Petfluencers, the Fur-Mula for Sincere Endorsements: Examining How and When Pets Exhibit Greater Persuasion as Influencers

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The use of social media influencers (SMIs) is of growing interest to advertisers as well as researchers. Though, to date, much research focuses on human influencers. Increasingly, advertising agencies and brands are turning to animal influencers to promote brands. Given the rise of the 'petfluencer', the authors investigate factors which could lead pets to be more persuasive than humans, and if so, why. In four studies, including one field study and one laboratory experiment, this research supports that petfluencers (vs. human SMIs) can be more persuasive. These effects are driven by increased perceptions of sincerity associated with petfluencers. Additionally, the authors argue that petfluencers are more persuasive when the petfluencer's message matches consumers' mindset by being present- (vs. future-) oriented.

INTRODUCTION

In today's 'age of the influencer', brands are investing large proportions of their marketing budgets in social media influencers (SMIs) hoping to gain from their 'magical effects' (Richardson 2022; Siu 2021). In fact, while the spending in 2023

Management Slant

- Petfluencers can be more persuasive than human influencers because they are perceived as more sincere.
- Petfluencers represent a viable alternative to human SMIs who often generate feelings of skepticism and may be involved in scandals, whereas greater control can be exerted over petfluencers.
- Petfluencers are more persuasive when the message matches consumers' mindset, such that a present-oriented message is more persuasive for consumers with a high propensity to anthropomorphize.
- More concrete features should be favored when using a petfluencer (*e.g.*, anthropomorphizing the pet, a message focused on the present) to reduce psychological distance and increase consumer responses.

reached $30.8 billion dollars, the influencer market is expected to grow to $35.1 billion by the end of 2024 to reach $56.3 billion in the following five years (Statista 2024). The term SMI refers to individuals who have a substantial social media following and create content for brands in exchange for compensation (Campbell and Grimm 2019; Voorveld 2019). Influencers are known to be persuasive because people tend to afford SMIs with similar levels of trust as they do their friends (Swant 2016). Yet, while the number of sponsored posts by SMIs continues to rise, the perceived sincerity of these SMIs is on the decline, attributed to 'influencer fatigue' (AlRabiah et al. 2022; Casey 2020; Smith 2017). One type of influencer that could remedy this issue is the pet SMI, or petfluencer.

Although the term petfluencer has gained popularity over the last few years, a clear definition is still lacking. We define petfluencers as pets that have, similar to their human counterparts, a significant social media following and may be compensated for endorsing brands on social media. Importantly, we delineate the concept of petfluencers more clearly by specifying that petfluencers are not pets merely appearing on their owners' social media feeds, but influencers with their own dedicated social media accounts. Petfluencers' profiles can either be seemingly managed by the pets themselves or transparently managed by the pet owners. Regardless, petfluencers' social media profiles are centered around the pets that have built their own online identities and are therefore influencers in their own rights rather than making occasional appearances. Similar to human SMIs, petfluencers may partner with advertising agencies to manage partnerships with brands, although petfluencers remain independent in the content they post. Mirroring the increased popularity of human influencers, petfluencers are quickly becoming household names and heavily sought-after brand endorsers. As an example, Nala the Cat has 4.5 million followers on Instagram and endorses various brands from cat food to mobile games, with a fortune estimated at more than $80 million (Allhusen 2024).

Despite the following that they have been able to amass, academic research has been relatively silent concerning petfluencers. Given that SMIs are more persuasive than traditional endorsers (Willemsen, Neijens, and Bronner 2012) because of their ability to connect with their audience (Daniel, Crawford Jackson, and Westerman 2018), petfluencers likewise might provide an even stronger means to persuade consumers.

Petfluencers provide distinct advantages relative to human SMIs, allowing brands to benefit from a unique and novel endorser. First, people follow and engage with petfluencers for the joy and entertainment that they bring, and are, overall, universally loved given their ability to communicate with

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diverse audiences and transcend cultural differences (MYOB 2023). Second, petfluencers provide a unique opportunity for brands to reach and influence consumers. Specifically, one blogger shares that compared to human SMI content, petfluencers' content consistently produces higher engagement rates across all influencer tiers (*e.g.*, macro, nano, etc.; Baklanov 2020). In fact, petfluencers are now considered must-haves for brands, which are expected to increasingly invest in petfluencers to endorse all sorts of offerings, beyond the pet industry (Green 2022). Third, petfluencers offer the same reach as human SMIs but generally cost less than their human counterparts and are much less likely subject to scandals (Baklanov 2020). Finally, petfluencers possess a singular quality that differentiates them from human SMIs, and, we argue, may make them more persuasive endorsers: their innate sincerity.

In the current research, we begin to unpack the reason behind petfluencers' success and argue that petfluencers can, in fact, be more persuasive than their human SMI counterparts due to the perceived sincerity underlying their endorsements, representing a novel alternative in light of increasing influencer fatigue. Thus, we address the following research questions. Can petfluencers be more persuasive than human SMIs? If so, do perceptions of sincerity explain these effects?

Across a field study and three experiments, this research offers several theoretical and practical implications. First, we provide evidence documenting petfluencers as distinct from human SMIs. To our knowledge, the current research provides the earliest empirical support for the influence petfluencers hold on online audiences and the behavioral process underpinning it. Second, whereas human SMIs' persuasiveness emanates from either felt similarity and identification (Daniel, Crawford Jackson, and Westerman 2018; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020) or aspirational identification (Leban et al. 2021), we demonstrate that petfluencers' persuasiveness stems from perceptions of sincerity underlying their posts. Third, we respond to Jia et al.'s call (2022) to investigate pets' persuasiveness considering consumers' propensity to anthropomorphize and suggest that consumers with a low (vs. high) propensity to anthropomorphize react differently to petfluencers' content. Finally, we offer practical guidance on how brands can benefit from this one-of-a-kind type of influencer related to selection and content creation.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Pet Influencers

Consumers frequently encounter advertisements that feature animals in the marketplace. Despite this exponential increase of animals in advertising with one of five advertisements featuring animals (Webster 2018), there has been surprisingly little examination of consumer responses. To date, the marketing literature has primarily investigated animals in advertising from both symbolic (Lloyd and Woodside 2013; Spears, Mowen, and Chakraborty 1996) and anthropomorphized perspectives (Connell 2013; Wang, Ming, and Zhang 2020). While initial evidence suggests that consumers may generally respond more favorably to ads featuring animals (Lancendorfer, Atkin, and Reece 2008; Yelkur et al. 2013), these findings have often included contingencies, such as consumers' affiliation towards animals (Lancendorfer, Atkin, and Reece 2008), gender (Yelkur et al. 2013), appreciation for nature (Keller and Gierl 2020), and level of identification with the animals (Connell 2013; Dessart 2018), qualifying their effectiveness. Critical to this research, prior contexts have often reflected traditional advertising paradigms, such as print advertising (Kennedy and McGarvey 2008; Spears, Mowen, and Chakraborty 1996; Trivedi and Teichert 2020), television advertising (Lerner and Kalof 1999; Yelkur et al. 2013), and product packaging (Park and Kim 2021), where brands ultimately controlled the message, limiting the role of the animal to a persuasive element of the brand message.

Little research, however, has considered how animals' endorsements of brands, such as those from petfluencers where animals 'personally' advocate for brands, can affect consumer responses. This personal endorsement of a brand is a key differentiating feature of influencer marketing, from traditional advertising, which reflects the discretion and control that influencers have over the content of their posts (Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019; Lee and Koo 2012). Importantly, the content created by SMIs allows for a greater level of interpersonal communication with their followers, increasing their credibility (Willemsen, Neijens, and Bronner 2012) and their overall effectiveness in engendering favorable consumer brand responses (Ballantine and Au Yeung 2015; Colliander and Dahlén 2011; Daniel, Crawford Jackson, and Westerman 2018). Expanding beyond petfluencers endorsement of brands, as evidenced by Nala the Cat's following, there is a tremendous opportunity for petfluencers to not only establish themselves as a brand, similar to human SMIs, but also cultivate relationships with their followers, independent of brands they endorse (Ki et al. 2020). As such, the role of the petfluencer would differ substantially from prior animals in advertising research, though it has yet to receive academic attention.

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Social Media Influencers

Influencers have been categorized in several ways. For instance, they have been classified based on their number of followers (Wise 2022), their expertise (Lin, Bruning, and Swarna 2018), and their origins of influence, such as celebrities versus grassroots influencers (Ge and Gretzel 2018; Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022). Despite the complicated nature of current SMI classifications, still missing is a meaningful investigation into more varied types of SMIs (Maheshwari 2018). As such, we seek to introduce another, more simplistic classification of SMIs: pet versus human.

Much of human SMIs' success is attributed to their ability to create seemingly intimate bonds with their followers (Kupfer et al. 2018). Social media audiences identify with human SMIs because of their power and influence (Kupfer et al. 2018), similarity with their audience (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020), or aspirational ability (Leban et al. 2021), which provides the potential for trustful relationships (Lou and Yuan 2019). Social identification with human SMIs is achieved through the nurturing and sharing of an online persona that is relatable to their followers (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020; Wu et al. 2022). Animals, on the other hand, who are often at the center of close psychological bonds and are essential to people's social lives (Amiot and Bastian 2017; Cavanaugh, Leonard, and Scammon 2008; Herzog 2011), are not easy to identify with (Connell 2013; Dessart 2018). In fact, the degree to which humans identify with animals depends on how close they feel to them and how similar to humans the animal appears to be (Amiot, Sukhanova, and Bastian 2020). In other words, identification with animals is a complex multi-dimensional construct and as such, petfluencers cannot offer their followers the same level of identification as human SMIs. Given that identification provides the foundation of human SMIs' social influence, using the traditional lens applied to human SMIs, petfluencers may, in fact, not be as persuasive endorsers as their human counterparts.

While human SMIs can leverage their perceived similarity to enhance their overall persuasiveness, there is increasing evidence that not all aspects of human SMIs are well-received. Human endorsers, including SMIs, can generate feelings of defiance and disgust when advertising a brand, if their persuasive intent is transparent (Chen, Yan, and Smith 2023; Coco and Eckert 2020) or if the endorser possesses egocentric motives (Shan, Chen, and Lin 2020). Additionally, human SMIs' sincerity is now constantly questioned, as people increasingly believe they endorse brands they do not always believe in for money (Gao et al. 2025; Smith 2017). Thus, while sponsored posts featuring human SMIs might negatively impact consumer responses, we argue that such motivational concerns do not apply to petfluencers, thus resulting in several advantages.

The underlying motivations attributed to animals, relative to humans, are more often positively valenced because animals are not "subject to envy, jealousy, elitism, and materialism" (Hirschman 1994, 620). Moreover, individuals constantly praise animals for their biological inability to lie, cheat, or voluntarily behave in an actively deceptive manner (Call and Tomasello 2008; Keller and Gierl 2020; Premack and Woodruff 1978). Hence, an evolutionary limitation in cognitive capacity also provides an enviable endorser's skill and a potential remedy to the ongoing influencer fatigue and sincerity crisis. Petfluencers may therefore be more persuasive than human SMIs who are often remunerated to endorse brands and whose message might appear disingenuous. Therefore, we next explore sincerity as a potential differentiator between human SMIs and petfluencers.

Sincerity Differences in Petfluencers versus Human Influencers

Recent research on human SMIs suggests that endorser personality can affect their persuasiveness. Specifically, influencers with more sincere (*e.g.*, down-to-earth, real; McRae 2017) personalities have more successful relationships with their followers and make more effective brand endorsers (Duffy 2017; Dwivedi, Johnson, and McDonald 2016). In this case, sincerity relates to honesty, wholesomeness, and cheerfulness. Hence, sincerity reflects a character's moral traits and is important in impression formation (Goodwin, Piazza, and Rozin 2014). When exposed to nonverbal communication (Mehrabian and Wiener 1967), individuals must assess whether they perceive an emotional display as sincere or not (Caza et al. 2015), and easily differentiate sincere from insincere emotional displays (Frank, Ekman, and Friesen 1993).

Research investigating the role of sincerity in SMI persuasiveness is scarce. Sincerity reflects how consumers evaluate the motives of an individual or brand (Schamp et al. 2023). Some research suggests that sincerity judgments emerge from a range of verbal

and non-verbal stimuli. For example, sincerity can be effectuated through influencer interactivity (Jun and Yi 2020), the types of images shared on social media (Lee and Eastin 2020), and even the endorser's accent (Puzakova, Kwak, and Bell 2015). Such judgments are made immediately after exposure to stimuli and can impact future attitudes and behaviors (Willis and Todorov 2006). Initial research suggests that individuals report higher attitudes toward high- (vs. low-) sincerity SMIs, but only when individuals do not envy the SMI (Lee and Eastin 2020) and the SMI is a micro- (vs. mega-) influencer (Park et al. 2021). Literature considering animals suggests that animals' motives are based on a drive to be cooperative, and this involves acting contrary to their interests (Kaminski and Piotti 2016). As such, pets are considered innately sincere (Griffin and Speck 2004). Importantly, individuals are more sensitive to impressions of sincerity when evaluating SMIs' content on social media (Lee and Eastin 2020). As such, we expect petfluencers to be perceived as more sincere than human SMIs, therefore engendering more favorable consumer responses. While we do not assert that all pets are sincere and all humans are insincere, we suggest that pets, in general, reflect a greater degree of sincerity. Specifically, we hypothesize:

H₁: Social media endorsements by petfluencers (vs. human influencers) will generate more favorable consumer responses (*i.e.*, greater engagement and willingness to pay).

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

Petfluencers' Persuasiveness, Anthropomorphism, and Temporal Focus

Petfluencers may be more persuasive than human influencers because they are generally perceived as more sincere, however this effect is likely to be impacted by consumers' propensity to anthropomorphize. Anthropomorphism relates to the tendency individuals have to assign human characteristics (*e.g.*, emotions, capabilities) to animals and even objects (Amiot, Sukhanova, and Bastian 2020). Additionally, anthropomorphizing an animal can impact how sincere individuals perceive it to be. Indeed, individuals high in anthropomorphism usually attribute feelings to animals, perceiving them as more sincere, and are therefore more likely to feel more empathy towards them, respond positively, and dedicate more resources to them (*e.g.*, increase support for animal rights; Connell 2013). Thus, while individuals with a high propensity to anthropomorphize are more susceptible to petfluencer persuasion, this may not be the case for individuals with a low propensity to anthropomorphize.

Anthropomorphism can also be viewed from a construal level theory perspective as construal level theory describes how people process information and make decisions (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007). Accordingly, when consumers tend to think more abstractly (*e.g.*, broad ideas) versus concretely (*e.g.*, details) they tend to prefer advertising messages that increase versus decrease perceptions of psychological distance (Zhao and Xie 2011). Anthropomorphizing tends to evoke more concrete thinking styles. In particular, the reduction of psychological distance resulting from anthropomorphizing has been shown to result in both more positive evaluations of non-human agents (*e.g.*, artificial intelligence assistants; Li and Sung 2021) and in an increased understanding of non-human entities (Wan, Kulow, and Cowan 2022). Likewise, anthropomorphizing can make an individual feel greater kinship with an object (Veer 2013), also reflective of close psychological distance. For instance, individuals reported greater care and concern with human-looking (vs. mechanical-looking) robots (Riek et al. 2009). As anthropomorphizing pets minimizes the psychological distance between an individual and a pet (Li and Sung 2021), individuals with a high (low) propensity to anthropomorphize should process petfluencers' content more concretely (abstractly), perceiving less (more) psychological distance.

Beyond predicting how people process information based on perceptions of psychological distance, construal level theory also explains how advertising message features can increase persuasiveness (Jin, Hu, and He 2014; Kim, Rao, and Lee 2009; Kim, Lee, and Choi 2019; Roose et al. 2019). In particular, when message features in an influencer post are consistent with consumers' mindsets (*e.g.*, concrete or abstract), messages have greater persuasiveness (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007). One way to achieve such a match is by altering the temporal focus of the post. Temporal focus, one form of psychological distance, is of particular interest as it can be easily manipulated by advertisers to match consumers' mindsets, for example by encouraging individuals to think about present versus future consequences (Chang, Zhang, and Xie 2015; Wan, Kulow, and Cowan 2022). Additionally, consumers' temporal focus is especially relevant for petfluencers as traits like sincerity are more salient to individuals with a stronger focus on the present (Roy and Naidoo 2021).

Temporal focus profoundly affects individuals' perceptions, experiences, attitudes, and behaviors (Shipp, Edwards, and Lambert 2009), and can be defined as the attention people devote to perceptions of the past, present, and future (Bluedorn 2002). Individuals can control the way they allocate their attention (*i.e.*, temporal focus) to several targets, therefore either recollecting the past, perceiving the present, or anticipating the future depending on the situation (Gardner et al. 1987, 1989; Shipp, Edwards, and Lambert 2009). While individuals focusing on the present process information more concretely with an interest in more proximal and immediate benefits, individuals focusing on the future process information more abstractly, with an interest in more distant and long-term benefits (Reczek, Trudel, and White 2018). Thus, anthropomorphizing (vs. not) would be more aligned with a focus on the present (vs. future).

Thus, we argue that if an individual has a high (vs. low) propensity to anthropomorphize and is hence processing information in a more concrete way, a message reflecting a strong present (vs. future) temporal focus will be more persuasive due to a match in mindset. However, a mismatch between the message and the consumer's mindset (*e.g.*, high propensity to anthropomorphize and future temporal focus) would lead to decreased consumer responses.

H$_{3a}$: Petfluencers will increase consumer responses towards advertised products when a match exists between consumers' propensity to anthropomorphize and temporal focus, such that petfluencers' persuasiveness increases when consumers with a high propensity to anthropomorphize are primed with a present temporal focus.

H$_{3b}$: Petfluencers will increase consumer responses towards advertised products when a match exists between consumers' propensity to anthropomorphize and temporal focus, such that petfluencers' persuasiveness increases when consumers with a low propensity to anthropomorphize are primed with a future temporal focus.

We tested our proposed framework across four studies (one field study, two online experiments, and one laboratory experiment). Study 1 establishes our basic effect that petfluencer posts, compared to human SMI posts, lead to more favorable consumer responses. Study 2 further supports the effect and provides process evidence by documenting that perceptions of sincerity mediate the effects of a petfluencer post on willingness to pay (WTP) for the product. Study 3 further confirms perceptions of sincerity as the underlying process by employing a mediation by moderation study design. We also consider a theoretically relevant moderator to our findings by showing that these effects are amplified when there is a match between consumers' propensity to anthropomorphize and temporal mindset (Study 4).

STUDY 1: FIELD STUDY
Method

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

Results and Discussion

Post Engagement. Results showed that the pet SMI performed better than the human SMI. Specifically, the pet SMI ad reached an audience of 18,224 (vs. 17,613) Instagram users from the target audience and generated 18 (vs. 6) post engagements at the cost of £2.29 (vs. £6.86) per result. As predicted, the pet SMI generated a significantly higher number of post engagements compared to the human SMI ($\chi 2 = 5.59$, $p < .02$).

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

This field study provides real-world evidence that a petfluencer (vs. human SMI) leads to more favorable brand responses, in support of H_1. As the stimuli only show the influencer's paws (hands), we control for potential confounds such as attractiveness and gender, showing that the effect of petfluencers holds nonetheless. The next study replicates the effect in an online experiment and tests for mediation.

STUDY 2: PETFLUENCER VS HUMAN SMI AND SINCERITY DIFFERENCES
Method

One hundred fifty TurkPrime participants (46.7% Male, M_{age} = 36.16 years) completed a study that consisted of one manipulated factor (SMI: human vs. pet). Participants were randomly assigned to either a human or pet SMI condition featured in an Instagram post for Naked Wines. While the focal SMI on the Instagram post either featured a woman (*i.e.*, human condition) or a cat (*i.e.*, pet condition), the content of the images and text in the post were consistent across conditions. A female SMI was selected as the human SMI, reflecting real marketplace practices as 84% of SMIs are females (Dencheva 2023). A pretest that involved showing the stimuli to a small number of social media users validated that both the human and pet influencers were believable as SMIs. The pictures were accompanied by the following texts written in the first person. The petfluencer perspective read: "What's your human's go-to wine that sets the scene for cozy evenings snuggled up by the fire? This one seems perfect for my human: Naked Wines says it's fruity, soft and easy to drink with its black currant fruits and its peppery finish. #ad #sponsored #nakedwines #redwine". Alternatively, the human SMI the post read: "What's your go-to wine that sets the scene for cozy evenings snuggled up by the fire? This one seems perfect for me on a cold night: Naked Wines says it's fruity, soft and easy to drink with its black currant fruits and its peppery finish. #ad #sponsored #nakedwines #redwine" (see Supplementary Appendix B).

After viewing the post, participants reported their WTP for a case of wine ($0 - $200). Participants next rated seven items that measured participants' perceptions of the SMI's sincerity (*e.g.*, "honest"; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; $\alpha = .94$; Aaker 1997). Lastly, participants reported how frequently they consumed wine (1 = never, 7 = very frequently) and demographic information (see Supplementary Appendix B).

Results and Discussion

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

Mediating Role of Sincerity. A one-way ANCOVA with sincerity index as the dependent variable, SMI condition as the independent

variable, and wine consumption frequency as a covariate yielded main effects of both the wine consumption frequency covariate ($F(1,147) = 10.52$, $p = .001$), and more importantly, the SMI condition ($F(1, 147) = 23.33$, $p < .001$). Specifically, participants who viewed the post featuring the pet SMI reported greater perceptions of sincerity ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.20$) compared to those who viewed a post featuring the human SMI ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.47$). To examine the mediating role of sincerity (H_2), an analysis using Model 4 from PROCESS (5,000 resamples; Hayes 2018) was undertaken and revealed that the effect of the SMI condition ($0 =$ human, $1 =$ pet) on WTP was mediated by perceptions of sincerity ($b = 8.74$, $SE = 2.69$; 95% CI [4.0566, 14.4287]).

As hypothesized, Study 2 supports that individuals exhibit a higher WTP when exposed to petfluencers rather than human influencers (H_1) and that such decisions are driven by perceptions of sincerity (H_2). Our next study seeks to provide additional support for our proposed mediator via a moderation-of-process design. Our theorizing suggests that consumers respond more favorably to pet (vs. human) influencer posts due to the innate sincerity associated with petfluencers. Therefore, we expect to replicate the positive effect of pet (vs. human) SMIs when sincerity with the influencer (pet vs. human) is made salient, but not when insincerity is made salient, such that the increased WTP among individuals who view pet (vs. human) influencer will be attenuated when petfluencers are primed with insincerity. Additionally, while the SMI manipulation reflects common marketplace practices (*e.g.,* the use of props, such as glasses; Olson 2018), its inclusion may have been viewed as novel, hence contributing to the participants' affective responses. Therefore, in the next study, similar stimuli were developed without the glasses to address this potential alternate explanation. A second potential limitation of Study 2 was the ambiguity related to the number of bottles included in a case of wine, which served as the basis for participants' WTP and likely contributed to the large standard deviations observed in both conditions. Thus, to control for this ambiguity, we once again used wine as the focal product category but assessed participants' WTP for a single bottle of wine.

STUDY 3: FURTHER SUPPORT FOR THE KEY ROLE OF SINCERITY ON PETFLUENCERS' PERSUASIVENESS
Method

Two hundred and one TurkPrime participants (56.7% female, M_{age} = 43.65 years), completed a 2(SMI: human vs. pet) x 2(sincerity prime: insincere vs. sincere) between-subjects study. Similar to Study 2, participants were randomly assigned to either a human or pet SMI condition. They were then presented with a writing task which served as the sincerity prime manipulation.

Participants were therefore randomly assigned to one of four conditions: a human sincerity prime, a human insincerity prime, a pet sincerity prime, or a pet insincerity prime. Participants in the human (pet) sincerity prime condition read the following, "Sincerity is often defined as being heartfelt and genuine. For up to the next minute, we would like you to think about an example where an individual [animal/pet (dog, cat, etc.)] that you had seen, heard, or had previous experience whose actions embodied this definition of sincerity." Alternatively, participants in the human (pet) insincerity prime condition read the following, "Sincerity is often defined as being heartfelt and genuine. For up to the next minute, we would like you to think about an example where an individual [animal/pet (dog, cat, etc.)] whose actions did not embody this definition of sincerity." Manipulating sincerity (rather than measuring it as done in Study 2) in a moderation-of-process design provides further support for sincerity as the underlying process (Spencer, Zanna, and Fong 2005). Specifically, we opted to prime sincerity through a writing task asking participants to recall past experiences/relationships, which is recognized as an effective means to activate specific constructs such as sincerity (or insincerity) in the psychology and marketing literature (Andersen and Chen 2002; Swaminathan, Stilley, and Ahluwalia 2009).

A pretest with a separate sample of 121 TurkPrime participants (57.9 male, M_{age} = 39.99 years) confirmed that the target of the sincerity prime (humans or animals/pets) was perceived as more sincere ($\alpha = .90$; Aaker 1997) among participants in the sincerity (vs. insincerity) prime conditions ($M_{sincere}$ = 5.54, $SD = 1.05$ vs. $M_{insincere}$ = 4.79, $SD = 1.38$; $F(1, 119) = 11.32$, $p = .001$; see Supplementary Appendix C).

In the main study, participants were then presented with an Instagram post for Naked Wines that matched their initial assigned condition for the writing task, such that those who completed the pet (human) writing task then viewed an Instagram post from a pet (human) SMI. The posts[1] were similar to those used in Study 2, still written in the first person [*i.e.,* from the (pet)influencer perspective] but without glasses; see Supplementary Appendix E). Then, participants reported their WTP on a single bottle of wine ($0 - $50). Lastly, participants reported their wine consumption frequency and demographic information.

Results and Discussion
WTP. A two-way ANCOVA with WTP as the dependent variable, SMI condition and sincerity prime condition as independent variables, and wine consumption frequency as a covariate yielded a main effect of both the wine consumption frequency covariate ($F(1,196) = 24.30$, $p < .001$) and a marginal effect of SMI condition ($F(1,196) = 2.93$, $p = .088$), and more importantly, revealed the
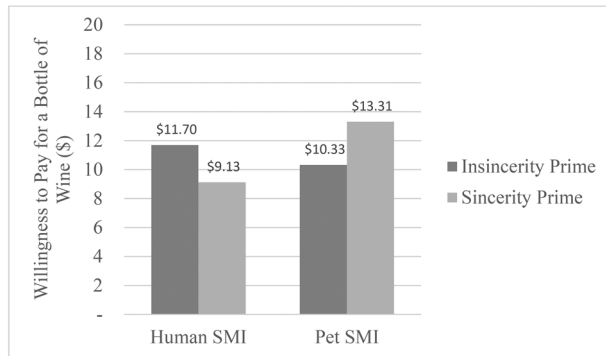
Figure 1 Effect of SMI Type on Willingness to Pay (WTP) as a Function of Sincerity Prime

expected interaction between SMI condition and sincerity manipulation ($F(1,196) = 9.65$, $p = .002$; see Figure 1).

When participants were exposed to the sincerity prime, a higher WTP was reported by those in the pet ($M = \$13.31$, $SD = \$8.82$) versus human SMI condition ($M = \$9.13$, $SD = \$6.90$; $F(1,196) = 9.49$, $p = .002$). Yet, no differences were observed across SMI conditions when participants were primed with thoughts of insincerity ($M_{pet} = \$10.33$, $SD = \$6.33$ vs. $M_{human} = \$11.70$, $SD = \$6.57$; $F(1,196) = .99$, $p = .32$). Further, within the pet SMI condition, a higher WTP for a bottle of wine was observed among participants exposed to the sincerity ($M = \$13.31$, $SD = \$8.82$) versus insincerity prime ($M = \$10.33$, $SD = \$6.33$; $F(1,196) = 4.77$, $p = .03$). Conversely, among participants in the human SMI condition, participants expressed a lower WTP following exposure to the sincerity ($M = \$9.13$, $SD = \$6.90$) versus insincerity prime ($M = \$11.70$, $SD = \$6.57$; $F(1,196) = 3.52$, $p = .06$).

Replicating our prior findings in Study 2, and once again supporting $\mathbf{H}_1$, Study 3 demonstrated that consumers exposed to posts by petfluencers (vs. human SMIs) report greater WTP for the featured product. Importantly, supporting sincerity as our underlying process ($\mathbf{H}_2$), through a process by moderation design, we demonstrate that when consumers are primed with thoughts of sincerity (vs. insincerity), consumers exhibit greater WTP[2]. While the results reveal that human SMIs lead to greater WTP in the insincerity (vs. sincerity) prime, this reversal might have occurred because the sincerity prime evoked skepticism in SMIs associated with influencer fatigue. Though, this is just one plausible explanation for this unpredicted finding.

The studies presented thus far show that pet (vs. human) SMIs elicit more favorable consumer responses. However, petfluencers' sincerity perceptions are contingent upon one's tendency to anthropomorphize pets, which influences their persuasiveness. In the next study, we examine the impact of consumers' propensity to anthropomorphize on petfluencers' persuasiveness and adopt a construal matching perspective to examine a moderator with an ability to amplify the effects (*i.e.*, temporal focus).

STUDY 4: PROPENSITY TO ANTHROPOMORPHIZE AND CONSTRUAL MATCHING

A supplementary test was conducted and confirmed consumers' propensity to anthropomorphize as a boundary condition whereby petfluencers are perceived as more (less) sincere and resultantly drive greater (lower) WTP when individuals have a high (low) propensity to anthropomorphize. The measures and full results are provided in Supplementary Appendix G. Study 4 focuses on construal matching between consumers' propensity to anthropomorphize and petfluencers' messages as a means to increase petfluencers' persuasiveness for consumers with varying levels of propensity to anthropomorphize.

Method

One hundred eighty-five undergraduate students at a large US university (53% male, $M_{age} = 21.68$ years), agreed to participate in a drawing for an advertised product, which involved the completion of a study that consisted of one manipulated factor, temporal construal (present vs. future) and one measured factor, propensity to anthropomorphize. Participants were randomly assigned to either a present or future temporal construal condition and were then presented with an advertisement for Yaya Maria's dish soap which served as the temporal construal manipulation and has been successfully used in previous research (Chang, Zhang, and Xie 2015; Wan, Kulow, and Cowan 2022). While the details regarding the dish soap were consistent across conditions, participants in the present (future) condition saw a tagline that read: "It's All About Today (the Future). Every Choice Matters," and "Make Your Choice. Make a Difference Today (for the Future)." Participants then answered a question reflecting the extent they found the advertisement likable (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

Participants then viewed an Instagram post for Bombas socks from the petfluencer's Instagram account that featured the following text: "This is Pookie. His favorite thing to eat is Bombas socks. But his human daddy is cool with it because Bombas replaces the ones he eats. #ad #sponsored #bombassocks" (see Supplementary Appendix H). After viewing the post, participants were informed that they would be entered into a lottery in which five students would receive a prize of $20, which was adapted from the Becker-DeGroot-Marschak (BDM) lottery method employed in prior research (Becker, Degroot, and Marschak1964; Fuchs, Schreier, and Van Osselaer 2015). Participants were told that they would be asked to indicate the maximum amount they would be willing to pay for a pair of Bombas socks (up to $20) and that a

random price would be drawn from all potential prices in $.50 increments within the potential price range. If that randomly drawn price was above their maximum WTP, the lottery recipients would receive a pair of Bombas socks and the difference between the randomly drawn amount and their stated price. But if the randomly drawn price was below their maximum WTP, they would receive the $20 prize, but not the socks. Participants then reported their WTP for the Bombas socks. Lastly, they completed a fifteen-item anthropomorphism scale (α = .94; Waytz, Cacioppo, and Epley 2010).

Results and Discussion

WTP. A regression analysis with temporal construal (0 = present, 1 = future), propensity to anthropomorphize and their interaction as independent variables, and WTP as the dependent variable yielded a simple effect of propensity to anthropomorphize (b = .25, t = 2.97, p < .01), and more importantly, the predicted temporal construal x anthropomorphism interaction (b = –.53, t = –3.06, p = .003). A spotlight analysis, performed at one SD above the anthropomorphism mean (M = 5.23), revealed that among participants with a high propensity to anthropomorphize, higher WTP was reported in the present versus future temporal construal conditions (b = –1.14, t = –2.09, p = .03). Conversely, among participants with a low propensity to anthropomorphize (–1 SD), a lower WTP was observed in the present versus future temporal construal conditions (b = 1.22, t = 2.25, p = .04).

These results support **H_{3a} and H_{3b}**, suggesting that a match between consumers' propensity to anthropomorphize and the message's temporal focus can further increase petfluencers' persuasiveness. Specifically, individuals who have a high (vs. low) propensity to anthropomorphize reported greater WTP when the message was present-(vs. future) focused.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this present research was to provide initial evidence that petfluencers can be more effective than human SMIs in influencing social media users' brand responses, more precisely on their social media engagement and WTP. This research offers both theoretical and managerial contributions.

Theoretical Implications

First, the research offers evidence that similar to the comparison of SMIs and traditional endorsers, petfluencers represent a distinct phenomenon from animals in advertising. Compared to the advertising literature, which has qualified the effectiveness of animals in advertising with varying consumer-level contingencies, this might not be the case for animals in social media. Our research supports

> **The research offers evidence that similar to the comparison of SMIs and traditional endorsers, petfluencers represent a distinct phenomenon from animals in advertising.**

that animals can be used effectively to endorse brands on social media without these qualifiers. Aside from the 'cuteness' factor of animals, social media audiences can connect to petfluencers because of their perceived sincerity. Thus, this research contributes to a greater understanding of how petfluencers act as the source of a brand-sponsored message, rather than merely as a persuasive element in a promotional message created by the brand.

Second, to the best of our knowledge, the current research provides initial empirical support for the influence petfluencers hold on their online audience. While we demonstrate that petfluencers can be more persuasive than human SMIs, we document the process underlying this influence as unique from factors contributing to SMIs' success. For human SMIs, their persuasiveness arises from an audience's ability to identify with the SMI stemming from either similarity and intimacy (Daniel, Crawford Jackson, and Westerman 2018; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020) or an SMI's aspirational nature (Kupfer et al. 2018; Leban et al. 2021). In contrast, petfluencers' persuasive ability stems from the sincerity they embody, enabling a higher emotional connection with their audience, particularly among consumers who possess a high propensity to anthropomorphize and a strong present temporal focus.

Third, we respond to Jia et al.'s call (2022) to investigate pets' persuasiveness considering consumers' propensity to anthropomorphize. We find that consumers perceive and respond to petfluencers' content differently, based on their propensity to anthropomorphize pets. Specifically, we consider consumers' propensity to anthropomorphize and related consumer psychological distance, and evidence that petfluencers can be more persuasive when the message's temporal focus matches consumers' mindsets. Construal level theory literature supports that the persuasiveness of the message increases when it matches an individual's mindset (Roose et al. 2019). As both a present temporal focus and anthropomorphism decrease psychological distance (Hu and Shi 2020; Li and Sung 2021; Trope and Liberman 2003), a present- (vs. future-) oriented message is more effective for consumers with a high (low) propensity to anthropomorphize.

Managerial Implications

We provide practical suggestions on how brands can create more effective content by providing actionable insights on SMI selection and content creation. Social media users spend a few seconds only on each post (Pancer et al. 2019), consuming over 300 posts in less than an hour (Luckerson 2015; Stewart 2016). As such, social media users are overwhelmed with information from SMIs and other users, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to generate content that will attract sufficient attention and stop the scrolling (Pancer et al. 2019). Although human SMIs provide potential for identification and inspiration (*i.e.,* lifestyle, appearance, etc.), it is accomplished with a double-edged sword. Social media users compare themselves to these SMIs, which could potentially result in negative consequences (*i.e.,* jealousy, emotional distance, etc.). Additionally, the growing popularity of influencers and the frequency of sponsored content leads users to perceive human SMIs as insincere and experience feelings of disbelief (Casey 2020; Chen, Yan, and Smith 2023; Smith 2017; Stewart 2016). Our research suggests that petfluencers may mitigate these concerns, providing potential for generating more positive consumer responses and allowing them to be more persuasive than their human counterparts. Marketing managers may therefore consider petfluencers as a viable alternative to human SMIs for product sponsorship in response to the so-called influencer fatigue and sincerity crisis (Casey 2020; Smith 2017). More importantly, this means that petfluencers represent an effective and safer way to reach customers and endorse various offerings, as they remove the concern of future scandals associated with human SMIs (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022). Nonetheless, human SMIs remain, at least for now, the mainstream online advertisers. This research does not suggest that human SMIs cannot be effective endorsers, but rather that petfluencers bring new opportunities for more sincere endorsements. As with any new phenomenon, we encourage practitioners to move cautiously and carefully consider their audiences' expectations before selecting a petfluencer.

Furthermore, to amplify the effect of petfluencers on customer responses, practitioners need to consider their audience's propensity to anthropomorphize to frame the petfluencer's message more effectively. Specifically, practitioners need to pay particular attention to the framing of petfluencers' messages and ensure they match the mindset of petfluencers' content. Petfluencers' persuasiveness arguably relies on their perceived sincerity, encouraging a more concrete mindset. When opting for a petfluencer, practitioners may generally want to favor more concrete features (*e.g.,* anthropomorphizing the pet, a message focused on the present) to reduce psychological distance and increase consumer responses.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The research provides theoretical and practical implications, but it is not without its limitations. Our research aimed to investigate whether petfluencers could be more influential than their human counterparts and why this may be the case. We attempted to control for as many features as possible in the stimuli used, though limitations still exist. We further propose future experimental research to further validate our findings in various contexts. While our stimuli allow for a better control over the variables, hence granting greater internal validity, and reflect marketplace practices, future research should use data from real influencers to fully capture their persuasiveness through the relationship they build with their audiences.

Furthermore, while our research focuses on the sincerity perceptions associated with the petfluencer rather than the pet owner, future research should examine whether such sincerity impressions reflect on the petfluencer's owner, and if their presence impacts the persuasiveness of the post. It could be that petfluencers' owners are perceived as more sincere than other human influencers, and their presence alongside their pet would make a petfluencer's post even more persuasive than when featuring the pet alone.

Additionally, future research should investigate the impact of congruency between petfluencers and the products/services they endorse on their persuasiveness. Although we explore petfluencers' persuasiveness with a variety of products including both congruent and incongruent ones (*i.e.,* Studies 2, 3, and 4 feature wine and socks which are products that are incongruent with pets, Study 1 features peanut butter which is a product suitable for both human and animal consumption), and while it was not the aim of the current research to investigate SMI-product congruency, we acknowledge this as a limitation. For example, it could be that when petfluencers offer greater fit and congruency with sponsored brands, competency perceptions would impact their persuasiveness relative to traditional SMIs. After all, congruency might be more relevant for cognitive processing strategies (Moorman, Neijens, and Smit 2002). Given that petfluencers frequently endorse both congruent (*e.g.,* BarkBox and Subaru; Ungerleider 2016) and incongruent products (*e.g.,* Budweiser and NyxCosmetics; Dua 2017), and to support the generalizability of our results, we urge future research to be conducted on the efficacy of pet SMIs in promoting both traditional human versus pet products, as well as products that can be consumed by both.

Finally, further research should explore factors that might decrease the persuasiveness of petfluencers and increase that of human SMIs. For instance, while this research revealed the importance of matching consumers' propensity to anthropomorphize with the message's temporal focus, future research could explore the persuasiveness of a construal match for human SMIs. As

human SMIs are perceived as less sincere, their messages might be more effective when consumers are faced with making decisions in the far future or when the message is future-oriented. **JAR**

NOTES

1. A pre-test with a separate sample confirmed that the SMIs generated different levels of sincerity perceptions but did not differ in terms of attractiveness and cuteness ($ps > .05$), hence ruling out potential alternative explanations. The measures and full results are provided in Supplementary Appendix D.

2. A post hoc test was conducted to rule out other potential drivers for petfluencers' persuasiveness (*i.e.*, novelty and credibility), ensure the association cat/wine was not perceived as harmful/inappropriate and test the effect of attitude towards cats. The results support that only sincerity mediates the effect, that the product/influencer association did not impact the findings, and that participants' attitude towards cats positively impacts petfluencers' persuasiveness. The measures and full results are provided in Supplementary Appendix F.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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