

Following Furbabies: How Humans Form Parasocial Relationships

With Animals Through Social Media.

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### **Abstract**

The definition of parasocial relationships traditionally refers to humans, but perhaps should be expanded to incorporate non-human celebrities as well. Instagram is among the most popular social media platforms available, and it is saturated with animal content. Though humans can form parasocial relationships with other humans on social media platforms like Instagram, it is unclear how humans can form parasocial relationships with animals on Instagram. A survey was conducted to address this research gap. Three thousand, six hundred subjects' answers were analyzed regarding their parasocial relationships with various animals on Instagram. Results show that increased social media use and exposure to animal content increases a user's likelihood of forming parasocial relationships with the animal accounts they follow. Those who spend more time on social media and browsing animal content were also more likely to feel a connection to the accounts they follow. Finally, Instagram users more highly value physical qualities of the animals they follow such as cuteness, uniqueness, and breed/species. Convenience sampling was utilized through gathering participants on specific social media groups, leading to many participants having innate bias to the content. Though it is clear that humans can form parasocial relationships with animals, and these relationships are very similar to those between humans, future studies could also provide insight as to the implications of such human to animal parasocial relationships might be, such as within advertising.

### Introduction

As of October 2018, Jiffpom, an adorable pomeranian, has over 8.9 million Instagram followers, just over one million fewer than the President of the United States, Donald Trump. Jiffpoms' follower count is nearly double the population of New Zealand. This little dog has even met famous celebrities such as Ariana Grande, Jake Paul, Max Schneider, Scott Hoying, and Collins Key. Pets like Jiffpom are not uncommon on social media, and, in fact, are extremely popular across the platforms, earning millions of dollars for their posts.

Considering the wide range of influence these social media pets can have, it is important to include them in media studies. Social media connects an enormous portion of the world's population, and the individuals who have the most power on social media are those with the most followers. Many of these individuals are animals, so even non-humans have the ability to influence hundreds of thousands and even millions of people. Animals as celebrities is not a new concept and is important in the study of celebrities and fame in general. However, there are not many publications available regarding how humans form relationships with animals.

With the rise of social media, it is easier than ever for individuals to find fame and popularity. Anyone with access to the Internet can gain a following, becoming what is known as a micro-celebrity, and potentially connecting themselves with millions of people across the world. Viewers can feel real emotions toward the famous dog Lassie on screen, but it is uncertain why hundreds of people will wait in line to meet a dog they follow on Instagram. As with any other human celebrity, audience members or fans have the potential of forming one-sided relationships with these animals, otherwise known as parasocial relationships, through repeated interactions. Parasocial relationships have traditionally been defined as occurring between two

humans, but the popularity of animals on social media signifies that the definition may need to be expanded to include non-humans. Animals have been seen in television, books, and movies for a long time, but the rise of animal-focused social media accounts is a new concept.

Celebrities have enormous power; the animals themselves may not be able to wield it, but the humans behind every one of them can.

Because of this, animal celebrities could increasingly hold influence over their followers, similar to many human celebrities involved in advertising. Considering there is limited academic research surrounding the topic of human-to-animal parasocial relationships, the formation and cultivation of these relationships was first analyzed. A study was conducted to analyze how human to animal parasocial relationships form, particularly through the social network Instagram.

## **Literature Review**

### **Micro-celebrity and Social Media Celebrities**

Primarily due to the rise of social media, individuals have more opportunity to gain attention. This has led away from a world of few big celebrities to a world of many little celebrities, commonly known as micro-celebrities. Though these celebrities revolve around social media, social media celebrities are one of many kinds of micro-celebrity.

**Micro-celebrity.** When most people think of the word ‘celebrity,’ what likely comes to mind is a figure like Beyonce, Donald Trump, or Tom Cruise. Many celebrities have become household names, and it can be difficult to find anyone who does not know who they are.

Though there will always be larger-than-life stars, there are countless others who are still in the process of gaining their following. Every celebrity has to start from somewhere, and when they

are in the earlier stages of smaller fan bases, they can be known as ‘micro-celebrities.’ Marwick (2015) defines the term in saying, “Micro-celebrity is a mind-set and a collection of self-presentation practices endemic in social media, in which users strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status” (p. 138). Micro-celebrities can be found across nearly all social media platforms and can range from a few thousand followers to hundreds of thousands.

When discussed in the context of social media, micro-celebrities can be seen as human brands because they are viewed from advertisers’ perspectives as marketing opportunities (Kahmis, 2016). Here, they are often referred to as ‘social media influencers.’ According to Kahmis (2016), the goal of social media influencers is to gain as much attention as they can to attract companies and advertisers who will pay them to talk about or show off their product. This exemplifies the consumer culture intrinsic to modern society. Individuals believe that their personalities and appearances alone are marketable, which results in influencers devoting their energy to maintaining an image that is both edited and supposed to appear natural and authentic. In other words, the ‘real’ person that social media influencers are trying to portray is not real at all.

**How users connect through social media.** In the world of social media, the currency is attention. Often referred to as ‘attention economy,’ the more people that see someone else’s content, the more advertisers might want to pay. Considering the average teen in the US spends a minimum of one hour per day on social media, there is a lot of attention to go around. In fact, nearly 90% of teens in the US are on social media, and 24% admit to being nearly constantly

engaged (Bond, 2016, p. 656). There are so many people using social media that there have to be reasons everyone is drawn to it.

One of the main appeals of social media is that anyone can do it. Different platforms allow everyday people to reach large audiences. In the past, only broadcast media outlets were able to do this (Marwick, 2014, p. 157). Not only can social media users reach large numbers of people, they also tend to have a more authentic feel about them than celebrities from television, film, etc. A social network like Twitter has an improvisational feel to it that makes it appear more authentic (Bond, 2016, p. 659). The more authentic media personae seem, the more likely audience members are to form attachments with them, even though they have never met in person. Of course, social media is also easy to manipulate and can be less authentic through the use of fake profiles, privacy settings, or selectively hiding personal information.

In addition to the authenticity that social media provides, it allows users to interact with the individuals they follow. This is not to the same extent as normal person-to-person interactions, of course, but receiving a like back from a celebrity has its own kind of gratification. Social media, unlike television, allows audience members to be a part of the show, publicly contributing their own thoughts and ideas. Because social media exists behind a screen, it is often easier for individuals to reveal certain parts of themselves that others might not otherwise see, or that may be difficult for them to express offscreen.

It is so easy for anyone to participate in social media that it is hard to find anyone who does not use it. Social media revolves around the individual, and sharing their personal lives. Audience members are so saturated with enormous amounts of content that it is extra important for influencers to differentiate themselves from the competition and try to be as visible as

possible. This means that social media influencers have to come up with content that stands out so it can gain more attention.

**Instagram** Though social media in general values images over text, Instagram is arguably the best at it, with 11% of American teenagers using the platform (Marwick, 2015, p. 137). These images allow users to have a more intimate look into other people's lives, especially celebrities. While in the past, a fan of Marilyn Monroe, for example, would have to wait for her next film or next news appearance to learn about what she is doing, now fans can just log onto social media and know where their favorite stars are and what they are up to. Some of the most popular Instagram accounts include musicians, actors, brands, reality TV stars, athletes, politicians, and YouTube celebrities (Marwick, 2015, p. 146).

However, many of the people who accumulate millions of followers are not famous outside of social media. If any user can create content that is appealing to a large amount of people, they can gain followers; no real talents or skills are necessary. Any person who has collected a large following on Instagram is now referred to as 'Instafamous.'

Though the majority of Instagram users are not famous, it is not difficult to find Internet celebrities on the platform. The Explore page is filled with accounts containing hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of followers, covering nearly every topic imaginable. There is no single model for what makes up a famous Instagram account.

### **Celebrity Worship**

Admiration of famous individuals is far from a new phenomenon. People can and do become obsessed with any type of celebrity, including musicians, actors, athletes, and

politicians. . These relationships are typically one-sided, but can still serve a large purpose in a person's life, and have a big impact. As technology changes, and the Internet changes with it, new social networks are frequently making their way into the mainstream. When these new forms of media arise, users discover different ways to gain a following. This means that the definition of what it means to be famous or a celebrity has to evolve as well. Since it is so easy for individuals to reach a large audience, unexceptional people are more frequently becoming famous. Average people can gain popularity for memes, videos that go viral, etc. (Marwick, 2015, p. 140).

**How and why people form connections with celebrities.** According to Giles (2012), the idea of celebrity is not a trait that someone is born with; it is a cultural process (p. 125). The idea of being famous is often equated to how a fish feels in his bowl: never able to escape the gaze of the people around him. Giles (2012) writes,

The close-up is said to 'capture' the star, allowing us to believe that we have access to their unique personhood, a process that is 'probably central to the star phenomenon.'

Sunbathing celebrities are likewise 'captured' by the telephoto lens... What, then, could be a more perfect symbol of celebrity than a caged animal? (p. 126).

Society is fascinated by famous people and everything they do. When fans are able to get a peek into what their favorite stars are up to, they feel much closer to them, as though they are a part of their social circle. The question is, why do people care so much about these people they have never met?

For some people, celebrity worship may stem from their own desire to be famous (Zsila, McCutcheon, & Demetrovics, 2018, p. 2). For many others, fawning over a celebrity can fulfill a



social need. According to Greenwood and Long (2011), these celebrities can fill holes in people's lives that are not currently occupied. Stars can even serve as role-models for their fans. Considering the fans do not interact with the celebrity in their offline, everyday lives, there is minimal possibility of getting hurt or being let down. This makes parasocial relationships dissimilar to traditional interpersonal relationships because they are void of the negative complications that come with two-sided relationships. However, there may still be specific personality traits and other psychological features that lead to someone being more predisposed for celebrity worship. One study found there is a positive correlation between celebrity worship and predisposition for addiction (Sansone, R. & Sansone, L., 2014).

As explained by Zsila, et al. (2018), there are three dimensions of celebrity worship: entertainment-social dimension (low level), intense-personal dimension (moderate level), and borderline-pathological dimension (extreme level). Around one-third of the population has been shown to fall under the borderline-pathological dimension of celebrity worship. In the first stage, individuals are interested in the entertainment aspect of celebrity interaction. They may enjoy watching the celebrity on screen, and reading about them on occasion, but do not devote excessive time to thinking about the celebrity. Individuals who fall under the second level have the same behaviors as those in the first level, but intensified. They may check in on the celebrity's activity more frequently, consume more content that involves the celebrity, and spend more time thinking about the celebrity. In the final, extreme stage, individuals will demonstrate excessive levels of sympathy and empathy toward the celebrity's achievements and failures, obsessively following their lives. They will also over-identify with the celebrity, making

superfluous connections between the celebrity's life and their own (Sansone, R. & Sansone, L., 2014).

### **Parasocial Interaction**

Though parasocial interactions are very common in recent forms of media, like social media, they are not a new phenomenon. The concept of parasocial interactions originated in the field of psychology in 1956 by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl. In the 1970s, the uses and gratifications theory was developed and applied to research in mass communication. This theory refers to why people use media, and how they seek out media to fulfill certain goals or needs such as entertainment, socialization, leisure, and education (David, 2016). This was when the interest in parasocial interactions took off as well (Giles, 2009, p. 280; Ward, 2016, p. 2).

Parasocial interactions have become a part of most media-consumers' day-to-day lives. There are so many different forms of media now that it can be hard to avoid familiar famous faces. Like any other relationship in a person's life, the relationships everyday people form with individuals they have never met can affect their lives.

**What are parasocial interactions?** According to Schmid and Klimmt (2011), "Parasocial interactions are conceptualized as immediate psychological responses of media users to media characters in the moment of exposure" (p. 254). For example, someone who watches the same news channel every morning may grow more and more familiar with the newscasters. Any time the viewer agrees with a newscaster, infers what they will do next, or even talks out loud to them, it is considered a parasocial interaction. The newscaster is unable to respond or return the interaction, but a small, one-sided connection is still formed. These interactions can lead the viewer to look at the character as a personal acquaintance (Giles, 2009, p. 289). Perse

and Rubin (1989) write, “Viewers feel that they know and understand the persona in the same intimate way they know and understand flesh-and-blood friends” (p. 60).

The more the viewer consumes media that involves the particular character, the stronger the bond will become (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011, p. 254; Ward, 2016, p. 3). For example, if a viewer watches an actor in a long-running television show, they may feel more connected to that person than if they watched a different actor in just one movie (Giles, 2009, p. 282). Because television can run for many seasons, the viewer can simply have more hours invested into the show, and therefore the character.

**How and why do parasocial interactions happen?** Since parasocial interactions are integrated into modern media consumption, it is important to acknowledge what the effects might be on the viewer. For many people, parasocial interactions fulfill a small social need because the characters they interact with may remind them of people in their real lives (Giles, 2009, p. 280). As characters progress through their own stories, audiences may make connections to their lives, thereby understanding themselves better. Viewers can look up to these characters as idols or role models, using them for guidance and support. Sometimes, through media avenues like social media, these characters will respond back to their fans. In the past, fans of famous Hollywood stars could only hope to connect with their idols if they met them in person. Social media, however, allows for the possibility of earning that moment of undivided attention from someone the user admires. In this way, social media can resemble gambling: The fact that the media personae may or may not respond only serves to make it more interesting and exciting. If celebrities responded to every one of their fans, their attention would lose its novelty. Instead, viewers form an attachment to an individual they see on a screen. As they see more

content from that individual, their attachment grows. If the viewer chooses to contact the person they admire, through Twitter, for example, and receives a reply, it is infinitely more gratifying for them to know that, for a moment, the celebrity thought about them (Giles, 2009).

### **Parasocial Relationships**

Famous film director Martin Scorsese says,

You really got to love [celebrities]. They don't know you. But you love them. But you love, I think, what you imagine they are. You put more into the person to a certain extent than they may even be giving out on the screen, because they represent a dream. You lose yourself in those people. (as cited in Rockwell, 2018, para 11)

What Scorsese is referencing is the deep relationships many viewers form with celebrities who they have never met. These are called parasocial relationships (PSRs) and they are extremely popular in modern society. Parasocial relationships occur through nearly all types of media around the world in a wide variety of cultures. They can be seen outside of media as well.

Because they are so prevalent in society, PSRs have a high potential of influencing the users who have them.

**Defining parasocial relationships.** Though Horton and Wohl (1956) were central to the idea of parasocial interactions growing in popularity, their research was not perfect. One of the issues with Horton and Wohl's original research was that there was no distinction between parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships. By 1987, Robin and McHugh defined parasocial relationships as "...a type of intimate, friend-like relationship that occurs between a mediated persona and a viewer" (as cited in Rockwell, 2018, para 6). In other words, a parasocial

relationship develops as a result of numerous parasocial interactions. The two concepts are intertwined but not interchangeable.

The more exposure a viewer has to an individual media persona, the more likely they are to form a parasocial relationship with them. Still, the viewer's personality and life circumstances can have a lot to do with their ability to form parasocial relationships or to strengthen them. For example, a person who is already in a romantic relationship is less likely to form parasocial relationships (Greenwood & Long, 2011). Different cultures can also affect a person's ability to form a parasocial relationship. However, there are some exceptions like with the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling. Schmid and Klimmt (2011) write, "The overwhelming success [of the Harry Potter books] demonstrates that people all over the world feel entertained by the series and indicates strong positive parasocial relationships with the protagonist in readers from very different (cultural) backgrounds" (p. 253). This shows that culture can have an influence on whether or not a person can develop a parasocial relationship, but it is not a heavy influence.

If an individual sees the character they like often and for longer periods of time, they will seek out access to more media with that character to keep the imagined relationship growing (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011, p. 254). One of the most important traits viewers look for when forming these relationships is authenticity. However, many cultures heavily mold celebrities to sell products or movie tickets, thereby decreasing their authenticity. According to Rockwell (2018),

Celebrities, rather than being authentic and freely expressing human beings, are actually images that are framed, groomed, packaged and highly produced solely for the purpose of dissemination through mass media onto our living room television sets, and through the

Internet to our device screens. (para 21)

For many celebrities, even the act of appearing authentic is crafted and staged. In modern media, it is very difficult to discern real from fake.

Parasocial relationships are commonly known to occur through television, movies, and social media, but they do not always have to be through media. Examples of non-media parasocial relationships include a boy having a crush at school, imaginary friends, relationships between readers and fictional protagonists, citizens and political figures, and individuals and Gods (Giles, 2009, p. 287). All of these relationships are less dynamic than traditional relationships, considering the one-sided nature of them (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011, p. 254).

**How do PSRs form?** Parasocial relationships can develop at a very young age. Kids frequently talk about celebrities they like as if they are personal friends. Around the time an individual becomes a teenager, there is a shift in their social circle. As a child, the closest people in one's life are parents or caregivers. According to Bond (2018), "An interpersonal shift occurs during adolescence whereby same-gender friends displace parents as primary relational partners" (pp. 4-5). This means that teenager's friends have the potential to influence them more than their parents. Parasocial relationships have the potential of feeling like friendships, so audience members who idolize celebrities could be influenced to mimic their behavior. Depending on the celebrity, this could be a good thing or a bad thing. Bond (2016) writes, "In one study, adolescents who reported strong PSRs with the cast of *Jersey Shore* had sexual attitudes that mirrored those of the cast more so than adolescents who did not have PSRs with cast members" (p. 656). This shows how media personae can have a real impact on a viewer.

According to Giles (2009), viewers primarily value three characteristics that may determine the nature of the parasocial relationship. As mentioned previously, one of these factors is authenticity, or how credible the media figure'. However, this is not always the case considering people often have PSRs with pop stars, fantasy characters, and cartoon characters. Second is representation across media outlets. If a celebrity only appears once in a small film, they will likely not achieve the amount of exposure necessary for audiences to form a parasocial relationship with them. If a celebrity is present in numerous films, TV shows, and on social media, for example, their presence across these varied media outlets allows for more parasocial relationships to form (Giles, 2009, p. 291). According to Greenwood and Long (2011), "Imagined intimacy may also strengthen when media figures may be 'known' through a variety of different projects as well as through behind the scenes interviews on entertainment programs and in magazines" (p. 294). Therefore, it is not only important for celebrities to appear on multiple platforms or variations of work for fans to form parasocial attachments with them, they should also appear publicly for press events. This provides viewers with a more personal perspective of the celebrity because the celebrities are less scripted, more authentic, and provide a peek into their offscreen lives.

Lastly, the context of the viewer can influence the nature of their PSRs. PSRs do not always serve as a replacement for interpersonal interaction. Though they may fill some sort of social need, they cannot single-handedly fulfill a person socially. Co-viewing, or consuming media alongside another person, may also influence the development of PSRs (Giles, 2009, p. 291).

Usually, parasocial relationships develop because the viewer feels a social attraction toward the media persona. In other words, they could see the celebrity as a real friend in their life. This is even more important than the celebrity's physical attraction (Giles, 2009, p. 284). Attractiveness still can influence or affect a PSR (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011, pp. 254-255), primarily for women. Women value appearance most in characters while men value intelligence (Ward, 2016, p. 3). Viewers can also be attracted to a character because of their success. If a character is a hard worker and owns their own successful company, a viewer will be more likely to form a parasocial relationship with them than someone who is lazy and does not have a job (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011, p. 255). Depending on the type of media figure, similarity can also be important for viewers. If a celebrity shares similar ideas, looks, experiences, or beliefs with the viewer, the viewer is far more likely to develop a parasocial relationship (Giles, 2009, p. 284).

**What purpose do PSRs serve?** Considering the one-sided nature of parasocial relationships, it is important to understand what the implications might be. Viewers' PSRs can feel like real-life friendships, and they often evaluate them in the same way that they would if they met the person in their everyday life. If the PSR ends, the individual can feel similar emotions to what they would feel if it were a real life friend (Bond, 2018, p. 2). Bond (2018) explains the purpose of parasocial relationships in saying:

PSRs with media personae may serve as functional alternatives, compensating for inadequate real-life social relationships among special populations considered relationally vulnerable such as LGB adolescents. (p. 21)

Parasocial relationships also have some advantages that traditional interpersonal relationships do not. For one, media users have more of a choice with PSRs. They can choose the



longevity of the PSR, unlike real life relationships where there are rules and expectations. They also allow for media users to live vicariously through the celebrities they love without many of the obligations and responsibilities that come with traditional relationships (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011, p. 254).

One of the implications of the prevalence of parasocial relationships in modern society is the use of famous figures in advertising. When advertisers pair with celebrities to promote products, they are drawing on the audience's love for the celebrity to sell the product. If someone is a fan of a celebrity advertising Nike, for example, they will be more likely to purchase Nike products (Rockwell, 2018).

### **Animal Celebrities**

Traditionally, the term 'celebrity' is synonymous with 'human' which means most of the studies on celebrities and fame have only taken into consideration the human aspect of it. Still, within every form of media are famous animals, including actors, models, dancers, etc. Some animals even became famous just for being owned by celebrities. For decades, Hollywood has made animals into stars (Giles, 2012, p. 117).

It does not take much more than exposure for an animal to become a celebrity, but there are factors that can increase the chances. For one, it helps for the animal to be photogenic. That does not necessarily mean that the animal has to be attractive or beautiful, however. Animals like sharks or octopuses are not traditionally attractive animals, but sometimes their 'freakish' appearances are what leads them to fame.

According to Giles (2012), animal celebrities can be grouped into four categories. The first category is anthropomorphic, or animals that exhibit human-like characteristics such as

life-saving dogs, piano-playing cats, and Koko the gorilla learning American Sign Language. In these cases, the animals are amazing to humans because they are performing behaviors that were thought to be only human. The second category is promotional, including circuses, zoos, or animals rescued from dangerous circumstances. The third category is freaks, such as two-headed snakes, record-breaking sizes or abilities, and cross-breeds. Finally, there are celebrity pets.

Unlike human celebrities, animal celebrities do not have the opportunity or ability to tarnish their reputations or lose their desirability through their own actions. Giles (2012) explains that the relationship with a human and animal can only end with the death of the animal. There is never a question with animal celebrities as to whether or not they are authentic because they cannot be anything but themselves (p. 117).

Fascination with and love for animals has been present for as long as humans have existed. Therefore, it is not surprising that humans have brought their non-human friends into the limelight with them. Throughout history, animals have been celebrated without having to do anything exceptional. Unfortunately, not everyone who is involved in the animal celebrity industry has good intentions. Many circus animals are used as instruments for making money and increasing fame. Still, there are many pet owners who want their animals to achieve fame only because they want the world to love their pet as much as they do (Giles, 2012).

**Social media animals.** Though animals are a common addition to many cast lists throughout Hollywood, animals can achieve fame outside of the big screen too. On social media, animals are everywhere. Pets have Instagram accounts, people create themed compilation videos of animals, Facebook feeds are flooded with videos of adoption stories and animal abuse rescues, and it could be argued that nearly everyone who owns a pet has posted a photo of it on some

form of social media. Many of these animals become famous, compiling hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers. Some of these pets have gone on world tours to meet fans who will wait in line for hours to see them (Newman, 2017).

In New York, there is a talent agency that solely represents social media celebrity animals; it is called the Dog Agency. The Dog Agency has around 80 animal clients, including a hedgehog, a pig, and finger monkeys (Newman, 2017). Though the idea of an agency just for animals is out of the ordinary, the founder of the company admits that animal influencers outperform people: their posts go viral more frequently and they receive more comments and likes. Newman (2017) writes, “Pets whose followers number in the hundreds of thousands could get \$3,000 to \$10,000 for each piece of content... They get book deals.” Product placements are increasing in popularity among social media animals. Like human celebrities, there are many famous social media pets that do not have an agent. Winston the white corgi is one of these, but he has teamed up with American Express and Polaroid, and his owner even turned down offers from both Coke and Pepsi because it felt too inauthentic (Newman, 2017).

The most famous type of animal on social media is the dog. Jared Kasner, owner of an Instafamous golden retriever puppy, says, “Despite our differences, red or blue, color, race, religion, whatever it is, dogs can unite us. And so can bringing out people’s happiness” (Newman, 2017). In spite of the overall popularity of dogs online, not all breeds are at the same level. As stated by the American Kennel Club, the top five dog breeds in the US are the labrador retriever, German shepherd, golden retriever, bulldog, and beagle. However, the five most popular dog breeds on Instagram are the pug, bulldog, terrier, Chihuahua, and husky. The most popular dog breeds in the country are primarily in the sporting and working classes of dogs.

Though these breeds are also cute, they tend to be intelligent or obedient dogs. On Instagram, users follow the dogs that are the cutest, rather than most smart or well-behaved. The only exception here is the bulldog which appears in both top five lists.

Typically, the dogs that gain the most fame are the ones with “a signature style flourish... Pointedly aristocratic breeds tend not to pop on social media as much as dogs with quirky features or compelling backstories” (Williams, 2018). These style flourishes could be both genetic or groomed, from an underbite to beautiful fur to funny costumes. A very popular trend is rescue dogs and less common breeds. A majority of the humans following these social media animals admit that mixed breeds, rescues, and disabled dogs appear as a more ethical choice from their perspective, making them more likely to follow. Users admit that it is refreshing to see flawed animals happy to be themselves, compared to the human expectation of presenting a certain polished aesthetic on social media. Elias Weiss Fredman, photographer of the popular blog and Instagram account *The Dogist* says, “I’ve found that people prefer the more real, natural dogs. Poodles seem to give off a pretentious vibe, especially if they have a classic poodle haircut. The older generations love them, but I think the younger generation sees that style as fake, undogly” (as cited in Williams, 2018, para 27). The two most popular photos taken by Fredman were of a mixed breed puppy with quirky ears and a 12-year-old lab with a disease called vitiligo. When viewers see dogs with imperfections, they find them much more relatable. They see dogs with life challenges and find it inspiring to watch them overcome and be happy.

On Instagram, dogs are far from the only animals that become famous. Other animals like possums, raccoons, and rats are helping change people’s perceptions on their entire species through their posts. When someone comes across a possum or rat in the wild, their initial

reaction might be fear or disgust. However, once these animals are placed in the context of someone's home, dressed in cute outfits, and shown acting sweet or cuddly, they have the power to alter how people view the species in general. These animals can even get just as much attention on social media as more traditional animals like dogs and cats (Olien, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

In today's media-saturated society, films, advertisements, social media, and television, have such a wide range of influence that it is important to acknowledge what impact the media could be having on the individuals who consume it. Just like human celebrities are able to greatly affect their fans, animals can hold a great deal of power too. Still, Giles (2009, 2012), explains that animal celebrities are part of a very different industry than humans, or other animals that are not their own.

There are an enormous amount of individuals on social networking sites like Instagram that have millions of followers. Many of these individuals achieved fame solely through their social media accounts. The mass quantities of minor celebrities, or micro-celebrities, are becoming important to modern culture (Kahmis, 2016). As these individuals gain a larger following and people become more aware of them, their fans start to develop attachments through parasocial interactions, leading to parasocial relationships (Giles, 2009). Though these social media accounts often feature humans, many times they do not. Juniper the fox, Winston the white corgi, and Doug the Pug are just a few of the many animals that have become publicly recognizable all thanks to social media, particularly Instagram (Newman, 2012).

Animals are very prevalent across social media, but there is minimal research as to whether or not social media users can form true parasocial relationships with them. The

definition of parasocial relationships traditionally refers to humans (Rockwell, 2018), but perhaps should be expanded to incorporate non-human celebrities as well. It is unclear whether or not similar factors in a person's life have an influence on their propensity to form parasocial relationships with animals, such as past or current pet ownership, relationship status, or exposure to content. If individuals can identify that they feel some sort of connection to an animal they follow on Instagram, it is likely that, by definition, they have formed a parasocial relationship with that animal.

Despite the extensive reach animal stars have, little research has been done to better understand what impact they might have on their audiences. Many social media animals have their own brand deals, which gives them the potential to motivate followers through advertising (Newman, 2017). Animals are prevalent in other forms of advertisements, but it is a new phenomenon to see the individual animals promoting products. Though there is research done around categorizing animals as celebrities in general, there is limited research available that is specific to animals on social media (Giles, 2012). There are certain characteristics of human celebrities that influence their audience members into forming parasocial relationships, but it is unclear what traits cause followers to gravitate toward animals (Greenwood & Long, 2011). These traits could include personality characteristics, physical attributes, or species classification. Despite the similarities between human and animal celebrities, there are obviously many differences, but there is minimal supporting research. Human-to-human parasocial relationships can be fairly predictable, and have been extensively explored (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011). However, there are other types of parasocial relationships that should be acknowledged and examined because they could be just as important or influential.

Given the fact that there has not been enough research done on human-to-animal parasocial relationships, the following research questions were studied:

1. How do humans form parasocial relationships with animals through Instagram ?
  - a. Does the amount of time a social media user is exposed to a particular animal on social media increase the strength of their relationship with that animal?
  - b. What species, breeds, characteristics, or categories of animals are most often the subjects of parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships?
  - c. What social or personal factors, such as age, location, relationship status/loneliness, gender, or personality type, might influence a person's likelihood of forming parasocial relationships?

### **Methodology**

Survey was selected as the method of analysis for this study because, in order to collect the most accurate results, a wide range of people needed to be reached. The survey was distributed online, allowing participants to complete it at their leisure and wherever they chose. The survey takes participants around 10 minutes to complete, thereby not costing them much time or effort. A huge portion of the data that needed to be collected was demographic information, which was simple and quick for participants to fill out through the online format. Survey-takers are able to spend as much time as they need on a question, go back and change their answers, choose not to answer questions, and exit the survey at any time, without having to confront the researcher. This allows for survey takers to feel more comfortable answering the questions honestly because there is no pressure regarding time or face to face interaction. Pew Research Center (2015) supports the use of surveys in saying, "Self-administered surveys tend to

be less expensive and to provide ways of asking questions that are difficult or impossible to ask in an interviewer-administered survey.” Considering online surveys are easy to distribute, a large demographic of participants were able to be reached. In order for the data to be generalized, survey participants from a variety of countries, ethnicities, and backgrounds much be collected. For some survey takers, this demographic information may be considered personal, which could put up walls for individuals who prefer to stay private. However, Pew Research Center (2019) explains that survey-takers tend to be more honest about personal information when taking an online survey where they don’t have to talk directly to a person.

This study was based loosely on Bond’s 2018 study in which LGBT adolescents were surveyed about their parasocial relationships with media personae. The survey was distributed online, and allowed survey takers to work their way through the questions at their own pace, without any contact with the researcher. This allowed participants to feel more comfortable answering honestly, especially because their answers were recorded anonymously.

The sampling methods used in this study include convenience sampling, snowball sampling, voluntary sampling, and non-probability sampling. First, convenience sampling was used in a few of the websites utilized to share the survey link. The survey was posted on the researcher’s personal Facebook page. This only exposed it to the people within her circle, and primarily in her general geographic vicinity. A few of her Friends also chose to share the survey link on their own Facebook timeline, which thereby expanded the survey reach to their Friends list as well. This is also an example of snowball sampling because, after the initial researcher shared the survey, other survey takers shared it themselves, exposing it to even more people. Friends of the researcher who took the survey were also asked to share it with their friends



individually, requesting that they take it as well. Voluntary sampling was utilized for every participant of the survey because all of them made the choice of whether or not they wanted to participate. They were also able to leave the survey whenever they wanted, making it entirely each individual's decision to proceed. Finally, non-probability sampling was used because the researcher is not able to identify who participated in the survey because each response is anonymous. This means that the researcher was blind to all demographic information of the participants. It cannot be determined prior to data collection what populations of people will be participating.

First, the survey was distributed on Reddit under the subreddit titled r/SampleSize on Friday, March 1st, 2019 at 6:24pm. The post was entitled, “[Academic] Animal Accounts on Instagram (18+, Instagram users who follow animal accounts).” The word in brackets identifies for Reddit users that the survey is neither casual nor for marketing purposes. The use of words like “parasocial relationships” or “parasocial interactions” was avoided as to not indicate to the participants what the research is focused on. This allows for more unbiased data because participants cannot tailor their responses to what they believe the researcher wants to hear. Per the subreddit's rules, the text inside the parentheses indicates what requirements or demographic information are required to complete the survey. The two requirements to take the survey are the participant must be over 18 years old, and they have to have an Instagram account and be following animal accounts. Anyone who does not meet those requirements who chooses to take the survey, will be filtered out immediately. By indicating this in the title of the post, the researcher avoids wasting participants time who do not qualify. The r/SampleSize subreddit has 87,200 participants, the term used for Reddit users who subscribe to this subreddit, making it

visible to them in their individual, personalized timelines. It is not possible for the Reddit user to see how many of those participants have taken their survey

Second, the survey was posted to the researcher's personal Facebook timeline to her 953 Friends on Friday, March 1st, 2019 at 6:30pm. Preceding the survey link, the researcher wrote, "Hey everyone! For my senior thesis, I am looking for participants to take my survey. The requirements are you may not be an Endicott student, may not be under 18 years old, and must currently have an Instagram account. The survey should take about 10 minutes, and will ask you questions about your experience with pets in your life and on Instagram. Your participation would be greatly appreciated, and will help me immensely with my research. Thank you so much in advance, and please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions! 😊" Primarily, participants who discover the survey through Facebook will reside in the New England area, as that is where the researcher lives. In addition to the researcher's personal timeline, the survey was shared on five private Facebook groups, "MA Girls Group," "Ratto Bamboozlin," "Dogspotting," "Dogspotting Society," and "Pet Rabbit Advice."

The collection of data was complete three weeks from the day the survey was posted, Friday, March 22nd. Though no incentives were used to recruit survey participants, the researcher ensured a large sample size was collected through requesting friends to further share the link, and posting the link on multiple websites. A total of 3,684 individuals participated, 93% (n=3,088) of which were female, 5% (n=173) were male, and 2% (n=58) were non-binary. Sixty point sixty three percent (n=2014) of participants were between the ages of 18-24, 28.51% (n=947) were between 25-30, 5.33% (n=177) were between 31-35, 2.29% (n=76) were between 36-40, 0.99% (n=33) were between 41-45, 0.99% (n=33) were between 46-50, 0.84% (n=28)

were between 51-55, 0.27% (n=9) were between 56-60, and 0.15% (n=5) were between 61-65.

The primary research question for this study was, “How do humans form parasocial relationships with animals through Instagram?” The independent variable was the parasocial relationships, while the dependent variables were exposure, past experience with pets, personality type, relationship status, age, geographic location, and animal preferences. The secondary research questions were, “Does the amount of time a social media user is exposed to a particular animal on Instagram increase the strength of their relationship with that animal?,” “What species, breeds, characteristics, or categories of animals are most often subjects of parasocial relationships?,” and “What social or personal factors, such as age, gender, or personality type, might influence an Instagram user’s likelihood of forming parasocial relationships?”

The independent variable, parasocial relationships, was measured through questions 26 through 30 of the survey. These questions asked participants to identify a specific animal account they follow on Instagram, what they like about the account, and how they would react if they were to see the animal in real life. Through the participant choosing an account themselves, their selection represents the types of accounts they are most interested in because they have to specifically identify why. Asking participants to think about whether or not they would recognize the animal outside of the Internet identifies how invested they are in the animal because, the more familiar they are with the animal, the more likely it is that they have formed a parasocial relationship.

Questions 4 addresses the dependent variable, age. Questions 5 and 6 address the dependent variable, geographic location. Question 7 addresses the dependent variable, gender.

Question 8 addresses the dependent variable, relationship status. Questions 3, 9, 19, 20, 24, and 25 all address the dependent variable, exposure. Question 11 addresses the dependent variable, personality type. Questions 10, 12, 17, 18, 21, 22, and 23 address the dependent variable, animal preference. Finally, questions 13-16 address the dependent variable pet experience. See Appendix A for the full list of survey questions.

## **Findings**

### **Results**

In the field of communication research, there have been extensive studies on parasocial relationships, parasocial interactions, and animal celebrities. However, little research has been conducted combining the subjects, to analyze how humans form and develop parasocial relationships with animals. Through a survey analysis, 3,600 subjects' answers were analyzed regarding their parasocial relationships with various animals on Instagram. Participants were asked various background questions as well as questions about their pet ownership history, Instagram experience, and how they felt about a specific animal Instagram account of their choosing.

Survey-takers were asked what their relationship status currently is and could select single, in a relationship (not married), engaged, married, or divorced. After selecting a specific animal Instagram account later in the survey, they were asked if they felt a connection with that animal. The majority of survey participants identified that they are in a relationship, but not married. Thirty eight percent (n=1,209) of these individuals also selected that they felt a connection with a particular animal account on Instagram. Across the board, more individuals selected that they felt a connection with the animal account than did not. Thirty one percent

(n=1,003) of participants identified that they are either single or divorced, and showed the same Proportionally, more individuals who selected that they have a significant other reported that they also felt a connection to a specific animal on Instagram. Every other data point was 11% of less; see Table 1 for reference.

**Table 1: Relationship Status and Connection to Animal Account**

	Relationship Status					
Feel Connection?	Single	In a relationship (not married)	Engaged	Married	Divorced	
Yes	24% (n=771)	38% (n=1209)	5% (n=155)	11% (n=358)	0.3% (n=11)	
No	7% (n=217)	11% (n=337)	1% (n=35)	2% (n=66)	0.1% (n=4)	
<b>TOTAL</b>	988	1546	190	424	15	3163

Survey participants were asked to report on their experience with pets growing up and currently. The majority of participants, 72% (n=2,388) reported both that they grew up with pets, and that they currently own pets. Eighteen percent (n=619) reported that they grew up with pets, but do not currently own any. Few people selected that they did not grow up with pets; see Table 2 for reference.

**Table 2: Growing up with pets and currently have pets**

Do you currently have pets?	Did you grow up with pets?		
	Yes	No	
Yes	72% (n=2388)	5% (n=151)	
No	18% (n=619)	5% (n=157)	
TOTAL	3007	308	3315

To gauge general personality characteristics, survey participants were asked whether or not they can be categorized as introverted or extroverted, and a third “I don’t know” option was added for individuals who might either be unfamiliar with the terms, or do not know enough about them to identify as either. After survey participants selected a specific animal they are following on Instagram, they were asked to identify how they would react if they were to see that animal in public. Most participants reported being introverted, and 39% (n=1233) also reported that they would try to interact with the animal. Few survey participants selected that they would not be interested in the animal if they were to see it in public. The question as to how the participant would react if they were to see the animal they follow online in public allowed for the survey-taker to select more than one of the three options. Participants who selected more than one answer have been omitted from the results because some of their selections did not make sense together, see Table 3.

**Table 3: Introvert or Extrovert and Reacting in Public to Instagram Animal**

React in public?	Introvert/Extrovert			
	Extrovert	Introvert	I don't know	
1. I would try to interact with the animal.	24% (n=755)	39% (n=1233)	6% (n=183)	
2. I would watch the animal from afar but not approach	6% (n=184)	13% (n=410)	2% (n=60)	
3. I would not be interested in the animal offline	0.4% (n=12)	0.6% (n=18)	0.06% (n=2)	
<b>TOTAL</b>	1022	1856	274	3152

Survey participants were first asked how much time they spend on social media every day, and then how much of that time is spent looking at animal content. The majority of participants fell in the middle range, spending between one and five hours every day on social media. Those individuals also reported spending between “some” and “half” of that social media time on animal accounts. Fifteen percent (n=518) of participants who spend two to five hours a day on social media spend some of that time looking at animal content. Twenty percent (n=675) spend some of that time looking at animal content. Thirteen percent (n=444) of participants who spend one or two hours a day on social media spend half of that time looking at animal content. 18% (n=589) spend some of the time looking at animal content. Few participants reported spending all or very little of their time on social media, looking at animal content. See Table 4 for reference.

**Table 4: Time on Social Media and Time on Animal Accounts**

	Time on Social Media				
Time on Animal Social Media	Five or more hours	Two to five hours	One or two hours	Under an hour	
All of the time	0.1% (n=4)	0.2% (n=8)	0.2% (n=8)	0.09% (n=3)	
Most of the time	2% (n=64)	8% (n=276)	8% (n=274)	0.8% (n=28)	
Half of the time	2% (n=87)	15% (n=518)	13% (n=444)	1% (n=34)	
Some of the time	3% (n=105)	20% (n=675)	18% (n=589)	1% (n=43)	
Very little (a few minutes)	0.4% (n=15)	1% (n=52)	2% (n=72)	0.6% (n=19)	
<b>TOTAL</b>	275	1529	1387	127	3318

Whether or not survey participants felt a connection with a selected animal Instagram account was also compared with the portion of their social media time spent looking at animal accounts and content. The largest percentage of participants, 32% (n=1,010), reported that they spent some of their time on animal social media, and also felt a connection with their selected animal. Twenty-seven percent of participants (n=846) reported that they spend half of their social media time on animal accounts, and also felt a connection.



**Table 5: Time on Animal Social Media and Feeling Connection**

	Time on Social Media Spent on Animal Accounts					
Feel a connection ?	All of the time	Most of the Time	Half of the Time	Some of the Time	Very little (a few minutes)	
Yes	0.6% (n=21)	17% (n=529)	27% (n=846)	32% (n=1010)	3% (n=96)	
No	0.06% (n=2)	3% (n=96)	6% (n=193)	10% (n=324)	1% (n=44)	
<b>TOTAL</b>	23	625	1039	1334	140	3161

On social media, most popular accounts post new content frequently to keep their audience engaged and interested. Some choose to post up to multiple times per day, others no more than once per week. Though many accounts vary in their frequency, the type of content shared, in this case animal photos and videos, may carry different audience expectations than by other famous Instagram users like Kylie Jenner. In other words, if Kylie Jenner stopped posting, she would lose a lot of followers. Participant's amount of time on social media was compared with whether or not they valued regular activity on Instagram accounts. Participants who spent an hour or more of their time every day on social media were more likely to also select that active accounts are important to them. The majority of participants spent between one and five hours per day on social media and most of them also reported that they value active accounts, see Table 6.

**Table 6: Time on Social Media and Importance of Account Activity**

	Time on Social Media				
Is Account Activity Important?	Five or more hours	Two to five hours	One to two hours	Under one hour	
Yes	5% (n=160)	28% (n=894)	23% (n=732)	2% (n=59)	
No	3% (n=107)	18% (n=585)	19% (n=611)	2% (n=67)	
<b>TOTAL</b>	267	1479	1343	126	3215

Similar results were found when comparing social media time spent on animal content with the importance of regular account activity. The majority of participants reported some of half of their social media time spent on animal accounts, most of which also reported that account activity is important. Twenty-four percent (n=801) reported that they spent some of their social media time on animal accounts and also believe account activity is important, see Table 7.

**Table 7: Time on Social Media Animal Accounts and Importance of Account Activity**

	Time on Social Media Spent on Animal Accounts					
Is Account Activity Important ?	All of the time	Most of the time	Half of the time	Some of the time	Very little of the time	
Yes	0.4% (n=15)	11% (n=364)	18% (n=590)	24% (n=801)	2% (n=75)	
No	0.2% (n=8)	8% (n=260)	14% (n=459)	17% (n=569)	2% (n=76)	
<b>TOTAL</b>	23	642	1085	1412	158	3320

Survey participants were asked what animals they currently own, if any, and what specifically they like about their animals. A random sample of 100 responses was selected, and coded into six categories: Physical qualities, animal's personality, entertainment value, comfort and physical connection, companionship, and "everything." Of the 100 responses, 13% (n=13) survey participants listed physical qualities as what they like about their pet, such as cuteness. 31% (n=31) identified personality as what they love about their pet. Many specified that their animal is smart or quirky. 2% (n=2) listed entertainment value, including training the animal or enjoying bringing the animal to parks or on hikes. 14% (n=14) described how they particularly like having their animals for comfort when they struggle, or how their animal cuddles with them, that physical connection being extremely important. 23% (n=23) answered that they like their pet/s for the companionship. Many participants used the term specifically, others described their pet's loyalty, and how they enjoy having an innocent animal to spend time with. Finally, 17% (n=17) of survey takers claimed to like "everything" about their pets. See Table 8 for examples of quotes from the open response question regarding participant's thoughts on their current pets.

**Table 8: Open Responses to “What do you like about your current pets?”**

Physical Qualities	Animal’s Personality	Entertainment Value	Comfort and Physical Connection	Companionship	“Everything”
“She is extremely cute.”	“She is loving and loyal.”	“She brings me daily happiness and is a constant source of entertainment.”	“Their ability to make me feel better.”	“The companionship.”	“What’s not to love? Dogs are perfect.”
“My pup is the cutest thing on the planet.”	“I like their personalities and friendliness.”	“Source of humor.”	“Unconditional love and cuddles.”	“Unconditional love and companionship.”	“Literally everything.”
“The fluffiness.”	“One is crazy and excitable, the other is loving.”	“They are entertaining and enjoyable.”	“They provide emotional support.”	“They’re my best friends.”	“Literally every single thing.”
“His soft ears.”			“She is my happy place.”	“They are always there for me.”	“Everything, she’s my soulmate.”

After selecting one animal account they follow on Instagram, survey participants were asked what they like about the account. Of the responses, 100 were selected and coded into six categories: Physical qualities, inspirational content, the animal’s personality, content and account management, entertainment value, and informative content. Thirty-eight (n=38) of respondents described physical characteristics. The word “cute” was often used as an important description of the account. Ten percent (n=10) of responses described the selected account as inspirational, valuing animals overcoming abuse or other challenges. Eleven percent (n=11) of respondents liked personality best. Adjectives used to describe personality included “funny” and “smart.” Eighteen percent (n=18) liked the page’s content or account manager, often the featured animal’s owner. Survey participants valued high-quality photos and videos, as well as the overall

uniqueness or individuality of the account. The human running the account was also shown to be important to followers because many survey participants reported appreciating seeing someone take good care of their animals, especially if the pet is a rescue. Twenty percent (n=20) of respondents reported liking the entertainment value of the account. Many found their chosen account funny, and even claimed that it cheers them up when they are upset. Finally, three percent (n=3) of survey participants most valued the informative nature of the account. Some reported enjoying learning about particular species or animal care from their chosen accounts. See Table 9 for examples of quotes from the open response question regarding participant’s thoughts on the animal account they selected from the list of accounts they follow.

**Table 9: Open Response to “What do you like about the pet/s in your selected animal account?”**

Physical Qualities	Inspirational Content	Animal’s Personality	Content and Account Management	Entertainment Value	Informative Content
“So. Cute.” “The pig is adorable.” “Cute dog, different costumes.” “He looks like my own dog.”	“Shows off his success as a one-eyed dog.” “They do a lot of charity work.”	“Love her personality.” “Sweet pup.” “He’s a weird dog.” “How goofy Zeus is.”	“Frequent post and high quality videos.” “Beautiful photos and interesting captions.”	“It’s funny.” “The morbid, dry humor.” “He skates!” “The owner and the dog’s relationship is hilarious.”	“Educational.” “She takes the time to educate her followers.” “Information about issues with poaching.”

**Discussion**

Reflecting the second research question of exposure time influencing an individual's formation of parasocial relationships, Bond (2016) explains around 90% of teens are on social

media, and 24% of those individuals admit to being almost constantly using it. Though participants were required to be at least 18 years of age to take the survey, the majority of survey-takers were close to teenager-age, with 60% (n=2014) falling between the ages of 18 and 24. Most people spent half to some of their total social media time consuming animal content. Every level of social media activity peaked in the “half of the time” or “some of the time” categories, meaning the majority of participants did not spend more than half of their time on social media looking at animal accounts or content. The majority of people who spend half of their time on social media consuming animal content also claimed to feel a connection with the animal. According to Schmid and Klimmt (2011) and Ward (2016), the more exposure an individual has to a character or public figure, the stronger their bond or parasocial relationship will become. However, it was shown through this study that having more of a balance and mix various types of content may make people more likely to form parasocial relationships with online animals, rather than the majority of content focusing on one figure.

Single and in a relationship (not married) people were the most likely to feel a connection with the animals. According to Bond (2018), parasocial relationships can serve as alternatives to real life, traditional emotional relationships, such as LGBT adolescents. However, the same is not shown to be true here with human to animal parasocial relationships, as the majority of individuals who felt a connection to a specific animal account were also in a relationship, thereby likely minimizing feelings of loneliness that a parasocial relationship could hypothetically fill. Still, Giles (2009) claims that parasocial interactions fulfill some sort of social need because the object of the parasocial relationship may remind the individual of someone they know in their personal life. In terms of animal accounts on social media, it was shown that participants favored

accounts that featured breeds or species they were familiar with in their own lives. This reflects the fourth research question, referencing how social or personal factors, such as relationship status, influence an individual's propensity to form parasocial relationships.

Also addressing the fourth research question, the majority of participants who grew up with pets, also currently have pets, and those who did not have pets growing up were more likely to currently not have pets as well. When asked what they liked about their own pets, participants were quick to gush about a variety of qualities, focusing mostly on the non-physical, personality-based characteristics. When participants were asked to describe what they like about the animals they follow online, they were more inclined to describe physical features than personality traits. It is likely that participants feel a much stronger connection to the animals in their personal life than the ones they see online. This also touches on the third research question that asks what types of animals individuals are more likely to form parasocial relationships with, and it is clear that Instagram users are more interested in animals that are similar to current or past pets.

Surprisingly, more introverts were shown to be more likely to approach the celebrity animal if they saw it in public than extroverted people. Very few from any category, including "I don't know," selected that they would not be interested in the animal offline. It would be expected that extroverted personality types would be more inclined to approach a stranger and ask to interact with their pet, but the majority of individuals who selected they would do that were actually introverts. This, again, reflects the fourth research question of personal or social factors such as personality type.

### **Limitations**

Though the researcher attempted to reach as broad of an audience as possible, there was compromised external validity in a variety of areas of the study. First the survey was posted in Facebook groups which were specific to certain species of animals, including rabbits, rats, and dogs. The majority of participants (over 3,100 of the 3,300 total) came from Dogspotting Society, a group with over one million members. This resulted in most participants already preferring dogs over many other species. The survey was also posted on the researcher's personal social media page, thereby exposing it to her Friend's list which mostly consists of millennials in her geographic area.

Internal validity was compromised through coding participants' responses. It was clear that some could have been worded more clearly or specifically. Some open-ended questions yielded confusing results. This could have been due to the language, or lack of effort on participants end. Utilizing an open-ended question format when asking participants location proved difficult when the extensive quantity of survey-takers responded in a variety of ways for the same answer (i.e. USA, United States, US, America, etc.). Misspellings were also present, making data more challenging to organize.

The answers to the final question on how participants would react if they saw the animal in public were not exclusive. The researcher should have made the question multiple choice, rather than with checkboxes, and specified that survey takers should choose the option they feel *best* describes their reaction.

## **Conclusion**

Though the field of communication has studied parasocial relationships for decades, the research has only revolved around humans. Animals as celebrities is not a new concept, but their



presence on social media is fairly new territory. Through this study, it was demonstrated that humans can and do form parasocial relationships with animals, and these relationships share many similarities with human-to-human parasocial relationships. This study showed that humans can easily form parasocial relationships with animals on Instagram, and that these relationships are very similar to human-to-human parasocial relationships. However, some factors differ between human-to-animal parasocial relationships and human-to-human parasocial relationships such as relationship status and personality type. It was also shown that social media users are more inclined to follow accounts involving animals they have familiarity with in their offline lives, whether they currently own a similar pet or have other past experience with the animal. It was also demonstrated that mid to high social media use can increase an individual's likelihood of forming parasocial relationships with animals, especially if at least half of that social media time is spent viewing animal content. Most individuals seemed to maintain a healthy balance of animal and non-animal content, making them even more likely to form human-to-animal parasocial relationships than those who almost exclusively viewed animal content.

Though humans can and do form parasocial relationships with animals on Instagram, it is still unclear how this could impact users. Future research could examine the potential implications of human-to-animal parasocial relationships, such as in advertising. According to Sanders (2017), the average Internet user encounters over 11,000 advertisements every month. For social media users, many of these encounters happen in their newsfeeds. Many Instagram animals now have sponsors, brand deals, and advertisers which discreetly promote their content through adorable spokes-animals. Further studies could explore the similarities and differences between human social media advertisements and animal social media advertisements.

As animals increasingly infiltrate the world of celebrities, particularly online, communication research must evolve to understand what impact and power they may have over their fans and social media followers. Any social media user is vulnerable to the influence of powerful accounts, even if those accounts feature adorable animals.

**Appendix A**

1. Message of Informed Consent (See Appendix B)
  - a. I acknowledge that I have read and agree to the above terms.
  
2. Are you currently a student at Endicott College?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
3. Do you currently have a personal account on Instagram?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. I did in the past, but not currently
  
4. How old are you?
  - a. 18-24
  - b. 25-30
  - c. 31-35
  - d. 36-40
  - e. 41-45
  - f. 46-50
  - g. 51-55
  - h. 56-60

- i. 61-65
  - j. 66-70
  - k. 70+
5. In what country do you currently reside?
- a. Open response
6. If applicable, in what state do you currently reside?
- a. Open response
7. What gender do you most identify with?
- a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Non-binary
  - d. Prefer not to say
  - e. Other
8. What is your current relationship status?
- a. Single
  - b. In a relationship (not married)
  - c. Engaged
  - d. Married
  - e. Divorced

- f. Widowed
  - g. Other
9. Do you follow any accounts on Instagram that feature an animal or animals? This does not include personal accounts who infrequently share photos of their pets, but rather accounts that are named after, focus on, and primarily post about a particular animal or animals.
- a. Yes
  - b. No
10. Please review the accounts you are following on Instagram, and list at least three animal accounts.
- a. Open response
11. Are you more extroverted or introverted?
- a. Introvert
  - b. Extrovert
  - c. I don't know
12. Do you consider yourself to be more of a dog person or cat person?
- a. Dog
  - b. Cat
  - c. Neither

13. Did you grow up with pets?

- a. Yes
- b. No

14. What animals did you own growing up? Please be as specific as you can (e.g. One English bulldog, two parakeets, a hamster, and four goldfish). If you did not own animals growing up, please leave blank.

- a. Open response

15. Do you currently own any pets?

- a. Yes
- b. No

16. What animals do you currently own? Please be as specific as you can (e.g. two black labs, one Siamese cat, three rats, and a guinea pig). If you do not currently own any pets, please leave blank.

- a. Open response

17. If you currently own a pet, what do you like about them?

- a. Open response

18. If you listed that you have owned a pet in the past, or currently own a pet, what have you gotten out of having relationships with these animals?

- a. Open response

19. On average, how much time do you spend on social media every day?
- Under an hour
  - One to two hours
  - Two to five hours
  - Five or more hours
20. How much of that time spent on social media is spent looking at animal content?
- Very little (a few minutes)
  - Some of the time (more than a few minutes, but less than half)
  - Half of the time
  - Most of the time
  - All of the time
21. What species of animals do you most like to follow on Instagram? (Check all that apply)
- Dogs
  - Cats
  - Birds
  - Reptiles
  - Small pets (e.g. rabbits, ferrets, hamsters, mice, etc.)
  - Horses
  - Farm animals (e.g. cows, pigs, goats, chickens, etc.)

- h. Aquatic animals (e.g. fish, whales, etc.)
  - i. Wild animals (e.g. raccoons, foxes, squirrels, etc.)
  - j. Other
22. Of the animals listed above, what breeds/subspecies do you most like to follow on Instagram? (e.g. pugs, Clydesdales, and teacup pigs)
- a. Open response
23. If you are scrolling through your feed and find an animal that you would like to follow, which of the following is important to you? Check all that apply.
- a. Animal's appearance (cuteness, breed, species, uniqueness)
  - b. The page is successful (frequent posts, many followers, high quality photos and videos)
  - c. Animal's personality (intelligence, humor, entertainment)
  - d. The animal is familiar (have/had a similar animal in the past, or know someone with a similar animal)
  - e. Other
24. Is it important to you that the Instagram account is active (e.g. responding to comments, posting regularly, adding to their story)?
- a. Yes
  - b. No



- c. Other
25. Have you ever managed or created an animal account on Instagram?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
26. Please take a moment to select one specific animal account on Instagram that you follow and enjoy. What is the username of this account?
- a. Open response
27. Do you feel a connection to the animal(s) in this account?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
28. What do you like about this account?
- a. Open response
29. If you saw this animal offline, would you recognize it?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
30. If you saw this animal in public, how would you be most likely to react? (Select all that apply)
- a. I would not be interested in the animal offline
  - b. I would try to interact with the animal

- c. I would watch the animal from afar, but not approach

## **Appendix B**

Hello! My name is Jenna Cole, and I would like to invite you to participate in this survey for my senior thesis. This survey aims to understand how and why humans form relationships with animals through Instagram. Your participation will require approximately 10-15 minutes. You will be asked about your experience with animals throughout your life, as well as your interactions with animals on Instagram. For the most accurate results, please have your Instagram account open where you can reference it while you are taking the survey.

Please do not take this survey if you have a fear of or are uncomfortable with any animals. There are no known risks associated with this survey. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and you may terminate your participation and exit the survey at any time, without penalty. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation in this research will be completely confidential, and data will be averaged and reported in aggregate. Your responses will also never be associated with your name. Any report of this research that is made available to the public will not include your name or any other information by which you can be identified.

If you have any questions about this study or project, you may contact Jenna Cole at [jcole680@mail.endicott.edu](mailto:jcole680@mail.endicott.edu). Clicking agree below indicates that you are 18 years of age or older, and that you have given consent to participate in this survey.

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