with personality traits such as pleasantness, a component of the warmth construct, which leads to greater relationship satisfaction with their owners (Cavanaugh et al., 2008). Therefore, the warmth perceptions associated with pets may reflect on the brand when these are included as part of a service recovery effort, such as an apology.

Existing research supports the role of warmth and competence in effective apologies following a service failure. For example, Smith et al. (2016) support that female employees' weight can impact consumers' perceptions of warmth and resultant service satisfaction. Li et al. (2019) also suggest that emoticons increase warmth perceptions, but simultaneously decrease competence perceptions, which can both lead to more positive or negative consumer outcomes depending on consumers' relationship norm orientation. Therefore, it is possible that similar to emoticons, the use of pet images in corporate apologies may be a double-edged sword. Simultaneously, other research (Marder et al., 2020) suggests that increased perceived warmth outweighs a decrease in perceived competence, which echoes previous findings (Fiske et al., 2007) suggesting that individuals are usually more sensitive to warmth information than to competence information. As such, warmth is judged before competence, hence having a stronger impact on affective and behavioural reactions (Fiske et al., 2007). Furthermore, according to recent findings

(Güntürkün et al., 2020), warmth is more important than competence for brands wishing to move beyond a merely transactional bond. Specifically, for brands aiming to build and maintain a relationship with their consumers, regardless of the service type and industry, warmth is the leading dimension that should be considered to foster customer satisfaction and loyalty (Güntürkün et al., 2020). Therefore, pet images may elicit greater warmth perceptions resulting in more positive consumer responses, without negatively impacting competence perceptions.

As such, pets should increase feelings of warmth when included in a corporate apology, without having an impact (or with a minimal outweighed impact) on competence perceptions. Thus, as warmth perceptions are crucial in service interactions:

H₁. The presence (vs absence) of a pet in an apology will lead to more (less) positive consumer responses (i.e., higher repurchase intentions and satisfaction, lower nWOM).

H₂. The effect of the presence of a pet in an apology on consumer responses will be mediated by warmth perceptions.

6.3.3 Service Failure Severity

While apologies usually have a positive impact on customer responses (van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010), they may also backfire when not delivered appropriately (Roschk & Kaiser, 2013). Specifically, empathetic apologies that show a focus on and understanding of customers' thoughts and feelings are particularly effective because they convey warmth and lower cynicism (Tran et al., 2022), although they might not be as effective depending on the failure severity. Failure severity relates to the degree to which the customer is affected by the service failure (Weun et al., 2004). Logically, the higher the failure severity, the higher the expectations, and the greater the probability of a negative reaction from customers (Levesque & McDougall, 2000). Oppositely, when the failure severity is low, customers are more likely to have a positive response when the apology is empathetic, as the expectations are lower.

Nevertheless, research suggests that major incidents are not necessarily always more likely to lead to negative outcomes (e.g., dissolution of the customer-

brand relationship, brand hate) compared to a series of minor ones (Johnson et al., 2011). As such, even a few “relatively minor headaches” (p. 121) can lead customers to end their relationship with the brand and potentially engage in anti-brand actions (Johnson et al., 2011). Additionally, these minor service failures which can lead to negative outcomes for both the brand and the customer are not easy to tackle. Indeed, major service failures are often easier to address as they tend to be well-known and easily recognised by brands (Johnson et al., 2011), and usually require an economic/utilitarian recovery strategy (e.g., free gift) as psychological/symbolic recovery (e.g., apologies) is not enough (You et al., 2020). Meanwhile, minor service failures may be harder to recognise or be considered inoffensive (Johnson et al., 2011), hence brands may minimise the impact such minor incidents have on customers and fail to find an effective way to tackle them. Therefore, finding an effective means to respond to minor service failures is of utmost importance for brands in order to avoid the negative consequences associated with seemingly harmless - yet significant - small incidents.

While psychological/symbolic recovery is not sufficient to recover from major service failures, it can be for minor ones. Specifically, apologies can be effective in handling such minor service failures when they convey warmth (Choi et al., 2021). Therefore, while it is likely that the presence of pet images is sufficient to have a positive impact on consumer responses when the failure severity is low, this is likely not the case when the failure severity is high. Specifically, it is expected that apologies featuring pets (vs apologies without a pet picture) will be more effective when the failure severity is low, as they likely bring the necessary warmth required for effective apologies (Choi et al., 2021; Tellis et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2022). However, when the failure severity is high and customers’ expectations and cynicism increase, it is expected that the presence of a pet will not affect the apology’s effectiveness.

H₃. The effect of the presence of a pet in an apology on consumer responses will be moderated by service failure severity, such that the presence (vs absence) of a pet in an apology will lead to more (less) positive consumer responses (i.e., higher customer service rating) only when the service failure is minor (vs major).

6.4. Methodology and Findings

Study 1 tests the main effect of pet pictures (absent vs present) on customer responses to corporate apologies following a service failure (**H₁**) and investigates warmth as the mediator explaining the effect (**H₂**). Study 2 replicates the main effect (**H₁**) and investigates service failure severity as a moderator (**H₃**) in a field study using the data from an experiment conducted with a large fintech company.

6.4.1 Study 1

6.4.1.1 Method

Study 1 used a single-factor between-subjects design (pet picture: absent vs present) to test the main effect of the presence of a pet picture on customer responses, with random assignment to conditions. In total, 114 respondents from the United States ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.06$, $SD = 11.44$, male = 54.4%⁶) were recruited from Connect.

The online service failure experience was illustrated by a scenario. The scenario asked participants to imagine themselves visiting the website of an online retailer they regularly visit (no brand was mentioned to avoid potential familiarity biases), in order to buy a gift for a friend's birthday party. The participants were told the gift had to be ordered on the same day to arrive on time. The service failure was operationalised by showing a fictitious error page that was created for the purpose of this study. The error page included a message that read "Sorry our website is down" in the pet picture absent condition, while the same message was accompanied by the picture of a dog in the pet picture present condition. Participants were then told that the website ended up working a couple of hours later (see [Appendix Six](#) for the full stimuli). After reading the scenario and looking at the error page, the participants responded to three items measuring repurchase intentions ($\alpha = .82$) and three items measuring nWOM ($\alpha = .92$). Both scales were taken from Maxham & Netemeyer (2002), and Bougie et al. (2003), respectively, and adapted to fit the context. All items were measured on 7-point Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree/Not

⁶ After the removal of three responses that failed data quality checks (i.e., incomplete demographics and responses with the same location data).

at all) to 7 (Strongly agree/Very much). Participants then reported their perceptions of warmth and competence on two 3-item 7-point bipolar scales (Oliver et al., 2022; $\alpha = .93$). A list of all measures can be seen in [Table 8](#).

Repurchase Intentions (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002), 1 = strongly disagree / 7 = strongly agree, $\alpha = .82$
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the future, I intend to use this online retailer again
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the near future, I will not use this online retailer as my provider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the future, I will continue using this online provider
nWOM (adapted from Bougie et al., 2003), 1 = not at all / 7 = very much, $\alpha = .92$
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Say negative things about this online retailer to other people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not recommend this online retailer to someone who seeks my advice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discourage friends and relatives to do business with this online retailer
Warmth Perceptions (Oliver et al., 2022), $\alpha = .93$
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The online retailer seems to be cold (1) / warm (7)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The online retailer seems to be unfriendly (1) / friendly (7)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The online retailer seems to be unpleasant (1) / pleasant (7)
Competence Perceptions (Oliver et al., 2022), $\alpha = .94$
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The online retailer seems to be clumsy (1) / skilful (7)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The online retailer seems to be incompetent (1) / competent (7)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The online retailer seems to be unqualified (1) / qualified (7)

Table 8: Constructs, measures and sources for Paper Three.

6.4.1.2 Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks. The pet picture manipulation was checked using one item asking participants whether they saw an error message only or an error message with the picture of a dog. All participants selected the right answer, confirming that the manipulation was successful. The scenario realism was checked using two items from Gelbrich et al. (2015; $\alpha = .87$). The scenarios were perceived as realistic as they were significantly higher than the scale midpoint ($M_{\text{petabsent}} = 6.14$, $SD = 1.05$; $M_{\text{petpresent}} = 6.32$, $SD = .76 > 4$, $p < .001$), with no differences across the conditions ($p > .05$).

Repurchase Intentions and nWOM. An ANOVA was conducted, using the pet picture condition (absent vs present) as the independent variable, and repurchase intentions and nWOM as the dependent variables. As expected, results showed that respondents in the pet picture present (vs absent) condition reported higher ratings in repurchase intentions ($M_{\text{petpresent/absent}} = 5.49/4.95$, $SD = .97/1.56$, $F[1, 112] = 5.00$, $p = .027$, $\eta^2 = .04$) and lower ratings of nWOM ($M_{\text{petpresent/absent}} = 1.71/2.27$, $SD = .78/1.41$, $F[1, 112] = 7.06$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2 = .06$; see [Figure 11](#)).

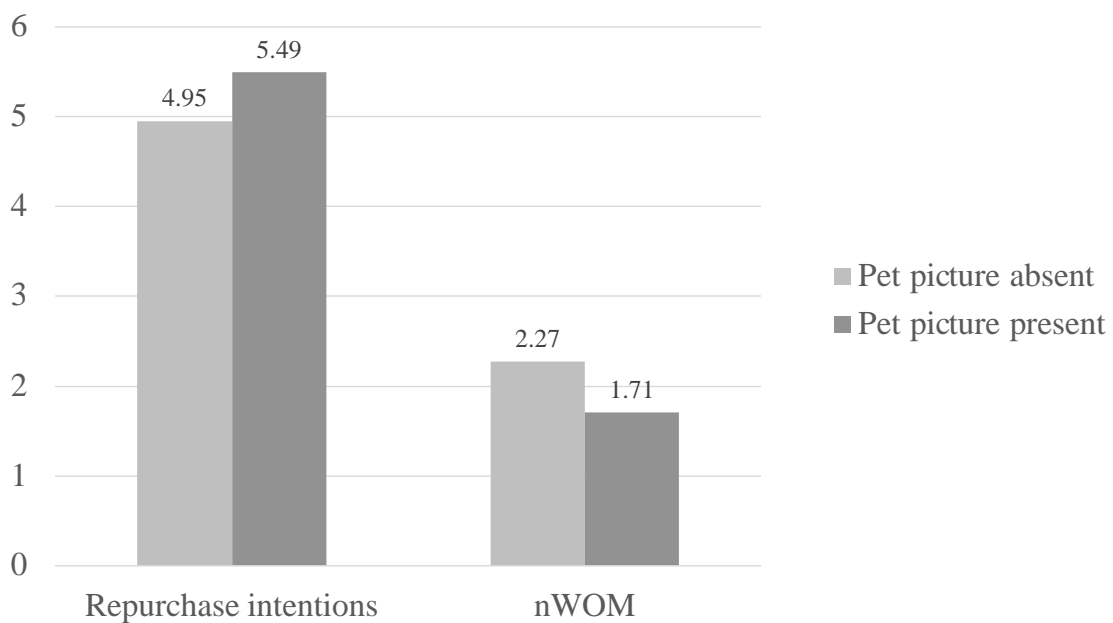


Figure 11: Means for repurchase intentions and nWOM for pet picture absent versus present conditions.

Mediating Role of Warmth and Competence. A one-way ANOVA with the pet picture condition as the independent variable, and warmth and competence indexes as the dependent variables yielded a main effect on warmth perceptions ($F[1,112] = 19.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .15$), but no effect on competence perceptions ($F[1,112] = 2.52$, $p > .05$). In particular, participants in the pet picture present (vs absent) condition reported greater perceptions of warmth ($M_{\text{petpresent/absent}} = 5.41/4.43$, $SD = .98/1.37$). To examine the mediating role of warmth as predicted in **H₂**, an analysis using Model 4 from PROCESS (Hayes, 2018) was undertaken. Bootstrapping involving 5,000 resamples from the data revealed that the effect of the pet picture condition (0 = pet picture absent, 1 = pet picture present) on repurchase intentions was mediated by perceptions of warmth ($b = .21$, $SE = .12$; 95% CI [.0075, .4849]) and not by perceptions of competence ($b = .23$, $SE = .14$; 95% CI [-.0453, .5177]), with a similar mediating effect of warmth on nWOM ($b = -.22$, $SE = .12$; 95% CI [-.4829, -.0143]) and

no effect for competence perceptions ($b = .18, SE = .12; 95\% CI [-.4479, .0330]$; see [Figure 12](#)).

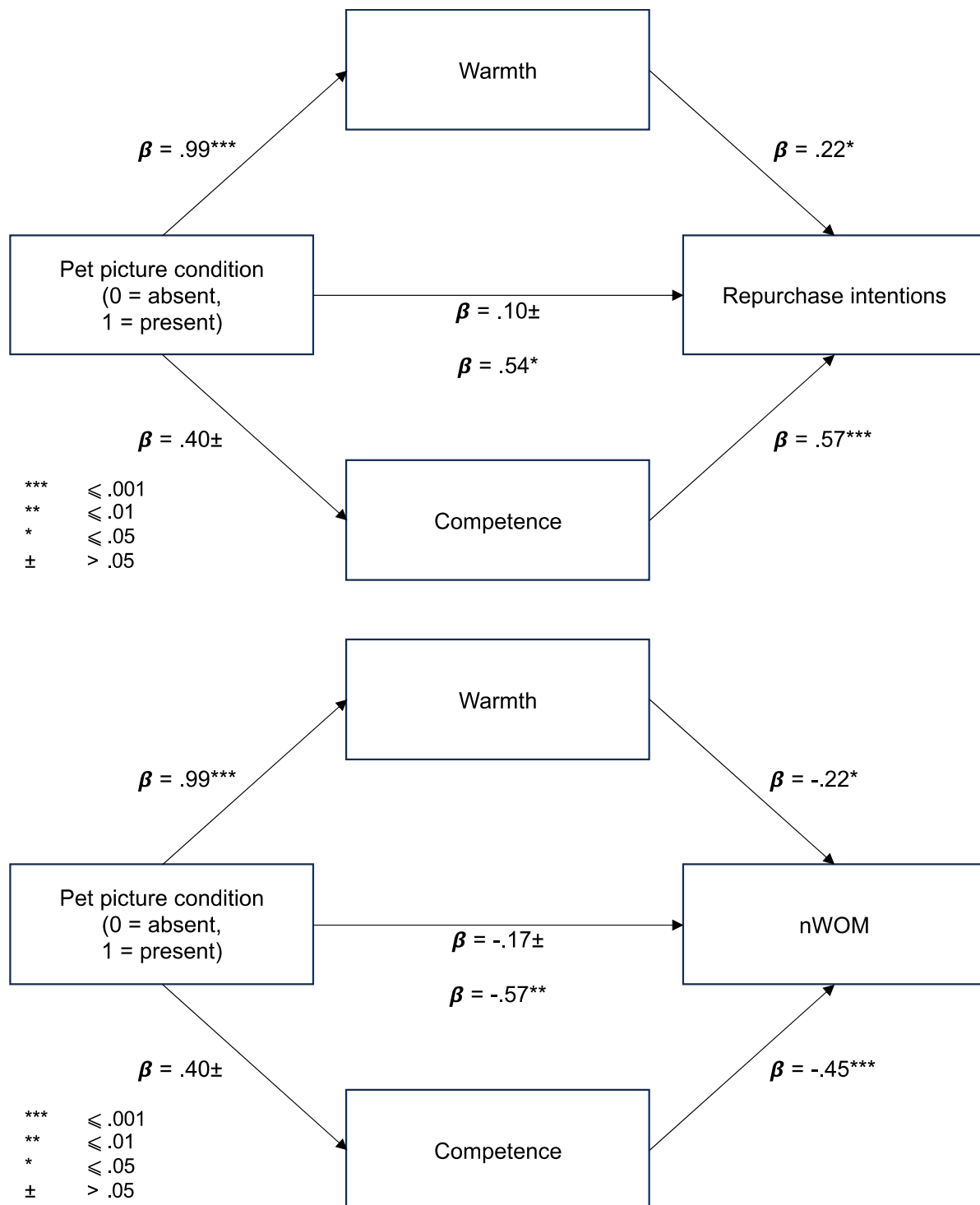


Figure 12: Full behavioural model for Study 1, supporting warmth only as mediating the effect of pet picture condition.

The results provide initial support that the mere presence of a pet picture in response to an online service failure (i.e., unavailable online retailer’s website) leads to higher levels of repurchase intentions and lower levels of intentions to engage in

nWOM, supporting **H₁**. Additionally, the findings show that perceptions of warmth mediate the effect, without impacting competence perceptions of the retailer, hence supporting **H₂**. The next study provides further support to the effect and investigates service failure severity as a moderator through a field study.

6.4.2 Study 2

6.4.2.1 Method

The field study aims to validate the main effect found in Study 1 in a real-world setting, while testing the moderating effect of the failure severity. A fast-growing circular economy fintech based in the United Kingdom and counting over one million users was selected. The company helps its consumers to convert unwanted goods into cash while offering traditional banking services. As the company was adding new categories of second-hand products to be sold through the app and is expanding globally, the management team was interested in participating in this experiment to explore new ways to improve their customer service experience.

The field study took place between April and September 2023. The sample includes users who reached out to the company's customer service. The company was provided with two different stimuli of dogs (i.e., Basset Hound and Bulldog), in order to provide greater variability in the content and minimise the risk of endogeneity, hence increasing the robustness of the findings (see [Appendix Six](#)). The company's customer service team was instructed to randomly add one of the two dog pictures to some of their responses to users. Once the discussion with the customer support team ended, users were prompted to give a rating for the customer service experience, ranging from 1 (represented by an unhappy smiley ☹) to 5 (represented by a happy smiley ☺). The reason for contacting customer support was also recorded and classified into minor or major service failures (0 = minor, 1 = major). Minor service failures include unavailable product categories or brands, locked passwords or accounts, processing or shipping issues, technical glitches, and delays. Major issues include unissued returns, lost items, payment issues, and revalued or rejected items.

A total of 266 customer service interactions were recorded. Responses from users who did not provide a rating following their discussion with the customer support

team were removed. The final sample was thus composed of 177 responses, 89 were female (50.3%), with a majority of respondents residing in the United Kingdom (76.3%), while other countries included the United States (9.6%), France (4%), Germany (2.3%), Ireland (1.2%), Spain (1.1%), Portugal (1.1%), Finland (1.1%), Italy (1.1%), Norway (1.1%), Netherlands (0.6%), and Kosovo (0.6%).

6.4.2.2 Results and Discussion

Customer Service Rating. An ANOVA was conducted using the pet picture condition (absent vs present) as the independent variable, and the customer service ratings as the dependent variable. As expected, results showed that respondents in the pet picture present (vs absent) condition reported higher customer service ratings ($M_{\text{petpresent/absent}} = 3.68/2.88$, $SD = 1.59/1.58$; $F[1, 175] = 10.55$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$). An ANOVA was then conducted to investigate each dog picture independently, using the pet picture condition (absent vs Basset Hound vs Bulldog) as independent variable, and the customer service ratings as the dependent variable. As expected, both dogs drove higher customer service ratings (vs pet picture absent; $F[1, 174] = 6.02$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .07$). Specifically, post hoc tests revealed that customers reported lower customer service ratings when no dog picture was included in the message, compared to when the customer service message included a Basset Hound ($M_{\text{bassethound/absent}} = 3.47/2.88$, $SE = .23/.19$, $p = .05$), or a Bulldog ($M_{\text{bulldog/absent}} = 3.84/2.88$, $SE = .20/.19$, $p < .001$; see [Figure 13](#)). Although there was no significant difference between the Basset Hound and Bulldog ($p > .05$), the latter appears to lead to increased customer ratings compared to the former ($M_{\text{bulldog/bassethound}} = 3.84/3.47$).

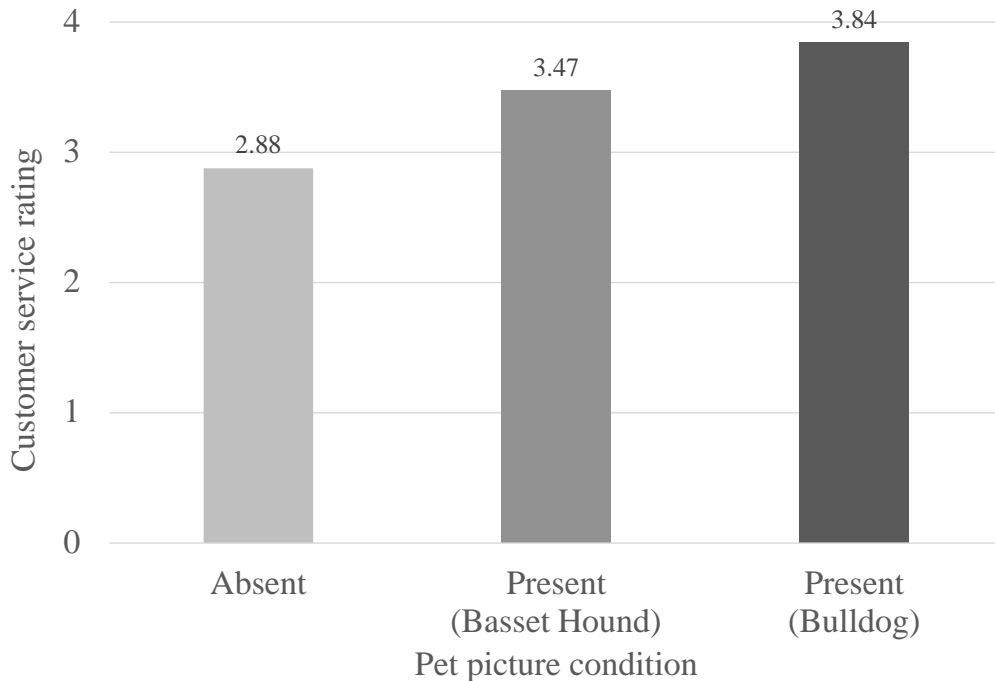


Figure 13: Means for customer service ratings for pet picture absent versus present conditions.

Moderating Effect of Service Failure Severity. An ANOVA was conducted, using the pet picture condition (absent vs Basset Hound vs Bulldog) and failure severity as independent variables, and the customer service ratings as the dependent variable. Results revealed a marginally significant main effect of the pet picture condition ($p = .07$) and a significant main effect of service failure severity ($p < .001$). More importantly, the pet picture condition by failure severity interaction was significant ($F[1, 171] = 5.87, p = .003, \eta^2 = .06$). Specifically, post hoc comparisons revealed that customers in the pet present (vs absent) condition reported higher customer service ratings when the service failure severity was minor ($M_{\text{absent}} = 2.80, SE = .25$, vs $M_{\text{bassethound/bulldog}} = 3.84/4.35, SE = .27/.23, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$), but not when the service failure severity was major ($p > .05$). [Figure 14](#) shows the interactions.

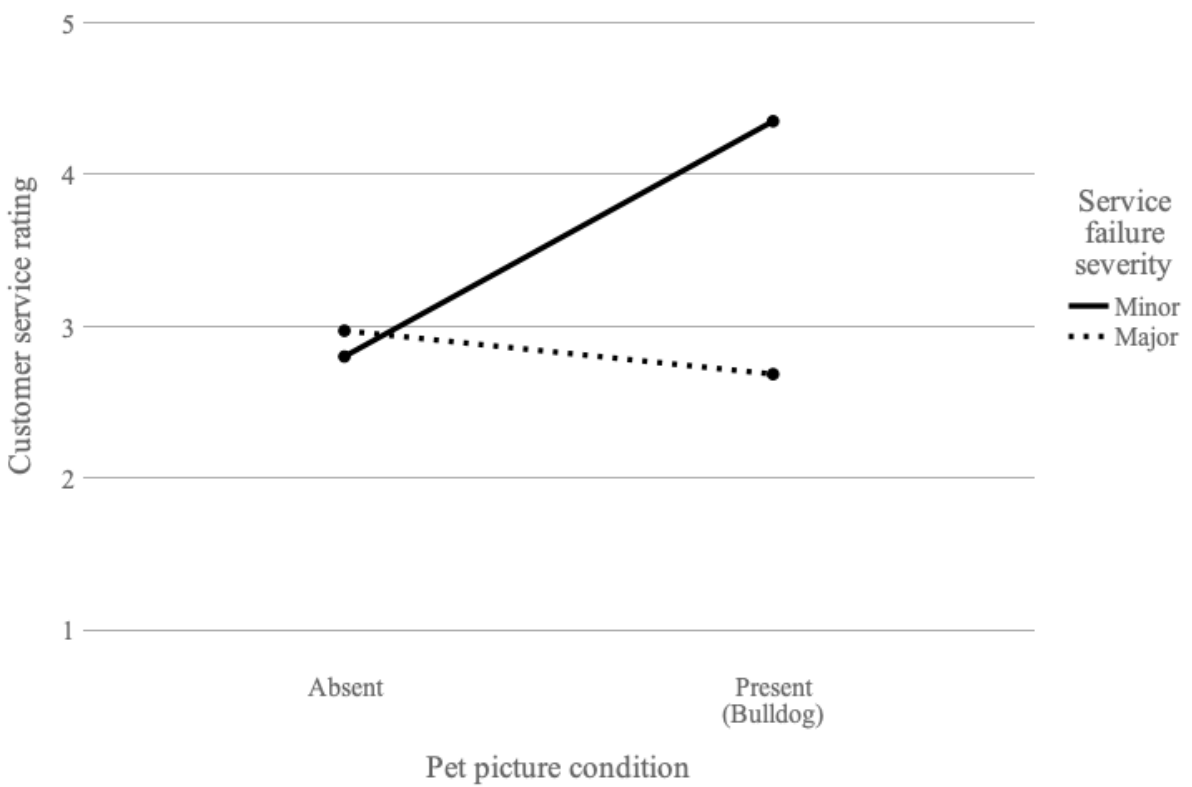
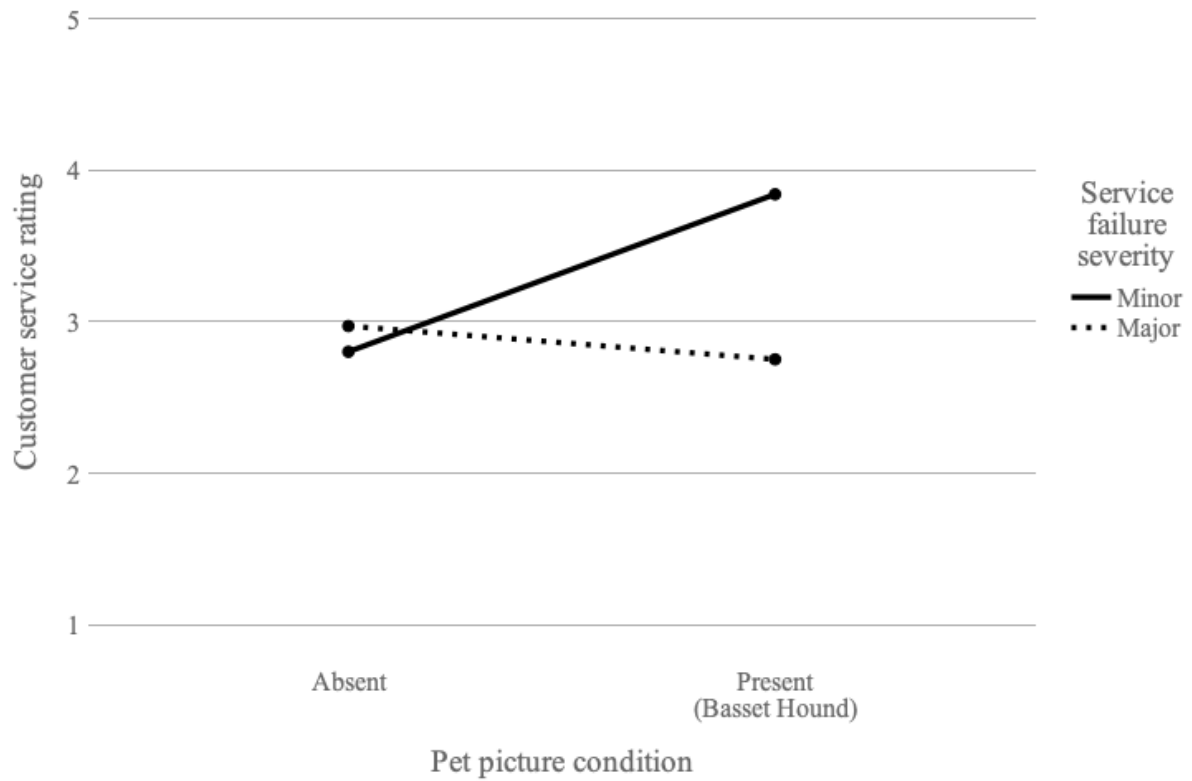


Figure 14: Estimated means for customer service ratings for pet picture absent versus present conditions by service failure severity.

A moderation analysis (Model 1) was performed based on Hayes (2018). Pet picture condition was selected as the multicategorical independent variable (0 = pet

picture absent, 1 = Basset Hound picture present, 2 = Bulldog picture present), service failure severity as the moderator (0 = minor, 1 = major), and customer service ratings as the dependent variable. The results confirmed significant simple effects for the two dogs ($b_{\text{basset hound}} = 1.04$, $SE = .37$, 95% CI = .31, 1.77, $p < .01$; $b_{\text{bulldog}} = 1.55$, $SE = .34$, 95% CI = .87, 2.22, $p < .001$). More importantly, the results confirmed the ANOVAs' findings, as the interaction effects are significant for the Basset Hound ($b_{\text{basset hound}} = -1.26$, $SE = .59$, 95% CI = -2.42, -.09, $p = .03$) and Bulldog ($b_{\text{bulldog}} = -1.83$, $SE = .55$, 95% CI = -2.92, -.74, $p = .001$). Specifically, both dogs significantly increased customer service ratings when the service failure was minor ($p < .01$), but not when the service failure was major ($p > .05$). [Figure 15](#) shows the moderation effect.

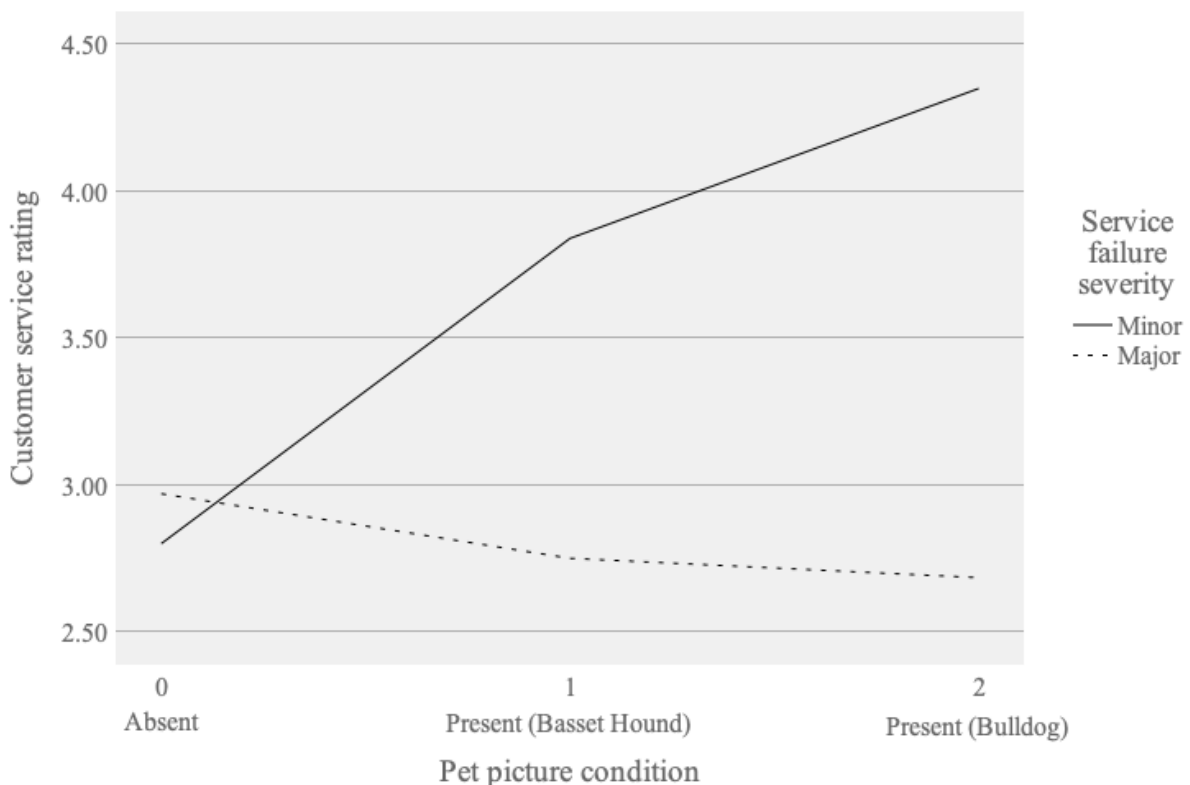


Figure 15: Moderating effect of service failure severity on customer service ratings.

The results of Study 2, which are based on data from a fintech company, validate the experimental findings from Study 1, supporting that the presence of a pet picture generally leads to more positive consumer responses to service failures (H_1). Furthermore, Study 2 also supports that service failure severity moderates the effect, hence supporting H_3 . Specifically, the presence of a pet picture drives greater positive consumer responses when the service failure is minor but has no effect when the service failure is major.

6.5. General Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this present research is to provide, through an experiment and one field study, initial evidence for the effectiveness of pet images in digital corporate apologies and the positive impact they have on consumer responses. This research offers both theoretical and managerial contributions.

6.5.1 Theoretical Contributions

First, the current research extends knowledge of pets as marketing tools by exploring the effect of pet images in the context of service recovery. In doing so, it also contributes to knowledge in the domain of service failure and recovery, with a particular focus on corporate apologies. There is a misconception that the part of the customer journey which is of interest to marketers is the pre-purchase phase, and that marketing efforts should focus on getting customers to buy (Court et al., 2009). Yet, once a customer reaches a decision at the moment of purchase, the customer journey only begins again, and each touchpoint that customers experience informs future decisions and behaviours (Court et al., 2009). Therefore, research on post-purchase customer-brand interactions is crucial, not only to build strong relationships, but also to avoid the potential consequences arising from customers exiting the relationship following a service failure (e.g., nWOM; Johnson et al., 2011). However, while critical incidents are easier to address for companies, this is usually not the case for smaller, less critical incidents that may gradually erode the customer-brand relationship (Johnson et al., 2011). This research proposes pet pictures as an effective means for brands to deal with such incidents. Specifically, it provides seminal empirical support for the positive impact pet images can have on consumer responses following a service failure. The findings suggest that corporate apologies can be more effective when including the image of a pet, resulting in greater satisfaction and repurchase intentions, as well as lower intentions to engage in nWOM. This effect is observed in an experiment and a field study, increasing the generalisability and validity of the results. This research hence responds to calls (e.g., Grewal et al., 2022) for investigating new means to handle service failures, as well as animals' other potential uses as business tools beyond endorsing brands in ads (Keller & Gierl, 2020; Lancendorfer et al., 2008). While some of today's major brands (e.g., Amazon) have

already seized the opportunity to use pets in their service recovery strategy, this research provides actual empirical support for the effect pet images can have in recovering from a service failure, paving the way for brands to improve their future apology messages for better consumer outcomes.

Second, this research furthers knowledge of the role warmth and competence perceptions hold in service recovery efforts, and more specifically in corporate apologies following a service failure. Echoing previous findings on the importance of warmth versus competence perceptions (e.g., Fiske et al., 2007; Marder et al., 2020), this research highlights the leading role of warmth (vs competence) in driving more positive relational outcomes. Although competence has long been considered a more important dimension for brands, research is starting to uncover the “previously underestimated role of warmth” (Güntürkün et al., 2020, p. 496). However, one challenge associated with increased warmth is that it is often associated with decreased competence perceptions (Güntürkün et al., 2020). This research proposes pet images in corporate apologies as a means to increase the warmth perceptions of brands following a service failure without negatively impacting competence perceptions, and suggests that increasing warmth perceptions using pet images (without increasing competence perceptions) is enough to drive more positive consumer responses. Considering the importance that warmth and competence perceptions have in service encounters and consumers’ future attitudes and behaviours (Choi et al., 2021; Willis & Todorov, 2006), this research offers new insights on how to trigger positive consumer responses through greater warmth perceptions within an apology, without affecting or requiring an increase in competence perceptions, hence contributing to knowledge on social cognition and the role it plays in service recovery processes. It further supports warmth as the leading dimension to consider when the desired outcome is not purely transactional but rather relational, such as increasing customer satisfaction and repurchase intentions.

Third, this research extends knowledge of the role of service failure severity by assessing how consumer responses to corporate apologies featuring pets are impacted by the type of failure severity (minor vs major). Specifically, the findings suggest that solely increasing warmth perceptions, for example by using pet images in corporate apologies, is only more effective under certain circumstances, rather than

universally effective in driving positive relational outcomes, as suggested by recent findings (Güntürkün et al., 2020). Specifically, and as expected, the effect of pet images in corporate apologies only holds when the service failure is minor, but not when it is major. This is in line with previous findings suggesting that warm and empathetic apologies can be a powerful and effective tool to recover from a minor service failure but are very often not sufficient when the service failure is major, as consumers' expectations increase (Levesque & McDougall, 2000; Tran et al., 2022). In this case, customers are likely to expect more than an apology, and increasing competence perceptions may be required. Furthermore, by proposing pet images as a means to increase warmth perceptions, this research offers a novel simple way to manipulate warmth perceptions without impacting competence perceptions in minor service failure situations. Recent research finds that cute artificial intelligence assistants or baby-faced service providers can also emulate greater warmth perception and customer responses when the service failure is minor (Liu & Li, 2022; Lv et al., 2021). However, this requires considering several aspects such as facial and body features, which may also be problematic when involving human stimuli as they might be evaluated very differently based on subjective opinions and biases. Using pet images appears as an easy and straightforward way to manipulate warmth perceptions and drive more positive outcomes in minor service failure situations, as pets innately generate warm feelings (Sevillano & Fiske, 2016). This is also supported by the fact that two different dog breeds are used in this research and lead to the same positive results, hence suggesting that brands can select and successfully use pet images without having to consider features that would usually be considered for other characters (e.g., humans, chatbots).

6.5.2 Practical Contributions

This research provides practical insights for brands on how to leverage pet images in online corporate apologies, which are becoming increasingly popular amongst brands such as Amazon. Based on the findings, brands should consider using pet images in their digital apology messages, as these have the potential to drive greater positive outcomes for consumers and brands alike. Additionally, as pet images emulate greater warmth perceptions without impacting competence impressions, these can be used without having to consider brands' personalities. For example,

Amazon can be construed as a competent brand with its fast and effective customer service and wide product range and has been successfully using pet images in its error pages for several years. Overall, pet images in corporate apologies seem to provide a relatively safe means to drive the warmth perceptions needed for an effective apology, even for brands that are usually perceived as more competent than warm.

Furthermore, this research suggests that brands should use pet images in their apology messages when the service failure is minor rather than major. Although the results from the field study suggest that the use of pet images in apologies for major service failures does not seem to have a negative impact on customer responses, more research is needed in that area. It is possible that when the service failure is very severe (e.g., a cancelled flight with no immediate alternative), the use of a pet image may be perceived as manipulative and/or disrespectful. Therefore, brands are advised to use pet images with caution by using them when apologising for minor service failures, such as technical glitches and other processing/delivery issues, and to conduct their own tests on their target audience before fully integrating pet pictures into their service recovery processes.

Finally, based on the field study's findings, it seems that some pet images may be more effective than others, depending on the type of pet featured in the apology message. Specifically, although there is no significant difference in customer rating between the Basset Hound and English Bulldog, the latter appears to be driving greater consumer outcomes, although the difference is not significant. Furthermore, both Study 1 and Study 2 use English Bulldogs (although different pictures) and show that these can successfully drive greater consumer responses. As such, this particular dog breed seems to have a positive effect on corporate apologies' effectiveness. Therefore, this research proposes an effective type of stimulus that brands may consider when including a pet in their apology messages.

6.5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Although this research provides robust findings with an experiment and a field study, several limitations can be acknowledged. First, more research is needed to provide further support to the suggested mediator and moderator. Specifically, Study 1 tested warmth and competence as mediators, while Study 2 tested service failure

severity as a moderator, using the data provided by the company which agreed to take part in the field experiment. Therefore, mediation and moderation were not simultaneously tested in this research. Future studies should aim to manipulate service failure severity while measuring warmth and competence perceptions to provide further support to the proposed process.

Second, future research could consider the long-term impact the use of pet images in corporate apologies may have on consumers. As pet pictures appear to drive more positive consumer outcomes, and as service recovery (including apologising following a service failure) is key to customer retention, it could be that using pet images in corporate apologies may also lead to greater loyalty towards the brand or tolerance towards future service failures.

Third, it would be interesting to test whether the effect of pet pictures in digital corporate apologies is amplified for certain brands. Brands considered as warm by consumers would likely benefit even further from the effect. For example, recent research suggests that consumers prefer when warm (vs competent) brands address them informally (vs formally) (Leung et al., 2023). In a similar vein, it is expected that corporate apologies featuring pet pictures would be even more effective when used by warm (vs competent) brands, because consumers expect these brands to communicate in a warmer and less formal manner (Leung et al., 2023). Furthermore, although the findings suggest that including pet pictures in corporate apologies does not decrease a brand's competence perceptions, it would be valuable to test whether this is the case for brands or even industries/sectors meant to be seen as purely competent (e.g., business-to-business companies, public institutions). Simultaneously, when considering the type of brand that would benefit the most from using pet images in their apology messages, considering the congruence between the brand and the pet may be a valuable consideration for future research. For example, pets may likely be even more effective as a service recovery tool when they feature in corporate apologies from brands selling congruent offerings (e.g., pet-related products).

Fourth, future research could try to manipulate digital corporate apologies to increase warmth perceptions in another way (e.g., through text). This would be useful to test whether the effect of pet pictures still holds when warmth is induced through

other means and can be further increased, or if it does not but is easier to implement for brands (vs having to convey warmth through text).

Finally, more research is needed to fully uncover the potential of pet pictures in corporate apologies, and which type may be more effective. While this research has been focusing on dogs, future research should consider other types of pets, such as cats. It is likely that cats, which are often considered less social and warm, may be less effective in mitigating the negative consequences of a service failure. Additionally, future research should consider other dog breeds. The findings suggest that one breed (i.e., English Bulldog) is particularly effective, but it is unclear why. Although Study 2 used two different dog breeds to provide further support for the effectiveness of pet pictures, rather than to uncover which dog breed would be more effective, future studies could test different breeds and measure different constructs that could be associated with these (e.g., facial expressions, stereotypes...). For example, although the two dogs used in Study 2 have similar facial expressions and both seem relatively 'sorry', it is possible that the English Bulldog is perceived as more apologetic, or more humorous, leading to greater warmth perceptions and a more positive effect on consumers.

The next chapter provides an overall discussion summarising the findings of the exploratory study and the three papers.

Chapter Seven: Overall Discussion

The overall aim of this research is to empirically assess pet endorsers' persuasiveness in digital marketing communications. The importance of this research stems from the omnipresence of animals, and pets in particular, in advertising, but a lack of academic consideration in the marketing literature. While the pet-human bond has been investigated in the psychology literature (e.g., Amiot & Bastian, 2015; Amiot et al., 2020), the marketing literature remains, however, scantly. The focus on dimensions such as pet ownership, gender, or affiliation with nature and the animal kingdom (e.g., Jia et al., 2022; Lancendorfer et al., 2008; Yelkur et al., 2013), as well as a preference for qualitative methods and traditional media marketing, motivates the exploration of the pet endorsement phenomenon in a more systematic, measurable and generalisable manner. This would also provide practitioners with much-needed guidance, as [one of the pilot studies discussed in the introduction](#) reflects marketers' interest in using pets but a lack of knowledge on how to do so effectively. Although a vast majority of the marketers who took part in the survey agree that pets are effective endorsers, and although they would be interested in including them in their marketing communications, more than half of them acknowledge that they lack sufficient knowledge to use pet endorsers effectively.

Through three papers examining digital pet endorsements in different contexts, this research assesses key dimensions that need to be considered when using pet endorsers, which have been hinted at by the existing limited marketing literature on pets, as well as this research's exploratory study, but have until now been disregarded. These include whether they can be more persuasive than human endorsers, the type of offering they more effectively endorse, and whether their mere presence can emulate positive emotions that have a positive impact on both brands and customers. Taken together, these three dimensions that have been considered in this research, provide crucial insights on how to use pet endorsers at different stages of the buying process. Indeed, in the awareness and information search stages, on social media, pets appear to endorse various offerings in a more effective way than their human counterparts (Paper One). Furthermore, they have the potential to increase customers' purchase intentions as they are particularly effective when they promote congruent offerings rather than unrelated ones (Paper Two). Their capacity to influence

consumer behaviour even applies to the customer service domain, as even a simple pet picture seems to soften the blow of minor service failures (Paper Three). This chapter is a reflection on the findings obtained across the exploratory study and three experimental papers.

7.1 Exploratory Study

The exploratory study provides an opportunity to confirm potential dimensions to explore in the quantitative phase that have been mentioned in the limited existing marketing literature on pets. The ten semi-structured interviews allow for the extraction of information on how individuals interact with pets and how this influences how they respond to ads featuring them. As expected, pets appear to provide a plethora of benefits contributing to individuals' well-being, which appear to impact how they perceive marketing communications featuring furry endorsers. As pets are perceived as being mood-lifting and, in some respects, better than humans as they cannot lie or have bad intentions, individuals seem to respond better to marketing communications featuring pet endorsers (vs no pet or human endorser). Nonetheless, a minimum level of product congruence is expected in pet ads, as a pet endorsing a completely irrelevant and incongruent offering may seem too far-fetched for most individuals, reflecting poorly on consumer responses. The themes confirmed by the exploratory study mostly echo the dimensions probed as worth investigating in the existing pet-related marketing literature. The first aspect that was empirically tested following the exploratory study is the effectiveness of endorsements from pet endorsers versus human endorsers. As the exploratory study's participants mention pets as sometimes superior to humans for their innate goodness and sincerity, Paper One is the first piece of research to empirically test whether pets can indeed be more persuasive endorsers, which is discussed next.

7.2 Paper One

Paper One shows that pet endorsers, SMIs in particular, can indeed be more persuasive than human SMIs. As brands increasingly turn to SMIs to promote their offerings and reach consumers (ReportLinker, 2020), a better understanding of what the different types of SMIs are and what drives their persuasiveness is needed

(Maheshwari, 2018). This research is the first to investigate the petfluencer phenomenon and introduce petfluencers as a new SMI type into the marketing literature, which appears relevant and timely as petfluencers are considered some of the most popular influencers nowadays (Anderson, 2023). The findings of Paper One show that petfluencers can actually be more persuasive than human influencers, beyond the usual criteria used to classify influencers' success factors, such as expertise and number of followers (De Veirman et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2019). These results are particularly interesting as they contrast with existing literature on traditional SMIs, which suggests that traditional (human) SMIs' persuasiveness stems from social identification (Kupfer et al., 2018). While individuals can identify with human SMIs based on their similarities or aspire to share some common aspects, hence building seemingly close bonds (Jin & Phua, 2014), this cannot be the case for petfluencers. Instead, Paper One proposes another explanation for petfluencers' success, which echoes one aspect human SMIs may be lacking: sincerity.

As human SMIs are increasingly considered insincere (Casey, 2020), petfluencers seem to provide an effective alternative. Specifically, Paper One supports sincerity perceptions as a mediator explaining petfluencers' superior persuasiveness, and reflects the exploratory study's findings where pets are praised for having only good intentions and none of the negative concerns usually associated with humans. Sincerity impacts human SMIs' persuasiveness (Lee & Eastin, 2020; Park et al., 2021), and according to this research, is the driver of petfluencers' success. As petfluencers have the potential to be more persuasive than human SMIs when endorsing brands on social media because they are perceived as more sincere, it is obvious that the advantages associated with pets reflect on and impact the effectiveness of their endorsements. And while this research supports sincerity as a crucial factor to consider in influencer marketing, it seems difficult for human SMIs to be able to replicate the sincerity perceptions associated with petfluencers, as pets are biologically unable to be insincere. Moreover, Paper One tests a way to manipulate the sincerity perceptions associated with petfluencers, that is through their photo arrays, and more specifically the type of pictures they post, either more posed or more casual. Specifically, the more a petfluencer posts casual pictures (vs posed), the more sincere it appears to be.

Furthermore, Paper One offers a means to increase petfluencers' persuasiveness and reach a wider audience by considering consumers' propensity to anthropomorphise. Existing literature supports that consumers anthropomorphising non-human agents tend to respond more positively to them (e.g., Connell, 2013; Li & Sung, 2021). Unsurprisingly, consumers with a high propensity to anthropomorphise respond positively to petfluencers, regardless of the content they post (i.e., casual or posed pictures). However, consumers with a low propensity to anthropomorphise are more sensitive to the kind of content (i.e., pictures) petfluencers post, which may affect how sincere and persuasive they find them to be. More precisely, for these individuals, petfluencers are more sincere and persuasive when they feature greater (vs fewer) casual pictures. As posed pictures are likely to be more closely associated with human content and/or intervention, it is reasonably easy to understand why petfluencers are more sincere and persuasive when they do what they are most loved for: simply being pets.

7.3 Paper Two

Paper Two explores the role of product congruence in digital pet endorsements, which is a dimension that has been frequently mentioned in the existing literature (e.g., Lancendorfer et al., 2008), but also in [one of the pilot studies](#), and by participants in the exploratory study. While pets frequently endorse all sorts of offerings and brands, ranging from congruent (e.g., pet supplies) to less obvious and expected ones (e.g., coffee), the academic literature remains silent on whether product congruence is a key factor to consider when using pet endorsers. The findings suggest that this is indeed the case. Specifically, pets are more persuasive in driving purchase intentions of products that are congruent with them, rather than products that are completely unrelated to pets. This aligns with previous research on congruence (e.g., Moorman et al., 2002) that supports congruence as more effective than incongruence in generating positive consumer responses and as particularly important in digital environments (Vermeir et al., 2014), especially in social media where consumers expect a certain degree of credibility from endorsers (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2022).

Additionally, Paper Two proposes attention as a mediator for the effect, such that increased product congruence in pet ads attracts greater consumer attention and purchase behaviour. This is unsurprising as digital environments, such as social media, monopolise most of consumers' cognitive resources (Vermeir et al., 2014). Therefore, as congruent information is easier to process and requires fewer cognitive resources, consumers are more likely to pay attention and respond positively to congruent content (Vermeir et al., 2014). It is interesting to note that Study 3 in Paper Two introduces a new level of congruence (i.e., mixed product), which is a product that can be used by both humans and pets. As the mixed product leads to the same results as the congruent product, it seems like as long as a product is somewhat related to the pet, then it is considered congruent and is more effective than a totally incongruent product. As pets are part of our homes and are often seen as family members, it is likely that most of the common household items are somewhat considered congruent, unless the product is forbidden for pets. For example, although dogs will never be driving cars, seeing them endorse a car brand can be considered congruent because dogs frequently join their owners during their trips. Another example that may seem incongruent and yet be considered congruent by consumers could be a cleaning product: while the pet is not the one using it, it may help pet owners clean after their pets. This contrasts with the incongruent product selected for Paper Two, as granola is a product solely destined to humans, and from which no association with the pet endorser can be created.

However, Paper Two provides an effective means for pets to be more persuasive when endorsing incongruent products: inducing immersion within the ad. Indeed, while consumers are more naturally immersed and pay more attention to ads that are easier to process, such as those comporting congruent information, this is not the case for more complex ads which are more difficult to process, such as those including incongruent information. Simultaneously, immersion 'plugs' consumers in and provides a way to gain consumer attention (Bhatnagar & Wan, 2011; Cowan et al., 2023; Mainemelis, 2001). Therefore, while inducing immersion is not necessary when the information presented is congruent, it can be powerful to increase the effectiveness of incongruent information (Bhatnagar & Wan, 2011). This is reflected in the results, as the pet ad featuring an incongruent product became significantly more effective in driving increased purchase intentions when immersive (vs not immersive).

Immersion is manipulated in this research through the background, as done in existing seminal research on immersion (Walters et al., 2007; Yoo & Kim, 2014). As the immersive pet ad featured a simple bedroom background (vs plain background), these findings show that simply adding more context and vividness to an incongruent pet ad can have a powerful effect on consumer attention and purchase intentions. Even more vivid backgrounds would likely drive an even larger effect, including for congruent products.

7.4 Paper Three

Paper Three focuses on the mood-lifting aspect of pets mentioned in the exploratory study, and on current marketplace practices: using pet images to apologise to customers after a service failure. Although online retailers such as Amazon have included pet images in their service recovery strategies, Paper Three is the first empirical testing of this phenomenon and shows that pet images are indeed effective in mitigating the negative consequences associated with a service failure. Specifically, the first study of Paper Three shows that simply adding the picture of a dog in an apology message (e.g., error page) drives increased repurchase intentions and customer service ratings, and reduces intentions to engage in nWOM, providing a powerful - yet easy-to-implement - tool to recover from service failures. Corporate apologies are important to restore social losses following a service failure (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2015), as they emphasise the brand's positive motives (Joireman et al., 2013). From this research's findings, incorporating the picture of a pet into an apology can increase its effectiveness by emulating more positive emotions, such as warmth.

Warmth, a key determinant of attitude and behavioural change particularly important in service interactions (Aaker et al., 2012; Choi et al., 2021), emerges as the mediator driving the effect. Pets are recognised for eliciting positive and warm feelings both by academics (Sevillano & Fiske, 2016) and participants from the exploratory study, hence warmth was considered a relevant mediator to investigate. Sincerity, a construct related to warmth was also considered, but warmth was eventually selected for three reasons. First, warmth is a popular construct in the service recovery literature (e.g., Choi et al., 2021; Huang & Ha, 2020). Therefore, this research aligns with how existing service recovery research assesses successful recovery processes, with

warmth perceptions being a powerful driver, especially in the context of corporate apologies (e.g., Choi et al., 2021). Second, the sincerity dimension (as explored in Paper One) encompasses both moral and sociability traits (e.g., honesty, friendliness), whereas warmth perceptions focus on sociability traits only (Leach et al., 2007). As a variety of other factors may impact a corporate apology's sincerity (e.g., perceived intentionality of the service failure, apologies accompanied by another form of compensation; Nazifi et al., 2022), focusing on the sociability traits only (i.e., warmth) seems more relevant. Third, and more importantly, an examination of warmth perceptions also allows for an examination of competence perceptions. Both warmth and competence perceptions are fundamental dimensions in marketing and service recovery, as they guide consumers' perceptions and behaviours towards service providers (Güntürkün et al., 2020). Therefore, examining warmth instead of sincerity in this research allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the effect of pet images on consumer responses, as warmth perceptions are examined simultaneously with competence perceptions which are also crucial to service recovery. Specifically, the findings suggest that pet images are particularly effective in corporate apologies as they provide a way to increase warmth perceptions without damaging a brand's competence perceptions, which has often been considered a difficult task (Güntürkün et al., 2020). In doing so, Paper Three's findings echo recent research (e.g., Güntürkün et al., 2020) on the superior importance of warmth over competence in driving more positive customer-brand outcomes, and support that pet images are enough (without also having to increase competence perceptions) to emulate feelings of warmth amongst customers following a service failure, resulting in greater customer responses. Interestingly, pet images have a strong impact on perceptions of warmth but not on perceptions of competence, suggesting that consumers are indeed more sensitive to warmth than competence judgements (Fiske et al., 2007). This is not always the case, with for example emoticons simultaneously increasing warmth and decreasing competence perceptions in corporate apologies (Li et al., 2019). Yet, pet images appear to be a more effective option that can drive more positive outcomes without negatively impacting the competence perceptions of a brand.

However, the effect only holds in minor service failure situations, not when the service failure is severe. Therefore, when the service failure severity is low, so are customers' expectations (Tellis et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2022). In that case, it seems

that corporate apologies including pet images are effective in making the apology warmer and more empathetic, which positively impacts warmth perceptions of the brand and customer responses. Oppositely, when the service failure is major, customers' expectations are higher, and the inclusion of a pet image is unlikely to be sufficient to have a positive effect on customer responses (Levesque & McDougall, 2000; Tellis et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2022). It is important to note, though, that including pet images in corporate apologies following a major service failure does not seem to have a negative effect on customer responses. It could have been anticipated that adding pet images could not only be ineffective, but even negatively impact customer responses, as they could convey cynicism or even mockery. Since the findings suggest that this is not the case, pet images also appear to be a safe option that only brings benefits without significant downsides.

The following chapter concludes this thesis by bringing together the papers' theoretical and managerial implications, as well as the limitations and future research avenues.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

This research explores, through a consumer psychology lens, the impact pets can have on consumer responses when they feature in digital marketing communications. Over the last few decades, pets have gained importance and have become omnipresent in people's lives, homes, and advertising (Amiot et al., 2020; Webster, 2018). As their ubiquity became customary, the marketing academic literature has relatively overlooked this phenomenon, leaving practitioners with little to no guidance on how to effectively use pet endorsers, but academics with a plethora of avenues for research. Across an exploratory study and three experimental papers, this research contributes to shedding light on the mainstream but unexplained popularity of pets in marketing and provides implications of interest to academics and practitioners.

8.1 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis provides two main core theoretical contributions. First, it increases knowledge of pets as marketing tools by exploring if, when, and why they can be persuasive. Second, it extends knowledge in the domain of digital marketing communications by examining their persuasiveness across various online environments such as social media and online retailing.

8.1.1 Core Contribution One: Increased Knowledge of Pets as Marketing Tools

This research naturally contributes to the sparse marketing literature in the domain of pet endorsements, and more generally in the domain of animals in marketing communications, by investigating if, when, and why they can be effective marketing tools, as summarised in [Figure 16](#).

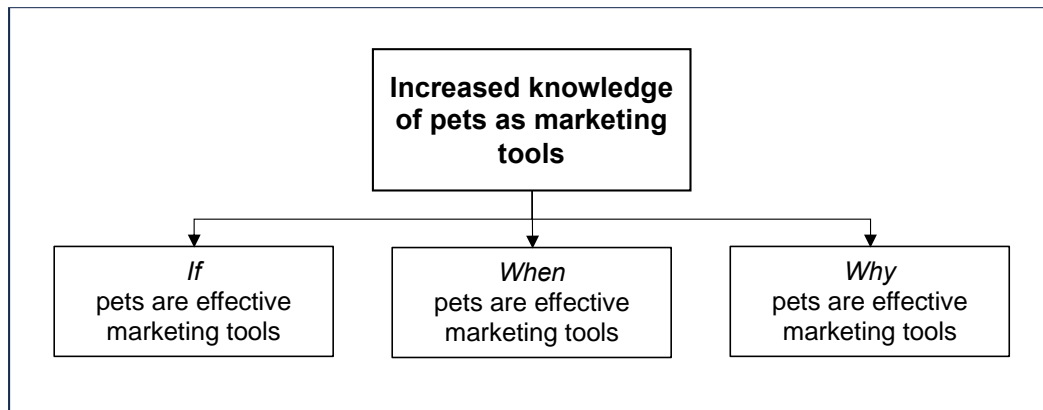


Figure 16: First core theoretical contribution of this thesis.

8.1.1.1 Investigating *if* pets are effective marketing tools

First, these seminal findings begin to answer an obvious yet crucial question regarding pets in marketing: Are they really effective as endorsers? This research suggests that they are. Pets are somewhat of a mystery in marketing: they are everywhere, everyone assumes that they work, but their effectiveness (or the circumstances required for it) is uncertain. Although this research does not claim to provide all the answers regarding how to effectively use pets as marketing tools, it is one of the first to empirically test the effect they have on consumer responses across the customer journey. Specifically, this research provides the earliest empirical support for pets as effective marketing tools, either as SMIs having their own dedicated social media accounts that are more persuasive than human SMIs, but also as mere images featuring in corporate apologies following a service failure.

Therefore, pet imagery appears as a successful means to raise awareness and interest in brands, but also to handle service failures occurring after the purchase decision has been made, hence suggesting pets as marketing tools that can be effective in driving positive consumer responses at different stages of the customer journey. In doing so, it contributes to shedding light on an ever-growing marketing phenomenon which deserves even more attention now as it continuously gains further visibility and interest through digital channels. While the secret behind pet endorsements' success is yet to be fully uncovered, this research proposes pets as an effective way to reach customers who are increasingly avoiding and immune to constant marketing messages.

Furthermore, contrasting with the limited existing literature in the domain of pets in marketing, this research does not rely on consumer contingencies, which have until now played a central role in the assessment of pet endorsements, and overcomes many of the limitations associated with a focus on pet ownership, gender, or appreciation for nature, amongst other considerations. Thereby, this research suggests that pet endorsements can be effective without accounting for these qualifiers. Moreover, this research empirically tests the effect of pet endorsements on consumer responses across various contexts, using experiments and field data. In doing so, this research adds to the existing literature in the domain of pets in marketing which mainly adopts a qualitative approach and brings new insights for a better understanding of pet endorsements' persuasiveness.

8.1.1.2 Investigating *when* pets are effective marketing tools

By considering pet imagery across various digital contexts, this research not only proposes that pet imagery can make digital marketing communications more effective, but also provides cues on when this may occur. First, pets appear to be persuasive SMIs, thanks to the sincerity they reflect, which appears superior to that of human SMIs. However, this research suggests that petfluencers' persuasiveness is impacted by individuals' propensity to anthropomorphise pets. The findings support that consumers with a high propensity to anthropomorphise pets unsurprisingly respond positively to petfluencers' content, regardless of the type of photos they post on their social media profiles. However, consumers with a low propensity to anthropomorphise pets respond more positively to petfluencers posting fewer posed pictures but greater casual pictures on their social media profiles, that they perceive as more sincere. Responding to calls for an investigation of the impact of consumers' anthropomorphising tendencies on pet ads' effectiveness (e.g., Jia et al., 2022), these interesting findings contribute to a novel understanding of consumers' propensity to anthropomorphise, by suggesting that the latter can influence the sincerity perceptions associated with a pet endorsement and, therefore, its persuasiveness. Hence, pets are effective endorsers on social media, but considering their audience's propensity to anthropomorphise is also key to understanding when they may be more (or less) persuasive as influencers.

Furthermore, this thesis's findings suggest that pet endorsements are more effective when a congruent (vs incongruent) offering is endorsed, as it attracts greater consumer attention. In doing so, this research increases knowledge in the domain of product-endorser congruence. Although the literature in the domain of (in)congruence provides contradicting findings, this research suggests that congruence, namely product congruence, is particularly important in ads featuring pets, and more generally in digital ads. As consumers' attention is constantly side-tracked and absorbed when interacting with digital environments, such as social media and other websites, congruent information is more accessible and more effective in attracting consumers' limited attention (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Vermeir et al., 2014). The importance of congruence is likely amplified for pet ads, because pets are so dissimilar and distracting (Dessart, 2018), that product congruence might be needed for the ads to be understandable and relatable. This research is the first to examine the role of product congruence on ads featuring pets, hence responding to several calls for an examination of the 'fit' between pet endorsers and the offerings they promote (e.g., Keller & Gierl, 2020; Lancendorfer et al., 2008). Simultaneously, this research suggests that although a pet endorser promoting an incongruent offering is less persuasive because consumers prefer simpler (i.e., congruent) messages, inducing further immersion through the background allows to 'plug' consumer attention to incongruent pet ads and enhances their persuasiveness. Therefore, this research extends knowledge on the role of immersion in the domain of pet endorsements and, more broadly, in the digital advertising discipline, by proposing immersion as a means to mitigate the negative consequences of product incongruence through increased consumer attention.

Besides petfluencers, this research shows that pets can be successful endorsers beyond social media. Indeed, pets are not only effective when they personally endorse brands on social media, but can also be when they appear in digital corporate apologies. Specifically, the findings support that the mere presence of pet images (not from petfluencers but rather using unknown pet models) in digital corporate apologies leads to more positive consumer responses following a service failure, thanks to the warmth perceptions pet images are able to emulate. This shows that while pets are effective as SMIs through building a relationship with their audience and personally advocating for brands, they can be as effective when they feature as

unknown models occasionally appearing in brand messages such as corporate apologies. However, this research reveals that digital corporate apologies featuring pet images are only more impactful when service failures are minor, hence extending knowledge of service failure severity and its impact on service recovery. In the case of major service failures, solely focusing on increasing warmth perceptions may not be enough, and increasing competence perceptions or providing other forms of compensation (e.g., monetary) is likely to be needed. Nevertheless, minor service failures are potentially equally important as major ones, as they are inevitable and can have a negative impact on the brand-customer relationship (Johnson et al., 2011). This research hence introduces pet images as a novel and relatively straightforward service recovery tool for minor failures to the literature in the domain of service failure and recovery.

8.1.1.3 Investigating *why* pets are effective marketing tools

This research also provides cues as to why pet imagery is effective in marketing communications. For petfluencers, their persuasiveness seems to rely on their sincerity perceptions, which are greater than those of human SMIs. This finding further highlights the importance of sincerity in SMIs' endorsements, which may be lacking in human SMIs who rely on social identification to influence their audience. Sincerity hence appears as the key driver of petfluencers' persuasiveness and may be manipulated through photo arrays. This research echoes previous literature suggesting that sincerity is an important characteristic of successful SMIs (Park et al., 2021), although while it is inherent in pets, it is increasingly questioned in human endorsers. Therefore, as sincerity is crucial for successful SMIs, and as distrust toward human SMIs grows, pets appear particularly fitting for social media, explaining the growing success of petfluencers.

Additionally, pets' persuasiveness also relies on the attention they are able to garner, particularly when they endorse congruent offerings. This research contributes to knowledge of the role of attention in the domain of pet endorsements by suggesting that ads, including pet ads, do not necessarily need to be incongruent to gain consumers' attention, especially as incongruence can also be associated with more negative outcomes (Mandler, 1982). Oppositely, congruent digital pet ads are effective because they attract greater consumer attention. Product-endorser congruence is

hence a key factor explaining digital pet ads' success, as pets in ads are more effective for simple and clear messages (Lancendorfer et al., 2008), and as congruent information is more effective for attracting people's attention in online environments (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Vermeir et al., 2014).

Moreover, when used in digital corporate apologies, pet images positively impact consumer responses by increasing warmth perceptions. This research proposes pet images as an effective tool to use digital corporate apologies to successfully recover from service failures by increasing warmth perceptions, echoing literature on service recovery suggesting warmth as an essential dimension of effective corporate apologies (Fiske et al., 2007; Marder et al., 2020). As importantly, this research suggests that pet images in corporate apologies are effective because they not only increase warmth perceptions but also do not hurt competence perceptions, which is a concern usually associated with other digital apology tools (e.g., emoticons; Li et al., 2019). Hence, pet images' effectiveness in corporate apologies can be explained by the warmth perceptions associated with pets (Sevillano & Fiske, 2016) reflecting on brands.

8.1.2 Core Contribution Two: Increased Knowledge in the Domain of Digital Marketing Communications

The second core theoretical contribution of this thesis lies within the domain of digital marketing communications (see [Figure 17](#)), on which this research focuses.

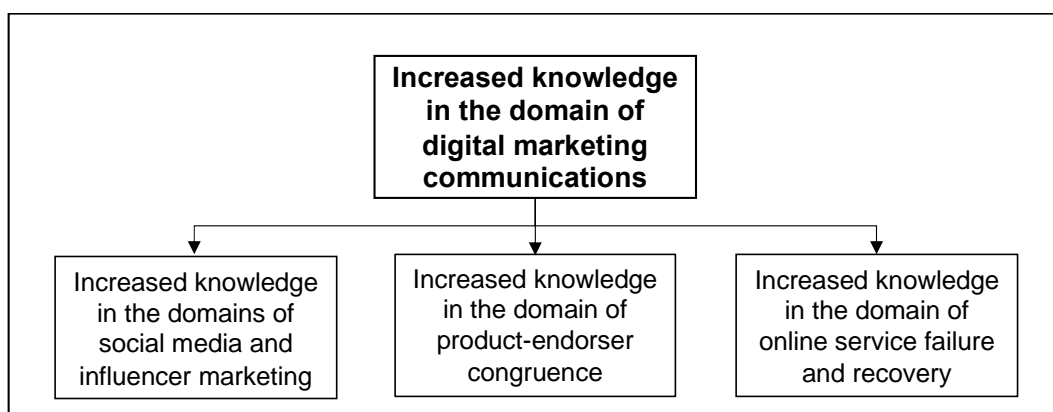


Figure 17: Second core theoretical contribution of this thesis.

This research extends knowledge in the domain of digital marketing communications by focusing on digital pet endorsements, including social media ads

and online retailing. In doing so, it not only provides a novel understanding of pet endorsements in a digital context, hence contributing to the existing literature in the domain of pets in marketing largely focused on traditional media (e.g., print and television advertising), but also answers calls for moving beyond traditional media and investigating digital marketing communications' idiosyncrasies in the marketing discipline (e.g., Batra & Keller, 2016). Companies are now spending more on digital marketing compared to traditional marketing (Buchholz, 2020), which is unsurprising as digital channels provide a plethora of opportunities for brands and marketers, such as reaching a wider audience, gaining access to customer data, interacting with customers or reaching customers in more creative and cost-effective ways (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Additionally, digital marketing communications are processed differently (compared to most traditional marketing communications) as customers can process these at their own pace, which allows for the communication of longer and/or more complex messages, and easy interaction with the brand and other customers (Belch & Belch, 2012). Therefore, a better understanding of digital marketing communications, including those featuring pets, is crucial.

By investigating the petfluencer phenomenon, this research broadens knowledge in the domain of social media marketing, and more specifically SMI marketing. Specifically, this research suggests petfluencers as a new SMI category worthy of its own examination and is the first to investigate their persuasiveness, hence providing the earliest empirical support for the influence pets can have on their social media audiences. It also supports that petfluencers can be more persuasive than human SMIs because they are perceived as more sincere. In doing so, this research is also the first to directly compare human to pet endorsers, responding to several calls for an evaluation of which endorser type has a stronger influence on consumer responses (Jia et al., 2022; Keller & Gierl, 2020). The mediating role of sincerity further highlights why petfluencers differ from human SMIs and can therefore be considered as two distinct categories: petfluencers rely on their innate sincerity, while human SMIs rely on social identification. But while the former is immutable and biologically rooted, the latter is fragile and endangered by growing defiance and scepticism (Chandler, 2019). Hence, this research proposes petfluencers as an alternative to the growing concerns associated with human SMIs, as these represent a 'safe' type of influencers that will never be involved in scandals or deceitful

endorsements. Additionally, this research contributes to a better understanding of the sincerity perceptions associated with SMIs and how these may be manipulated to trigger more positive consumer responses. It identifies photo arrays, and more specifically the types of pictures petfluencers post on their social media profiles, as an effective means to manipulate sincerity perceptions.

Furthermore, this research also contributes to theory on the role of congruence in digital advertising, and more specifically on the role of product-endorser congruence. Contributing to the existing contradicting literature on (in)congruence, this research argues that congruence, and more specifically product congruence, is essential in ads featuring pets, and more generally in digital ads, to attract consumers' limited attention. This echoes previous findings suggesting congruence as a key success factor of ads in online environments (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Vermeir et al., 2014). In doing so, it further emphasises the importance of attracting and retaining consumer attention online, and how the latter might be impacted by an ad's congruence. While existing literature already discusses congruence as an antecedent of consumer attention (e.g., Moorman et al., 2002), the latter has not been measured based on perceived product congruence within an ad. This research echoes existing literature and suggests that product congruence can indeed have an impact on consumers' attention and subsequent purchase behaviours, and highlights the importance of gaining consumer attention to drive more positive consumer responses in digital environments. Therefore, it extends knowledge of the key role congruence, and more precisely product-endorser congruence, plays in digital advertising. Moreover, this research proposes that immersion can increase a digital ad's effectiveness by mitigating the negative consequences of product incongruence, and offers ads' backgrounds as a means to manipulate immersion. Although the latter is closely linked to attention and is gaining popularity within the marketing literature, what it is and how to manipulate it remains uncertain (Jennett et al., 2008), and literature on the topic remains scarce. This research, by manipulating it and measuring its effect on consumer attention and consumption behaviours, contributes to building knowledge on the role of immersion in digital marketing.

Finally, this research contributes to the extant knowledge in the domain of service failure and recovery in online environments, and more specifically in the

domain of digital corporate apologies as a form of compensation. More precisely, this research provides the first empirical support for pet images as effective service recovery tools, showing that digital corporate apologies drive more positive consumer responses when they include pet images. As technology provides new opportunities for companies to fail and apologise, the service recovery literature is calling for an examination of potential new ways to deal with service failures (Grewal et al., 2022). This research provides further support for the crucial role apologies play in service recovery and proposes the inclusion of pet images as a means to drive better outcomes for both brands and consumers through increased warmth. Hence, this research also furthers knowledge of the role of warmth and competence perceptions in service recovery, by suggesting that increasing warmth perceptions when apologising to customers online following a service failure, for example by adding pet images, can be enough to drive more positive consumer responses. In doing so, it emphasises the crucial importance of warmth perceptions resulting from a corporate apology (Fiske et al., 2007; Marder et al., 2020), and suggests that increasing competence perceptions is hence not always necessary. This finding provides an alternative to other digital tools accompanying apology messages such as emoticons, which contrary to pet images, simultaneously increase warmth perceptions and decrease competence perceptions (Li et al., 2019). As digital corporate apologies featuring pet images increase warmth without decreasing competence perceptions, this research proposes the former as a viable option to handle service failures.

8.2 Practical Contributions

This research provides important implications for practitioners. Pets are frequent partakers of marketing communications (Webster, 2018), yet research on the topic is scarce, and so is guidance for practitioners. The [pilot study with marketers discussed in the introduction](#) highlights these concerns. While almost all respondents believe pets to be effective marketing tools, a majority indicate that they lack the necessary knowledge to use them effectively and that much-needed guidance is difficult to find. As practitioners appear to be apprehensive about whether they should use pets and how, this research provides key insights on how to strategically include pets in marketing efforts. It proposes pets as persuasive endorsers that can sometimes be more effective than humans. It also provides directions about how to

effectively pets throughout the customer journey, including how to reach customers and incite them to buy via petfluencer marketing and by choosing the right offering to endorse, as well as how to use pets to retain customers when things go wrong. Nevertheless, as this research provides seminal findings which have been obtained in specific contexts, and considering the relative lack of academic attention on the topic, practitioners should aim to conduct their own market research and test whether the findings hold with their target audience before using pets in their marketing strategy. Although this research's findings seem to support pets as effective endorsers, ensuring that their use is a suitable option depending on the company's objectives and audience is crucial.

Second, it provides specific guidance to marketers and brands on how to leverage petfluencers. More precisely, practitioners are encouraged to consider petfluencers as an alternative to human SMIs, as they can be more effective than their human counterparts without suffering from the same drawbacks, such as jealousy or scepticism. As this research brings attention to the importance of sincerity in SMI marketing, practitioners should carefully consider sincerity perceptions when selecting an SMI. If practitioners opt for a petfluencer, selecting those with rawer and more casual content might be a safer option to reach a wider audience, regardless of their propensity to anthropomorphise. Another way to select a petfluencer could be to consider the type of brands or offerings to be promoted, as this can provide insights into the audience likely to engage with the promotional content. For example, pet-related offerings usually target pet owners who are likely to have a higher propensity to anthropomorphise (Apaolaza et al., 2022), and should therefore respond positively to petfluencers' content, regardless of its type. In that case, all types of petfluencers appear as viable options, ranging from a 'normal' dog sleeping on the couch to a famous one hanging out with celebrities wearing different costumes. However, more general brands and offerings (i.e., beyond the pet industry) do not solely target pet owners and may therefore reach individuals with varying levels of propensity to anthropomorphise. Practitioners may then select a more 'sincere' petfluencer with content that is more casual and amateur, so as to not turn down individuals with a low propensity to anthropomorphise.

Third, this research offers crucial insights regarding the type of offerings pets can effectively endorse online. Although marketers are encouraged to include pets in digital ads, especially as these can be more persuasive than human endorsers (Paper One), and as their presence can lead to better outcomes than when they are absent (Paper Three), pets appear to be more effective when endorsing congruent offerings. Practitioners should therefore, once again, carefully consider the type of offerings to be endorsed by a pet. If the offering is somewhat pet-related, even if not overtly, practitioners are advised to consider pet endorsers. However, if the offering is incongruent and no link between the pet endorser and the offering can be made (e.g., alcohol), then practitioners should ensure that immersion can be further induced within the ad. This can be done through the ad background, for example by using vivid and lively backgrounds and avoiding plain ones, but also potentially by considering the format or channel to be used. For example, video formats might be more effective in inducing immersion and triggering positive consumer responses when the pet ad is incongruent. Oppositely, a static billboard ad with a plain white background and a dog endorsing an incongruent product such as a bottle of alcohol is likely to be less effective.

Fourth, practitioners are urged to consider pets not only in the awareness and selection phases of the consumer journey, but beyond the purchase decision as well. Specifically, pet images can be effectively used to apologise to customers following a service failure, similar to what brands such as Amazon are already doing with their error pages. Such pet images can be easily incorporated into web pages as well as customer service messages, both human and automated. As simply adding a pet picture to an apology is sufficient to drive greater consumer outcomes, brands of all industries are encouraged to consider such an addition to their service recovery processes. Moreover, as pets impact warmth but not competence perceptions, they represent a straightforward and effective way to recover from service failures, regardless of brands' personalities. Hence, even a competent brand can safely use pet images without affecting consumers' competence perceptions. However, practitioners should remember that the effect only holds when service failures are minor. While using pet images in response to major service failures should not have a negative impact on consumer responses, practitioners could consider the types of service failures their customers may encounter, classify them based on their severity,

and favour minor service failure scenarios to implement pet images. Finally, as the effect holds across two different dogs, practitioners can consider different pets that may fit better with their brands. Though, the English Bulldog being consistently effective across the two studies, appears as a safe choice that practitioners can implement.

8.3 Limitations and Future Research

Although this research benefits from robust results from several experiments and field data, it is not without its limitations. Simultaneously, these limitations also provide interesting avenues for future research. Beyond summarising the general limitations associated with this research (the limitations associated with each specific paper are not discussed here as they are already provided in each paper's limitations section), this section offers a research agenda (see [Table 9](#)) that delineates research areas worthy of examination, including those beyond this research's limitations. This research agenda will hopefully pave the way for marketing researchers to *em-bark* on further evaluation of the pet phenomenon.

First, this research focused on pets only, with a particular focus on dogs and cats, which are the most popular pets (Megna & Tilford, 2023). However, research suggests that consumers sometimes respond differently to different pets. For example, dogs (vs cats) activate consumers' promotion- (vs prevention-) mindsets, which can also impact how consumers respond to advertising messages (i.e., messages that fit with their mindsets; Jia et al., 2022). Similarly, wilder animals are likely to evoke different reactions from consumers (e.g., fear, disgust), even when these are sometimes considered as pets by some (e.g., rats). Therefore, future research should test other animals, including other types of pets and wilder animals.

Second, this research uses experiments, and therefore mainly assesses intentions rather than actual behaviours. Apart from Paper Three's field study which uses the customer ratings usually used by the company, and Paper One's field study on Instagram which uses customer engagement with the ads, all the other studies from the three papers measured intentions through self-reported scores using online panels. Although this is standard practice in academic research and can effectively test causality between variables, hence providing "a more complete theoretical picture"

and internal validity (p. 1793), testing hypotheses in actual shopping settings is needed to ensure external validity and managerial relevance (Otterbring et al., 2023). Beyond increasing realism, this would also help make the sample more representative, as this can also be a limitation associated with online panels which often include a majority of participants from Western countries (Otterbring et al., 2023). Furthermore, this research would have benefitted from including physiological and neuroscientific methods, such as measuring participants' heart rates, eye movements, facial activity, sweat secretion or even brain activity (Bell et al., 2018). These techniques provide greater ecological validity and fascinating insights to better understand and predict consumers' behaviours, including unconscious ones, and remove potential limitations associated with self-reported measures or even field studies, such as information consumers do not feel like sharing (e.g., socially undesirable preferences or attitudes) or do not know how to express (Bell et al., 2018). Therefore, future research should aim to test the effect of pet images on consumer responses using a variety of methods beyond self-reported measures, including further field studies and physiological and neuroscientific techniques.

Third, this research was conducted within countries where the majority of people treat their pets as friends and family members (Sanders & Hirschman, 1996). However, in some countries, pets are still treated as possessions or tools (Beverland et al., 2008). Although dogs and cats are the most commonly kept pets across cultures, their functions and the perceptions the population holds of them significantly vary, ranging from aiders (e.g., for hunting, pest control) to companions, or even food (Gray & Young, 2011). These functions sometimes overlap, rendering the human-pet relationship complex and largely dependent on cultural influences, even within the same country (Amiot et al., 2020; Gray & Young, 2011). Hence, future research should aim to replicate the findings through other field studies or to gather data about real-life consumer behaviour, or even physiological data, across different cultures, to provide a better understanding of how the human-pet bond may differ across cultures and results in potentially different outcomes.

Finally, although this research includes a qualitative exploratory study, a more in-depth qualitative study would be useful to gain a better understanding of the emotions and behaviours pets (and even animals in general) trigger, and why / how

these manifest beyond the dimensions and variables discussed in this research. Future research should aim to conduct a more in-depth analysis of consumers' perceptions, emotions and behaviours, and better grasp the subtleties associated with using animals in marketing. This could be done by adopting a less structured data collection approach (e.g., unstructured interviews) and analysing the data using an inductive (vs deductive) approach.

Beyond the limitations associated with this research, other avenues for future research can be acknowledged, which are also summarised in [Table 9](#). For example, it would be valuable to test whether the superior persuasiveness of pets versus humans holds in other contexts, for example in traditional media where sincerity might be less of a pre-requisite. Furthermore, as pets seem to effectively trigger emotions (e.g., warmth), it would be interesting to evaluate their effect on charity appeals. As suggested by the exploratory study, respondents appeared to be more responsive to charitable donation appeals when a pet was present. Therefore, charity appeals may be more effective when including a pet. Oppositely, it could be that charity appeals including pets may lead to an emotional overload, which could negatively impact charitable behaviours. Another interesting avenue for future research is the consumer decision-making process that pet owners go through when buying for their pets. Future research could assess whether the consumer decision-making process is similar to that of parents or people buying gifts, and how this impacts consumers' responses to marketing communications. For example, what factors do pet owners consider when evaluating options? Are their motives only utilitarian, or also hedonic? How does this influence how marketing appeals targeting pet owners should be framed? In a similar vein, it would be interesting to evaluate how pet ownership impacts individuals' consumption behaviours. For example, do pet owners avoid or even boycott brands that are not pet-friendly (e.g., hotels not accepting pets, brands testing on animals)? Does this also impact consumers' behaviours even when they do not have a pet with them? How are pet-friendly brands perceived by non-pet owners, and how should marketing efforts be tailored? Another potential research avenue could involve comparing marketing communications featuring pets versus babies (humans and pets). Although it is a common belief that pets trigger similar responses to human babies as they might both evoke a desire to take care of them, the exploratory study and [one of the pilot studies](#) suggest that this may not be the case. Specifically, many

individuals feel strongly about babies and children (i.e., some individuals do not want children and/or do not feel positive about them). Pets may be more effective than babies as they seem to be more universally liked and associated with positively valenced emotions. Yet, these preliminary findings offer an interesting avenue for future research which was beyond the scope of this thesis. It is possible that pets, and especially baby pets, would be more effective than human babies, even when the endorsed brand or offering is not pet-related. Finally, as this research supports pets as effective marketing tools, future research must consider how their growing popularity and omnipresence in marketing communications may impact their well-being. For example, is the rise of petfluencers encouraging people to adopt pets without considering the implications and contributing to higher abandonment rates? Is the use of costumes and other props ethical? Should pets endorse offerings that could be harmful to them? Both the United States and United Kingdom government agencies released guidance regarding petfluencers in 2023, although petfluencers have been used for years without regulations. As pets become increasingly ubiquitous across all channels, a debate around ethical concerns and potential regulations is needed to ensure pet endorsers' well-being is considered. While this research encourages the use of pets for more effective marketing communications, it also acknowledges the risks associated with their success and urges academics, government bodies, practitioners, pet owners as well as consumers to keep pet endorsers' well-being as a priority.

Research Agenda Based on this Research's Limitations	
Limitations	Avenues for Future Research
This research focuses on pets, namely dogs and cats	Future research should consider other pet types, as well as wilder animals, as these are likely to evoke different emotions that may change this research's findings (e.g., rats may evoke fear or disgust rather than sincerity or warmth).
This research mainly uses self-reported measures (rather than actual behaviours) from online panel participants	Future research should aim to increase this research's external validity by testing the effects using field studies, gathering data about actual shopping behaviours (e.g., analysing a company's actual sales), or testing individuals' physiological/neuroscientific reactions to stimuli featuring pets. Assessing the long-term impact of pet endorsements on consumer attitudes and behaviour would also be valuable.

<p>This research was conducted in Western countries only where pets are seen as companions or even family members</p>	<p>Future research should test whether the effects hold in other countries where the human-pet bond may be culturally different, which likely impacts the findings.</p>
<p>Semi-structured interviews were analysed using a semantic thematic analysis</p>	<p>Future research could aim to gather more in-depth data by conducting unstructured or longitudinal interviews, or focus groups, and analyse the data using an inductive approach.</p>
<p>Sampling limitations in the exploratory study (i.e., some individuals recruited through convenience sampling, British-only participants)</p>	<p>Future research could include interviews with participants unknown to the research team to avoid any potential biases, and who come from a variety of countries to test whether individuals' perceptions vary across cultures.</p>
<p>Potential confounds that could impact the findings</p>	<p>Future research should consider potential consumer contingencies that could have impacted the findings, such as endorser attractiveness, humour or facial expressions and gender.</p>
<p>Most of the experiments feature existing offerings and brands</p>	<p>Future research could create fictitious offerings and brands to be featured in the stimuli to minimise potential biases.</p>
<p>The symbolic associations between pets and endorsed offerings were not considered across the three experimental papers</p>	<p>Future research could consider whether potential symbolic associations between the pet endorser and the featured offering or brand impact pets' effectiveness as endorsers. This could be considered for all the topics examined in this research's three papers.</p>

Product congruence was not considered in Paper One and Paper Three	Future research should assess whether product congruence impacts the effectiveness of petfluencers' endorsements and corporate apologies featuring pets.
Paper One uses only four stimuli and SMIs to test the effect of SMI type (human vs pet) on consumer responses	Future research should aim to replicate the findings using different stimuli and SMI types. For example, future research could include several stimuli including both petfluencers and human influencers, and test whether petfluencers consistently win over human influencers.
Paper One focuses on human <i>versus</i> pet SMIs, but does not consider pets <i>with</i> humans	Future research could test whether including a human, or making the human more salient (e.g., pet owner speaking instead of the pet), reduces the effect of petfluencers on consumer responses.
Sincerity is key to petfluencers' persuasiveness and could be manipulated in many different ways	Future research could test how sincerity can be further manipulated within petfluencers' content to further increase persuasiveness. For example, sincerity might be manipulated through the text or the use of emoticons. Future research could also test whether the dimensions usually applicable to human SMIs (e.g., number of followers) impact petfluencers' sincerity and persuasiveness.
Product congruence was only tested using social media posts	Future research should assess the role of product congruence in pet endorsements' effectiveness across different channels and formats (e.g., ads on social media or web browsers, traditional media).
Immersion was manipulated through the background only, using one background type	Future research should test different ways to manipulate immersion, not only by testing different background types but also by considering potential alternatives to the background (e.g., using a video format instead of a picture, manipulating the text to be more immersive).
Paper Three did not test for mediation and moderation simultaneously	Future research should test for moderated mediation to confirm that service failure severity does moderate the effect of pet pictures in corporate apologies on warmth and consumer responses.

General Research Agenda

Future research should compare human and pet endorsers in various contexts across various channels (e.g., traditional media).

Future research could test the effect of pets in charity appeals and consider the valence of the appeal, as well as the emotions triggered.

Future research could evaluate the consumer decision-making process for pet owners, and test whether it differs or resembles that of consumers buying for others or children.

Future research could assess pet-friendly offerings and how these impact the responses of both pet owners and non-pet owners.

Future research could compare pets and babies (humans and pets) to test whether they trigger the same emotions and responses, which is more effective and under which circumstances.

Future research should consider the implications of the increasing use of pets in marketing on pets' well-being (endorsers and pets in general).

Table 9: Research agenda based on the current research's limitations.

8.4 Concluding Remarks

Through one qualitative exploratory study and three quantitative papers including nine experiments, this research suggests that pets can indeed be effective endorsers. Specifically, pets are particularly persuasive as SMIs (vs humans) because they are perceived as more sincere, which can be further manipulated through the photos they post on their social media profiles. They are also effective in promoting congruent offerings (consumable/usable by pets) more so than they are for incongruent ones, as consumers pay more attention to congruent information in digital contexts, although this can be mitigated by introducing further immersion in the pet ads through the background. Finally, pets also appear to be effective service recovery tools when they appear in corporate apologies following a minor (vs major) service failure, as they increase consumers' warmth perceptions associated with the brand without impacting competence perceptions. While these results emerge from research conducted in specific contexts and deserve further investigation, these seminal findings provide interesting cues for academics and practitioners alike. While pets' omnipresence in people's lives and marketing communications is undisputed,

academic attention is still lacking and practitioners are still missing crucial guidance on how to effectively include them in marketing communications. This research proposes that pets in digital marketing communications can be powerful in driving positive consumer responses and encourages both academics and practitioners to consider the positive impact pets may have on brands and consumers. While further examination is needed to fully comprehend their effect, there is no doubt that academics and marketers would be barking mad if they did not *paws* for thought and acknowledge pets as *top-dog* marketing tools.

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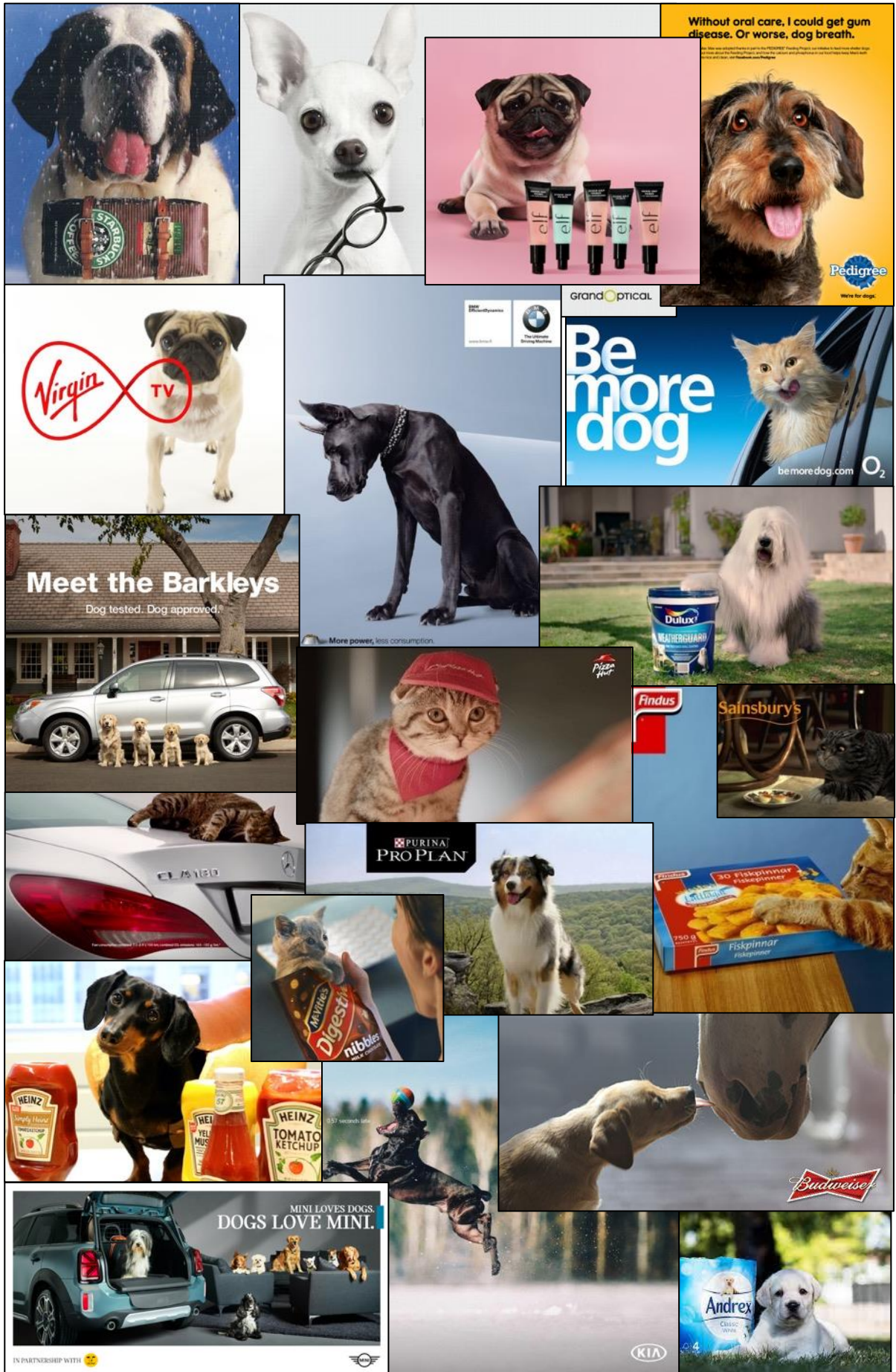
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Appendices

Appendix One: Examples of Marketing Communications Featuring Pets in Relation to the Three Papers


The collage consists of several social media posts:

- Top Left:** A French Bulldog wearing a red hoodie, sitting next to two containers of Paw CBD Hip & Joint Chews. The post is from @izythe.frenchie and includes a promotional code ZZZ150.
- Top Right:** A dog wearing sunglasses and a pink hoodie, sitting in front of a laptop displaying a website. The post is from @brunothemindachshund.
- Middle Left:** A dachshund wearing a black tuxedo and a top hat, sitting at a table with a glass of champagne and a bottle. The post is from @look_its_ginger.
- Middle Center:** A tabby cat sitting in front of a laptop displaying a website. The post is from @no.more.cash.
- Middle Right:** A grey dog sitting next to a bottle of Dior Gris perfume. The post is from @tikatheggy and promotes the Dior Beauty collection.
- Bottom Left (Top):** A brown dog wearing a Starbucks apron, sitting next to a Starbucks coffee cup. The post is from @zeus.themingin.
- Bottom Left (Middle):** A white cat sitting on a couch, looking at a tablet. The post is from @nala_cat.
- Bottom Left (Bottom):** A dog wearing a purple hoodie and a sign that says "Bruno", sitting on a couch. The post is from @brunothemindachshund.
- Bottom Center:** A dog sitting on a car, wearing a blue and white shirt. The post is from @toyotusa and promotes the Toyota RAV4.
- Bottom Right (Top):** A dog sitting on a couch, looking at a tablet. The post is from @loki and promotes Toyota.
- Bottom Right (Middle):** A dog sitting on a couch, looking at a tablet. The post is from @paracy and promotes Paracy stain remover.
- Bottom Right (Bottom):** A dog sitting on a couch, looking at a tablet. The post is from @jiffpom and promotes Jiff Pom dog food.



WISTIA

Sorry we sent you the wrong link. Something got tangled along the way...



But seriously, we apologize for the confusing experience. If you're looking to learn more about what to wear on camera, click the button below (we promise it'll work this time!)

[Correct link to the blog](#)

404

Seems like we are not so wild. Rarrrrr!

404
Oops! I may have chewed up the power cord.

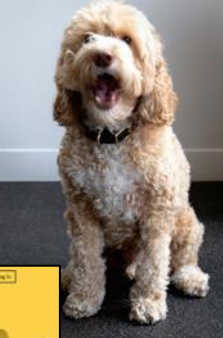
[Go back to our main page to continue your visit.](#)

[Back to main page](#)

We had some technical difficulties this morning. [View in browser](#)

MILLIGRAM

OOPS, OUR BAD*




Home Who are we What we do Portfolio

YOU'VE REACHED THE 404 ERROR PAGE

Oops.

Looks like the site you're after isn't here. Don't worry, Tucker says everything will be alright.

[Yieldmo.com](#)



Hello,

...morning during our 15% off Molestine sale, but don't worry and running now and the sale is still on!


code: **MSKINE15** at checkout

...wants you to know, he didn't do it.

[SHOP NOW >](#)

Well, this is slightly embarrassing, it appears your looking for has been stolen by kitty

To get back to where you were either click on your back button, [go home](#) or [get in touch](#) for help



amazon Search


SORRY

we couldn't find that page

Try searching or go to [Amazon's home page](#).

NOT ON THE HIGH STREET

We're in the doghouse



We've realised that some of our customers may not have been getting emails they've signed up for (yikes!).

The good news is it's now sorted, so you'll be kept up-to-date with extraordinary, unique products from the UK's best small creative businesses.

Or if you've frankly had enough of us now, you can unsubscribe below *sob*.

[UNSUBSCRIBE ME #](#)

A LITTLE 'SORRY' FROM US, WITH 10% OFF

By way of an apology for the hooahaa, we'd like to offer you **10% off** your next shop. Your code is valid until **31 October 2016** and can only be used once, so make it count! Just enter code

DOGHOUSEZ779T at checkout.

Thanks and all the best from, [notonthehighstreet.com](#)

[START SHOPPING >](#)


URBAN OUTFITTERS


Women's Men's Apartment Gifts Blog Site SHOP

OOPS OUR BAD!

Our website totally broke yesterday during our **OMG Sale**, but don't worry...it's all better now and the **SALE** is still on and now we're offering **FREE SHIPPING** on all orders!

ONE DAY ONLY! NO MIN/NO CODE






Amazon

FOREVER 21

NEW ARRIVALS CLOTHING ACCESSORIES SHOES 21&ST LOVE 21 PLUS SIZES MENS GIRLS SALE

SORRY!



Our cat ate our website speed. Please accept **FREE SHIPPING** on us as a token of our apologies!

Use code: **SHIPFREE***

[SHOP NOW](#)

Appendix Two: Interviewees' details (Exploratory Study)

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Pet Owner
Sam	20	Male	Student	No
Sarah	38	Female	Head of service for a regulatory body	Yes
Jane	52	Female	Project officer	Yes
Josie	26	Female	Student	No
Mike	29	Male	Content manager	No
Julia	37	Female	Self-employed and senior academic support for disabled university students	No
Maddy	33	Female	Early years practitioner	Yes
Max	44	Male	Unemployed	Yes
Rob	49	Male	Unemployed	No
Marie	29	Female	Student	No

Appendix Three: Interview Guide and Stimuli (Exploratory Study)

Introduction of the project / ethics

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research about animal imagery in marketing communications. I am Laura Lavertu, I am a PhD student in marketing at the University of Edinburgh. Please confirm the following to provide consent in participating in this study:

The participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time. The interview will be recorded and transcribed to provide valuable information, which might be used in publications. The recording will be deleted after being transcribed but the transcript will be stored securely for five years. You understand that no personal data will be collected, and the data collected during the interview will be anonymised and will be held confidentially and securely.

Do you agree and are you happy to participate to this research?

Demographics

Can you please share the following:

- Your age
- The gender you identify with
- Where you are from
- Where you currently live
- Your profession

Questions about pets and animals

- How many pets have you had in your life?
 - Do you currently have a pet?
 - Yes → What type?
 - No → Would you like to have one? What type?
 - Are you used to being around pets? If not, how long do you reckon you have had animals in your immediate environment for?

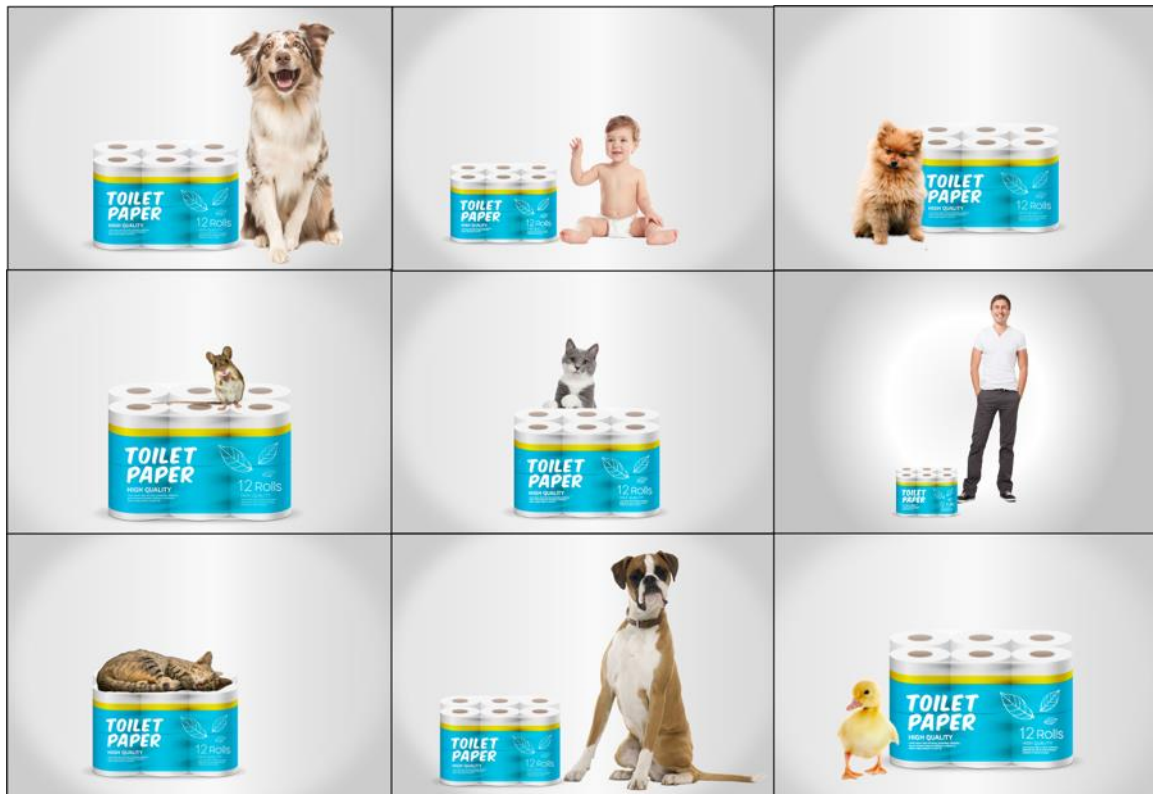
- What relationship would you say you have/had with your pet? Why?
- Have you ever talked to your/a pet or other animals as if they were humans?
- Why would you say you like pets?
- How does contact with pets make you feel? Why?
- Do you feel the same way about other animals (for example wild animals or animals that may be less beautiful)?
- How do you feel about other people and is it different from how you feel about animals? Why?
- Do you feel protective with animals? Why?

Stimulus 1



- Who do you feel needs your help the most? Why?
- Do your perceptions/feelings change when a homeless person has an animal compared to when they have not? Why?



Stimulus 2





- How do you feel when looking at these pictures? Can you walk me through each of them?
- Which one do you dislike the most? Why?
- Which one do you like the most? Why?
- How do you feel regarding the ones featuring human beings in the ad rather than animals? Does it feel different? Why?
- Do you like animals in ads? Why?
- Why do you think advertisers include animals in ads?
- Which one encourages you the most to buy the advertised product? Why?
- Do you remember an ad which included an animal? Why do you remember it? Was the animal a good fit for the advertised product and/or the brand?

Appendix Four: Scenarios and stimuli (Paper One)

Study 1



Human SMI Condition	Pet SMI Condition
<p data-bbox="284 477 707 533">Instagram</p> <p data-bbox="284 539 707 577">MynameisJessie Sponsored</p>  <p data-bbox="284 1122 707 1160">Any peanut butter addicts around here? 🥜 Reached out to my Pip & Nut jar for a treat this morning!</p> <p data-bbox="284 1223 707 1261">#peanutbutter #pipandnut #peanutbutterlover #instafood #ad #sponsored</p>	<p data-bbox="890 477 1313 533">Instagram</p> <p data-bbox="890 539 1313 577">PoukietheDoggy Sponsored</p>  <p data-bbox="890 1122 1313 1160">Any peanut butter addicts around here? 🥜 Just helping my human daddy clean up this Pip & Nut jar!</p> <p data-bbox="890 1223 1313 1261">#peanutbutter #pipandnut #peanutbutterlover #instadog #ad #sponsored</p>

Study 2

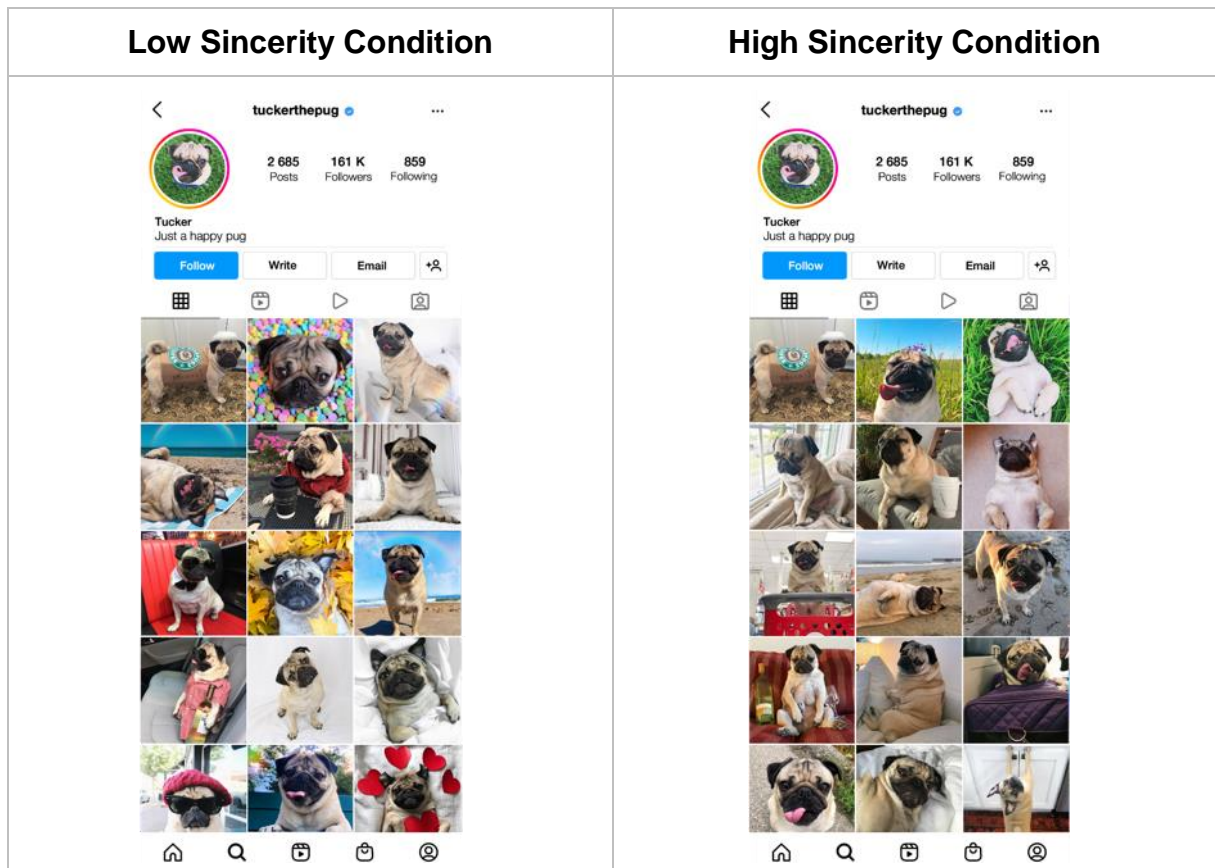
Human SMI Condition	Pet SMI Condition
 <p>The image shows an Instagram post from the user Caseydoll. The profile picture is a woman's face, and the name 'Caseydoll' is displayed with a verified badge and 23.1K followers. A 'FOLLOW' button and a three-dot menu are visible. The main image shows a woman with long dark hair, wearing a black sleeveless top and glasses, holding a bottle of wine. Below the image are icons for likes, comments, shares, and bookmarks. The text of the post reads: '27 357 likes', 'Caseydoll What's your go-to wine that sets the scene for cozy evenings snuggled up by the fire? 🍷 This one seems perfect for me on a cold night: Naked Wines says it's fruity, soft and easy to drink with its black currant fruits and its peppery finish. #ad #sponsored #nakedwines #redwine'. At the bottom, there is a link to 'View all 324 comments', a comment input field with 'Add a comment...', and a timestamp of '3 hours ago'.</p>	 <p>The image shows an Instagram post from the user Lancelot. The profile picture is a cat's face, and the name 'Lancelot' is displayed with a verified badge and 1.1K followers. A 'FOLLOW' button and a three-dot menu are visible. The main image shows a fluffy white cat wearing glasses, sitting on a wooden floor next to a bottle of wine. Below the image are icons for likes, comments, shares, and bookmarks. The text of the post reads: '27 357 likes', 'Lancelot What's your human's go-to wine that sets the scene for cozy evenings snuggled up by the fire? 🍷 This one seems perfect for my human: Naked Wines says it's fruity, soft and easy to drink with its black currant fruits and its peppery finish. #ad #sponsored #nakedwines #redwine'. At the bottom, there is a link to 'View all 324 comments', a comment input field with 'Add a comment...', and a timestamp of '3 hours ago'.</p>

Study 3 (and Study 3 Pre-Test)

Insincerity Prime	Sincerity Prime
<p>Sincerity is often defined as being heartfelt and genuine. For up to the next minute, we would like you to think about an example where an individual (animal/pet) that you had seen, heard, or had previous experience with whose actions did not embody this definition of sincerity.</p>	<p>Sincerity is often defined as being heartfelt and genuine. For up to the next minute, we would like you to think about an example where an individual (animal/pet) that you had seen, heard, or had previous experience with whose actions embodied this definition of sincerity.</p>

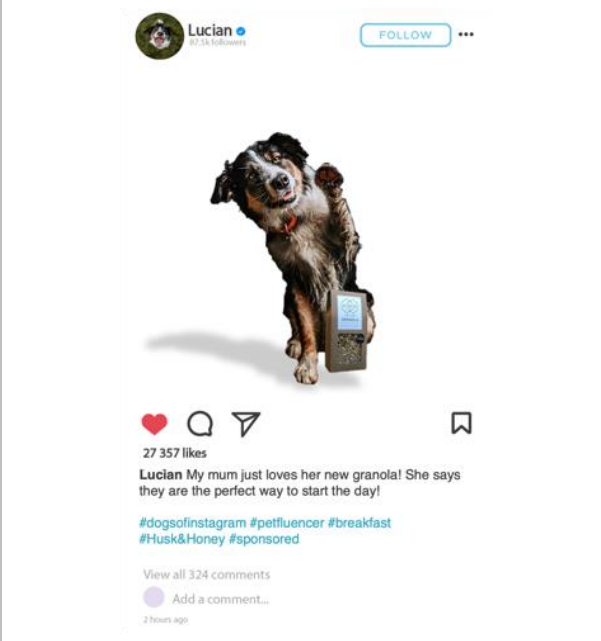

Human SMI Condition	Pet SMI Condition
	

Study 4 (and Study 4 Pre-Test)





Appendix Five: Scenarios and stimuli (Paper Two)





Study 1

Incongruent Condition	Congruent Condition
 <p>Lucian • 87.5k followers</p> <p>FOLLOW ...</p> <p>27 357 likes</p> <p>Lucian My mum just loves her new granola! She says they are the perfect way to start the day!</p> <p>#dogsofinstagram #petfluencer #breakfast #Husk&Honey #sponsored</p> <p>View all 324 comments</p> <p>Add a comment...</p> <p>2 hours ago</p>	 <p>Lucian • 87.5k followers</p> <p>FOLLOW ...</p> <p>27 357 likes</p> <p>Lucian I love my new breakfast food! These nuggets for dogs are the perfect morning treat!</p> <p>#dogsofinstagram #petfluencer #dogfood #Lily'sKitchen #sponsored</p> <p>View all 324 comments</p> <p>Add a comment...</p> <p>2 hours ago</p>

Study 2

Incongruent Condition	Congruent Condition
 <p>Lucian • 87.5k followers</p> <p>FOLLOW ...</p> <p>27 357 likes</p> <p>Lucian My mum just loves her new granola! She says they are the perfect way to start the day!</p> <p>#dogsofinstagram #petfluencer #breakfast #Husk&Honey #sponsored</p> <p>View all 324 comments</p> <p>Add a comment...</p> <p>2 hours ago</p>	 <p>Lucian • 87.5k followers</p> <p>FOLLOW ...</p> <p>27 357 likes</p> <p>Lucian I love my new breakfast food! These nuggets for dogs are the perfect morning treat!</p> <p>#dogsofinstagram #petfluencer #dogfood #Lily'sKitchen #sponsored</p> <p>View all 324 comments</p> <p>Add a comment...</p> <p>2 hours ago</p>

Study 3

Non-Immersive Congruent Condition	Immersive Congruent Condition
 <p data-bbox="328 383 660 421"> Lucian <small>27.5k followers</small> FOLLOW ... </p> <p data-bbox="328 770 660 801"> 27 357 likes </p> <p data-bbox="328 824 660 860"> Lucian I love my new breakfast food! These nuggets for dogs are the perfect morning treat! </p> <p data-bbox="328 875 660 904"> #dogsofinstagram #petfluencer #dogfood #Lily'sKitchen #sponsored </p> <p data-bbox="328 920 660 981"> <small>View all 324 comments</small> <small>Add a comment...</small> <small>2 hours ago</small> </p>	 <p data-bbox="935 383 1267 421"> Lucian <small>27.5k followers</small> FOLLOW ... </p> <p data-bbox="935 770 1267 801"> 27 357 likes </p> <p data-bbox="935 824 1267 860"> Lucian I love my new breakfast food! These nuggets for dogs are the perfect morning treat! </p> <p data-bbox="935 875 1267 904"> #dogsofinstagram #petfluencer #dogfood #Lily'sKitchen #sponsored </p> <p data-bbox="935 920 1267 981"> <small>View all 324 comments</small> <small>Add a comment...</small> <small>2 hours ago</small> </p>
Non-Immersive Mixed Condition	Immersive Mixed Condition
 <p data-bbox="328 1086 660 1124"> Lucian <small>27.5k followers</small> FOLLOW ... </p> <p data-bbox="328 1473 660 1505"> 27 357 likes </p> <p data-bbox="328 1527 660 1563"> Lucian Mum and I just love this beef jerky! A good source of energy for both humans and dogs! </p> <p data-bbox="328 1579 660 1608"> #dogsofinstagram #petfluencer #beefjerky #Tuddys #sponsored </p> <p data-bbox="328 1624 660 1684"> <small>View all 324 comments</small> <small>Add a comment...</small> <small>2 hours ago</small> </p>	 <p data-bbox="935 1086 1267 1124"> Lucian <small>27.5k followers</small> FOLLOW ... </p> <p data-bbox="935 1473 1267 1505"> 27 357 likes </p> <p data-bbox="935 1527 1267 1563"> Lucian Mum and I just love this beef jerky! A good source of energy for both humans and dogs! </p> <p data-bbox="935 1579 1267 1608"> #dogsofinstagram #petfluencer #beefjerky #Tuddys #sponsored </p> <p data-bbox="935 1624 1267 1684"> <small>View all 324 comments</small> <small>Add a comment...</small> <small>2 hours ago</small> </p>

Non-Immersive Incongruent Condition



27 357 likes

Lucian My mum just loves her new granola! She says they are the perfect way to start the day!

[#dogsofinstagram](#) [#petfluencer](#) [#breakfast](#)
[#Husk&Honey](#) [#sponsored](#)

View all 324 comments

Add a comment...

2 hours ago

Immersive Incongruent Condition



27 357 likes

Lucian My mum just loves her new granola! She says they are the perfect way to start the day!

[#dogsofinstagram](#) [#petfluencer](#) [#breakfast](#)
[#Husk&Honey](#) [#sponsored](#)

View all 324 comments

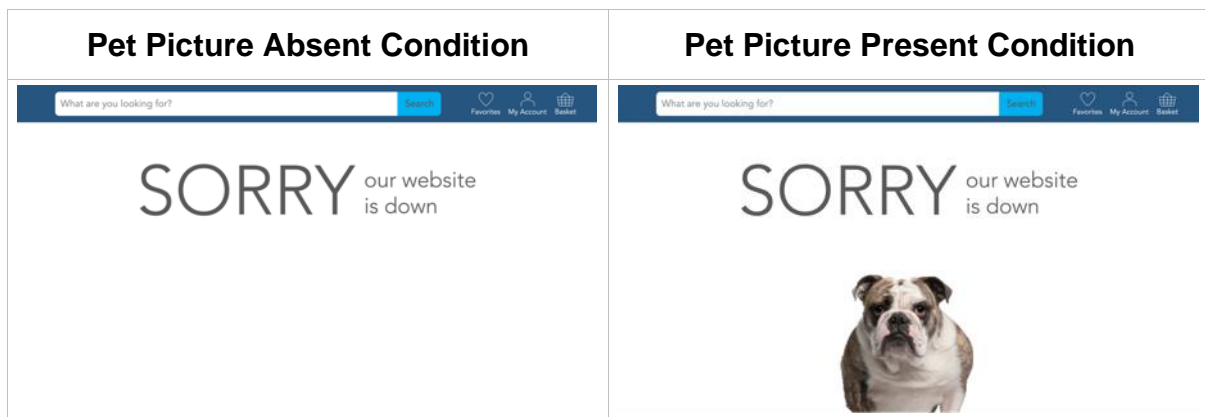
Add a comment...

2 hours ago

Appendix Six: Scenarios and stimuli (Paper Three)

Study 1

Imagine that you are browsing the website of an online retailer you regularly visit. You are about to buy a gift for a friend's birthday party that you really need to buy today for it to arrive on time, when the following page appears on your screen.



You check out the website a couple of hours later and it works.

Study 2

