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FULL NAME: **Isabella Liss**

STUDENT NUMBER: **LSSISA001**

CONTACT NUMBER: **072 296 3366**

COURSE CODE: **FAM5012W**

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Name of supervisor: **Ron Irwin**

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Narrative Branding In Support of Anthropomorphised Personality: A Case Study of The South African Dog Influencer Industry

Isabella Liss
LSSISA001
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Introduction and Background

Online self-representations are an important area of media studies research, but, to my knowledge, pet influencer accounts have been granted little attention despite their potential to reveal latent information about Instagram users and their communities (Liss, 2022). Dog influencer accounts in particular show unique aesthetics of self-representation and craftsmanship (Liss, 2022). Having already explored South African user behaviour in my pilot paper, this project aims to map the wider South African dog influencer community, making a case for multimodal media as their online world migrates into tangible offline activity.

Narrative branding has long been a tool of marketing companies, but we now see how influencer subculture harnesses these techniques to grow. Specifically, this paper focuses on anthropomorphised personalities as influencers — a group of internet personalities closely linked to traditional branding mascots or characters. By extending the term "influencer" to those characters with mediated influence beyond Instagram, anthropomorphised personalities that employ a range of platforms are examined. The six creatives interviewed in this project utilise mediums such as television, children's fiction books, non-fiction stories, and photography, often in conjunction with social media. Through the following research questions, the relationship between narrative branding and modern media is unpacked.

1. What salient themes can be identified in different participant's content, and ways in which they market their content?
2. How do the core principles of narrative branding assist in building anthropomorphised personalities?
3. How do techniques and characteristics associated with multimodal media and transmedia storytelling support anthropomorphised personalities?
4. How is agency framed when dealing with dog influencer personalities?
5. How do creatives behind anthropomorphised personalities negotiate self-representation?

Key Findings

Salient themes in participant's creative works include "joy marketing" (the feel-good effect), sensationalism in imagery, and collaborative anthropomorphism. The value of positivity, different perceptions of sensationalism, and spirit of creative collaboration underpin what it means to be part of the cute economy (Maddox, 2021, p. 3335).

It was found that fundamental concepts examined in narrative branding literature are used in near identical ways to traditional advertisements when applied to anthropomorphised personalities extending their stories across multiple platforms. Chiefly: bestowing brand personality, assigning human characteristics and value systems, employing narrative thought, and providing opportunities for consumer contribution to the narrative.

Techniques that are more particular to transmedia storytelling and multimodal narratives include breaking up a larger narrative into individual components that retain synergy, diversifying audiences and sustaining their interest for lengthy amounts of time, employing a hierarchy of values, and designing narrative universes with the object of being highly immersive.

Self-Representation is negotiated as a delicate balance between overt portrayal of creative's influence and crafting depersonalised content, heavily influenced by the phenomenon of the "decontextualised pet" (Maddox, 2021, p. 3341). Overt self-representation is not usually employed in anthropomorphising dog personalities.

Agency is framed in ways that can be applied to a child, aiding in anthropomorphisation. Bestowing human-like agency makes for a world that enhances a character's narrative, and can be applied to any personified being. The transformed character (in this case, a dog) can now transcend restrictive frameworks for concepts such as consent and free will that would never be applied to an animal, adding layers to their "personality" and what they are able to achieve within the narrative. What appears to be "exploitation" can be justified because the animal is positioned as possessing a small degree of human autonomy. The harsh reality of living within an animal world that does not provide opportunities to exert agency is circumvented.

Further, animals showing a high degree of baseline physical similarity to humans are viewed as favourable by audiences (Connell, 2013). Dog protagonists that possess human traits and reflect our values make for characters we can relate to. Bestowing dogs with agency is simply a means to anthropomorphise them, and achieve these goals.

Dogs as "Influencers"

Influencers are known to be a dominant subculture on Instagram, a social media platform that revolves around sharing images (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). Such subcultures result in the formation of online "imagined communities", where membership depends upon shared values and behaviours (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010). For example, a pet influencer community seeks to uphold values such as joy through imagery perceived as cute (Maddox, 2021).

A strong sense of belonging is cultivated between users within online communities, where users identify through the values they seek, and find kinship in those who do the same. This extension of human identity, self-representation, or their embodied label can be referred to as the "fur baby" identity (Maddox, 2021, p. 3334). "Fur baby" identifiers view their pets from a humanistic perspective — as beings whom they love dearly. (Maddox, 2021). Members reflect this love in the content they create or engage with.

Pet influencer accounts function as human influencers do — except human owners receive financial gains made if the page is profitable. Typically, one's pet is anthropomorphised, with owners running the Instagram page on the animal's "behalf" (Maddox, 2021). User actions may include posting images, captions, and media as seen from the animal's perspective.

Accounts featuring dogs are the most popular type of pet influencer (Statista, 2022). This is perhaps due to the mutually beneficial psychological relationship humans share with dogs (Holbrook & Woodside, 2008). Content and/or anthropomorphised personalities are being uniquely crafted to fit human emotional and entertainment needs. These profiles therefore form an important area of media studies research regarding online self-representations.

This paper examines the dog influencer as the protagonist across different medias, the anthropomorphised personality making its home within the mediums of print media, music, photography, televised commercials, social media, and more.

Narrative Branding
Modern approaches to branding revolve around “narrative branding”, through which the brand is given a “personality” (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). This set of traits and values is personified to create meaning for the consumer, and differentiate a brand from competition. Symbolic characters or mascots often aid in reinforcing the narrative (Aaker and Fournier, 1995).

In this project, a parallel is drawn between these mascots and the anthropomorphised personalities of dogs. Personification of non-human personalities is taking place as a marketing technique.

Multimodal Media and Transmedia Storytelling
These terms denote the telling of stories across multiple medias (Scolari, 2009). Narratives are spread across multiple channels of delivery (Jenkins, 2007). Expansive worlds are built by individual interlinked components that contribute towards a wider universe (Jenkins, 2007).

Techniques associated with multimodality are used within media corporations in marketing films, comic books, video games, anything that has a narrative with potential for growth. The advent of social media has encouraged advertising to transcend the rigid boundaries of entertainment versus marketing, with narratives being classified as both (Jenkins, 2007). This project focuses on the success of multi-platform marketing in relation to anthropomorphised personalities within their individual narratives.

Animal Agency
Animals possess “agency” in different ways than humans. There are also few legal and ethical frameworks designed to protect animals in our human world, so they never have the opportunity to exert “agency” (Blattner, 2021). Social media and fictional narratives provide a fabricated space where this isn’t the case, and animals have an autonomy afforded to humans. At the very least, they are portrayed as utilising an autonomy afforded to children.

Dogs that display the illusion of agency are convincing protagonists. They are able to better embody human traits, values and actions, aiding in their anthropomorphisation. They are also able to “negate” perceived exploitation.

Viewing dogs as moral children in order to navigate conceptions of agency is easily performed because this supports “fur parent’s” attempts to replicate a family dynamic. Owners will engage in activities that provide the opportunity to construct an image of a family, and elevate the status of a pet to that of a human baby (Greenebaum, 2004).

Self-Representation
Self-representation is shown in the balance between overt portrayals of creator’s lives and beliefs, versus the desire to remain a decontextualised pet (Maddox, 2021). This project does not discuss how self-representations are negotiated in great detail, as this is examined in my previous paper (Liss, 2022). But participants often tended to leave an element of themselves in creative direction, even with the goal of producing depersonalised content — which is briefly discussed.

Literature Review: Key Concepts Used To Examine Anthropomorphic Dogs In Relation To Social Media, Branding, and Animal Agency

This literature review has been divided into three components. The first deals with dog influencers in their traditional online space — Instagram. The concept of user self-representation is introduced, as well as some fundamental Instagram conventions.

The second component deals with dogs and branding, laying out key concepts used in advertising and how human's psychological attachment to dogs makes one more susceptible to these marketing tactics. Literature regarding transmedia storytelling and a semiotic approach to multimodal narrative structure shows how stories are extended across different platforms.

Lastly, the third component gives an overview of ethical questions that come into play when dealing with creators who cannot give consent, possess agency in the traditional sense, or function under laws intended for adult humans. It also examines the concepts of "art" and "creative license" in relation to beings who are not cognisant of copyright.

Part One: Dog Influencers & Instagram

1. Understanding Instagram

Modern dog influencers usually find themselves inhabiting Instagram (Maddox, 2021). In order to investigate mediated behaviours, one must have a basic understanding of Instagram, its users, and its communities.

Instagram describes itself as follows;

> Instagram is a free photo and video sharing app available on iPhone and Android. People can upload photos or videos to our service and share them with their followers or with a selected group of friends. They can also view, comment and like posts shared by their friends on Instagram (Instagram, 2022).

While the social media platform largely defines itself based off of user interactions, one must not neglect to acknowledge its visual focus. This is what makes Instagram a dominant space for particular power struggles, as well as a space for constructive collaboration (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). Emphasis on the visual has ignited struggles for authenticity, self-representations, and content visibility. Meanwhile, communication and commerce coincide, and online mediated activities increasingly become part of our offline physical world.

2. Influencers

"Influencers" form a dominant subculture on Instagram. Such accounts are defined by their high degree of online visibility (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). Through monetising visual content, influencers' visibility is usually harnessed as income. In order to maximise visibility and therefore income, they engage in particular aesthetics of self-representation online (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). For example, making certain creative decisions when editing visual content. This usually includes following trends.

Human influencers are characterised by their intention to create high follower-to-follower ratios, as opposed to intimate networks of close friends (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020, p. 84). Such profiles are transformed into “digital repositories” for advertisements and self-branding, in a bid to monetise content through engagement.

Later, dog influencer accounts are examined as a different sorts of “digital repository” — a “portfolio” of memories. As a result, they blur boundaries between use of Instagram as a networked public, versus a means to cultivate an intimate network of personal relationships.

3. Dog Influencers within Pet Influencer Subculture and The Cute Economy

Maddox simply defines pet Instagram accounts as those “run by humans on behalf of their pets” (Maddox, 2021, p. 3333). Characteristically, they feature the anthropomorphising of one’s pet. This may include sharing media and captioning imagery as if from the animal’s perspective.

As extensions of the pet owner’s identity, these accounts come to represent one’s interests, and reveal latent information about the people behind them (Maddox, 2021). Specifically, accounts featuring dogs have great potential to do so as their anthropomorphic personalities are crafted to meet the emotional and entertainment needs of human followers. This is perhaps why as of 2020, half of the most-followed animal influencers on Instagram were dogs, outnumbering cats and exotic pets (Statista, 2022).

Dog influencers have also become key players within the advertising industry in recent years, with international corporations harnessing “pet Instagram celebrities” to market their products (Loudenback, 2021). Dogs are sought after as they are generally viewed positively within the public eye. They are a safe choice, “apolitical” and “consistent” in their value systems (Loudenback, 2021). Meanwhile, employing human celebrity representatives always has the potential to go awry with regards to their actions or beliefs.

This preference towards dog influencers partially fuels what has come to be known as the “cute economy”, a system of internet visuals which users encounter across multiple social media platforms (Maddox, 2021, p. 3334-3335). The cute economy contains ubiquitous photography of other animals, babies, animations, mascots, or anything eliciting feelings of care and empathy (Maddox, 2021). Wider pet influencer subculture is located within this space where visuals must encompass “cute aesthetic” (Maddox, 2021).

In harnessing “cuteness”, Maddox identifies an entrepreneurial dynamic at play (Maddox, 2021). “Cute aesthetic” can be equated to labour, with “cuteness” being performed as work that garners financial and social capital (Maddox, 2021). The cute economy is therefore viewed as both a cultural exchange and means to secure financial transaction through monetising content (Maddox, 2021). Existing as a metaphorical cultural exchange while simultaneously encouraging financial transaction convolutes the system, contradicting themes of “purity” and “innocence” chiefly associated with “cute aesthetic” (Maddox, 2021).

4. Fur Baby Identity and Self-Representation within the Imagined Community

Online membership within influencer subcultures sees people behind Instagram accounts finding a sense of belonging within *imagined communities* (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010). These are online spaces for users with shared values or experiences to connect (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010). They allow for both geographical and social boundaries to be transcended, provided members share certain beliefs.

Imagined communities of pet influencers typically consist of a membership of “fur baby” identifiers, whose “fur parents” reflect a love for their pet in their own online self-representations (Maddox, 2021). These users hold a “humanistic” perspective towards their pets, viewing them as beloved companions rather than beings that occupy a status lower than that of a human (Maddox, 2021, p. 3334).

Such self-representations are not always overt. Maddox has identified a desire to establish a delicate balance between intimate and depersonalised content (Maddox, 2021, p. 3333-3334). This phenomenon is known as the “decontextualised pet”. Accounts showing largely pet-human selfies and other imagery of a pet reflecting direct ties to an identifiable owner may be seen as lacking in “holistic” content (Maddox, 2021, p. 3341). Instead, a variation in content is expected (such as the inclusion of memes). The imagery of a pet that does not harbour ties to anyone and their associated self-representations allows viewers ambiguity in drawing meaning from the images. Personal feelings viewers may have towards an owner and their beliefs are removed.

5. Unpacking the Fur Baby Identity

Early as 1985, research surrounding the surrogate function of pets and their ability to substitute human interaction has been explored (Veevers, 1985). Veevers (1985) notes that companion animals act as social lubricants, providing opportunities for owners to connect. This is because someone seen publicly with a pet is crafting a symbolic statement of self-image — they usually self-represent to others as an animal-lover.

Veevers (1985) also states that in extreme cases, companion animals have the ability to replace human relationships. It can be argued that by the early 2000s, this endeavour was no longer “extreme”. Greenebaum (2004) points out that leisure time activities enhance the role of pets as a “family member” — the position that has been bestowed by their humans. As a result, owners are increasingly investing in the care of their companions, legitimising their status amongst human family. Annual pet industry expenditure was predicted to reach $31 billion by 2003 in the United States (American Pet Product Manufacturers Association, 2003). This continues to escalate rapidly. In 2024, it is expected to reach over $150 billion (American Pet Product Manufacturers Association, 2024).

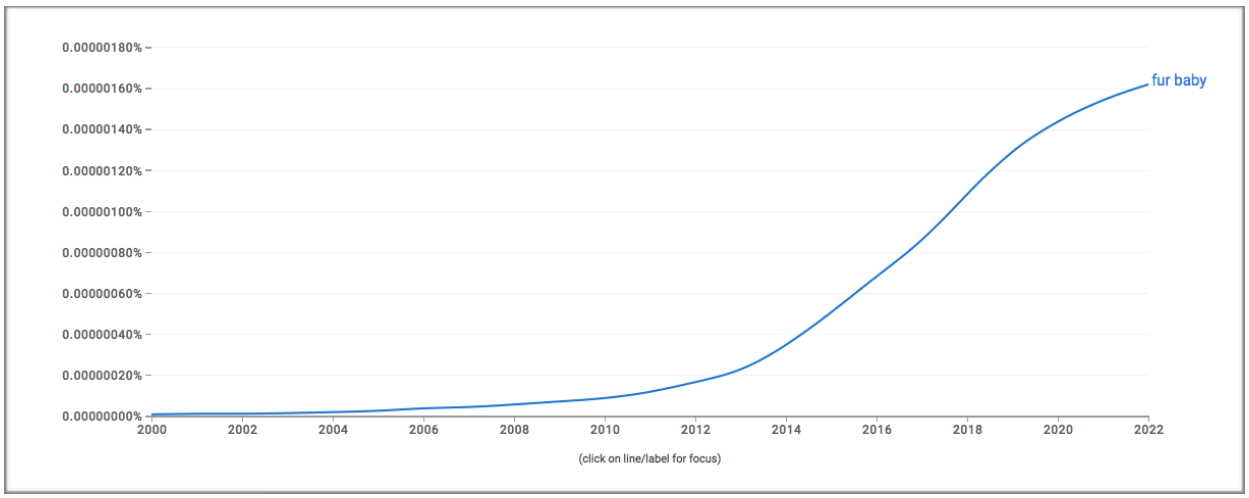
While these are American industry trends and statistics, they effectively highlight how fur baby identifiers perceive themselves as *parents* as opposed to *owners* of a pet, engaging in activities that provide an opportunity to construct the image of a family (Greenebaum, 2004). In order to become a “family”, the status of an owner is elevated to a parent, and the status of a dog is elevated to that of a human baby (Greenebaum, 2004). The term fur *baby* in itself indicates anthropomorphisation into child-like status. Greenebaum even suggests that people seek out particular breeds possessing traits akin to that of their own personalities (Greenebaum, 2004, p. 125-126). When human and dog personality traits align or complement one another, the illusion of a biological relation is created. Like a child, their personality reflects that of the parents.

For the purposes of this paper, the term “fur baby” can be seen to encapsulate these conceptions of a surrogate child, treasured companion, family member, and substitute for human relationships. In recent years, the the term “fur baby” has come to denote a humanisation of pets, and is used in popular discourse surrounding the implications of doing so (Wall, 2024).

Using Google Book’s Ngram Viewer tool, one can see that the term started gaining traction around 2012, and usage presently continues to increase (Google Books Ngram Viewer,

2024). The exact origins of the term are unknown, but it can be deduced that it developed alongside a societal shift towards the view of pets as family members, and the rise of social media — which encouraged people to share affection for their fur babies online.

This collective shift in mindset is supported by a set of human behaviours that "strengthens the cultural shorthand between dogs and motherhood" (Byrne, 2024). Birthday parties, religious ceremonies such as "Bark-mitzvahs", and "pawternity leave" are all practices rising in popularity amongst pet owners (Byrne, 2024).



Google Books Ngram Viewer results for "fur baby", 2024
Source: https://tinyurl.com/yc7zre65

6. Exploring Aesthetics

A broader understanding of aesthetic is useful in examining pet influencer subculture, as well as Instagram subcultures in general. "Aesthetic" plays an important role in dictating how online content is curated. As discussed above, content that forms part of the cute economy is marked by themes such as "purity" and "innocence", evoking feelings of care and empathy in viewers (Maddox, 2021).

Traditionally, the terms "aesthetic" or "aesthetic properties" are used when referring to the branch of philosophy dealing with beauty, grace, and form — but aesthetic is also about our perceptual experiences (Nanay, 2016). This includes our human engagement with art, different narratives, fiction, metaphors, humour, creativity, and an abundance of diverse experiences (Nanay, 2016, p. 5-6). How we identify with art is an experience — as is how we identify with fictional characters and narratives. How we perceive works that are not considered "art" is equally an experience.

So while the cute economy encompasses a specific experience for Instagram users ("cute aesthetic"), self-representation of pet influencers consists of related aesthetic properties intended to maximise visibility and income (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). Cute aesthetic, aesthetics of self-representation, aesthetic boundaries and decision-making (which I address later) are all perceptual experiences defined by certain aesthetic properties. How we perceive these experiences on Instagram can be affected by aesthetic properties such as colour palette, filters, editing style, thematic content, composition and layout (Borrelli, 2024). These conceptions are also significant when discussing brand

differentiation in part two of this literature review, with Scolari asserting that brand aesthetic assists in building distinct worlds (Scolari, 2009).

7. The Struggle for Authenticity

This is a common theme amongst influencer subcultures. Maddox suggests that pet accounts, in particular, are deemed “authentic” only when able to resist dominant toxicity trends such as human influencer’s perceived “fake authenticity” (Maddox, 2021, p. 3333, 3338).

These are terms that have come to imply the perceived quality of a product or service being advertised and denote particular ideas in marketing. As an 18th-century Romantic literary concept, the term once signalled the rejection of conformity and embodiment of the intrinsic self but has shifted to encompass values of sincerity, truthfulness and transparency (Södergren, 2021). Modern brand authenticity is defined as “the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true toward itself and its consumers, and to support consumers being true to themselves" (Morhart e*t al*., 2015, p. 202).

Research suggests that positive perceptions of brand authenticity not only increase purchase intentions but increase the likelihood of consumer forgiveness should the brand image be tarnished (Papadopoulou *et al*., 2023). Brand authenticity is harm reduction, with negative consequences being diminished. Consumers will possess enough brand loyalty and affection to shield the image against scandal (Papadopoulou *et al*., 2023).
In other words, a product seen as authentic by consumers is highly valued. Perceived authenticity is also what separates fact from fiction when consumers are processing information (Södergren, 2021). The brand deemed “most authentic” does not necessarily value truth itself, but projects an image of political or cultural authority (Södergren, 2021). Tension between this perception of authority and what is actually perceived to be true may lead the consumer to label a brand as inauthentic.

Fake authenticity or *inauthentic authenticity* is viewed as “the act of faking or copying something considered genuine” (Edwards, 2023). When marketers try too hard to be authentic, they risk diminishing true cultural conventions or societal traditions (Edwards, 2023). This may look like blatantly manufacturing a product for the sake of a passing trend, or an unsuitable brand mascot unable to connect with their audience demographic (Edwards, 2023). Ultimately, inauthentic authenticity can lead to a tarnished image, and isolating oneself from their target market.

Maddox (2021) explores inauthenticity as one of the abundant “dominant toxicity trends” found on social media. Users engage in trends with the aim of remaining within particular boundaries on social media while reflecting popular culture (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). *Dominant* toxicity implies hegemonic power structures that pet influencers seek to resist (Maddox, 2021). These are trends that lie in opposition to content that evokes values of joy and cuteness. Attempts to populate Instagram with dominant toxicity may look like trends that engage in a culture of “faux perfection”, world politics, and negativity (Maddox, 2021).

The term “wholesome” is used when pet imagery detracts from toxicity, or political turmoil and online conflict (Maddox, 2021, p. 3338). This content embodies the values of authenticity and cuteness. Spaces populated with wholesome animal content utilise pet influencer accounts as an act of resistance against dominant toxicity. (Maddox, 2021). Similarly, the desire to spark joy is a recurring theme cited among owners who run dog Instagram accounts (Maddox, 2021, p. 3336-3337). Bringing viewers happiness is an

online act of resistance, countering aforementioned inauthenticity and an influencer culture of perfection (Maddox, 2021, p. 3337).

Achieving consumer perceptions of sincerity isn't just understanding the above branding buzzwords, but the irony in the struggle for authenticity. Only an elite group of Instagram users will be able to achieve influencer status (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). This alone deems them "inauthentic", and creates a power imbalance. Inherently elitist accounts attempt "authenticity" through crafting content to be more "relatable" to followers. As discussed regarding cute aesthetic, those claiming to embody "joy" and "purity" often appear hypocritical in that these values will not align with attempts to commodify content (Maddox, 2021).

Lastly, perceptions of authenticity are also affected by how social media users navigate the interface they've been given, and the trends this may spark. The Instagram application interface limits the creator's aesthetic decision-making by imposing certain boundaries, prompting users to engage in or abandon trends (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). Vertical format can be considered a boundary within which Stories, IGTV, and Reels continue to present new aesthetic possibilities (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). The platform's decision to permit non-square images means users are now more likely to explore vertical visual aesthetic while following trends.

Creators are driven by aesthetic decision-making and take part in trends in order to persistently reflect popular aesthetics (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). Established trends dictate modern, acceptable aesthetic boundaries for content (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). Dependence on such trends leads to "templatability" (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020, p. 158).

Leaver *et al* (2020) refer to user content and aesthetic decisions as "templatable". This is when users engage in "rinse and repeat" actions; posting visuals, captions, hashtags, and curating their content in a homogenous way (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020, p. 158). Members of the same imagined community will express templatability potently, with thousands of dog influencer accounts creating similar Reels in which their pets perform against an identical audio bite.

"Aesthetic" and "templatability " are both cornerstones of online self-representation (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). It can therefore be questioned whether true "authenticity" will ever be achieved on Instagram, as aesthetic boundaries, the desire to follow trends, and the phenomenon of templatability limit the concept.

Part Two: Dogs & Branding

The psychology of dog-human attachment is outlined to introduce people's unwaveringly positive perception of dogs and why making use of them in marketing is a successful tactic. A basic comprehension of some core branding literature and concepts widely drawn upon in advertising is then necessary in examining how dog influencers function across different medias.

1. Man's Best Friend

Firstly, understanding the psychology behind dog-human relationships sheds light on why dogs, in particular, are viewed so favourably within the branding world. On some level, this is what subconsciously draws advertisers and consumers alike.

Dog-human relationships are symbiotic in nature, just as relationships between human beings complement each other (Holbrook & Woodside, 2008). Psychology scholars even go as far as to suggest such bonds are akin to that of mother and child (Hänninen, 2021). It is known that a human mother's brain releases oxytocin when viewing her child (Hänninen, 2021). This mutual gazing plays an important role in forming social bonds. Dogs also engage in mutual gazing, resulting in an increase in their owner's oxytocin concentration (Hänninen, 2021). Features shared with the human attachment theory framework include "dependency", "proximity seeking", and "caregiving". Dogs will often rely upon their caregivers during perceived stressful situations, showing that emotional attachment is mutually exhibited (Hänninen, 2021).

The Boomerang pet survey, a South African study, found that 67% of children consider their pets to be their best friends (Bizcommunity, 2017). Characteristics of human friendships are seen in one's relationship with their dog, such as intimacy, companionship, loyalty, and trust (Hänninen, 2021). This bond can even serve as a catalyst for human relationships, whereby people bond over their mutual love for their dogs (Hänninen, 2021).

With the above theories in mind, the dog-human relationship has potential to be "exploited" in advertising, as it is very likely to evoke an emotional response.

2. Psychology Behind Pet-based Branding

To leverage the bond owners have with their pets, advertisers may use particular marketing strategies, including "feel-good" marketing and anthropomorphic mascots — as discussed below. But why does appealing to owner's emotions work?

There is neurological evidence that the brain processes positive stimuli differently than negative stimuli, with happy faces yielding greater activation in the anterior cingulate and amygdala compared to sad faces (Killgore and Yurgelun-Todd, 2004). Further, it has been found that infants show left frontal activity while exposed to positive visual stimuli such as their mothers, and right frontal activity while viewing negative or unfamiliar visual stimuli such as strangers (Fox, 1991). With greater left frontal activity, more information is recalled (Stone, 2014). Simply, positively-perceived visuals have their own distinct patterns of activation in the brain, and can make a product more memorable to consumers.

In order to target these positive pathways, advertisers must understand the demographic and psychographic of their audience. While demographic includes information such as consumer age, gender identity, and income, psychographics focuses on personal and social characteristics (AX Insights, 2024). All of these attributes help inform what makes a positive experience for particular consumers.

Psychographic data such as spending habits, hobbies, and lifestyle reveal trends that can be incorporated in advertisements to make them appealing to their target market (AX Insights, 2024). According to the Segmanta Pet Survey 2020, humanisation is a popular trend amongst Gen Z pet owners (Segmanta, 2020). Behaviours include celebrating their pet's birthday, celebrating holidays with themed animal dress-up attire, and largely considering them to be their children (Segmanta, 2020). This information tells us that an advertising campaign harnessing an anthropomorphic personality would likely appeal to Gen Z dog owners, being viewed as positive and memorable.

While recording this kind of data can help target specific groups of consumers, it should be noted that the broader societal shift towards caring for pets as family is not confined to any single demographic (Scantlebury, 2024). Recent behavioural science-based studies are focusing on owner's newfound obsession with premium pet food. Since the 2020 COVID pandemic, pets have been elevated to the level of human family, offering a form a companionship that was lacking while contact with other people had to be limited (Scantlebury, 2024). Owners then began wondering why they were not feeding pets quality food as they would any other family member. In the United States alone, premium pet food grew by 4.4% over the past 5 years, and will reach $2.8 billion in 2024 (Lombardo, 2024).

Scantlebury (2024) goes on to describe the behavioural phenomena of "post pandemic pet guilt" that began to occur when the world eventually opened up. As a result of increased anthropomorphism, guilt towards pets was mediated in human ways like giving more quality food, treats, toys, affection, and even apologising more often (Bouma, Dijkstra, & Arnt Rosa, 2023). Alongside this guilt, societal trends increasing anthropomorphism include delayed parenthood for Millennials, and Baby Boomers needing companionship as they retire (Scantlebury, 2024). This all compounds in strong anthropomorphic identities that elevate pets to a new status.

In short, marketers have the opportunity now more than ever to leverage the connection people feel to their fur babies — a connection that goes deeper than "just a pet".

3. "Feel-Good" Marketing

Consumer's ability to feel good drives their interest in products being advertised. Scholars and marketing professionals have long attempted to unpack the concept of consumer happiness, and explore the ways it can be utilised in branding.

There is no single widely accepted definition of "feel-good" or "joy marketing". The below popular literature attempts to encapsulate this concept.

As early as 1986, formative branding literature has explored "warmth" in advertising, and attempted to measure how consumers experience this emotion (Aaker, 1986). Warmth was conceptualised as "a positive, mild, volatile emotion involving physiological arousal and precipitated by experiencing directly or vicariously a love, family, or friendship relationship" (Aaker, 1986). Consumers who enjoyed a commercial not only experienced happiness mentally but also had a physiological skin response (Aaker, 1986). This is called "electrodermal activity", which the body produces when reacting to action and excitement (Dorwart, 2023). Skin conductance is caused by sweat glands in the palms or fingers (Dorwart, 2023).

Audience perception studies found that framing advertisements as "sentimental", "family-oriented", or "feel-good-about-yourself" evoked warmth, with commercials falling into categories of "gentle and soothing", "mother-child interactions" or "affectionate couple

interactions", "vacation settings", and "appealing mascots" (Aaker, 1986, p. 366). Nevertheless, warmth was induced by a specific target in the consumer's environment, rather than the above themes (Aaker, 1986).

Aaker's (1986) warmth construct takes into account that emotions are often short-lived, and depend upon a social context within which social objects interact. Social objects are linked together, and warmth is perceived by comprehending emotions brought about by that relationship (Aaker, 1986). Such social objects can be people, animals, organisations, societies and institutions. This paper predominantly deals with warmth found in dog-human relationships (people and animals). It also explores the relationship between consumer or viewer and a dog character.

Marketing maestro Dr Alexa Dagostino asserts that "joy" simply has value as a buzzword, and commands attention (Dagostino, 2022). By associating one's brand with the word and conveying the emotion of "joy", an unspoken promise of happiness is made to the consumer (Dagostino, 2022). Happiness is a need, and joy marketing frames a product as being able to fill the gap (Dagostino, 2022).

Joy can also be a differentiator (Dagostino, 2022). Products are typically marketed as more efficient, durable, practical, or more modern than competitors (Dagostino, 2022). But the ultimate measure of whether a product can be perceived as "better" is whether it brings joy. Marketers must convince consumers that this purchase results in more happiness than competing products in the same market. And when consumers are encouraged to value their happiness, they perceive themselves as a top priority in the eyes of the brand engaging in joy marketing (Dagostino, 2022). Consumers are more likely to feel heard, and connected to the product (Dagostino, 2022).

A "feel-good" campaign or "joy marketing" is designed to leave consumers with a sense of positivity (Lightfoot, 2022). The positive emotional experience establishes a stronger bond between target audience and brand. The nature of such campaigns enables corporations to not only promote themselves, but often partake in public conversations about health or wellbeing (Lightfoot, 2022). There is a wider focus on whether brands can contribute more than profits and economic growth to society, and inspire individual action (Lightfoot, 2022).

A popular example is Nike's 2020 *You Can't Stop Us* campaign (Marketing The Rainbow, 2020). Sporting is closely associated with working towards a sense of achievement, perseverance, and unity (Lightfoot, 2022). These themes make for the perfect feel-good message, and motivate viewers to take action.

The art of playing on consumer's emotions is a standard advertising technique. When people feel good about themselves (or a product is perceived to create a positive improvement in one's life), they are more likely to invest in it (Ottman, 2017). This tactic is often used in fashion and beauty, or green marketing for sustainable, eco-friendly products.

As dogs objectively make us feel good, it is no surprise that they are employed in advertising products and services.

4. Baseline Anthropomorphism in Marketing

Animal mascots or animated "representatives" in advertising often show baseline physical similarities to humans. Anthropomorphic portrayals of animals with lower baseline physical similarities are viewed as less favourable than non-anthropomorphic portrayals (Connell,

2013). We can deduct that animal mascots who don't visibly reflect human qualities or characteristics are less likely to resonate with consumers.

Interestingly, a similar phenomenon occurs when consumers interact with imagery of real pets or animals (as opposed to animated mascots). Park and Kim (2021) argue that owners who share an emotional bond with their dogs become versed in the portrayal of "facial expressions" regarding the pooches on packaging (Park and Kim, 2021). Further, visuals of a dog's mouth and eyes that appear to imply happiness have a direct positive impact — consumers perceive the product as higher quality, and are more likely to purchase it (Park and Kim, 2021).

In the case of Instagram users who follow exotic pet accounts, animal content that depicts similar characteristics to their own domestic pet with which they share a bond brings greater joy (Hänninen, 2021). *Juniper the fox* is loved by many who compare her to their dog (Hänninen, 2021). By extension, a baseline physical similarity to humans is again identified as being preferable — assuming these users see some human qualities in their pets, as most do through the projection of an anthropomorphic personality.

However, Reavey *et al* (2018) have found that there are further nuances in how consumers perceive anthropomorphism in advertising. Consumers are said to prefer overt humanisation when an advertisement uses assertive language, but subtle humanisation when paired with non-assertive language (Reavey *et al.,* 2018). A speaking mascot coupled with a "Buy now!" directive would be perceived positively. On the other hand, a product that moves in a human-like manner while retaining its overall mechanical essence (like the iPhone login screen that shakes its "head" *no* when the password is incorrect), coupled with a non-assertive statement, can be just as effective.

This is because cognitive busyness has a moderating effect on the relationship between subtle versus overt advertising performance (Reavey *et al.,* 2018, p. 450). An advertisement that is less "busy" allows consumers the cognitive resources to draw meaning from subtle humanisation, instead of trying to resist persuasion tactics (Reavey *et al.,* 2018, p. 450). A visually busy advertisement containing assertive language may be just as successful because cognitively busy consumers lack the resources to process subtle humanisation, and must rely on overt appeals instead (Reavey *et al.,* 2018, p. 458).

What we learn from this study is that anthropomorphism is not a binary variable (Reavey *et al.,* 2018). Different degrees of humanisation affect consumers' attitudes towards the product. Cognitive busyness and the use of assertive language may also change how an anthropomorphic being is perceived.

5. Narrative Branding & Key Concepts

"Brand image" is understood as "the attributes and functional consequences, and the symbolic meanings, consumers associate with a product". (Padgett & Allen, 1997). These notions largely act to differentiate a brand from its competition in the marketplace. In recent years, scholars have linked the concept of brand image with "brand personality" (Padgett & Allen, 1997). In this paper, I use the terms interchangeably.

"Personality" is viewed from a narrative perspective in order for consumers to attach meaning to something. This is usually in the form of human personality traits and values, or behaviour and personified actions (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). Thus, brand personality has come to imply a set of human characteristics that are associated with a brand (Aaker

and Fournier, 1995). A well-known example is that of Levis 501 jeans, often thought of as "common", "blue collar", and "hardworking", indicative of the *traditional* American.

Brand personality can be used as a potent advertising mechanism when personified through a chosen mascot or live character. Consumers will see a "specific set of meanings which describe the inner characteristics of a brand" (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). They construct such meaning through observing how the brand "behaves" concerning attributes like price, product category, and benefits. The brand becomes a multidimensional character, with both a physical form and symbolic characteristics.

Consumers naturally think along the lines of narrative thought when undergoing this process of attaching personality to a product or service. In order for a character to be incorporated into the world of consumers, they must fit into a story. It is therefore argued that creating stories is a fundamental way humans make sense of the world, and that we store our knowledge in the form of narratives (Aaker and Fournier, 1995).

Advertisers harness consumer's tendency to create narratives by portraying their brands as characters "taking action" within a story (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). Consumers then infer personality from these "actions". The drama or general narrative provides circumstance within which intentional behaviour can be presented (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). Advertisers craft a story that has the potential to demonstrate particular brand attributes. And consumers have the opportunity to contribute to a narrative, providing a means for advertisers to gauge public perception of brand personality (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). However, consumers may also project their own narrative experiences onto the brand, affecting how it is viewed.

6. Transmedia Storytelling

"Transmedia storytelling" denotes a process whereby basic elements of fiction are dispersed across multiple channels of delivery, and is used as a branding technique within media franchises (Jenkins, 2007). In recent years, media scholars have harnessed the technique to support non-fictional contexts such as journalism, political campaigning, and different means of marketing (Gambarato, 2020). Key information is to be communicated across many platforms, including film, animated series, comic books, and video games (Jenkins, 2007). There is never a singular source for information which the narrative employs. Rather, the narrative must allow for expansions involving relevant new content — not repetition (Gambarato, 2020). However expansive these ever-growing worlds are, each individual component must make sense and remain accessible as its own contribution to the whole system (Jenkins, 2007). They must also work together, with each medium offering something unique to an unfolding narrative (Jenkins, 2007).

Scolari (2009) identifies four strategies used in expanding a narrative universe. Firstly, the creation of "interstitial microstores", which are designed to enrich the diegetic world, and lengthen spaces between seasons or episodes (Scolari, 2009). Next, "parallel stories" unfold simultaneously with the macrostory ("big picture"), sometimes evolving into spinoffs (Scolari, 2009). "Peripheral stories" act similarly, but are perceived to be more distant from the macrostory (Scolari, 2009). Lastly, user-generated content platforms (like blogs and social media) allow consumers to enrich fictional worlds.

Viewers will enjoy "unified" and "coordinated" entertainment as a result of following these different narrative components (Jenkins, 2007). The integrated experience maximises potential audience interaction and engagement (Gambarato, 2020). This is because transmedia stories can offer a more meaningful experience to viewers as they inevitably

have the opportunity to explore a narrative in more depth. A specific subject or issue that one relates to is consistently enriched through media of choice. Because a single story utilises multiple channels of delivery, “additive comprehension” may prove to be a delicate balance between crafting narratives that first-time viewers comprehend versus incorporating more complex storytelling elements that enhance the understanding of consumers who are already invested across many platforms (Jenkins, 2007).

Transmedia stories function to maintain an audience over longer periods of time (Jenkins, 2007). They do this by allowing for multiple points of entry into a narrative when marketing to new audience members, with these narratives extending across age groups, gender identity, or consumers of one exclusive medium (Jenkins, 2007). Consumers are encouraged to experiment, take up different mediums, and develop flexible interests. Because no one consumer is able to know everything through drawing information from all sources, fans must converse with others who follow the wider narrative (Jenkins, 2007). Shared interest is nurtured, ensuring that stories remain relevant topics of discussion, and retain visibility.

Another way in which audiences are maintained is to create collective speculation. “Gaps” are purposefully left unexplored in unfolding stories (Jenkins, 2007). This tactic encourages consumers to predict and theorise potential storylines, again generating discussion and ensuring the brand/its narrative remains visible. Unfulfilled plots containing details which hint at or imply there’ll be stories to come are incentives for fans to continue following along.

Audience discussion and shared interest around narratives is valued, so much so that consumers also have the freedom to create their own worlds. Transmedia texts do not only disperse information, but will often encourage consumer contribution, in line with narrative branding (Jenkins, 2007). By providing goals and roles to be assumed by viewers, narratives can be “tailored” to the individual consumer’s liking. A popular tool to generate this kind of contribution is action figures, which provide children with the opportunity to create their own stories around an already-established narrative or group of characters (Jenkins, 2007). Similarly, adults expand on established narratives by creating fan fiction.

Modern transmedia storytelling is of particular importance in journalism because of its emphasis on audience engagement (Moloney, 2019). By publishing many interconnected stories in different forms across multiple channels, readers are likely to view more than one single narrative (Moloney, 2019). This deepens their involvement with the issue, giving information value when awareness is created (Moloney, 2019). It is also easier for producers to reach a target audience that will utilise information best, as certain readers will choose to consume media from specific channels (Moloney, 2019). Likewise, advertisers will craft advertisements for their chosen audience, and place them within channels that members of this audience are sure to consume (Moloney, 2019). If an advertisement is overly successful in reaching target consumers, these viewers will coalesce into a mass audience.

Transmedia stories are differentiated from traditional branding narratives by way of their highly immersive nature. They are based upon complex worlds as opposed to individual characters and plots, drawing fans into the world-building process (Jenkins, 2007). Here, an expansive universe supports many interrelated characters and stories. Fans are compelled to impulsively follow along as the world continues to grow, or create their own stories. In contrast, a traditional branding narrative presents closure, constructed to reveal

itself in its entirety before viewers depart. There are no “gaps”, and all information needed to make sense of the story is already supplied.

Professor of transmedia storytelling Kevin Moloney succinctly summaries the concept as “one storyworld, many stories, many forms, many channels” (Moloney, 2019). A range of stories that are complete in and of themselves expand consumer understanding of a larger subject. Producing transmedia broadens an audience, both lengthens and deepens their engagement, and encourages collaboration between multiple channels or platforms in ways that are mutually beneficial (Moloney, 2019).

The economics of media consolidation (or “synergy”) is reflected in this process (Jenkins, 2007). Modern media corporations are horizontally integrated, retaining interests across a wide range of what were once distinct media industries (Jenkins, 2007). The approach is advantageous in many ways. For example, the publishing of Marvel comic books in advance of film releases. Not only would the comics provide backstory to fans, but simultaneously act as vehicles to publicise a forthcoming film (Jenkins, 2007). The boundaries between marketing and entertainment disappear (Jenkins, 2007).

As a result of the high degree of coordination needed to create transmedia stories across many media sectors, it is best applied to independent projects (Jenkins, 2007). However, most media franchises are not governed by co-creating artists on independent projects. Rather, a growing body of media is licensed under a singular original master text (Jenkins, 2007).

7. Multimodal Media Narrative Structures from a Semiotic Perspective & Brand Fiction

Transmedia has come to describe “multimodality” and “multiplatform” stories told across multiple media (Scolari, 2009). Concepts such as multimodality and intertextuality are experienced through a “coordinated combination” of language and media, or language and media within an interactive environment (Scolari, 2009).

The term *multimodality* is used to convey that producers use multiple modes of meaning-making (Jewitt *et al*., 2016). Different modes hardly ever appear in isolation and are more often used in conjunction (Jewitt *et al*., 2016). These may include integrating images with writing, speech with gesture, or even mathematic symbolism with the Latin alphabet. The need to study such phenomena became more apparent with the advent of digital technology, which allows for combinations of meaning-making that were previously difficult to disseminate (Jewitt *et al*., 2016). Now, ubiquitous modes such as the moving image are embedded into our daily lives through social media.

Scolari (2009) considers ties between transmedia storytelling and branding from a semiotic perspective. If transmedia stories are multimodal narrative structures, then they possess their own narrative world (Scolari, 2009). Simply, the brand as a device produces discourses, gives it meaning, and communicates this meaning to audiences (Scolari, 2009). By expressing values, the brand is seen as an interpretive contract between companies and consumers (Scolari, 2009). If consumers accept their series of values, consumers are granted access to the narrative world.

When a series of stories are expressed through different media, there is a hierarchy of values acting as the content of a fictional world (Scolari, 2009). All the different texts making up a narrative world will include these values. One might consider the primary values presented within the *Harry Potter* universe to be friendship and teamwork.

Secondary to those may be bravery and responsibility. *All* narratives within the Harry Potter universe will emphasise primary values. Some secondary values will be expanded upon in independent narratives that contribute to a bigger story.

Visual and semiotic structures are used similarly in meaning-making (Jewitt *et al*., 2016). The two are closely linked, with particular features of meaning-making being applied across different modes (Jewitt *et al*., 2016). One of these features is "intensity". The mode of speech will utilise loudness to demonstrate intensity of sound, but in the mode of gesture, intensity is realised by extent of hand movement (Jewitt *et al*., 2016).

With this in mind, visual and semiotic structures work together to build distinct, recognisable worlds. Brands present aesthetic; textures, colours, and styles that assist in differentiation (Scolari, 2009). Likewise, every fictional world, element, or episode connected to the brand must be differentiated from counterparts in the wider narrative universe. Distinctive narrative and discursive traits are applied to do so (Scolari, 2009). Varying the complexity of the narrative or plot can be used in conjunction with special visual effects in film. Certain values are also emphasised in particular texts, as with *Harry Potter* (Scolari, 2009). The characters across stories will retain distinctive attributes of visual style/fashion, and display the primary values of friendship in their behaviour. In a particular narrative that explores another value in more depth, their outfits may change.

There are more obvious ways in which brands meet narratives. A product or service may be presented as assisting the consumer in traditional commercials, improving their lives (Scolari, 2009). For instance, a woman is seen washing dishes better with Sunlight liquid inside a fictional narrative. Alternatively, the product placement is embedded inside non-commercial fiction, becoming integral to the plot (Scolari, 2009). Mr Bean's Mini Cooper is one of the most famous occurrences (Dorofte, 2020).

In transmedia storytelling, this scenario is different. The fiction is the brand, no longer brand inside fiction (Scolari, 2009). The fictional world becomes a product. Therefore, brands as narrative worlds are referred to as "brand fiction" (Scolari, 2009).

Brand fiction is linked to "place semiotics", a semiotic analysis that deals with the ways placement of discourse in the material world produces meanings that derive directly from that placement (Scollon and Scollon, 2003). A dimension of this analysis is "emplacement", referring to how physical placement of a sign in an environment results in certain affordances and constraints (Jewitt *et al*., 2016). These could be the historical meanings associated with an environment, or social relationships. So while Mr Bean's Mini Cooper is integral to his narrative, it constrains the narrative by ensuring it cannot revert back to stories occurring before the time of such cars. And a Mini Cooper cannot be mentioned in Mr Bean's discourse should such a story take place. Attempting the narrative risks decontextualising the Mini brand.

8. UX/UI in Branding Design

Advertisements are designed with the consumer in mind. The success of a product or service relies on two elements which work together closely — user experience design (referred to as "UX"), and user interface design ("UI").

User experience was originally conceptualised as a cognitive science-based practice to be applied to a wide range of products and industries, but the term is mostly used in reference to digital fields (Lamprecht, 2023). It can be described as the "human-first way of designing products", and focuses on all interactions between a potential or active customer, and the

brand (Lamprecht, 2023). Many different elements may shape this experience, largely how easy, efficient, and pleasant the user perceived it to be. Therefore, the goal for brands is to continuously improve the quality of interaction between users and all facets of a company (Lamprecht, 2023).

A UX designer will embark on tasks such as competitor analysis, user research, content development, testing and iteration, and goal-tracking (Lamprecht, 2023). Any part of the design process that aims to connect the business's goals to consumer needs falls into this list.

For example, a pet influencer that makes use of Instagram to promote different products should have a clear and concise bio, as well as engaging and relevant content. This makes for a pleasant user experience. If the bio is disorderly and confusing, and content is posted sporadically with little connection to the theme of the account, poor UX is experienced.

While UX focuses on the overall *feel* of an experience, UI is more about what users *see* and *touch*. It is an exclusively digital practice, attracting, guiding and responding to users through the interactive elements of a product interface (Lamprecht, 2023). This includes buttons, icons, colour palettes, and responsive design. The UI is a success if the product interface intuitively steers the user towards their desired outcome — without them having to put too much thought into the process (Lamprecht, 2023).

A UI designer will work to develop graphics and branding, storylines, animations, general interactivity, and adaptations to different screen sizes (Lamprecht, 2023). These are all endeavours that transfer the brand's messaging to the product, ensuring users can identify with it.

In the context of pet influencers, one should have consistent logos, icons, style and colour schemes throughout their social media. If their website has no identifiable link to an Instagram page or any other forms of social media, this makes for poor UI. Perhaps the website is difficult to navigate, or touch on a smartphone. This would lead to users becoming frustrated, and abandoning their support for the product.

9. Globalisation in Design

It is worth noting that appealing to a global audience — as many UX and UI designers are tasked with doing — is a difficult endeavour. Rath (2020) examines global trends leading towards "neutral" typography, particularly in the instance of brands stripping away their distinctive cultural meanings. He argues that brands who embrace functionalism, minimalism, and simplicity too enthusiastically risk erasing the communicative power of type.

Our increasingly globally-intertwined visual environment does not mean that brands should become sterile in their desire to retain "flexibility" across cultures (Rath, 2020). In any case, when a message produced in one culture is processed by another, it becomes difficult to ascertain a "preferred reading" of the brand (Fu, 2006). The art of thoughtful design, able to produce something with distinct identity across cultural boundaries, has immense value. Likewise, a brand with distinct identity has the power to be successful. In this paper, anthropomorphised personalities are crafted in unique ways to become differentiated entities regardless of where they are found.

Part Three: Art, Animals, and Agency

Lastly, the third component gives an overview of ethical questions that come into play when dealing with creators who cannot give consent, possess agency in the traditional sense, or function under laws and frameworks intended for humans. It also examines the concepts of “art” and “creative license” in relation to beings who are not cognisant of copyright or “human creativity”.

1. Framing Agency

“Agency” is central to human’s individual rights (Blattner, 2021). In a philosophical sense, agency is associated with autonomy, the ability to take action (Weissman, 2020). These ideas have been informed by Aristotle, who described the unison of *thought* and *being* (Weissman, 2020).

Aristotle’s views have been critiqued by scholars for assuming that the human mind perceives an ordinary reality or existence under which agency can be exercised (Weissman, 2020). This is not necessarily the case, as we know agency perceived by the mind may not align with a particular reality. One could struggle to overcome obstacles that do not exist outside of their mind.

Domestic animals usually find themselves in heavily restrictive environments like slaughterhouses, cages or enclosures (Blattner, 2021). Therefore, there exists little research surrounding animal agency or their potential interest in self-willed action. However, it can be agreed upon that animals exercise agency in terms of basic values such as bodily integrity and life/will to live, or personal preference (Blattner, 2021). A dog will communicate clearly that it is uncomfortable being touched by biting or growling. Individuals will also show food preference, which their owners must cater to.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises guaranteed rights, such as the right to life, education, and freedom of expression (Blattner, 2021). Although studies suggest humans underestimate the ability of animal decision-making, will to take action, and organise individually or as a group, there exists no similar framework through which they may exercise these abilities or garner protection (Blattner, 2021).

The majority of countries in the world label animals as property. Only a handful legally view animals as sentient beings. These countries include Portugal, France, New Zealand, and Germany. Because domestic animals lack legal protection and ethical consideration globally, it is difficult to conceptualise a world where animals may manifest agency (Blattner, 2021).

Recognising an animal’s right to live freely has potentially disastrous religious consequences, not to mention the economic consequences regarding animal agriculture. Practices such as animal sacrifice and eating meat are significant in many world religions (Cengage, 2019). Farmers could suffer, and abstaining from meat-based tradition means loss of cultural identity for particular groups— especially nomadic peoples (Galer, 2017).

This is perhaps why “agency” is framed in a human manner for pet influencers — it is difficult to imagine non-humans exercising legitimate agency in a world where only human values are validated. Modified kinds of “agency” simply do not fit the systems we have developed for humans. Exploring this also affects our socio-political systems negatively.

In navigating a modified agency, owners may assume their pet's identity on social media (Maddox, 2021). This creates the illusion of agency, as if the animal is sharing their personal viewpoint. Using first-person language and singular pronouns ("I went for a walk today"), it is often being framed in relation to a narrative.

2. Framing Consent

We know that animals cannot conceptualise how social media works, and are therefore never able to consent to information that is shared. Regulations surrounding children on the internet can be used as a frame of reference. These too are beings that cannot give informed consent, although they will face harsher consequences with regards to what is put online because children "grow up". Pets do not, and will never garner an understanding of the internet.

Children who are under the age of 13 may not have their own Instagram page, and it is required that their biography states the account is run by parents (Instagram, 2022). This is largely because children are considered too young to make informed choices about what and how they share online. However, even a foetus may appear on social media, the growing child being bestowed with an online presence throughout their lives (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). This is a rather new area of research, the consequences of a longterm online footprint being unknown. There remains little ethical framework and regulations regarding humans who cannot give full, informed consent.

Again, with few guidelines for humans, there exists no framework for consent regarding domestic animals. Followers may never know whether a pet was made to be photographed against its will. Through assuming a pet's identity online, these conversations are circumvented. It appears the pet is "wilfully sharing", even if contravening animal protection laws in its residing jurisdiction.

3. Non-Human Art, Creative License, and Copyright

When a being is perceived to have no agency, and is unable to give consent, they cannot neatly fit into human frameworks that incorporate these concepts.

The internet has long been a place for pigs that paint, or pooches that make their own music (Langley, 2018; Jardine & Cingrana, 2017). Profits made from works will be received by their owners, as there exists no models for compensation or ownership. Copyright law for animals is not a concern.

However, we know that many domestic animals have a basic understanding of art and music — albeit not as humans may perceive these pieces (Wassenberg, 2018). Animals may show emotional response to pitch and amplitude, while humans respond to spatial frequency in song (Wassenberg, 2018). Further, we know animals are able to exercise "choice" or "agency" in terms of basic values (Blattner, 2021). At the very least, they may show preference. It is unclear whether this simple understanding can be equated with the human concept of creative license on social media, as it is unlikely that animals have an intention to create (Langley, 2018).

Such regulations are still in the works for human children. Even though children retain copyright of their work, and are perceived to possess creative license at a young age, kids working in social media are not entitled to their profits (Wong, 2019). In the USA, Coogan laws created concerning the film industry do not yet apply to children working from home and filming online (Wong, 2019). This means that profits received by parents may be used

at their own discretion. The money does not have to be utilised for children's wellbeing and care, or reserved for their adult expenses.

The literature above leads to questions beyond the scope of this paper such as;

- Should beings who cannot consent or possess agency be afforded protection in the form of regulating how profits from art or labour are spent?
- Do they deserve formal credit for contributing to works which consenting adults consciously participated in?
- To what degree are pet influencer accounts a collaboration between animal and human? And so to whom do we credit concepts like creativity, aesthetic, creative license, and labour?

Topics relating to these questions have been addressed in the context of human agency. Borgström (2023) explores how and whether informed consent can be obtained when studying the social media habits of intellectually disabled youth — a group of people traditionally thought of as unable to consent. Cizek & Uricchio (2022) investigate co-creating with non-human entities, including animals and the natural environment. This is a topic that will likely see much additional research in the future, as humans continue to co-create art with artificial intelligence technologies. Meanwhile, Tarrikas (2022) examines models to measure animal creativity.

Methodology

Rationale

Qualitative interviewing allows for access to primary, eyewitness sources who are able to share information about their lived experiences (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). Interviewees can therefore give authentic, key insights into the industry. As this research concerns online self-representations and different ways creatives anthropomorphised dogs, perspective from the creatives themselves was needed. Any other method of data collection would not be suitable for a project of this nature.

Such research methodology is characteristic of creative non-fiction writing, or narrative journalism. Through this paper, I attempt to identify commonalities in participant's stories which can be used in presenting a comprehensive depiction of the dog influencer industry.

Research Methods

Interviews were conducted over Zoom, with the exception of photographer Sarah Keogh, whom I interviewed in-person. This was her preference. These interviews took place over a period of eight months — between September 2022 and April 2023.

Participants were emailed a list of questions and/or talking points prior to the interview. However, we did not follow these rigorously. Rather, they were intended as a tool to get participants thinking critically. I used these lists as a guide for semi-structured interviews, to be followed loosely. Resulting discussions ranged from under 30 minutes to an hour.

Questions and topics for discussion were tailored to each participant and their creative work. These included, but were not limited to, career choice, working with dogs, how participants developed their skillsets, intricacies of their job, techniques used in crafting characters and anthropomorphised personalities, inspiration behind them, utilising multimedia, collaborative ventures, and engaging with their following. After transcribing interviews, I made rough notes, grouping what participant's had relayed into themes or specific subject matter such as; links to narrative branding literature, links to multimodal media and transmedia storytelling, general discussion around anthropomorphised personalities, framing agency, negotiating self-representation, and salient themes across mediums.

I refined my research questions while adapting my discussion, deciding what was relevant and what required unpacking. Self-representation through anthropomorphised personality was a topic with potential to be explored more. However, I had already explored the topic in my previous paper (Liss, 2022). For the sake of brevity, I decided not to focus on it in this paper. As a result, much of what was discussed in interviews regarding self-representation did not make it into this paper. On the other hand, the topic of agency and "dogs as moral children" did not initially stand out to me as a facet of research worthy of being included. The more I analysed transcriptions, the more it became apparent that it would become a significant point of analysis. This method of data collection is known as an inductive approach.

An inductive approach allows findings to emerge organically from dominant themes present in the data, without constraints imposed by rigorously structured methodology (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). A unique benefit is that key themes are less likely to be reframed or missed entirely because of preconceptions in data collection. Strauss and Corbin (1998,

p. 12) summarise the concept best, stating, “the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data”.

The discovery of theory from data itself is known as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1973). I approached research from this perspective, incorporating information I may not have initially set out to find.

Alongside qualitative interviews, content analysis of participant’s relevant media was used in strengthening my discussion. This included; Emma O’Brien’s photography and her *Black Series* project, Sarah Keogh’s photography, Joanne Lefson’s non-fiction book and her Oscar’s Arc advertising approach, Jennifer Lindridge’s storybook with its illustrations by Tori Stowe, as well as her social media platforms, and Lena Boness’s Instagram page (O’Brien, 2024; Keogh, 2024; Lefson, 2010; Lindridge, 2022; Boness, 2024). I also examined the series of Buddy The Boxer commercials in conjunction with interviewing Tian van der Heever. A more concise table of participant’s media is provided below.

Content analysis involves a process by which data is organised, usually in accordance with specific themes and meanings they contain. By popular definition, this is “any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1968). With regards to media studies, it is used to examine a wide range of texts, from interviews to films, television programs, newspapers and magazines (Macnamara, 2005). Naturally, it was my method of choice for diverse mediums.

This is utilised significantly in sections titled “Sensationalism in Imagery” and “Framing Animal Agency”. Firstly, I examine elements of sensationalism in illustrations and photographs, grouping media in which anthropomorphised personalities appear as caricatures. In the latter, I explore the representation of these personalities both visually and linguistically in discourse, and how this informs perceptions of agency.

Participants

My paper which preceded this one examined the experiences of South African dog influencers on Instagram (Liss, 2023). Through discussion with these Instagram users and analysis of the content displayed on their pages, I came across various businesses, NGOs, and creatives within the pet influencer industry. Six of them became participants in this project.

Interviewees were selected from a wide range of mediums as I had multimodal research in mind. Two pet photographers, an NGO leader and non-fiction author, an advertising executive, a children’s fiction author, and the owner behind a very successful dog influencer Instagram account participated in in-depth qualitative interviews. I aimed to reflect the wider South African dog influencer industry and online community through this small sample of participants.

Participant	Media
Emma O’Brien	Photography
Sarah Keogh	Photography
Joanne Lefson	Non-fiction books, print media
Tian van der Heever	Advertising (TV commercials)
Jennifer Lindridge	Children’s fiction books, social media platforms
-	Music
Lena Boness	Instagram

Participants ranged in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties. Two were not South African but based their content in Cape Town, primarily resided in Cape Town, and garnered predominately South African social media followers (O’Brien, 2024; Boness, 2024). I also included a range of experience, with some interviewees being social media “veterans”, while others were fairly new to the dog influencer community.

Five participants identify as female, with only one male interviewed. All interviewees were white. I feel this is an accurate depiction of ownership within the South African dog influencer industry based on interviews regarding my previous paper (Liss, 2022)**.** This is also an accurate reflection of influencer subculture as a whole. Eighty-four percent of influencers creating sponsored posts on Instagram are women (Statista, 2019). White influencers are also thought to be compensated significantly more from brands, and attain the wide reach that comes with macro influencer status (MSL, 2021). This suggests white women are more likely to pursue being an influencer long-term.

Statistics show that the wealthier a South African household, the more likely they are to own a dog (Lowe, 2023). However, the ownership gap between mid-income earners and the elite (those earning over R200 000 monthly) is negligible. So it can be assumed that participants earn within the income bracket of middle class to wealthy households, as this demographic possesses the most dogs. However, participants were not asked to provide their monthly income.

Sociology of Pet Ownership

Before discussing ethical considerations, it is important to note South Africa’s chequered history with dogs. A marked increase in the use of police dogs between 1960-1980 saw the dog become a symbol of the Apartheid state (Van Sittert and Swart, 2003). With the escalation of rebellion against the National Party, the police and military trained a range of existing dog breeds, experimenting with new breeds and genetically-engineering wolf-German Shepard hybrids (Van Sittert and Swart, 2003, p. 165). The 1976 Soweto Uprising is even said to have begun with the killing of a police dog that was instructed to attack a group of children (Van Sittert and Swart, 2003, p. 165).

Reared to defend white power and property, the dog was not only the image of police brutality, but also the contested hierarchy of value between the black human and the animal (Mhlongo and Canham, 2021). If not being compared to animals, black people were treated as sub-human. Dogs of white farm owners were known to sit in the front of vehicles, with farm workers relegated to the back (Mhlongo and Canham, 2021, p. 7). Warnings such as “Passop vir die hond”/“Beware of the dog” on private property often targeted the imagined black intruder (Mhlongo and Canham, 2021, p. 7). On beaches, signs read “no natives and dogs”, categorising black South Africans as undesirables, and no more than an animal (Mhlongo and Canham, 2021, p. 7). Dog’s health was generally viewed as a priority over non-whites, and the white employer’s status symbol included the practice of uniformed domestic workers and gardeners walking their well-cared-for, pedigreed dogs (Mhlongo and Canham, 2021, p. 6).

It comes as no surprise that dog ownership is perceived as a marker of class and race in South Africa. This attitude was aptly publicised by former president Jacob Zuma while still in office. Hans and Moolla (2012) reported how Zuma stated that “spending money on buying a dog, taking it to the vet and for walks belonged to white culture and was not the African way, which was to focus on the family. There was a new generation of young Africans who were trying to adopt other lifestyles and even trying to look like others.”

Despite the assertion that dog-ownership is for middle-class white people, there exists the attitude that dogs have always been an important part of African culture. Mhlongo and Canham identified attempts to “historicise human-dog relations by extricating them from discourses of whiteness” (Mhlongo and Canham, 2021, p. 16). Some interviewees pointed out that historical practices like hunting and herding animals always involved dogs as assistants and companions. In this way, dogs were viewed as peers. Many black middle-class participants loved their dogs as family — more than just a peer (Mhlongo and Canham, 2021, p. 17). With these beliefs, working class and rural practices of caring for dogs are gradually challenging anthropocentrism. The black middle class in particular increasingly disrupts a colonial human-animal binary.

Ethics

It is important to note that this paper does not attempt to examine whether pet influencer subculture is elitist. I acknowledge that such perceptions can be drawn from the demographic of participants, and influencer subculture in general. Regardless, the question of whether these users and accounts are indeed elitist is again outside my scope of research, and no conclusion of this nature can be drawn from a small study of six interviewees.

It goes without saying that those who are able to afford pets and devote time to crafting them into influencers, create media based on their anthropomorphised personalities, or conceptualise highly sought-after advertising content are all in a position of privilege. As race, class, and privilege are often synonymous markers of identity in South Africa, this can be a sensitive topic. One may be tempted to presuppose the South African dog influencer industry is inherently elitist, comprising largely of privileged white women within higher income brackets. But more research is needed to examine this claim.

I would however like to highlight that the act of creating an online presence for an animal is accessible to a large sector of South African society — far larger than the elite. The pervasiveness of technology means anyone can partake in internet activities. As of 2023, over 72% of the population had internet access (Charles Smith Associates, 2023). The vast majority, 97%, accessed via their mobile phones (Charles Smith Associates, 2023).

Further, there are over 25 million social media users in SA, around 42% of the total population (Charles Smith Associates, 2023).

Promoting dogs on social media is also about raising funds for the care of an individual pet, or shelter animals in need. I have tried to highlight these aspects of “influencing” in this project’s feature articles, whereby there is a collective benefit. Animals are voiceless, and creating awareness surrounding their wellbeing is an important function of a compassionate society. Widely attributed to Mahatma Gandhi and Ramachandra Krishna Prabhu (1959), there is an assertion that “the greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”

It must be said that everyone — regardless of race, class, or financial situation — is deserving of the love an animal brings. The more we value caring for our animals as a nation, the more joy they are able to bring into human lives.

Lastly, all participants provided informed consent to being interviewed, and to sharing their work. Their identities and personal information are not examined during the course of this project, but rather what and how they create. Risk of harm to research subjects is negligible.

Findings and Discussion

First, I state how prevalent dog personalities are within the cultural mainstream — particularly within creative industries — and how social media keeps them there. The dog influencer did not arrive with social media, but has rather developed alongside it. The concept long preceded Instagram, with personified dogs commonly described in music and literature for centuries. This is why I extend the term “dog influencer” to anthropomorphised canine personalities inhabiting other platforms. In this paper, I assess Instagram personalities, but also those personalities that are independently found within books and film, art and music, or use social media alongside other modes of dispersal.

Simply, the dog influencer does not do the “influencing”. The animal has little agency in our world. Rather, human forces of marketing and narrative-building create and anthropomorphic being capable of performing for us — be that meeting our entertainment needs, selling a product, or providing symbolic meaning. And wherever narrative branding can be located, the dog becomes capable of “influence”. “Dog influencer” therefore refers to an array of canine personalities across mediums.

Next, I explore some salient themes from interviewees and their creative works. “Joy marketing”, sensationalism in imagery, and collaborative anthropomorphism link many of the discussed projects.

Finally, I address research questions directly by detailing; how agency is framed, how self-representation is negotiated, and how key literature surrounding narrative branding, transmedia stories, and multimodal narratives can be applied to my case study. This section helps unpack the relationship between narrative branding, dog influencers, and modern media. I have addressed branding narratives last as much of the preceding discussion alludes to these findings. Directly referencing the literature is needed to conclude the analysis.

Interviewees are referred to by name. A list of this project’s participants and their respective creative works can be found under the Methodology section. Full quotes can be found in the relevant feature articles on the project website, which must be read before this explication. It is essential to read these articles first as it contextualises their work, and how it is analysed here.

1. Dog Influencers in Popular Culture

In the mid-sixties, The Beach Boys released an album called “Pet Sounds”. Brian Wilson had decided it would be humorous to add his own dogs’ voices to the closing track, and indeed Banana and Louie are famous for ending off the album (Gilstrap, 2016). Mike Love then suggested naming the album “Pet Sounds”, not only in honour of Brian’s dogs, but his superb hearing and attention to harmonies, likened to that of a dog (Gilstrap, 2016). The choice of words would also reference their *favourite* sounds (“pet” as in “special”, or “pet peeve”), alongside Brian’s “dog ears” (Love, 1997).

Today, the compulsion to include animals in our artistic output remains alive and well. As covered in this project’s article titled *Sound Hounds,* Billie Eilish incorporated her pooch’s voice on her Grammy award-winning album, “Happier Than Ever” (O’Connell & O’Connell, 2021). South African musician The Kiffness makes Instagram Reel spoofs of “melodic” pets, a creative collaboration between man and animal (Scott, 2021). These pieces follow

an endless list of features from artist's dogs spanning decades. Other well-known cases include "Seamus" by Pink Floyd, and Norah Jones's "Man of the Hour" (Milano, 2023).

If the dogs themselves weren't available to bark in a recording booth, many artists still went on to write about their furry friends, bestowing them with fame and public endearment. These songs were also an enticing way to market intimate information. The pups had something legions of fans could never achieve — the closest of friendships with mainstream celebrities. And so audiences listened eagerly to songs revealing detail about relationships one could only dream of experiencing.

The Beatles profess their love for Paul McCartney's Sheepdog on "Martha My Dear" (Milano, 2023). Cat Stevens's single "I Love My Dog" became his first UK hit (Milano, 2023). Carrie Underwood proudly declares "the more boys I meet, the more I love my dog" (McEwan & Kennedy, 2007). And who could forget Kaiser Chiefs' "Ruby"? Once widely believed to be a catchy tune about unrequited love, drummer Nick Hodgson now admits that it was in fact written about his Labrador, Ruby (Geraghty, 2023).

One can argue that this is an age old occurrence. Anthropomorphisation of dogs as we understand the process today dates back to "autobiographies" of the 1800s, written in the voice of an animal (Grier, 2016). By the late 1800s, these stories were written in the form of "diaries" detailing the pet's daily lives, much like modern dog influencer social media accounts (Grier, 2016). Popular literature of the era included "Folly Frivolous: A Dog's Diary" by Louise Stockton, and "From the Diary of a Cat" by Edwina Stanton Babcock (Grier, 2016).

We know it doesn't end at novels or popular music, with all of the participants interviewed for this project incorporating dogs into their art. Dog influencers belong within the cultural mainstream, and social media ensures they remain there. So how are internet platforms structured to amplify our desire to showcase canines in our creative output?

Across media, content creators will find belonging within imagined communities of like-minded artists. Anthropomorphised characters with an online following allow for the creation of imagined communities that revolve around them. These function as virtual spaces where consumers who share values can connect (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010). Here, the values of community, connection, and shared interest sustain an anthropomorphised personality.

Online communities replicate the offline. Members will seek out human connections over shared values within an imagined community, just as they would at the dog park. Often, one's real-world relationship with their dog dictates that they locate human friendships where such dog-human relations are held in high regard (Hänninen, 2021). On an individual level, different parties will bond over their mutual affection for their pets. These community members typically hold a "humanistic" perspective towards dogs (Maddox, 2021).

Participants interviewed encouraged a sense of community. Lindridge's "Doggy Bloggy" and O'Brien or Keogh's social media platforms provided spaces for avid consumers of their media to interact (Lindridge, 2022; O'Brien, 2024; Keogh, 2024). Social media supports the creation of imagined communities, and those with interest in dogs amplify canine-related content in their interactions.

Lastly, popular culture is a reflection of art and content that makes us *feel*. At the heart of a dog influencer's following is an individual's emotional attachment to their pet, with features similar to that of human attachment theory frameworks (Hänninen, 2021). Dog-human relationships are symbiotic in nature, meaning both parties benefit (Holbrook & Woodside, 2008). Be it "caregiving", or "loyalty" that humans enjoy from these relationships — we like to see it depicted in art. Such art is made with the intention of prompting viewers to feel something, and draw meaning from it. Any content featuring man's best friend naturally evokes an emotional response.

In 1432, Jan van Eyck painted his "Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife", which would later become a well-known Renaissance piece (Dickinson, 2024). The couple look to each other in an act of devotion. Their terrier looks to the viewer.

In 2018, Thomas and Louis celebrate their glamorous wedding. Dog fashion influencer Tika, their Italian Greyhound, looks to the camera (Shapiro, 2023). Over a million followers rejoice. The sentiment is the same.

Tika The Iggy, 2023
Source: https://shorturl.at/akq08

Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife by J. Van Eyck, 1434

From Renaissance paintings to the mediated mutts on one's Instagram, dogs are embedded in popular culture. The multimodality and ubiquity of dog influencers only cements their significance.

2. Salient Themes

2.1 The Feel Good Effect

"Joy marketing" campaigns are created with the intent to leave consumers with a sense of positivity (Lightfoot, 2022). They also concern evoking the emotion of "warmth", which consumers are thought to feel both mentally and physically in relation to attractive branding mascots, and affectionate relationships (Aaker, 1986). Joy marketing frames a product as paramount in bringing much-needed happiness to the consumer (Dagostino, 2022). But it should simultaneously make the consumer *feel good* about themselves and their purchase, inspiring one to perceive themselves as valued within the eyes of a brand (Dagostino, 2022).

Dogs themselves easily demonstrate the feel-good effect, and are the embodiment joy of marketing. In general, their social media accounts exclusively portray affectionate relationships (either between dog and owner, or dog and viewer). Dogs as mascots naturally evoke feelings of endearment, because our relationship with them tends to be one of mutual emotional attachment (Hänninen, 2021).

Maddox (2021) cites the desire to “spark joy” as a recurring theme seen amongst those who run dog Instagram accounts (Maddox, 2021). Making viewers feel good is viewed as an act of resistance against different types of online “dominant toxicity”, or hegemonic power structures that support trends opposing the value of joy (Maddox, 2021). This is elaborated upon when discussing counter-culture. But upon further inspection, joy is in fact a contest. Heightening our instinctively positive perceptions of particular dogs means these profiles will receive more engagement, and possess wider reach. And so joy becomes a differentiator in measuring a product against its competition (Dagostino, 2022).

In order to become the dog influencer account (or mascot on any platform) with the *widest* reach, one must be perceived as bringing more joy than their competitors. “Cuteness” is cited as the ultimate means to secure social capital within the internet spaces that dog influencers exist (Maddox, 2021). But joy is just as powerful, and the feel-good effect is therefore of great significance.

So what branding techniques can we identify when dog influencer accounts market their characters in a fashion that makes viewers feel positive, warm, and fuzzy?

Firstly, big corporations are expected to contribute to public dialogue in positive ways — not just give of their profits, but their ability to ignite individual action (Lightfoot, 2022). Campaigns that motivate consumers to take action are harnessed as a technique in strengthening the brand’s bond with their audience.

Participants interviewed in this project took calls for action very seriously, the majority using their platforms in the hopes that they could create change. Photographers Emma O’Brien and Sarah Keogh featured in my article, *Canines & Cameras,* located on the website (O’Brien, 2024; Keogh, 2024). Both professionals described their desire to “make a difference” through their work, and aimed to spread positivity. O’Brien even went so far as to state that she prefers photographing “pre-adopted” dogs. This way, there is no uncertainty over their fate for consumers of her media, and they are promised a “happy ending”. She removes any possibility of losing viewers to unpredictability by determining the end to a narrative before it begins.

Not only does this aggressive approach to positivity benefit shelter dogs and inspire further action from their communities, but it cements the user’s positive perceptions of creatives they follow. “#AdoptDontShop” is a particular principle within the dog influencer community that many will find controversial. By supporting it, these photographers are able to identify a target market within their imagined community, and enforce an even stronger bond with specific consumers of their media.

Secondly, joy marketing positioned as an act of resistance is a technique that translates to social and financial capital. As mentioned above, pet influencers of Instagram lean heavily on this approach to content creation. Dog content must remain consistently happy and positive in order to detract from perceived internet “toxicity” that users feel subjected to

(Maddox, 2021). Lena's full quote can be found on this project's website under *Wildly Wired: The Making of Celebrity Sausage Dogs.*

> "Once, a lady messaged me and said, "Thank you, I just saw your picture, and it just made my day!" And those kinds of things — it's so nice to hear that. And yeah, [the dogs] are not involved in any politics and stuff. I don't want to get involved in that." (Lena Boness, 2022)

Dog influencer accounts of Instagram typically centre this positivity within the "cute economy", producing visual content that suggests innocence, purity, a being in need of care and empathy (Maddox, 2021). In this cultural exchange, the content producer curates a cute and positive experience to meet consumers emotional and entertainment needs (Maddox, 2021). The consumer must give of themselves, and provide emotional labour when interacting with visuals. Sharing the content (and therefore the positivity) is encouraged, and so the consumer also acts as a provider of social capital. "Cuteness" itself becomes a social transaction, a concept which both consumers and creators labour for. By monetising content, social capital is transformed into financial capital (Maddox, 2021).

We can therefore liken the feel-good effect to capital itself. The feel-good effect drives both labour and financial growth. But it is a unique kind of social capital that cannot exist without something to oppose. Positivity is always positioned as an act of resistance. The feel-good effect is reactive, applied against forces of perceived dominant toxicity. This reactivity means joy marketing is also a power struggle.

2.2 The Feel Good Effect and Counter-Culture

When one refers to dominant toxicity trends, they invoke the existence of hegemonic power structures that pet influencers seek to resist (Maddox, 2021). These are trends that lie in opposition to content that embodies values of joy and positivity. Attempts to populate Instagram with dominant toxicity may look like trends that engage in world politics, inauthenticity, or general negativity (Maddox, 2021).

So if shock tactics are a toxicity trend, content that makes people feel positive about the same situation is the preferred means to market a cause. If O'Brien and Keogh portray shelter dogs in cute, humorous ways as opposed to sad animals in an abusive environment, their joy marketing secures social capital amongst their audience, and the content is more likely to be shared within their imagined communities. O'Brien's sentiments can be found within the article *Canines & Cameras* on this project's website.

> "I think there's a lot of compassion fatigue. And you know what, people go on socials to entertain. They don't go on socials to be depressed. I think sometimes shocking people works to get a message out . . . but I'm not I'm not really in the business of trying to make people unhappy with the work I make. And I'm also quite conscious that whatever I create, if I want to get it out it has to be very shareable." (Emma O'Brien, 2022)

Lena Boness suggests general political turmoil is a toxicity trend, something that she does not wish to engage with online. Images of her cute dachshunds are produced as a direct reaction against that (Boness, 2024).

But approaches to joy marketing in traditional advertising campaigns (as opposed anthropomorphised Instagram personalities) tend to frame positivity and cuteness within

human value systems, rather than an internet economy laden with diverse toxicity trends. There is little exchange or complex relationship to mediated interactions, and less opportunity for a power struggle. Rather, advertisers provide an animal that is viewed in a positive light, and consumers follow suit by attaching these perceptions to the advertised product (Loudenback, 2021). Dogs are said to be sought out in advertising for their overwhelmingly positive public perception, “apolitical” stance, and consistency in “moral code” (Loudenback, 2021). The reaction is against humans themselves, rather than their infinite internet toxicities. Consumers then transfer positive ideas associated with the mascot onto a product or service. And traits of stability, reliability, and consistency are highlighted in its brand personality, ensuring financial capital is secured.

Participants who were less dependent on Instagram illustrate this approach. Toyota’s Buddy The Boxer was not produced as a reaction against negativity, but rather in support of a pre-established brand image (Nahana Communications Group, 2009). Similarly, Lindridge’s use of multiple platforms (Instagram, blogs, but predominantly picture books) exists to broadcast a singular sentiment across audiences (Lindridge, 2022; Lindridge, 2024). As a multimodal creator, she has crafted a system that almost exclusively supports and simplifies the message that one must have empathy for animals. Her characters have personalities both inside and outside of books — with social media providing a glimpse into their “real lives”. Readers are prompted to identify with them, or perhaps humanise them. No counter-culture can be pin-pointed in this messaging. The character’s anthropomorphic identities do not appear to resist any dominant trends.

A distinct difference in internet marketing versus other campaigning is the need to establish resistance against a targeted counter-culture. Dog influencers occupying spaces other than Instagram appear less invested in rebuttal. The feel-good effect is set about by multimodal artists that refute no ideology in particular. There is a lack of counter-culture here.

Joy marketing and the feel-good effect is very effective in conjunction with any sorts of advertising or mediated interactions involving dog influencers. But successful multimodal artists prove that complex relationships found within internet economies, as well as targeted rebuttals don’t heighten the feel-good effect. Joy isn’t quantifiable, and sometimes a neutral stance is enough to garner attention.

2.3 Sensationalism In Imagery

“Visually sensationalistic” is an apt way to describe the works of professional photographers and Instagram influencers alike. Sensationalism in imagery can look like overdramatised photographs (such as those taken with fisheye lenses), or anything that causes pets to appear “unnatural”, contradicting the ideal of authenticity.

Photographers Emma O’Brien and Sarah Keogh draw attention to a dog’s most prominent attributes in their work, such as overly large ears, or bushy tails (O’Brien, 2024; Keogh, 2024). Fisheye lenses are deemed particularly useful in enhancing the animal’s features, making for a striking visual. These are not shot from a natural viewpoint, but often from beneath, making the animal appear even more cartoonish.

Similarly, Oscar’s Arc purposefully crafts ridiculous imagery of shelter dogs photoshopped into humorous outfits (Oscar’s Arc, 2024). Founder Joanne Lefson has done this with the intention of garnering as much attention as possible. The presentation of an amusing outfit coupled with a dog’s unusual name against a bright backdrop makes the organisation instantly recognisable across media platforms. If a photograph of a dog is shared —

there's no doubt he resides at Oscar's Arc. This intense joy marketing makes them stand out on social media against a sea of cute canines.

Tori Stowe's caricatures and illustrations in Lindridge's book capture the dog's most prominent features, making them appear extraordinary (Lindridge, 2022). This might be their short legs, or loud bark. As a result, the characters are easily recognisable across her platforms, and differentiated from each other.

Influencer subculture in of itself places great value on content visibility (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). With many influencers competing for user's attention, sensationalism is a way in which influencers can craft high follower-to-follower ratios, and increase the sharing of content. These tactics ensure accounts remain visible, relevant, and able to compete within the cute economy.

Interestingly, dog influencers are an influencer subculture that purports to refrain from sensationalism, as this falls into trends of dominant toxicity, specifically *inauthenticity* (Maddox, 2021). Authenticity encompasses values of faith, sincerity, truthfulness and transparency (Morhart *et al*., 2015; Södergren, 2021). So when sensationalism distorts these values, content risks being labeled "inauthentic". This means tension between a brand's projection of cultural authority and what is perceived to be true by consumers have prevailed (Södergren, 2021).

Toyota experienced a case of sensationalism distorting perceived authenticity. The brand's Buddy mascot was always well-received by South African audiences (Nahana Communications Group, 2009). On the project website, Tian van der Heever tells the story of the character being used in a radio advertisement, and recorded singing *Jingle Bells*. It was initially enjoyed by consumers, but when DJs played it on heavy rotation, it irritated the public. Eventually, the advertisement lost all credibility as it no longer appeared innovative or sincere. This reflected poorly on the Toyota brand, and it lost the ability to dictate cultural authority in the vehicle market during the holiday season.

So how do O'Brien, Keogh, Lindridge, and Oscars Arc escape criticism? It is seen that imagery of dogs is usually dramatised within the bounds of being a "decontextualised pet". This is an animal on social media that shows few direct ties to an identifiable human owner and their beliefs or ideologies (Maddox, 2021).

Lena Boness was particularly concerned with remaining "apolitical", and bringing joy to fans through Hunter and Ella's account (Boness, 2024). This is how many dog influencer creators recognise "sensationalism" — overwhelming and provocative in terms of messaging rather than visual stimuli. A decontextualised pet could never appear inauthentic. Her dogs dress up in many fantastical outfits, including Christmas reindeer and Halloween ghosts. But the real scare is *politics,* which she wouldn't dare engage in. Unbelievable imagery has a place within the cute economy, but sensationalism that falls under an ideological standpoint does not.

This is not to say that imagery cannot be sensationalistic, but the drama is widely accepted because it is coded as positive, a means of joy marketing. For O'Brien, this is because *less is more.* "Compassion fatigue" is experienced by her social media followers when exposed to too much dramatised content, especially if these are images of homeless dogs in need. But fatigue is never expressed in relation to her quirky photographs of cheerful dogs. Only shock tactics and stories deemed depressing are unappealing. Dramatic

visuals are enjoyed, but not in combination with dramatic messaging that uses sensationalism to guilt viewers, or sway their opinion.

2.4 Collaborative Anthropomorphism

Creative collaborations underpin the success of modern narrative branding campaigns and transmedia stories. In the case of this project, creatives are often collaborating to build an anthropomorphised personality. This is a typical feature of narrative branding campaigns. Consumers are also given the opportunity to contribute to a narrative, and project their own narrative experiences onto the brand, affecting how it is viewed (Aaker and Fournier, 1995).

Two of O'Brien's most notable projects utilised the creative input of others to bestow distinct identities onto dogs. *The Black Series* incorporated imagined attributes from strangers who came across dog photographs on "Bored Panda", an entertainment news website (O'Brien, 2019). Users commented on images of the shelter dogs, eager to provide the perfect descriptions.

Her book, *Mutts*, featured stories from those who knew the photographed pups best — their humans (O'Brien, 2018). Here, collaboration was more personal and individualised, rather than open to the public. It made for a more intimate portrayal of distinctive personalities as this wasn't merely speculation, but what owners had witnessed.

A highly recognisable or *salient* personality is what Tian van der Heever (located within *The Buzz on Buddy* on this project's website) has in mind when creating campaigns. "One of the most useful distinctive assets you can have is a character", he insists. This is a primary function of brand image — to differentiate something from competition by way of its attributes, functional consequences, and symbolic meanings (Padgett & Allen, 1997). Toyota's Buddy mascot holds a high degree of salience, differentiating him from any kind of competition. But this isn't just due to his unique character design. He is also a distinctive asset because of the controlled way in which consumers contribute to the narrative.

In transmedia stories, collaboration is often initiated by consumers of the product (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). Fans of Buddy The Boxer purchased bumper stickers, projecting their own positive narrative experiences onto the brand. Putting Buddy on their cars also identified people as being invested in the brand. These fans could then easily connect with each other, and form imagined communities online.

While the Buddy brand is inseparable from his anthropomorphic appearance (a dog face with a human mouth), his character makeup is a straightforward projection of human qualities that remain largely static. He is designed to be unchanging. Consumers contribute only to the narrative that surrounds him, created by Tian and his team. This is unlike the very public collaboration that is *The Black Series,* whereby an anthropomorphised personality's brand image can change daily depending on what consumers invent (O'Brien, 2019).

Consumer contribution to the narrative is also typically seen on social media. But "collaborative anthropomorphism" takes this interaction one step further when the character's distinctive personality and their narrative is developed altogether through the process of collaboration. O'Brien and van der Heever give consumers a starting point. *The Black Series,* with portraits of a character or a pre-determined brand image that users have the ability to remodel (O'Brien, 2019). Buddy, with his scripted adventures and static

appearance (Toyota South Africa, 2022). But some creatives allow consumers a blank canvas.

In *Sound Hounds,* located on this project's website*,* I explored how pet influencers contribute to music technology. Artists such as The Kiffness crafted electronic music from the sounds made by people's dogs and cats who had landed themselves on social media (Scott, 2021). Users tagged him in content they saw fit, directing him to particular imagery, and requested certain musical attributes to be incorporated into the media. The tracks created then become intrinsically linked to the animal, as users come to know them from their involvement in the music. Positive perceptions of the viral event are transferred onto the pet, and consumers share the content however they like. The Kiffness is a conduit for user's creative ideas.

It can be argued that this is simply the result of "brand fiction" being extended into narratives that play out on social media. Scolari (2009) asserts that narrative worlds become a brand in their own right, instead of brands only being situated within a transmedia story. This is problematised by the existence of place semiotics and emplacement (Scollon and Scollon, 2003; Jewitt *et al*., 2016). Brands that are heavily intertwined with social media narratives may not have the opportunity to exist outside of their internet narrative. "Alugalug cat" may never establish their own brand image, and cannot be divorced from The Kiffness on social media (Scott, 2021).

The Black Series certainly shows a fictional narrative that becomes a dog's anthropomorphised personality, or their own unique brand. Similarly, social media's furry hitmakers, like Buddy Mercury, cannot be separated from the collaboratively projected narrative that personifies them as creative beings (Jardine & Cingrana, 2017).

3. Unpacking the relationship between Narrative Branding, Dog Influencers, and Modern Media

3.1 Framing Animal Agency & Consent

Aristotle famously philosophised "agency" as something that enabled one to take action, and provide autonomy (Weissman, 2020). While his ideas have been critiqued, they are still very much relevant today. Even dog influencers and mediated canine personalities attempt to uphold this basic sense of agency, a standard that humans occupy.

In the article titled *Sound Hounds* on this project's website, I examine how animals may possess "agency", but not in the same ways humans conceptualise it. They show joy, sadness, or discomfort with their body language to indicate a sense of consent (Blattner, 2021). They show preference in selecting favourite foods, toys, or spots where they like to be petted. This isn't a "choice" or "agency" as humans can exert, and animals will never fit into human frameworks for consent and ownership.

We know that recognition of "agency" and "consent" of sorts is unlikely because animals generally find themselves in restrictive environments, and granting them "rights" to exercise could have potentially disastrous effects on many industries — particularly agriculture (Blattner, 2021; Galer, 2017).

Further, Blattner (2021) explores how the Universal Declaration of Human Rights suggests various essential, "guaranteed" rights for people. A lack of research into animal's self-willed action, coupled with their classification as property under most international laws, means ethical and legal frameworks to protect them are never formed. Only human values are

validated in our human world. “Modified agency” doesn’t fit into these systems, however much we project human values onto our pets. In the world of pet influencers, this irony creates fascinating conflict.

Instagram appears to be a magical place where animals have agency, and are able to give consent. Maddox (2021) examines users who assume their dog’s identity through an Instagram page, and create the illusion of agency. This is largely shown through language (speaking in first person, use of “petfluencer” online lingo). But even those who do not assume their pet’s identity create a fictitious world where animals have free will. Simply by anthropomorphising a personality, dog influencers assume human values online and across medias.

Participants who used Instagram personified their dogs visually through dress up, photography that evokes emotion, and capturing common actions shared with human counterparts (sleeping, communicating, eating). Other forms of media, such as music, film and illustration, also aimed to capture distinctly “human” actions (singing, smiling). This can be closely linked to how we view human agency and expression. We differentiate humans through their personality, appearance, and abilities. Dogs can only show us their appearance — personality and ability is subjective to the viewer. And so these things must be imposed through brand image.

Lena Boness describes her dachshunds as “crazy”, but their Instagram only shows them being energetic in relation to agility training, where they complete obstacle courses (Boness, 2024). Rather, Hunter and Ella’s portraits show them sitting still for the camera, and behaving in a consistently calm manner (Boness, 2024). This choice does not reflect on the dog’s agency, who weren’t able to have their authentic selves represented. Instead, Lena has crafted their brand personality to appear more obedient. She ensures they are also viewed as athletic, because they are only filmed being energetic when sporting. They have no ability to exert agency in their portrayal. The dogs are also photographed partaking in human activities like dress-up, and watching rugby games, giving the impression of free will (Boness, 2024).

The illusion is essential in making the phenomena of decontextualised pet believable (Maddox, 2021). Nobody can have independence without agency, and so in order to portray an animal that has no relationship to a human, they must first be anthropomorphised to a degree that would make human independence believable.

Buddy The Boxer is a dog that communicates with viewers as if he were human (Toyota South Africa, 2022). He speaks, possesses an ever-growing knowledge regarding Toyota vehicles, and often partakes in activities without an owner present. He has autonomy, and takes action in human ways.

Of course, depicting Buddy as autonomous also supports his status as a *decontextualised pet*, or an animal that possesses few ties to human owners in their online representations (Maddox, 2021). This type of character is generally preferred as a brand mascot because consumers do not associate the “decontextualised” animal with feelings towards a particular human, their beliefs, or ideology that could impact the brand negatively. Viewers also have more freedom in drawing meaning from representative imagery, and are not restricted when called on to contribute to the narrative. Further, a dog influencer that appears to possess a high degree of agency often exhibits baseline physical similarities to humans. Connell (2013) asserts that this makes the character more likely to resonate with consumers.

Agency and consent is framed through the application of human values and actions. It is seen that human values are assigned in descriptive language, seemingly parallel action, and a general desire to replicate autonomy.

Lastly, a human-like existence is also referenced through the opportunity to take action in one's narrative. In the real world, only humans can take part in narratives as protagonists. Sometimes human narratives are imposed on dogs in order for the animal to become a protagonist, as Lefson manufactured in her book about Oscar (Lefson, 2010). But a dog cannot command their own story. However, this can be circumvented when operating within influencer subculture. Online dog influencers are always positioned as protagonists that carve out their own narratives. Users do not centre them as appendages, or the muse to a human influencer. They are bestowed their own Instagram accounts with the intention of building a narrative around their very own anthropomorphised personality. Participants crafted their dog characters in music, advertising/film, and children's stories in the same manner.

3.2 Dogs as Moral Children

A specific kind of personified existence is created to fit online portrayals of dog autonomy. Agency is often framed as if it belongs to that of a child, not an adult human. This is perhaps to make the mediated world in which animal agency exists appear more authentic.

Those behind pet influencer accounts are usually "fur baby" identifiers and reflect a love for their pet in their own online self-representations as "fur parents" (Maddox, 2021). Creators perceive themselves as *parents* as opposed to *owners* of a dog, and engage in activities that provide an opportunity to construct the image of a family (Greenebaum, 2004). Naturally, a baby must be represented to portray this dynamic. And so the status of an owner is elevated to a parent, while the status of the dog is elevated to that of a human baby (Greenebaum, 2004). When we consider that the emotional bond between a dog and their caregiver is similar to that of mother and child, such online role-playing becomes very real (Hänninen, 2021). Further, children themselves harbour a close relationship to their pets, with 67% saying that these animals are their best friend (Bizcommunity, 2017). Kids personify their pets as human-like equivalents.

Decontextualised pets can still fit into this dynamic, as users attempt to strike a balance between intimate and depersonalised content (Maddox, 2021, p. 3333-3334). In fact, they fit in the same way a human child is personified into adulthood online. Babies do not typically take up an idealogical standpoint on the internet, or have opinions. But they can be made to appear autonomous. Dressing up, having an adult narrate their adventures in the first person, even "growing up" on film with the incorporation of "#ThrowbackThursday" images. Lena Boness (2024) engages in all these trends with her dogs on their Instagram page.

Dogs are also framed as child-like in their creativity. This project's article *Sound Hounds* covers child artists, and their guardian's involvement. Children's art is promoted as legitimate, or at the very least entertaining. But it's not afforded the same copyright protection or considerations regarding creative license and consent as adult's work until the child is no longer a minor. Similarly, a creative canine like Buddy Mercury is portrayed as possessing the intention to create music (Jardine & Cingrana, 2017). But his owners will retain copyright and control his performance schedule without his consent.

Although there are no frameworks for creative collaboration between humans and animals, research suggests that many have a basic understanding of art and music (Wassenberg, 2018). This is not as a human comprehends music, but a different conceptualisation of pitch and amplitude that results in an emotional response (Wassenberg, 2018). An animal potentially understands creativity like a small child does.

Framing dogs as moral children solves some problems one may encounter when working within the influencer industry. Creatives often play on dog's "choice" and "desires" to get photographic results. O'Brien and Keogh frequently use treats and peanut butter as acts of "bribery" to ensure dogs perform for the camera. Dogs who were unknowingly used in the creation of music brought exposure to the human artists, and the humans profited financially. If dog influencers were truly anthropomorphised as consenting individuals with agency, these acts would appear exploitative. Dog influencers must remain "human" enough to be enjoyed, but not so human that they can be afforded rights beyond what is considered basic.

Greenebaum's (2004) framing of dogs as children makes potential "manipulation" of dog influencers more palatable. Children have little understanding of rights and values, and cannot advocate for themselves. They receive immediate gratification for acts that may seem exploitative in the long run (like bribery with food). They are also unable to give consent, but still fit into human frameworks for copyright and creative license as they grow up to receive rights.

Dogs do not grow up to receive rights. But framing them as children solves this moral quandary. Dog influencers are not able to take action as humans would, but they have about as much autonomy as a child, and can therefore be viewed as human-like. Keogh even draws parallels in her approach to dealing with dog influencers on set. She is quoted on this project's website under *Canines & Cameras.*

> "If you're impatient or you want to rush it, you're never going to get a decent shot. Because dogs are unpredictable like kids. You can't push kids [or] dogs to pose for you. They're going to do what they want to do. They run on their own schedules." (Sarah Keogh, 2022).

It wasn't long ago that children in film and social media content had no frameworks with regards to consent, creative license and copyright. Through acts such as Coogan laws in the USA, children are able to receive profits to be used towards their welfare (Wong, 2019). This begs the questions; Will there ever be legal framework or regulations applied to dog influencers who work online? And, further, how can consumers ensure their welfare?

Children have no ethical frameworks at all with regards to online anthropomorphism, and drawing parallels between dogs and children does not protect one's pets. In 2016, reality television show *Dr Phil* ran an episode on "digital kidnapping", causing a stir amongst viewers of mainstream media (Robinson, 2016). A Facebook user named Ashley was confronted by the concerned parents of the children she had essentially anthropomorphised into her own (Robinson, 2016). From newborn babies up until the age of four years old, the twin girls' photographs were collected by Ashley — a stranger to whom they had no relation. She gave them new names, new personas, new familial relatives, new stories, and new lives through her own Facebook account. The twin girls became entirely new personalities online. Ashely even framed pictures of them around her

house. This isn't illegal, nor considered to be stalking as the images were collected from a public forum.

I use this as an example of internet activities that can have potentially disastrous effects on an anthropomorphised personality. Digital kidnapping has no real world consequences for dogs, and none for children until they are old enough to understand notions of consent and privacy. But it does mean everyone's mediated selves are vulnerable. The picture we project of ourselves or other beings is always in danger of being manipulated online in infinite ways. From a marketing perspective, it is concerning that a well-received brand personality can be harmed. If thought to be legitimate by audiences, the manipulated mascot reflects poorly on the brand.

The incident evokes more questions beyond the scope of this paper. Should the process of attaching personality to something be regulated online? Is it possible to regulate who is able to anthropomorphise other people's children, dogs, or property? Is there a "moral" way to anthropomorphise living beings who have no agency in the matter?

These questions aren't just relevant to pet influencers, but significant to anything subject to online anthropomorphism. When dealing with a non-tangible attribute that is one's online personality, brands and digital marketers alike should be aware that anthropomorphised personalities are easily stolen and transformed into something that better represents a new self-appointed creator. This certainly isn't consumer contribution to a narrative as Jenkins intended it (Jenkins, 2007). As moral children, dog influencer personalities are equally at risk of digital kidnapping, and therefore a tarnished brand image.

3.3 Negotiating Self-Representation

As stated above, Maddox (2021) examines a delicate balance between overt self-representation and more depersonalised content on pet influencer pages. Dog influencers must remain true to being a *decontextualised pet* (Maddox, 2021).

Participants like Lena did not attempt overt self-representation through their Instagram account, never showing imagery of themselves, and only speaking of humans in relation to the dog's lives (Boness, 2024). Professional photographers O'Brian and Keogh attempted self-representation in their selection of project (preference for charity work and assisting shelter dogs), as well as creative choices (fisheye lenses, artistic silhouettes). However, they are largely bound by client's wants, and consumer contribution to their character's narrative. The anthropomorphic personalities that these works involve often feature decontextualised pets, meaning they cannot take on human ideals or beliefs about the world (Maddox, 2021). They must remain neutral in their ideological stance. So how is this negotiated?

Toyota's Buddy campaign features advertisements that include Buddy's owners, but their faces are never shown (Marketingmixmag, 2010). Buddy is the only identifiable recurring character. Similarly, Tori Stowe and Jennifer Lindridge collaborated to infuse what they perceived to be strong personality traits into illustrations of the dogs (Lindridge, 2022). But these characters had few ties to a human world, showing anthropomorphism in their own actions, but never next to a person. The exception is Oscar, whose book of adventures with Lefson meant his character could never be separated from the human's narrative (Lefson, 2010).

Online, a pet that is not deemed sufficiently depersonalised does not have a high degree of "templatability". Lack of templatability means users cannot easily engage in trends

(Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). This affects how content can be shared and monetised. But a low degree of templatability can be an asset, and ensure a character and their narrative is unique, or "authentic". True "authenticity" is what content creators strive for, and may be achieved by resisting dominant trends (Maddox, 2021).

Leaver *et al* (2020) refers to "aesthetics of self-representation" in negotiating these relationships. I believe these negotiations take place across multimodal medias, as creators grapple with the degree to which they are able to represent themselves or their interests through an anthropomorphised personality. On the one hand, they can craft a brand image with low templatability that is unique, and possesses authenticity. On the other, they can craft a generic character with high templatability, and easily build high follower-to-follower ratios, going viral (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020).

The concept of authenticity once denoted refuting conformity and the embodiment of the intrinsic self, rather than the version of sincerity it has come to imply (Södergren, 2021). It is interesting that the advent of multimodal media has lead us back to this notion. Incorporating social media into multimodal narratives is commonplace for today's brands. A brand personality can either be truly authentic and rebel against conformity, or *project* an illusion of political and cultural authority that consumers accept to be sincere (Södergren, 2021).

Refuting conformity on the internet is an act of resistance, and complicates "aesthetics of self-representation". When a creator decides to rebel against homogenous trends and aesthetic boundaries, they compromise their audience's view of the brand as authentic. When a brand no longer appears to be sincere, it risks decreasing purchase intentions, decreasing likelihood of consumer forgiveness, and losing its buffer against scandal (Papadopoulou *et al*., 2023).

Oscar can be identified as the only dog influencer in this project that doesn't at least attempt negotiating overt self-representation with depersonalisation, or balancing concepts like templatability and being a decontextualised pet. In other words, he takes a stand. Lefson (2010) has crafted an anthropomorphised personality through her book that may be considered isolating for entirely representing her human viewpoints and ideological beliefs. Their adventures together include promoting Veganism, The "#AdoptDontShop" movement, abusing the service dog industry by "registering" Oscar as a guide dog, and flippantly disregarding the law of many a country they visited. Albeit in defence of a good cause, a browse of this book's Goodreads reviews shows that these shenanigans riled up readers (Goodreads, 2024).

The anthropomorphised mascot that is Oscar isn't for everyone. He speaks to an audience that holds an ofttimes perverse sense of humour. Luckily, Oscar spent time in the limelight largely before the advent of Instagram, and the potentially volatile nature of social media discourse (Lefson, 2010). One cannot surmise whether the wider Oscar and Lefson brand image (including Oscar's Arc, Farm Sanctuary SA, and Pigcasso) would have been as successful if conjured up today. Or whether it would have received such a high degree of consumer forgiveness, and authenticity ratings. However, Oscar's brand personality certainly refutes conformity — which may eventually impact its longevity negatively by way of isolating consumers.

3.4 Fundamental Technique in Narrative Branding

While much of the above constitutes narrative branding, I would like to highlight some key features of narrative branding and transmedia or multimodal storytelling that

anthropomorphic personalities employ. I also detail some of these key concepts on the project's website, located within the article *It's a Dog's World: The Buddy Universe As A Narrative Branding Case Study.* Ultimately, dog influencers as anthropomorphised personalities harness narrative branding in a near identical way to traditional advertisers.

Brand image or personality encourages consumers to attach meaning to the ways in which a brand or its mascot "behaves". Personified action, and human traits or values inform this process (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). So brand personality has come to imply a particular set of characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). The Buddy brand is a great example of a this, with a group of characteristics being viewed from a narrative perspective. Buddy's personality is extended to Toyota, and the values applied strengthen consumer's positive perceptions of the brand (Nahana Communications Group, 2009). The dog is given many monologues, and finds himself in various situations on television that allow for the opportunity to demonstrate these values. Through televised narratives, viewers observe that both Buddy and Toyota's "personalities" consist of traits such as loyalty, trustworthiness, companionship, and excellence. If these qualities are continually ingrained in viewers, the brand is easily differentiated from competition, and appears superior.

It is implied that consumers naturally engage in narrative thought when perceiving brand personality. After all, stories are fundamental to the way in which we see the world, and how humans derive meaning from information around them (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). All dog influencers strive to make a point through their art and content. For Lefson and Lindridge, it was illustrating the plight of shelter dogs, and highlighting the "#AdoptDontShop" movement (Lefson, 2010; Lindridge, 2022). Their adult and children's narratives alike make sense of factual information for readers. They also make sad narratives entertaining, increasing awareness around these topics by bringing them to consumers who otherwise would not be invested. A multimodal approach allows such consumers to deepen their involvement with the issue (Moloney, 2019).

Viewers are often made to perceive brands or their mascots as "taking action" within narratives (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). Action provides opportunities for values to be assigned, so consumers may infer brand personality. Jennifer Lindridge does this brilliantly, ensuring each of her children's book characters are illustrated in action, or enjoying a specific activity (Lindridge, 2022). This makes them unique and recognisable, differentiated from other characters. It also strengthens their anthropomorphised personalities, making characters appear authentic, and evoking an emotional response from readers. This ultimately strengthens her goal of exposing children to values associated with "#AdoptDontShop".

Lastly, narrative branding and transmedia stories provide opportunities for consumers to contribute to a narrative (Jenkins, 2007). This technique has been mentioned throughout the paper, and is especially prevalent on social media, where consumers are encouraged to "interact" with the brand. For example, Hunter and Ella's adventures are posted on Instagram to be commented on (Boness, 2024). Followers may provide feedback, request particular content, and generally inform a narrative as Lena must cater to their wants in building her platform. Toyota's Buddy brand consumers indicate their positive perceptions of the character by engaging in actions that identify them as fans. This included purchasing bumper stickers, or crocheting their own lookalike plush toys. Positive feedback ensured that Buddy's narrative would continue.

3.5 Fundamental Technique in Transmedia Storytelling & Multimodal Narrative
Transmedia stories typically feature components of fiction that are dispersed across delivery platforms or mediums (Jenkins, 2007). Each component will contribute something new to the larger narrative, and deepen consumer's knowledge of the story (Rampazzo, 2020). The Toyota-Buddy campaign consists of many short televised advertisements that all make sense to viewers individually, but build a bigger picture when examined together. His story takes place across the platforms of television, radio, and newspapers/print media. This is ordinary for modern advertising campaigns. Different modes no longer appear in isolation, and are usually used in conjunction (Jewitt *et al*., 2016).

Transmedia stories also retain a high degree of synergy in their creation (Jenkins, 2007). Various sectors that were once distinct media industries have consolidated as the boundaries between marketing and entertainment diminish. Transmedia or multimodal narratives reflect the process of media consolidation (Jenkins, 2007). For example, all of the anthropomorphised personalities featured in this project make use of social media to promote their narratives — not exclusively for advertising purposes, but to deepen consumer knowledge of the narrative. Lindridge posts Instagram pictures of the real dogs her book characters are based off of (Lindridge, 2024). Toyota South Africa encourages YouTube uploads of old Buddy campaigns from unofficial sources for fans to bond over (Marketingmixmag, 2010).

Another goal of transmedia stories is that of maintaining an audience over long periods of time (Jenkins, 2007). Extending the narrative across platforms makes for multiple points of entry into the story, and easier marketing to a more diverse consumer base. This may incorporate different age groups, gender identity, class, or particular mediums (Jenkins, 2007). Toyota's Buddy campaign has released television advertisements twelve years apart, confident that a younger generation will enjoy the same character (Toyota South Africa, 2022). They can also now access the advertisements on Youtube, whereas older fans could not do so. Pigcasso (found within the article *Ahound The World: Lessons In Advertising & Animal Activism* on this project's website) maintains her audience by utilising multiple points of entry that target different age groups and sectors of society. Her book and paintings are largely aimed at tourists and visitors to the sanctuary. Pigcasso's chocolate chip cookies were sold at Woolworths in a stylishly-painted tin with her artwork and story on it, attractive to local kids and adults (Abillion, 2022).

This approach motivates consumers to develop flexible interests, as narratives may even expose them to new media platforms and fans who share their interest in the stories (Jenkins, 2007). If enough interest is generated, the works retain visibility. Lindridge's books are aimed at children (Lindridge, 2022). But parents may discover her Instagram page and blogs through the books, where they can connect with other likeminded parents.

Jenkins (2007) asserts that narratives must sometimes leave consumers with "gaps" to be explored in unfolding stories. Encouraging speculation is incentive for discussion. None of the anthropomorphised personalities examined in this project left gaps intentionally, although it can be argued that becoming a decontextualised pet satiates social media user's need for speculation.

Scolari (2009) examines multimodal narratives as stories that express a hierarchy of values acting as content in a fictional world. Every component or medium must reflect these values, some more than others. Particular values are even emphasised to differentiate components. For example, dog influencer Instagram narratives are usually "apolitical", and reflect values such as positivity, companionship, compassion, love, and

empathy. The primary values of an Instagram personality may be positivity, and the desire to remain apolitical. But the same character in a children's book such as Lindridge's will primarily reflect companionship, compassion, love, and empathy. All values are present in each component of the narrative universe, but some are emphasised in certain components for the sake of the narrative. This approach also makes it easier for creators to direct specific information at a target audience who are fond of only one medium or story (Moloney, 2019).

From a semiotics perspective, a brand that expresses values establishes a line of communication between consumers and the brand or company (Scolari, 2009). When consumers accept these values, they deepen their knowledge and involvement in the brand's narrative world. For fans to truly immerse themselves in the Buddy-Toyota campaign, they must accept that Buddy and Toyota share basic values of loyalty and durability.

Lastly, transmedia stories are immersive by nature (Jenkins, 2007). An expansive universe supports interrelated characters and stories. Fans follow the stories as a world continues to expand. The Buddy campaign encourages immersion through an unchanging world that can be added to through his puns and knowledge of cars. Other characters fit into this world, such as a new puppy whom Buddy must educate (Marketingmixmag, 2010). This keeps consumers interested. But ultimately, the narrative universe revolves around Buddy. Hunter and Ella's world expands and viewers watch them explore different spaces, even travelling overseas and meeting other dogs (Boness, 2024). But again, their universe places them at its centre. The "episodes" or mini stories are distinct and expand the universe, but their lives and character are largely unchanged.

Immersion is also enforced by visual and semiotic structures that work together to create meaning across different modes (Jewitt *et al*., 2016). If "cuteness" is a feature of meaning-making, then it is indicated visually by the mode of imagery in which endearing pictures are seen, and semiotically by the mode of language, using jargon specific to an online imagined community. (Users interested in dog influencer subculture might use "doggo" or "fur-friend" to describe their pet).

Social media has enforced highly immersive world-building, giving users a more intimate window into the lives of anthropomorphised personalities. Scolari (2009) identifies the use of "parallel stories" as a means to expand and immerse. Social media may provide a primary narrative, with films or television providing "spinoffs" simultaneously (or vice versa). The world of Snoopy and his "peanuts gang" was once restricted to the primary medium of comics. Now Snoopy appears in movies, television series, and of course Snoopy's own official Instagram page (Snoopygrams, 2024). Social media allows users to interact with the character daily.

Today's dog influencers rely on social media for this intimate connection to fans (although it may not be used as the primary medium from which spinoffs derive). Lena's Hunter and Ella, Buddy, Lindridge's dogs, and musical mutts from artists like The Kiffness are always available, and consistently adding content into their narrative universes (Boness, 2024; Toyota South Africa, 2022; Lindridge, 2024; Scott, 2021). Brands present a range of textures, colours, and styles across modes to differentiate fictional worlds amongst the influx of new content (Scolari, 2009). A fairly obvious example is Lindridge's Instagram narratives as standalone photography, versus caricatures of those characters in children's fiction (Lindridge, 2024; Lindridge, 2022). The style, texture, and colour of visuals are different, despite representing the same mascots.

Immersive world-building with the help of social media also means dog influencers are better personified than ever before across medias. Ubiquitous Instagram and Photoshop-style filters encourage human clothing, “makeup”, and different facial expressions akin to Buddy’s CGI mouth. The assertion that consumers can identify happy-coded imagery of a dog’s eyes and mouth is supported by Park and Kim’s research (Park and Kim, 2021). A smiling dog mascot means consumers perceive the product as better quality, and are more likely to purchase it (Park and Kim, 2021).

Buddy’s smile published in *Lowvelder*, 2022
Source: https://www.citizen.co.za/lowvelder/uncategorized/

This “FaceApp” filter gives your furry friend a human smile.
Posted by Jon Williams on Twitter.
Source: https://shorturl.at/bem06

Conclusions

Advertising techniques drawn from narrative branding literature and studies surrounding mediated influence, in conjunction with social media platforms, make it possible to successfully create anthropomorphised personalities. Dog influencers have occupied the cultural mainstream since at least the 1800s, and continue to do so through the multimodality that the internet encourages. This is largely by way of imagined communities, which provide a network to sustain anthropomorphised personalities (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010). The following themes, techniques and principles support dog influencers in remaining culturally relevant.

1. Salient Themes: Positive Values, Sensational Imagery, and The Spirit of Collaboration

Positive values, sensational imagery, and collaborative anthropomorphism are identified across medias.

Firstly, it was found that joy marketing played a substantial part in attracting followers or media consumers across anthropomorphised personalities. Creatives went out of their way to pursue values of “joy”, “positivity” and “cuteness”. Dog influencer Instagram accounts often strive for these values associated with the cute economy in an attempt to resist hegemonic internet trends of toxicity or inauthenticity (Maddox, 2021). Joy also becomes a differentiator in measuring a product against its competition, with whoever brings the most joy winning over an audience (Dagostino, 2022).

Large corporations are expected to utilise positivity in public dialogue, motivating individual action (Lightfoot, 2022). Small-scale dog influencers also took this to heart, using their platforms to bring awareness to shelter dogs (O’Brien, 2024; Keogh, 2024). In doing so, these creatives strengthened their bond with consumers and social media followers who believed in similar ideals.

When positioned as an act of resistance, joy marketing can translate to social and financial capital. Its reactive nature makes for a power struggle, engaged in by users that provide emotional labour (Maddox, 2021). However, dog influencers that primarily resided on the internet showed a more targeted resistance against a counter-culture. Anthropomorphised personalities that occupied multiple platforms did not vehemently resist any dominant trends in particular.

Ironically, influencer subculture often lends itself to sensationalism, or heightened drama in visual stimuli. This was largely through images or depictions that make dogs appear unnatural (O’Brien, 2024; Keogh, 2024). Sensationalism is necessary in anthropomorphising personalities, making dogs appear overly human-like and easier to personify, as well as attention-grabbing. But it does risk the perceived “fake authenticity” that social media users attempt to resist instead being replicated (Maddox, 2021).

Both anthropomorphised personalities of social media and alternative platforms appeared to deem sensationalistic messaging embedded with an ideology as more contemptuous than dramatic visuals coded as “positive”. In this way, creatives can still attempt to refrain from dominant trends of toxicity. And dramatised visuals, particularly those illustrating action, can then act to differentiate characters and ensure they are recognisable to consumers. Adopting the image of a *decontextualised pet* was helpful in navigating audience perceptions of sensationalism (Maddox, 2021).

Lastly, the process of anthropomorphising a character and personality on Instagram is usually a collaborative effort. This took place between creatives and their clients/subjects, as well as groups of like-minded consumers. Creative collaboration has the positive effects of increased salience for the anthropomorphised personality, and increased opportunity for fans to connect. Consumer contribution to a narrative is encouraged across mediums (Jenkins, 2007).

It can be argued that creative collaboration through social media channels extends the concept of brand fiction from transmedia narratives to modern anthropomorphised personalities. But having multiple creators behind a character also means their anthropomorphised personality may be subject to change, and establishing an unwavering brand image is challenging. When conceptualised through social media, the character's brand image may be limited.

2. Framing Agency and Consent

The technique of framing animal consent, agency, choice, and rights as if these things belong to a human child ensures that the narrative worlds in which anthropomorphised personalities exist appear to be a pleasant place. This is in contrast to the restrictive environments animals experience in reality (Blattner, 2021). Dogs portrayed as moral children also support the construction of a family dynamic that fur parents seek to replicate (Greenebaum, 2004).

If dogs were anthropomorphised into consenting adults with unlimited autonomy, human conduct towards them could appear exploitative. Treating dogs as moral children means that audiences can subconsciously negate any manipulation, forms of bribery, or discomfort the animals are subject to. This is because children are subject to similar treatment, and possess little understanding of their rights in any case. Like children, dogs cannot obtain full consent, copyright for their art, or credit for creativity. In order to remain a decontextualised pet, characters must be perceived as human enough to be relatable and entertaining, but not so human that they are afforded rights. This leaves room for a childlike persona.

Perceived agency can be affected by how creators portray their pets, and how they choose to share content. Publishing and posting specific situations where the pet is seen as being able to exert agency informs viewers of their "personality", which can be inferred from action. Creators are able to craft a personality based on how and when the characters are shown to exercise "agency."

Degree of perceived agency and ability to "consent" dictate whether an anthropomorphised personality is a decontextualised pet (Maddox, 2021). In this fictional world where animals have autonomy, dogs appear to control their own story, and can exist as independent individuals without their owner's assistance. This helps to authentically position the character as a protagonist within their narrative (Lefson, 2010). A dog influencer is validated in a narrative world where they are granted "modified agency" — something that a story designed around human frameworks cannot contain. The dog can assume human values, aiding in baseline physical similarity when occupying spaces as a protagonist (Connell, 2013).

Simply, framing dogs as if they have an agency akin to humans means that man's best friend is afforded luxuries that are only applicable to people. Media consumers can escape the obstructions, or things that prevent our worlds from merging. Our trajectories are

similar, giving consumers or social media followers the illusion that we are closer to our pets than ever before.

But the illusion of agency is fragile. Any branded personality, dogs included, risks digital kidnapping (Robinson, 2016). This begs the question of whether there is a “moral” way to bestow and regulate online anthropomorphism.

3. Negotiating Self-Representation

Creatives behind anthropomorphised personalities must marry their own creative direction with the idea of being a decontextualised pet (Maddox, 2021). This is a balancing act. Depersonalised content should have a high degree of templatability, and be perceived as shareable (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). Templatability makes for easier engagement in trends and monetisation (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). Overt self-representation resulting in low templatability may attain “true authenticity” in resisting dominant trends. But such content will have a very limited reach despite being deemed original. Rebelling against dominant trends may also compromise a brand’s perceived sincerity, decreasing consumer purchase intentions and likelihood of consumer forgiveness, as well as losing its buffer against scandal (Papadopoulou *et al*., 2023).

Participants in this project largely presented dog characters as decontextualised pets, with the exception of Oscar, who took many an ideological stance (Lefson, 2010). Narrative branding literature indicates that mascots and brand personalities are highly successful means to advertise products, and attract consumers (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). Decontextualised pets make better mascots, as they centre themselves within a narrative in which they hold greater significance. Such mascots do not need to be connected to owners.

Leaver *et al’s* (2020) “aesthetics of self-representation” is still an area of research that requires exploration. But I suspect that social media will continue to highlight the decontextualised pet — a lack of over self-representation — and audiences will come to prefer this portrayal in advertising and across media.

4. Fundamental Advertising Techniques Used In Support of Dog Influencers

Core advertising techniques used in traditional narrative branding, transmedia storytelling, and across multimodal medias make for engaging content. Key methods from narrative branding literature include bestowing brand personality, assigning human characteristics and value systems, employing narrative thought, and providing opportunities for consumer contributions to the narrative (Aaker and Fournier, 1995; Scolari, 2009; Jenkins, 2007). Techniques that are more particular to transmedia storytelling and multimodal narratives include breaking up a larger narrative into individual components that retain synergy, diversifying audiences and sustaining their interest for lengthy amounts of time, employing a hierarchy of values, and designing narrative universes with the object of being highly immersive (Jenkins, 2007; Scolari, 2009).

These methods are particularly powerful tools when used in conjunction with social media, which can amplify traditional advertising techniques by ensuring daily interaction with personified mascots, all while cultivating intimacy with viewers. Social media platforms allow anyone to become a dog influencer — literally personifying your pet with filters, or just marketing them to the correct audience.

Toyota-Buddy campaign content illustrates the above methods through its firm brand image, long-lasting relationship with fans, and engaging series of televised advertisements

that have built a profitable narrative universe. Lindridge, Boness, O'Brien, and Keogh harnessed social media to expand their narrative universes, encourage consumer contribution, and target a particular audience. Meanwhile, Lefson uses narrative branding to create attention-grabbing campaigns that centre around a singular mascot.

This projects shows that narrative branding techniques, as well as those endemic to transmedia storytelling and multimodal narratives, can be successfully extended to anthropomorphised personalities occupying the mediums or platforms of Instagram, music, print media (both children's and adult fiction), photography, and film/televised advertising. If anything, it is clear that media consolidation and the process of removing boundaries between marketing and entertainment has resulted in dependence on narrative thought. If a product, brand, or character is to be promoted in any way, it receives a tailored narrative.

Overall, dog personalities beckon to be personified, and made into something that humans can cultivate a deeper connection with. As social media becomes more critical to advertising and building narratives, the case for crafting anthropomorphised personalties is strengthened. Dog influencers, as a subculture, captivate consumers across media and can fulfil various roles that both entertain and promote a product. The world of dog influencers is of increased significance in an era of anthropomorphised personalities, where anyone and anything can be personified, and made into a brand.

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