

How Does Social Media and Influencer Marketing Shape Consumer Trust and Purchasing Decisions in the Pet Industry?

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ABSTRACT: The pet industry has adopted influencer-driven marketing as its main advertising method because social media networks have experienced fast growth lately which has changed the traditional marketing methods. Pet influencers on Instagram use the platform to create content which emotionally connects with consumers while providing relatable material that changes consumer behaviour. The study focuses on the research question which examines the impact of social media and influencer marketing on consumer trust and buying behaviour in the pet industry. The study uses thematic analysis to extract findings from academic research, industry reports and digital case studies through its qualitative literature-based research method. The study results demonstrate that emotional connection establishes consumer trust in this environment because it operates independently of logical judgment. Influencers create emotional connections with their audience by showing their pets as family members and tell stories about their products through pet care and companionship. People evaluate trustworthiness by using perceived authenticity and relatability as their main evaluation criteria while social proof from engagement metrics and community validation strengthens trustworthiness. The analysis shows that ethical conflicts arise from undisclosed sponsorships, deceptive advertising and the way pet ownership gets portrayed. The case study examples of Doug the Pug and Nala Cat show how emotional storytelling and authenticity and commercialization create their interactive dynamics which drive their operational system. The study concludes that influencer marketing not only shapes purchasing behaviour but also redefines the nature of trust in the pet industry, with important implications for consumers, marketers and regulatory frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

The global pet care industry has witnessed remarkable expansion over the past decade driven by changing consumer lifestyles, rising disposable incomes and an increasing tendency to treat pets as integral members of the family. The global pet industry is estimated to reach a value of over \$500 billion by 2030. It is because of all its segments, which include food and healthcare, grooming and accessories, will continue to experience growth (Morgan Stanley, 2022). The market shows rapid growth which has brought new changes to consumer purchasing patterns owing to digital platforms now dominating consumer purchase decisions. Social media has emerged as a central arena where pet-related content is created, shared and consumed, significantly shaping how consumers perceive products and brands within the pet industry.

The digital landscape has seen a significant change through the emergence of pet influencers who use Instagram, TikTok and YouTube for their content creation. Pet accounts attract millions of followers through their unique personalities, stories, visuals etc. which create new digital personas from their animal content. Pet influencers establish themselves as important brand partners who advertise various products which include pet food and lifestyle items, thus acting as vital links between businesses and their customers. The influencers who create content for Abidin (2016) use their authentic presentation of curated material to shape how audiences perceive their content. The pet industry gives special importance to this phenomenon because its content contains both entertaining elements and emotional stories which promote products through indirect methods that achieve stronger persuasive effects.

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Growth Of The Global Pet Care Market

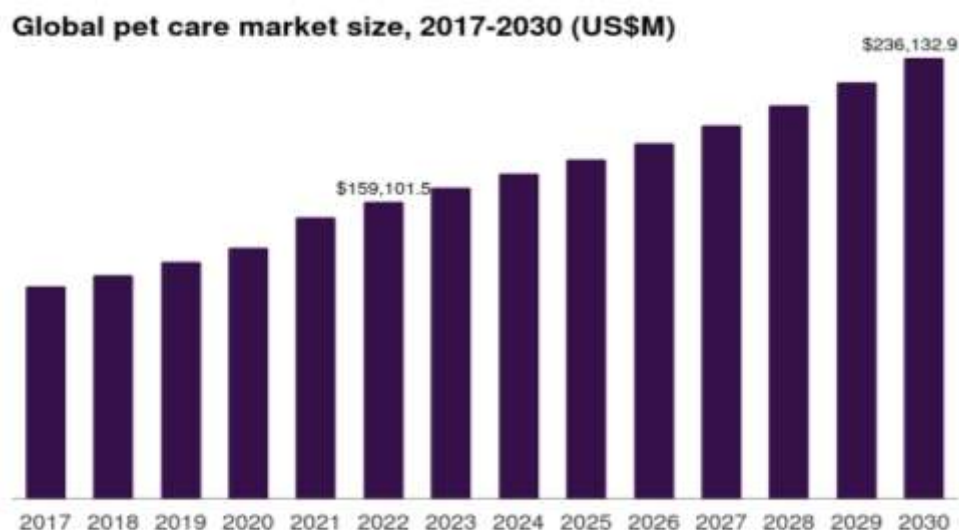


Figure: Global pet care market growth trends (2017–2030). Source: Grand View Research; Global Market Insights.

The emotional aspect of pet ownership determines how well influencer marketing works in this particular field. Contemporary consumers increasingly view pets not merely as animals but as family members, a trend commonly referred to as "pet humanization" or anthropomorphism (Dotson Hyatt, 2008). The emotional connection between people and their pets affects their purchasing choices because consumers decide which products to buy based on their need to show care and love and take responsibility for decisions. The marketing messages create emotional connections with customers through pet stories which people can relate to become and it becomes the most effective tool for changing customer behaviour and attitudes.

Social media platforms enable pet owners to connect with other pet owners who share their interests by sharing their pet experiences and asking for pet-related advice which validates their pet ownership choices. Consumers in the current ecosystem tend to choose influencer recommendations as their preferred method to obtain primary information. People tend to trust traditional advertising less than they trust content that comes from their peers or influencers because the latter two sources appear more genuine and relatable to them (Veirman et. al., 2017). Pet influencers create strong personal connections with their followers which leads to followers developing parasocial relationships that create one-sided emotional ties which resemble real-world social connections (Horton and Wohl, 1956). The establishment of trust between these two parties leads to higher product acceptance because the audience views product endorsements as more trustworthy. People use both product attributes and their emotional responses and their trust in the product to decide which products to buy.

The study needs key concept definitions, which are essential for understanding its dynamic study. Consumer trust refers to the confidence that consumers place in a brand, product or information source, particularly under conditions of uncertainty (Gefen et. al., 2003). In digital environments, trust develops through cues which include authenticity, consistency and social validation, instead of relying on direct experiences. Influencer marketing exists as a strategic method which enables people with dedicated social media followers to promote products and services through their perceived credibility and their ties to their audience (Freberg et al., 2011). The combined digital platforms, algorithms, user interactions and content practices of social media ecosystems create a system which determines how information gets created, shared and consumed.

This research paper investigates a key research question: How does social media and influencer marketing shape consumer trust and purchasing decisions in the pet industry? The question becomes important because the pet industry combines three elements which include emotional consumption, digital influence and commercial activity. Existing research has studied influencer marketing and online consumer behaviour yet, researchers need to study these dynamics based on pet ownership, which includes emotional and ethical aspects.

This research demonstrates that influencer marketing creates a new form of consumer trust which begins with rational product assessment and develops into emotional trust through social connections. The three factors which include emotional engagement, perceived authenticity and social validation mechanisms show how influencers affect consumer decision-making. The pet industry shows strong emotional connections between people and their pets which makes influencer marketing an effective tool to control consumer behaviour.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing influence of social media and digital platforms has fundamentally transformed how consumers access information, evaluate products and develop trust. This study analyses existing research through three theoretical frameworks which define consumer trust, influencer marketing and social media user behaviour while examining unique aspects of pet industry and its dynamics. The literature review establishes a vital research gap which exists between pet ownership emotional attachment and trust development through influencer content.

Consumer Trust in Digital Contexts

Consumer trust has long been recognized as a central determinant of purchasing behaviour, particularly in contexts characterized by uncertainty and information asymmetry. In traditional offline settings, trust is built through direct contact, physical product assessment and established brand recognition. Consumers in digital environments must find different ways to evaluate credibility because these environments lack the traditional trust cues that exist in other settings (Gefen et al., 2003) argue that online trust is constructed through institutional assurances, interface quality and informational cues because people lack personal knowledge about others. The online trust system functions differently from the offline trust system because it uses digital content to establish authenticity and credibility through digital content. The rise of user-created content has made user reviews, ratings and testimonials into essential information sources. Research by Cheung and Thadani (2012) demonstrates that electronic word of mouth (eWOM) significantly influences consumer attitudes and intentions which consumers view as more trustworthy than traditional advertisements.

Consumers use peer reviews as a collective validation method which enables them to evaluate product quality through other people's experiences. The study conducted by Filieri in 2015 found that consumers assess the legitimacy of online reviews based on their assessment of review consistency, review detail and review authenticity. Digital credibility in this situation emerges as a social construct which develops through personal understanding and group validation. Social media platforms create an environment where user-generated and influencer-created content leads to overlapping peer recommendations and commercial endorsements which results in confusion about trustworthiness.

Influencer Marketing and Credibility

Influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant strategy within digital advertising which uses the perceived credibility and relatability of individuals who have extensive online followings as its primary approach. The effectiveness of this approach can be understood through the lens of source credibility theory which states that a message becomes persuasive when people view the speaker as trustworthy and expert and attractive (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Through their content creation, ongoing interaction and personal branding social media influencers develop their authenticity to their followers.

Trustworthiness describes how people view an influencer's honesty and integrity, which becomes stronger when the influencer shows their genuine self and maintains values that their audience holds important. Expertise exists as a combination of demonstrated knowledge and actual work experience, yet people often believe someone to be an expert because they have seen that person before. Attractiveness includes physical beauty but it also consists of personal qualities that make people charming and easy to connect with, which help build connections with the audience. The study results demonstrate that all three dimensions of study dimensions which create better influencer endorsement results, help viewers develop better product attitudes toward the endorsements which they see (Ohanian, 1990).

The primary way that influencers achieve their goals is through building parasocial relationships, which involve audiences creating one-sided emotional bonds with media personalities (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Social media platforms enable users to establish relationships through their interactive elements, which include comments, direct messages and live content, that create a false sense of closeness between users. The researchers demonstrate that people who experience parasocial interactions develop higher purchase intent when they see online influencers because their emotional connection with the influencers makes them believe the influencers have actual expertise (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Influencer marketing connects personal communication with business communication because it creates a new way to share genuine beliefs through advertising methods. The hybrid communication model improves persuasive power, yet it creates doubts about how well organizations maintain transparent operations, which leads to ethical problems when they fail to show that their content has received financial backing.

Social Media and Consumer Behaviour

The communication function of social media platforms extends beyond their basic purpose because they function as social and algorithmic systems which create different social behaviour patterns. One of the most influential concepts in this regard is social proof which refers to the tendency of individuals to look at others behaviour as a guide for their own actions particularly in

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situations of uncertainty (Cialdini, 2009). Instagram as a platform provides users with three metrics of likes, shares and comments to show them which content their audience finds most popular and approves of their work.

Herd behaviour describes this phenomenon too. It shows how people follow what most other people do while ignoring personal desires and knowledge. Multiple researchers have shown that positive social media content gets more initial positive feedback which creates a bandwagon effect that results in greater content popularity (CITATION NEEDED, 2013). The dynamics of social media platforms enable consumer behaviour to increase the visibility of influencer endorsements which makes those endorsements appear more trustworthy and drives customers to purchase products.

Users experience content through two main factors; social dynamics and algorithmic influence. Social media algorithms promote content which attracts user engagement because this practice boosts existing popular content through shared emotional material. Bucher (2018) argues that algorithms create hidden editing processes which direct user experiences through methods which remain unclear yet, result in major effects on how users access and comprehend information. The selective visibility system enables echo chambers to form which concentrate on particular products and brands and influencers to create patterns of trust and preference.

The combination of social proof and herd behaviour together with algorithmic curation creates a system that makes popular content more accessible while people start trusting content that they see more. The fundamental social connection between trust and technological systems requires examination because trust exists as something people construct through their social interactions with technological touchpoints.

Pet Industry Specific Dynamics

The pet industry creates special conditions which make the digital consumer behaviour patterns that existing theories explain, more difficult to understand. The most important of these elements exists as anthropomorphism which describes the practice of people assigning human traits to nonhuman creatures. Consumers often interpret pets' behaviours, preferences and emotions through a human lens which results in them making decisions that show greater understanding of their pets' feelings (Dotson and Hyatt, 2008). Marketing professionals use this practice to promote their products by portraying them as things that pets need or enjoy which will lead customers to buy the products because they think they will fulfil their pets' emotional requirements.

The pet industry has a vital ethical consumption element because customers now prioritize animal welfare, sustainability and ingredient transparency. According to Carrington, Neville and Whitwell (2014), ethical considerations have a strong effect on consumer purchasing patterns but people often struggle to match their declared values with their true actions. In influencer marketing, ethical messages reach audiences through stories that describe care, rescue and responsible ownership which build trust while they distract from commercial purposes.

Pet industry's decision-making processes show strong emotional influence because pet owners form deep emotional connections with their pets. Pet owners evaluate pet products through two main criteria, their functional performance and their price but also through how they believe the products will affect their pets' health. The emotional connection people have with their pets increases their tendency to believe in persuasive messages that showcase love and care and responsibility through content which they find either familiar or inspiring on social media platforms.



Figure: Conceptual framework of influencer-driven trust formation in the pet industry. Source: Author

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Research Gap

The pet industry needs more research because existing studies about consumer trust and influencer marketing together with social media behaviour research have not yet established their intersection point. Research studies about influencer credibility and digital trust assessment usually examine both factors in non-specific environments because they overlook the special emotional connection which pet owners' experience. Digital influencers play an essential role in shaping emotional consumption through their ability to create human-like content which research studies on anthropomorphism and emotional consumption fail to recognize.

The research investigates the relationship between pet owners' emotional attachment to their pets and how they establish trust through influencer-based mechanisms. The study combines digital marketing knowledge with consumer psychology insights and pet industry research to explain trust development processes which lead to consumer decision-making in this emerging market.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a qualitative research design which relies on existing literature to investigate how social media and influencer marketing affect consumer trust and purchasing decisions within the pet industry. A qualitative research method becomes essential because the study investigates exploratory research questions which require understanding fundamental processes instead of evaluating direct cause-and-effect links. Qualitative research enables researchers to understand complex social situations through studying how different knowledge systems create meaning, tell stories and establish patterns (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The research study creates a theoretical foundation of influencer-driven trust development by merging existing academic research with industry reports and real-world digital examples.

The primary method employed is thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative technique for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns within textual data. Thematic analysis becomes the best approach for literature-based research because it enables researchers to methodically arrange multiple sources into unified themes which answer their research inquiries (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The method establishes an inductive approach for data analysis through which researchers can develop fundamental concepts which include emotional engagement, authenticity, social validation and ethical concerns. The digital environment enables consumers to establish trust through various elements which work together to create trust and drive their digital behaviour.

The study's data sources are divided into three primary categories and the theoretical framework of the study uses academic literature as its primary source which includes peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books that study consumer trust and influencer marketing, social media behaviour and anthropomorphism. The sources provide established frameworks through which current digital phenomena can be understood which includes source credibility theory, parasocial interaction and electronic word-of-mouth. The study uses industry reports together with market analyses to show how current trends in global pet care and digital marketing practices which are common in the industry affect the discussion. The Morgan Stanley reports together with other market research organization reports provide insights into how consumers behave, how markets grow and how social media has become an essential factor in consumer purchase decisions.

The study uses digital case studies which include well-known pet influencers and pet brands that include Tucker Budzyn and The Farmer's Dog. The researchers used the cases as illustrative material to demonstrate how theoretical concepts show themselves in real-world situations instead of treating the cases as empirical datasets. The pet industry shows emotional storytelling, authenticity and social proof through its influencer content, brand collaborations and audience engagement patterns. The study analysis gained analytical strength by using these cases which connected theoretical concepts with real life practices.

The coding process uses an iterative approach that works with thematic analysis through its interpretive nature. The research team conducted a review of both literature and case materials to find common concepts that shape trust formation in consumer decision-making. The researchers organized these concepts into major thematic groups that included emotionalization of trust, authenticity, relatability, parasocial relationships, anthropomorphism, social proof and ethical tensions. The study examined the ways that these themes developed through their interconnected relationships which created synergistic effects between different elements. The analysis process required researchers to develop themes through multiple iterations until they matched with the research question and existing theoretical frameworks. The method enables researchers to study multiple social media ecosystem operations through its complex mechanism mapping.

The methodological approach has several strengths but its researchers need to acknowledge specific limitations. The research study does not include any primary data collection methods like surveys or interviews or experiments. It uses existing literature and public content to create a research interpretation which restricts researchers from establishing definite causal relationships. The study focuses on providing conceptual insights which lead to theoretical synthesis instead of producing empirical

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generalizations. The existing literature and case material create a platform-specific bias because most studies focus on visual platforms that drive user engagement, particularly Instagram. The findings show important pet industry effects that Instagram brings, but they do not indicate the complete range of platform effects which emerge from different content systems and user groups.

The report shows that digital case examples provide useful demonstration value, yet they create selection bias because analysts tend to choose well-known influencers and successful brands for their research. The focus of this study excludes less successful cases because they lack visibility to provide different viewpoints. The research methodology establishes a solid framework that uses theoretical development and specific chosen examples to analyse how social media content and influencer marketing activities affect consumer trust in the pet industry. The qualitative thematic method provides researchers with a complete understanding of trust development and mediation processes which occur in online spaces linked to markets that rely on emotional sales. The research establishes essential elements which drive customer assessment processes and their buying choices that follow.

Thematic Analysis and Discussion

This section analyses how social media and influencer marketing influence consumer trust and purchasing decisions within the pet industry. The discussion uses the methodology framework to show how trust development and operation processes work in digital spaces through theoretical knowledge and practical case studies. The findings show that trust in this situation functions as a dynamic process because it develops through emotional bonds and people see him as real and those around him validate his backstory.

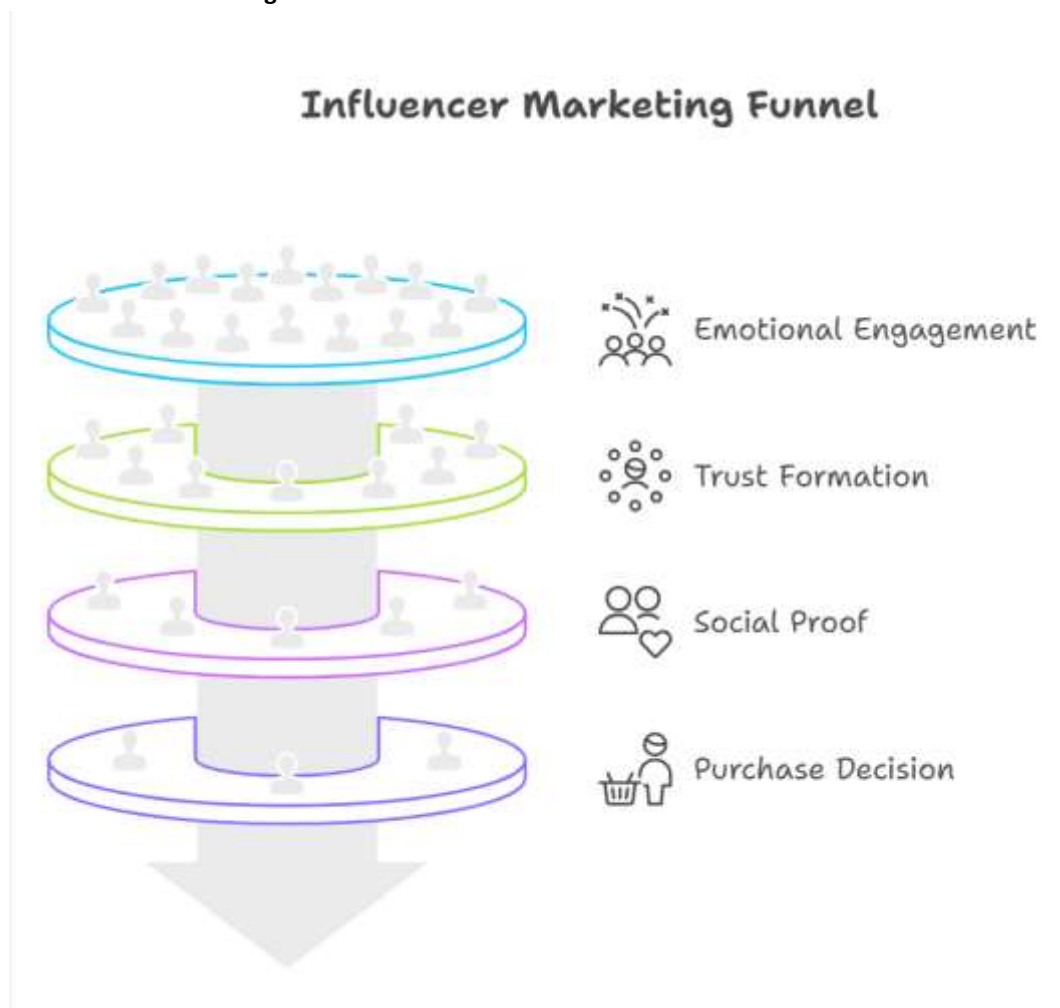
Emotionalization of Trust and Attachment

The analysis reveals emotionalized trust as a central theme which develops from people regarding pets as family members. Pet ownership today shows people who own pets develop deep emotional connections which lead them to treat their pets as they would treat their human family members (Dotson and Hyatt, 2008). People make decisions through emotional reasoning which causes them to make choices based on their feelings of affection and their obligations to provide care and love. Social media influencers create emotional connections through their storytelling which shows people developing friendships and their experiences of rescuing animals and spending time with their dogs. Influencers use curated images and videos with captions to create emotional stories which help audiences connect with the pet and its life experiences. The process creates empathy and emotional commitment which strengthens trust between influencers and their endorsed products. Doug the Pug demonstrates this phenomenon through his case. Doug the Pug creates funny content which shows humanlike behaviour through his online presence which allows audiences to connect with him as a character who has specific personality features. The humanization process establishes emotional bonds between followers and the pet because they see it as a social being who shares their experiences. The content demonstrates more trustworthiness when viewers see products which include positive emotions that pets bring through their petting.

The pattern shows that people in the pet influencer field trust their pets through feelings instead of logical thinking. Consumers base their product evaluations on their emotional responses which stem from their bond with the influencer and the pet. People make purchasing decisions because they feel affection and connection which shows that emotional involvement plays a key role in building digital trust.

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Emotional vs Rational Decision-Making



The figure visually reinforces trust becomes affective rather than rational. Source: Author

Authenticity, Relatability, and Influencer Credibility

The authenticity of an influencer functions as the main factor which determines their credibility to the public and this affects how consumers build their trust toward them. The public views social media content as more appealing than traditional advertising because social media content shows genuine human behaviour instead of following scripted patterns. Influencers who share "everyday life" moments, which include feeding routines, playtime and minor challenges, create a sense of transparency which enhances their perceived authenticity (Audrezet et. al., 2020).

Relatability stands as a fundamental element that drives audiences to trust influencers who share their authentic life experiences. The different ways micro-influencers and celebrity influencers operate show this phenomenon. Micro-influencers achieve better audience interaction and trust because they connect with their followers on a personal level compared to celebrity influencers who have bigger fan bases (De Veirman et al., 2017). Pet industry professionals use relatable content to connect with customers through their shared experiences of pet care which includes handling health problems and selecting suitable products.

The success of Nala Cat demonstrates that businesses can achieve financial success through authentic and relatable products. Nala Cat's content shows normal human activities and emotional moments which make followers feel closer to her. The trust which developed over time made it possible to launch partnered products successfully because people believed in their authentic nature which drove their buying choices. Consumers who view the influencer as genuine are more likely to interpret product endorsements as sincere recommendations rather than paid promotions.

The analysis demonstrates that authenticity functions as the main factor which people use to evaluate trustworthiness. In digital environments where information is abundant and often ambiguous, consumers rely on cues such as consistency, transparency, and relatability to assess credibility. Authenticity projection enables influencers to influence consumer perceptions which results in changes to both product attitudes and purchasing behaviour.

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Storytelling and Parasocial Relationships

The storytelling process helps people develop parasocial relationships which serve as the main way influencers connect with their audiences. Influencers create ongoing pet narratives that develop continuous relationships. Followers develop a sense of ownership over the pet and its owner. The stories contain several important life events and obstacles and emotional events which make the audience become more involved with the story and its characters.

The concept of parasocial relationships which Horton and Wohl established in 1956 gains its strongest impact through social media platforms that use interactive features to create an appearance of real-time user interaction. Followers can comment on posts and receive responses and participate in discussions, which creates an illusion of reciprocity. The audience develops trust through this perceived closeness, which makes them see the influencer as a trustworthy source of information who shares personal experiences. The case of Tucker Budzyn demonstrates how storytelling and parasocial interaction reinforce trust. Tucker Budzyn's content includes emotional narratives which show how pets react to new experiences and how they interact with family members. The stories use captions which present the pet's viewpoint to enhance relatability and emotional engagement with the audience. The audience demonstrates strong emotional connection through their comments and shares which show how followers feel with affection and personal identification. The relationship between people creates a trust relationship which functions like real social trust. The relationship exists as one-sided yet it still creates emotional and cognitive patterns which human beings create during social encounters. The product endorsements in these stories function as suggestions from a trustworthy friend, which boosts their ability to persuade people.

Anthropomorphism and Perceived Product Value

The social media content about pets uses anthropomorphism as its main feature which affects how people understand their pets and the related products. Influencers establish a product evaluation method which uses human emotions and preferences as they show their understanding of animal behaviour needs and wants which researchers found in their study (Dotson and Hyatt 2008). The process shows itself through influencers who use pet voices to display their product opinions through their use of captions and dialog. A pet might show affection for a certain brand of food through its behaviour or it might show preference for a certain toy through its actions. The representations lead people to value emotional satisfaction and enjoyment more than they value functional product attributes which include nutritional content and durability.

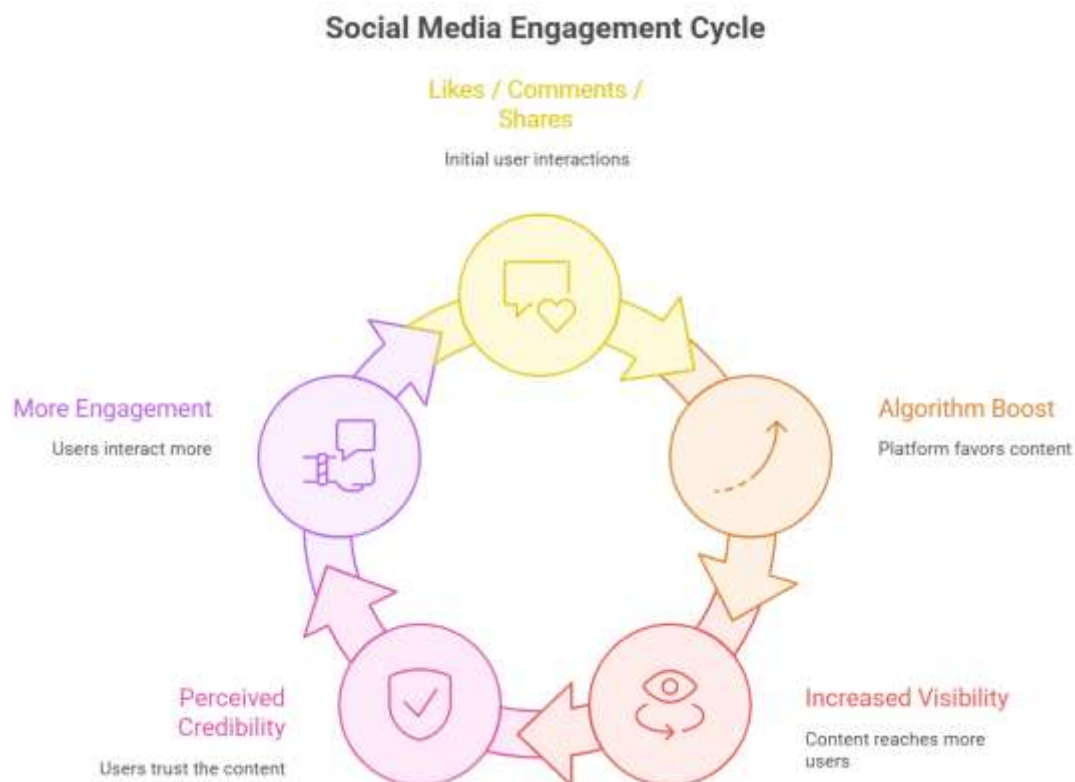
Multiple influencer accounts show products as items that improve pet happiness and well-being rather than showing them as methods that address actual issues. The new presentation method changes consumer value assessment by making them focus more on emotional results than on actual measurement standards. Pet owners make product choices based on their intention to create the ideal experience for their pet which they understand through anthropomorphic stories.

The analysis shows that anthropomorphism alters how people perceive product quality. Pet owners make product assessments based on how well products match their pets' assumed personality traits and personal preferences. The pet industry consumer pattern needs emotional and symbolic elements to shape its development process.

Social Proof and Community Validation

Trust on social media platforms develops through social proof and community validation as its fundamental elements. Users use visible engagement metrics which include likes and comments and shares to determine content popularity and approval, which affects their content interpretation. According to Cialdini (2009) people show a stronger tendency to follow social proof because it operates as their guide during moments when they experience uncertainty.

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The figure explains how Instagram amplifies trust. Source: Author

Instagram users experience these patterns because the platform's algorithms show preference for content that receives high user interaction. The platform promotes content that receives high user interaction because it boosts both content visibility and user credibility assessment. Popular content creates a feedback loop which makes it more powerful because it establishes new consumer patterns that determine how people see products and make their purchases.

Pet influencers achieve community validation through their followers who share personal stories and product recommendations. Followers share their product experiences through product discussions which lead to shared perceptions of product quality and trustworthiness. The community endorsement process transforms personal recommendations into socially accepted endorsements.

The analysis shows that people develop trust through collective processes in digital spaces. The broader community responses and behaviours about the influencer determine how consumers choose their path. Social dynamics create the foundation for consumer behaviour through which trust develops as a communal process.

Perceived Expertise vs Emotional Authority

The primary conflict which exists in influencer marketing originates from the difference between people who perceive expertise and those who possess emotional authority. Traditional authority sources like veterinarians and scientific experts acquire their credibility through formal education and professional qualifications. Through their personal experiences and their ability to create emotional bonds with others influencers build their authoritative status.

The marketing approach used by The Farmer's Dog demonstrates this pattern because the company partners with influencers to market its products as nutritious and beneficial. Influencer content uses visible results to show energy and appearance improvements instead of showing scientific proof. The endorsement becomes trustworthy to consumers because they believe in the influencer's personal experiences which they acquired through life experience instead of their official qualifications.

People now trust emotional authority because they find it relatable while they believe experts possess professional knowledge. People who have developed a bond with influencers will trust their recommendations more than expert advice which they consider to be distant. The process increases user interaction while building trust but it creates problems because it affects the accuracy of information and the trustworthiness of details. The analysis shows that emotional authority determines consumer trust because people develop strong emotional ties to particular situations. In the pet industry customers make purchases based on their beliefs about caregiving and their sense of responsibility which creates a deep effect on their buying patterns.

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Ethical Concerns and Trust Distortion

Influencer marketing delivers major advantages which improve audience involvement and power to sway others yet it creates serious ethical problems which need proper ethical solutions to maintain transparent operations with accurate information and responsible conduct. The main problem exists because hidden sponsorships exist between promotional content and advertising which fails to show its commercial nature to the audience.

The practice of hidden advertising results in consumer deception which prevents people from making correct decisions (Evans et al., YEAR NEEDED). The pet industry faces misleading health claims which create problems because pet owners lack necessary skills to examine information about pets. The product promotion by influencers creates dangerous health risks because they promote items as natural and healthy and veterinarian-approved without showing any proof that supports their claims.

The Juniper Fox case shows how influencer culture creates complex ethical challenges that need to be addressed. The popular account delivers entertaining content yet it faces backlash because its content promotes exotic pet ownership without showing the actual difficulties that come with owning such pets. The way people perceive products through social media channels creates behaviour patterns which lead to animal welfare violations because people fail to understand the actual treatment of animals. Digital environments create opportunities for trust manipulation according to these problems. Emotional signals together with perceived authenticity create a situation where consumers become more vulnerable to commercial advertising which hides its real purpose while showing false product advantages. The situation creates a need to examine how brands and platforms and influencers should practice their ethical duties for transparent and precise information exchange.

Thematic analysis shows that trust in the pet industry operates as a complex social construct which develops through three main factors: emotional bonds between people and their pets, their social relationships and their usage of advanced technology. The use of influencer marketing helps marketers increase customer engagement while providing customers with better information about product selection, but this method creates additional risks which need thorough evaluation.

Implications

The study results provide important benefits for all stakeholders which include consumers, marketers and policymakers. The pet industry needs assessment between the present-day influencer marketing system and its impact on consumer trust and purchasing behaviour. The analysis demonstrates that trust in this context requires more than basic information because it develops through emotional bonds and social relationships, which demands special methods for handling, messaging and monitoring operations.

Implications for Consumers

Social media and pet influencers now dominate consumer behaviour, which necessitates better media literacy skills for customers. The increasing emotional impact of digital content in combination with its immersive nature makes it challenging for consumers to tell apart real product endorsements from planned marketing efforts. People use their understanding of authenticity and relatability to evaluate influencer content, which results in them accepting promotional messages without questioning their validity, according to research findings (Lou and Yuan 2019). In the pet industry, where decisions are closely tied to perceptions of care and responsibility, this reliance on emotional cues can significantly shape purchasing behaviour.

Developing critical media literacy requires people to identify persuasive intent and assess source credibility and determine the truthfulness of various statements. Consumers need to understand that influencer content which appears casual and personal actually exists to promote products. Unrevealed advertising creates a risk of misleading consumers who require sponsorship information to make informed choices about products according to (Evans et al., 2017). Consumers who study digital content with an analytical approach will discover new ways to understand how influencers market products.

Understanding how emotions create persuasive effects stand as two vital components of emotional persuasion. The study results show that emotional storytelling and anthropomorphism together with parasocial connections shape trust development and decision-making processes. The elements improve engagement and provide necessary information about the content, but they generate biased assessments because people fail to evaluate them with critical thinking skills. A product which gets approval from a [CORRECTION NEEDED][محبوب] pet influencer will be seen as trustworthy because users form emotional bonds with the pet instead of evaluating the product through its actual standard of quality. The recognition of this process helps consumers create equilibrium between their emotional responses and their logical decision-making process which results in better purchasing choices.

Implications for Marketers

The pet industry requires marketers to embrace their growing responsibilities which arise from the increasing need for influencer marketing. The results show that consumer trust develops through influencer endorsements. Strategic marketing partnerships

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with influencers who match brand identity and customer base. The research results show that trust exists as a delicate and changing element which needs people to perceive both authenticity and transparency to maintain their trust.

Consumer trust throughout the market depends on businesses displaying full transparency to their customers. Marketers need to disclose sponsored content through clear methods because regulatory authorities and consumers have become aware of deceptive marketing techniques. Businesses that implement transparent operations achieve legal compliance while building their brand's trustworthiness for extended periods. Research indicates that consumers exhibit higher trust and brand engagement toward companies which disclose their marketing activities despite their promotional content (Audrezet et al., 2020).

The establishment of ethical influencer partnerships functions as another essential element that needs evaluation. Marketers need to choose pet industry influencers based on their content and values because this industry requires and ethical standards. Animal welfare needs to guide collaborators during their work because they should not create harmful products or misleading practices. All claims about health benefits, nutritional value and product efficacy need to have trustworthy evidence which supports them. Marketers need to understand that authenticity functions as a major driver which shapes how consumers perceive their brand. Brands need to give influencers freedom to create product integration into their content because this method enables influencers to produce their own promotional material. The method increases audience connection while decreasing the chance of viewers seeing content as fake which damages their trust. Marketers can gain social media influence through genuine influencer partnerships while protecting their brand integrity and accountability.

Implications for Policy and Regulation

The rising use of influencer marketing on online platforms which people use every day will create major effects on existing policies and regulations. The research results show that when personal and commercial content combine together, it becomes difficult for consumers to recognize advertising because they cannot see the marketing intentions. The existing situation needs authorities to create specific rules which organizations must follow to disclose their marketing activities through social media influencers.

Influencer organizations have to demonstrate their sponsored content through clear identification requirements which various government agencies have established. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the United States has set guidelines which state that endorsements must use clear and conspicuous methods for disclosure (Federal Trade Commission, 2019). Countries around the world now implement similar laws because they need to create digital consumer protections. The success of these initiatives relies on their proper implementation and their ability to handle new changes which will occur on digital platforms.

The pet industry needs to establish monitoring systems which track false or unverified statements that specifically affect animal health and well-being. The practice of influencing people through endorsements which claim products to be healthy or vet-approved without providing proof of their statements results in dangerous consequences for pet safety. Policymakers and regulatory bodies need to create systems which will assess and handle these claims through cooperation with veterinary professionals and industrial experts.

The need exists to study ethical aspects of influencer content that includes pet ownership and pet care representations. The study discovered that specific content types will unintentionally create practice patterns which include exotic pet ownership as a standard practice. The regulatory framework should establish standards for responsible content representation together with programs that teach both influencers and their followers about ethical standards.

The study results show that regulations need to establish an equilibrium between the advantages of influencer marketing and the requirement to safeguard consumers while maintaining ethical standards. The process needs all stakeholders to work together, which includes government officials, social media platforms, businesses and content creators; while researchers study how new patterns and obstacles emerge.

The research results show that trust in the digital pet industry develops through multiple stages because it needs people to test their trustworthiness and verify their trustworthiness. Stakeholders can improve their understanding of influencer marketing through three methods which are: teaching consumers to be aware of critical information, establishing ethical standards for marketers and developing stronger regulatory systems.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to investigate how social media and influencer marketing impact consumer trust and purchasing habits within the pet industry. The research employed a qualitative literature-based method to conduct thematic analysis which revealed that trust in this situation exists as a socially constructed emotional bond that goes beyond simple product assessment. The study discovered that influencer marketing functions through interconnected processes which affect how consumers gather information and determine trustworthiness before they decide to buy products. The process of trust transformation depends on how emotional

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trust relationships evolve. The research demonstrates that modern pet ownership practices develop from emotional bonds between people and their pets who become recognized as family members. The emotional attachment between consumers and products leads to higher consumer participation which results in decision-making that concentrates on their feelings. Influencers use this pattern to create stories about care and companionship which help them connect product endorsements with emotional customer preferences. The Doug the Pug example demonstrates that humour combined with personality traits enables people to form emotional connections with their pets which creates trust in related products. In those situations, people base trust on their personal connections which include empathic and affectionate and identity-based aspects.

The development of trustworthy relationships depends on authenticity as an essential mechanism which serves as their main driver. In digital spaces where users face extreme information abundance and show disbelief toward conventional advertising methods and consumers use their assessment of authenticity to determine which sources they trust. Followers regard influencers who share common life experiences through their daily life content as authentic which boosts their ability to persuade others. The Nala Cat case study shows how authenticity and relatability lead to actual purchase behaviour because followers view product endorsements as genuine product suggestions instead of advertisements. According to this finding, authenticity functions as an essential element which builds trust between consumers and influencer marketing campaigns.

The process of social validation creates stronger social connections because people start to view their own opinions through a shared perspective that others use to assess their views. Social media platforms provide users with access to engagement metrics which show likes and comments and shares as indicators of how others perceive their content. The analysis shows that these signals create a system which develops trust through group involvement instead of single person assessment. Popular content receives algorithmic boosts which create feedback systems that make certain influencers and products appear more trustworthy and accepted by the public. Consumer trust development occurs through two channels, first through the influencer content and second, through the community members active in their response to the content.

The research study demonstrates that particular mechanisms function through established methods, which include storytelling, anthropomorphism and the development of parasocial ties. The Tucker Budzyn case study demonstrates how narrative content creates familiarity between viewers and the influencer, who then becomes a trustworthy information source. The adoption of anthropomorphism enables customers to assess products through pet-like human traits, which results in their emotional responses being prioritized over assessment of product functions. The pet industry uses influencer marketing to build strong emotional connections with customers through its authentic storytelling approach, which goes beyond simple product endorsements.

The research findings demonstrate that these social dynamics create risks for people who engage with them. Consumers become more vulnerable to deceptive practices when they depend on emotional signals and trustworthiness, especially when sponsorships remain undisclosed and claims lack proper evidence. The Juniper Fox case study demonstrates how influencers need to understand their ethical duties because they affect public views on pet ownership. The need for organizations to disclose their practices and educate people about their activities becomes critical because unethical practices lead to consumer disadvantages and animal welfare risks.

The research demonstrates that influencer marketing affects both, consumers' buying choices and trust relationships within the pet sector. Trust exists as a dynamic social construct which people develop through their emotional connections with others based on their trustworthiness and their reputation within a social group. The research shows how digital systems operate because theoretical frameworks unite with real-world examples to create this understanding of their operational processes. The study provides multiple routes which researchers can pursue to conduct future investigations.

Cross-cultural studies will show researchers how cultural norms and values affect the pet industry relationship between influencer marketing and trust and consumer behaviour. The global reach of social media requires researchers to study these differences because they will impact both theoretical understanding and practical application. The study needs researchers to use differential platform analysis which examines Instagram and TikTok and YouTube to understand how each platform's unique features and algorithms impact influencer trust development and performance benchmarks. The combination of qualitative research methods with quantitative research methods will create a complete analysis of these relationships which allows researchers to study both fundamental processes and their scientific evaluation.

In conclusion, as the pet industry continues to evolve alongside digital technologies, the role of influencer marketing in shaping consumer trust will remain a critical area of inquiry. By recognizing the complex interplay of emotional, social and technological factors, stakeholders can navigate through the opportunities and challenges presented by this rapidly changing landscape.

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